



Inside
ADRIFT

**The Newsletter Of The
ADRIFT Community**

November/December 2006

Issue 32

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Editorial

So another year's IFComp is over with. No win for ADRIFT (no real surprise there, of course, although I'd have loved to see the looks on the faces of the RAIF/RGIF crowd if an ADRIFT game had carried off first prize) but a number ten placing for Richard Otter's *Unauthorised Termination* and a number twelve for Revgiblet's *The Sisters*. My own effort - *Requiem* - came further down the list at nineteen. Disappointing, but I keep telling myself that if I'd won, I'd have nothing to aim for next year... :) Two other ADRIFT games featured - Elfindor's [Cheryl Howard] *The Wumpus Run* at thirty-two and Sartre Malvolio's [Slan Xorox] joke entry *PTGOOD 8*10^23* at forty-three.

From the ADRIFT point of view, this year was notable more than anything for the huge amount of feedback/reviews for the ADRIFT games. At the time of writing this, three of the games have garnered over twenty reviews each (a record for an ADRIFT game); even *The Wumpus Run*, which no one would say was successful in terms of the IFComp, had fifteen reviews written for it. In fact, there were even six reviews written for *PTGOOD 8*10^23*, a surprisingly large amount for a game that most people knew was a deliberate joke entry and wouldn't be any good.

Not all of the feedback was positive, of course. Indeed, a good deal was negative. The popular theme of criticising ADRIFT for its weak parser was seen on more than one occasion and one reviewer even commented on the fact that you could tell what a terrible IFComp this had been because he'd rated an ADRIFT game in his top ten. But even negative comments can be nice to hear if they're raising a valid point and most of the

negative comments my game received were at least that. I won't say I jumped for joy at reading another negative review stating I'd missed this out and I'd forgotten to include that, but it certainly made a refreshing change to find that most of the criticism my game received was directed solely at the game itself and not the system used to write it. I'd far sooner be criticised for mistakes that are my responsibility than the system's. After all, I can fix my own mistakes.

Another positive thing about so much feedback is that, finally, people seem to be taking ADRIFT seriously. Even if the idea of ADRIFT being considered on a level footing with the likes of TADS and Inform is just a hopeful daydream of mine, at least the majority of non-ADRIFT users seem to be coming round to the idea that it *is* possible to produce a decent game with ADRIFT. Refreshingly, they're prepared to give us a try and not just dismiss us out of hand for using a non-programmer's system.

There's light at the end of the tunnel after all.

David Whyld

There are two issues of the Newsletter available this time. Both can be found at

<http://www.shadowvault.net/newsletter/32.htm>

What you're reading now is the standard version (i.e. fancy fonts, generally easier on the eyes, etc); there is also .taf version which you can open up with the ADRIFT Runner (Version 4 [Release 46 is recommended though older versions ought to handle it fine]) and play like you would a regular game. If you want to have the .taf version and need the Runner, there's a link to it from the page above.

HOT Off The PRESS

Being the latest goings on from the wide world of interactive fiction...

ADRIFT Writing Challenge

The Writing Challenge on the ADRIFT forum

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=SF:f=6>

was started in February 2005 by NickyDude and has run (almost) every month since. The idea is simple: a location name and several items within it are suggested. People then have to come up with a room description based on the name and the items.

September's writing challenge was won by Revgiblet with this contribution:

You are standing in a morgue. Your breath mists in front of you, telling you what you already knew - that it's very cold in here.

The walls and floor are clinically clean and bare, though the north wall contains about a dozen hatches, no doubt each containing a dead body. Your least favourite kind of body.

There is an open coffin leaning upright against the south wall. Inside the coffin stands a well-preserved, fully clothed cadaver, his skin stretched tightly across his face forming a disturbing rigor mortis grin. Beside the coffin, on the floor, is a collection of stoppered bottles - various chemicals by the looks of it.

As you walk across the room your feet clatter against something. Looking down you see a bloodied knife on the floor. As you bend down to examine it further you hear sinister laughter coming from behind you - the south wall...

In joint second place were, in alphabetical order, Kaos, Mystery, Ravells (narrowly missing out on winning two months in a row), Sprite and David Whyld.

October's writing challenge was jointly won by former writing challenges organiser NickyDude:

Sand surrounds you in every direction, the burning sun making it hotter by the second. Scattered and maimed bones indicate that there's been some sort of encounter here but why you're not quite sure. Perhaps the half-buried jeep might yield some clues? In the distance to the east is the only vegetation that can be seen, a single solitary cactus, dark pink in colour, something definitely strange has gone on here. You won't have much time to investigate as a dust storm is heading in your direction from the south.

and by current writing challenges organiser David Whyld (is there a connection here, I wonder?):

Desert

It was the strangely shaped cactus that had wrecked my car and caused it to break down. Somehow, for some reason that didn't make a blind bit of sense to me, the cactus had grown right in the middle of the highway. Maybe I ought to have spotted it there, but then you don't tend to find many highways with cacti growing out of the middle of them.

That wasn't the only strange thing I could see. Even with the dust storm cutting visibility down to just a few feet, I could make out what looked to be bones poking up out of the ground; the fingers clutching at something not immediately apparent.

The highway continues to the north and south and there is empty, featureless desert in all other directions.

November's Writing Challenge, which closes on 30th November to make way for December's, has the following from which hopeful winners have to make a room

description:

Location: graveyard

Items: graves, fog, strange light, skeletal hand poking out of the ground, fallen tombstone

The relevant thread on the forum if you fancy having a go is at:

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=6;t=5755>

IFComp Results

The IFComp 2006 is over and the results in full are:

- 1 Floatpoint, by Emily Short
- 2 The Primrose Path, by Nolan Bonvouloir
- 3 The Elysium Enigma, by Eric Eve
- 4 The Traveling Swordsman, by Mike Snyder (writing as Anonymous)
- 5 Moon-Shaped, by Jason Ermer
- 6 Delightful Wallpaper, by Andrew Plotkin (writing as Edgar O. Weyrd)
- 7 Legion, by Jason Devlin (writing as Ian Anderson)
- 8 Madam Spider's Web, by Sara Dee
- 9 Mobius, by John Clemens (writing as J.D. Clemens)
- 10 Unauthorized Termination, by Richard Otter
- 11 Game Producer!, by Jason Bergman
- 12 The Sisters, by Revgiblet
- 13 Star City, by Mark Sachs
- 14 Strange Geometries, by Phillip Chambers
- 15 The Tower of the Elephant, by Tor Andersson
- 16 Aunts and Butlers, by Robin Johnson
- 17 Xen: The Hunt, by Ian Shlasko
- 18 Labyrinth, by Samantha Casanova Preuninger
- 19 Requiem, by David Whyld
- 20 Carmen Devine: Supernatural Troubleshooter, by Rob Myall
- 21 The Bible Retold, by Justin Morgan and "Celestianpower"
- 22 Another Goddamn Escape the Locked Room Game, by Riff Conner
- 23 Fight or Flight, by Sean Krauss (writing as geelpete)
- 24 MANALIVE, A Mystery of Madness - I, by Bill Powell
- 25 Hedge, by Steven Richards
- 26 A Broken Man, by Geoff Fortytwo
- 27 Polendina, by Christopher Lewis

- 28 The Initial State, by Matt Barton
- 29 MANALIVE, A Mystery of Madness - II, by Bill Powell
- 30 Pathfinder, by Tony Woods
- 31 The Apolcalypse Clock, by GlorbWare
- 32 Wumpus Run, by Elfindor
- 33 Ballymun Adventure, by Brendan Cribbin
- 34 Tentellian Island, by Zack Wood (writing as Waru)
- 35 Lawn of Love, by Santoonie Corporation
- 36 Beam, by Madrone Eddy
- 37 Enter the Dark, by Peter R. Shushmaruk
- 38 Green Falls, by Paul Panks (writing as Dunric)
- 39 Sisyphus, by Theo Koutz
- 40 Visocica, by Thorben Bürgel
- 41 Simple Adventure, by Paul Panks (writing as Dunric)
- 42 Fetter's Grim, by Paul Panks (writing as Dunric)
- 43 PTGOOD 8*10^23, by Sartre Malvolio

ADRIFT games came in at ten, twelve, nineteen, thirty-two and forty-three, roughly comparable to last year when we managed places eleven, twelve and fourteen in the top twenty.

No real surprises at the top end - three of the big names from the IF world in the top four, another at six and the winner of last year's IFCComp at seven. No real surprise at the other end, either, with the bottom two places being occupied for the third year in a row by the same two people. One of these people, Sartre Malvolio [Slan Xorox], writes a deliberately bad game for the IFCComp every year and generally winds up here. The other, Paul Panks, writes games that only he seems to like and also winds up at the bottom of the heap as a result. At least he's improving though... the last two years he's had the last place in the Comp whereas this year he managed to beat that. I'm sure he's pleased.

One interesting thing to note from the games placed at the bottom end is that they're either a) joke entries (*Sisyphus* and *PTGOOD 8*10^23*) or b) games written not with one of the standard IF systems but instead a custom job (*Green Falls*, *Visocica*, *Simple Adventure* and *Fetter's Grim*). While writing a game with a custom system doesn't mean you're guaranteed a low place - *Aunts & Butlers* came 16th - it's a clear indication that if you want to do well in the IFCComp, a custom system probably isn't the way to go.

Spring Thing 2007

Greg Boettcher has announced details of the Spring Thing 2007, the 'other' major Comp in the IF world. This tends to be a smaller Comp than the IFCComp and carries a \$7 entry fee which, despite being an amazingly trivial amount (from my point of view anyway), has

caused something of an uproar over the years. On the plus side, the entry fee, trivial though it may be, generally has the effect of keeping joke entries and buggy messes out of the Comp. Whereas with the IFComp, you get a generally mixed bag - good games brushing shoulders with games that should never have been released in the first place - the ones in the Spring Thing are usually of a higher quality.

Full details: <http://www.springthing.net/2007>

ADRIFT Forum

Digest

By Stefan Donati (Shuarian)

Adrift Forum Digest 4

Programming Help

Operator precedence in numeric expressions

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=4;t=5777>

TedSwippet examined the use of operator precedence in numerical expressions, and explained the difference between Adrift's use and other programs like Basic or C.

Say [subject] to [character] - use of synonyms

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=4;t=5763>

Looks at possible ways to replace Adrift's standard ask [character] about [subject] sequence by say [subject] to [character] instead.

Game Design, Writing Techniques

A maze amazes

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5756>

The Amazing Poodle Boy uses the maze in 'Countdown to Doom' as an example of a well crafted and satisfying maze. It was then discussed what qualities a good maze must have, and what typical mistakes authors are making when creating a maze.

Player Preferences

How do you make a good game?

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5735>

djchallis started this discussion by asking what elements are defining a good game. Are the puzzles important? The technical implementation? The story?

Competitions

Random thoughts on the IF Comp

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5806>

Notes and short comments by David Whyld on the IF Comp entries.

IF Comp Results

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5782>

An overview of the IF Comp 2006 results. After the rather successful results in the IF Comp 2005, the outcome of this year was more mixed. Richard Otter's Unauthorized Termination came tenth, becoming the second Adrift game (after 'The PK Girl' in 2003) to be placed in the top ten of the IF Comp. The other Adrift games were The Sisters by revgiblet (12th place), Requiem by David Whyld (19th place) and Wumpus Run by Elfindor (32th place). PTGOOD 8*10^23 by Sartre Malvolio, which was also written in Adrift, came last (43th place), and probably deservingly so.

Miscellaneous

The Bigger Picture

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5734>

This thread, started by David Whyld, talks about the audience one writes his/her game for, and to what extent (if any) an author should make compromises and concessions. The general consensus seemed to be that an author should, first and foremost, write the story to his liking. However, when this story gets incorporated into Interactive Fiction, certain technical and gameplay standards should be kept in mind.

Increasing the appeal of IF

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5746>

Ravells puts forward the idea to increase the appeal of Interactive Fiction by enlarging its audience. Most games are only promoted along the well established IF scene, even though some games could be of interest to people which are more interested in the subject of the actual game (eg. Ancient Rome) than in its form (i.e. IF).

In The Hot Seat

Interview with Jason Guest

Now he's returned after a year and a bit away from the ADRIFT scene, I decided it was high time to sit down Jason Guest, AKA The Amazing Poodle Boy, and question him about just where he's been and what he's been doing during all that time.

Q

Tell us about yourself - who is the Amazing Poodle Boy?

A

I live in London, I'm 36 years old and my day job is making animated TV commercials, TV station idents, that sort of thing. It's a lot less exciting than most people think. I spent the whole of last week trying to squeeze a live-action cow into a Pot Noodle pot. Seriously.

Q

And (a question I've always been kind of curious know the answer to), why are

you called the Amazing Poodle Boy?

A Good question. It was one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions that you make and then have to live with! I was new to the ADRIFT forum and wanted to make an impression. I have always been fond of superheroes, and many superheroes have animal powers. So I thought, what's the stupidest animal I can think of for a superhero to take his powers from? And poodles are so ridiculous. I have a tendency to be rather serious, and I thought it would be difficult to be too serious with a ludicrous name like that. That and the fact that I was imbued with amazing poodle-like powers by an extra-dimensional being known as Ozwas the Omnipotent.

Q You've been gone from the ADRIFT scene for 18 months or so, with just the odd post here and there during that time, yet now you're back. What prompted you to return? And is it a permanent return or just you popping back to say hi?

A I returned because the ADRIFT forum is one of the nicest online communities I've ever encountered. I do feel guilty that so few of my recent posts have been ADRIFT related. And I *am* writing another ADRIFT game - honest!

Q Let's talk about your games. "Goldilocks Is A Fox" won the ADRIFT End of Year Comp in 2002. What was the inspiration behind it?

A I first started writing "Goldilocks" just after finishing the HTML version of "Escape from the Crazy Place." At the time I wasn't aware of the wider IF community, or even of the ADRIFT forum! I was writing purely for my own amusement, and to see whether I *could* write a decent text adventure game. I didn't spend too long thinking up the idea; I thought a spoof fairytale might suggest some interesting puzzles and locations. Nor did I have a plan; I just made it up as I went along. The PC was based upon a girl I had the hots for at art school, she was smart, punky, and sarcastic, and very sexy.

Q

Your next game “To Hell In A Hamper” - about a Victorian balloonist and his unusual companion trying to avoid death by volcanic eruption. Did much research go into the game or were the facts and figures pretty much made up ‘on the spot’?

A

I think you have to do a certain amount of research for any “period” game, and by research I mean reading stuff written at the time, otherwise you’re drawing on second-hand reference material. I’m a voracious reader of Victorian fiction anyway, so it was no hardship. I discovered a lot of things about Victorian ballooning that became crucial for the mechanics of the game, such as that *hot air* balloons were not in common usage until the 1940s - the Victorians used sealed hydrogen balloons. There’s no way to make one of those float higher except by throwing out ballast - and without that fact the game simply wouldn’t have worked. I also discovered that the Victorians were inclined to carry all sorts of preposterous things up in their balloons with them, such as art treasures and musical instruments, which fitted in very nicely with the idea of my game. From reading Coxwell and Glaisher’s account of their historic ascent of 1862 I found out just how high it is possible to go in a balloon without passing out, and exactly what happens to an unprotected person at very high altitudes.

Q

Was there anything about either of those games that you wished you'd done differently? Would you consider releasing updated versions at some point?

A

I’m currently some way into a remake of “Goldilocks is a FOX!” which is being coded in Inform by Mark J. Tilford. There’s also an unfinished TADS 2 port of that game which I may or may not continue with. I’ve polished a lot of the writing, and added a lot of bells and whistles; things that are difficult or impossible to code in ADRIFT.

Q

What about future games? I've heard mention of titles like “Gorilla Suit”, “Stranded On Iloofrax” and “The Body In The Airing Cupboard” before. Will any of those see the light of day at some point?

A I tend to announce that I'm working on games in the hope that it will spur me to finish them. Unfortunately it doesn't seem to work that way - in fact I'd say it has the opposite effect! "Stranded on Iloofrax", an ADRIFT game, will almost certainly be released at some point - I've done too much work on that game to abandon it. Beyond that, I'm determined to make one more game, and actually enter it in the IF Comp, but it won't be any of the others mentioned. I have an idea I'm working on at the moment, in I7, which I think could really work.

Q "Escape From The Crazy Place" - a choose-your-own-adventure style game - has been available on your website for a while now. I hear you've made a TADS version of it; what was the motivation behind writing the game in TADS as opposed to ADRIFT? What features does the TADS version have that an ADRIFT one wouldn't?

A I'm not even sure how you'd go about writing a CYOA in ADRIFT, though I know it's been done. "Escape from the Crazy Place" has something like 700 pages, and I needed something that would allow me to copy and paste code so as to take the donkey work out of it. Initially I tried Adventure Book, but that didn't allow me to add illustrations, so I switched to TADS 2 and Mark Musante's CYOA library. There are around 70 illustrations in "Escape", and it would have been a shame not to include them.

Q Why did you write a CYOA style game instead of a more conventional IF game?

A "Escape from the Crazy Place" is a port of a game that started life as a series of handwritten books, which I began writing aged 13, so in a sense it's my first game.

Q And plans for a sequel?

A No. It's time to lay that old dinosaur to rest. I was disappointed by the review of the game in SPAG, but not particularly surprised. It made me laugh, actually. The whole point of the game is that if you take it seriously, you won't enjoy it. It's designed to wind serious-minded people up, whilst being a lot of fun to anyone who enjoys silliness. Escape is one of those games that you either love or hate. It's like Marmite. I wrote it originally to amuse myself, my brother and sister, and a few friends who share my apparently "sophomoric" sense of humour. The reviewer, Mike Harris, points out that the game "reads like something written by a 13 year old." If he'd read the introduction, he'd have realised that parts of it *were* written by a 13 year old. I wrote it for 22 years, literally, and didn't re-write a thing. It's a pity he didn't play beyond the first few turns, as later parts of the book contain some of my funniest writing; my favourite bit is the whole "Cow of Honour" section, which was written about ten years ago in collaboration with my friend Loz Etheridge. I would write one line, and he the next, and so on. Neither of us knew where the story was heading. In all, thirty different people contributed their efforts, and yet through all the chaos, if you play the game for long enough a kind of theme begins to develop, to do with life and death and rebirth, the whole cyclical nature of the universe. It's to do with Samsara, and it's also a koan. People can say what they like about Escape from the Crazy Place - I'm proud as hell of it.

Q You've written a game with TADS in the past. How do you think it holds up against the likes of Inform 7, the big talking point in the IF community right now?

A Well, I haven't used TADS 3, so I really can't comment about how the current version of TADS holds up against the current version of Inform. TADS 2 basically allowed me to do anything I wanted to do with IF. TADS 3 came out just at the time when I felt I'd got the hang of working with TADS 2, and the prospect of learning the language all over again just didn't appeal. I7 on the other hand seemed like a whole different authoring experience; different from TADS, different from ADRIFT, so I thought I'd give it a go. I'm having fun, but I'm finding the documentation a little frustrating. I keep wanting to look things up in the built-in manual, but find I can't because I don't know what the thing I'm looking up is called. An example is the story headline - I wanted to change the line at the beginning that says "An interactive fiction by..." which is called the story headline, but I didn't know that, so I spent ages trawling through the manual. Eventually I turned to the source code for "Bronze". In my opinion looking at the source code for other people's games is the best way to learn how to program, anyway.

Q

As you know how to program, what was it about ADRIFT that made you choose it over a programming language in the first place?

A

I wrote several unfinished text adventures in BBC Basic when I was in my teens, and even wrote a program for cataloguing product orders for the firm where my Dad worked, but when I first rediscovered IF I wasn't aware of Inform or TADS. The first system I discovered was something called CAT, The Creative Adventure Toolkit, but soon after I discovered ADRIFT which was much better. ADRIFT allowed me to do pretty much what I wanted to, but I did have some difficulty with coding certain puzzles in "Goldilocks", the one involving the large chair in particular. The lack of proper IF-THEN-ELSE statements meant creating dozens of tasks with different restrictions, and it almost did my head in at one point. That and the weaknesses of the parser prompted the move to TADS. In TADS, the same puzzle took me minutes to code. But I still love working with ADRIFT - with "Stranded on Iloofrax" I've kept things a lot simpler.

Q

You occasionally post on the Usenet newsgroups of RAIF and RGIF. Recently there's been a lot of discussion over there about setting up an IF forum (several attempts have even been made). What are your opinions on the subject? Do you think the move to a forum would be likely to increase the IF user database?

A

I think that question's answered itself. I visited one of the IF forums yesterday and nobody had posted anything for three weeks. I'm not a big fan of the newsgroups. They're very dry and dusty places. It's hard to get excited about a group where so many of the topics have titles like "TADS 3: SysInfoVersion", "I6: Infix Stack Overflow" or "FrobTADS runs on BeOS?!", to quote three from RAIF today. RGIF is almost as bad; there seems to be very little discussion in either group about writing, plot, puzzle construction; the creative, rather than technical aspects of writing text adventures. I guess people like to keep their ideas close to their chests, and that's fair enough. It would be nice, on RGIF, though, to find a few posts enthusing about games rather than a slew of posts pointing out minor bugs in interpreters. As for forums, I'm all in favour of somewhere more informal and chatty, where people can post off-topic without getting shouted down, but unless that's what the rest of the community want too, they're not going to succeed.

Q

Collaboration. You took part in the “Pass The Taf” project in the past (where a group of drifters each wrote part of a game file before passing it on to the next person) which sadly died out before reaching completion. Would you be interested in another collaboration project and, perhaps more importantly, what do you think the chances of one succeeding would be?

A

I love the idea of collaborative IF. “Escape from the Crazy Place” had around thirty authors, it worked like the game *Exquisite corpse*. It’s easier with a CYOA type game than with traditional IF because it requires no coding. The kind of collaborative IF project I’d be interested in would be a series of games all set around a common location, like the *Reality-on-the-Norm* games written by the AGS community. Each game would be like an episode of a TV series - Imagine a setting like Springfield in “The Simpsons”, someone would write a game in which Homer was the PC, and then someone else would write a game centred around, say, Apu. The games wouldn’t necessarily follow on directly from one another, but the events of one could suggest another. Years ago I suggested that the Australian town of Loogaborooga, the setting of Matt Dark Baron’s “When Beer Isn’t Enough” would be perfect for something like this. It’s a highly original setting populated by colourful characters. I think comedy games lend themselves to collaboration better than serious games. People are less precious about comedy; they’re less likely to object when someone introduces an element that doesn’t fit with how they saw the games unfolding. In improvisation comedy there’s a rule that whenever one improviser “offers” something, that is, introduces a new element into the performance, his fellow improvisers must “accept” the offer in order for the performance to work, in other words they must take whatever has been introduced and incorporate it. The “Pass-the-TAF” game failed because everybody was introducing new ideas and nobody was following them up.

Q

Any plans to enter either of the major non-ADRIFT Comps in 2007 - the Spring Thing or the IFComp?

A

I’m always planning to enter the IFComp; this year the film got in the way of IF, but next year could be the one.

Q

What IF games are you playing right now?

A

I'm playing through some of the comp games. There's one in particular I really like, but I won't discuss it here because the Comp is still ongoing. The last game I played through from start to finish was Emily Short's "Bronze". I love everything Emily does - she has a real feel for the medium.

Q

What do you do away from the world of interaction fiction?

A

Well, I've just finished a short film, entitled "The Visitation", which I wrote and directed. It's taken up a lot of the time this year I'd normally have spent writing IF. It's a live action film, surprisingly, that stars Paul Darrow of Blake's 7 fame. Right now I'm trying to get it entered into festivals. There's a page dedicated to the film on my website www.groundchuck.co.uk, and eventually you will be able to download it from Digital Deli, <http://212.124.197.186/jasonguest/index.html> Interestingly the film also stars Tommy Herbert, author of IFComp 2004 entry Bellclap. Tommy was introduced to me by a friend of a friend, who suggested he might be right for the part - it was only afterwards that we realised we'd beta-tested each others' games!

Q

Finally, is there anything else you wish you'd been asked in this interview or anything you'd like to add?

A

No, I don't think so - thanks for asking me!

AUTHOR PROFILE: Jason Guest

Full Size Games:

- 1) 07 09 02 **Goldilocks Is A Fox**
- 2) 20 04 03 **To Hell In A Hamper**

Awards:

Goldilocks Is A Fox came 1st place in the ADRIFT End Of Year Comp 2002 & 2nd place in the ADRIFT Spring Comp 2002.

To Hell In A Hamper came 1st place in the 1st place in the ADRIFT End Of Year Comp 2003 and ADRIFT Spring Competition 2003.

VQGS

(Very Quick Guide to SCARE)

By Ren

Okay - what's this 'SCARE' nonsense?

Rising from the ashes of Mark Tilford's (aka *ralphmerridew*) no-longer-supported jAsea (itself a Java GPL clone of the Adrift runner), SCARE enables users of non-windows systems to play games written in Adrift 3.8, 3.9 and 4.0.

Or, in the words of creator Simon Baldwin (*TedSwippet* on the Adrift Forum), SCARE "*aims to provide an ANSI/ISO C core Adrift interpreter, portable enough to run on Linux, Windows, DOS, Macintosh, Amiga, or any platform that offers an ANSI/ISO C compiler. Maybe even PalmOS.*"

SCARE is also part of the Gargoyle bundle.

Wait - Gargoyle?

Yes, Gargoyle is a little different.

It's not an acronym

Indeed it isn't, but Gargoyle also isn't an interpreter. It's Tor Andersson's front-end for a number of interpreters, a bundle that lets you play Frotz, Alan, Hugo, Adrift and Tads games (to name a few) in one typographically lovely, shiny package, and it uses SCARE to run the Adrift games. Like Spatterlight.

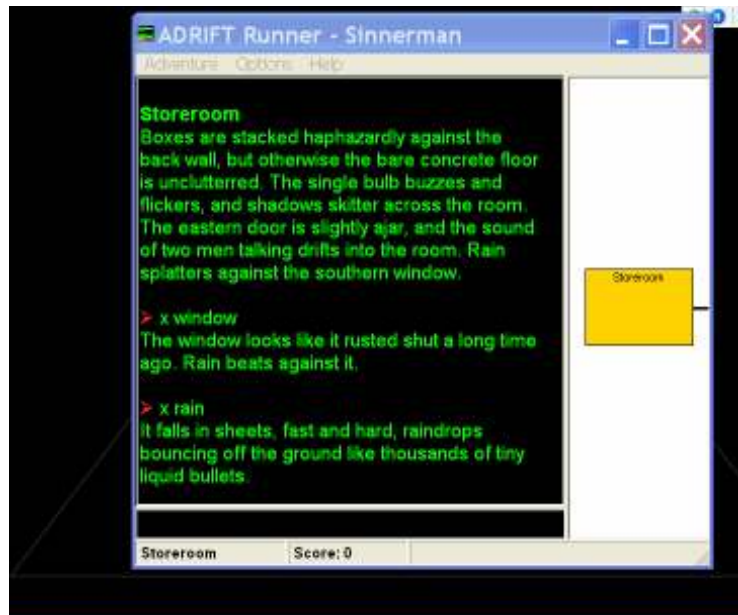
Spa-

Gargoyle for Macs.

Fine, but I have just use the runner, why should I care?

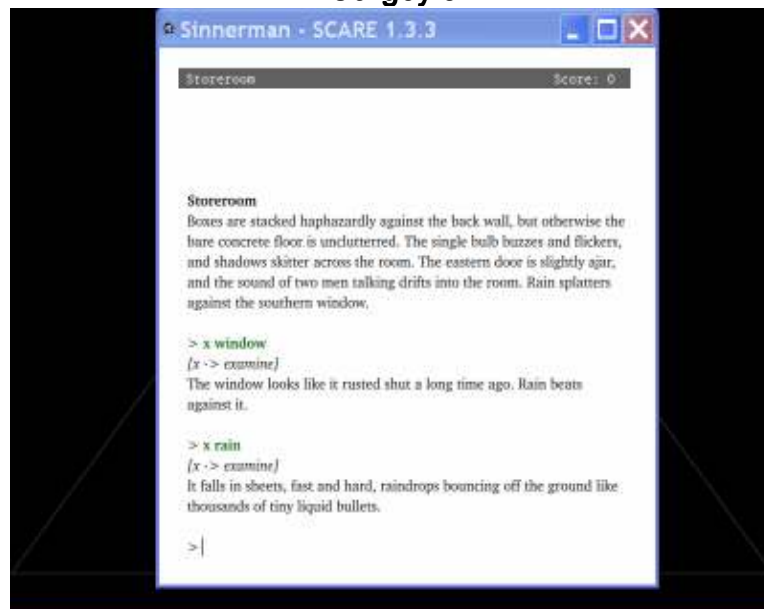
Because Gargoyle is so damn pretty, look:

Adrift



Not pretty

Gargoyle



Mmmm. Pretty.

No, seriously, why should I care?

A while back there was a forum debate on who drifters wrote their games for - the Adrift community, or the wider IF community. Anyone interested in the latter - and particularly anyone interested in the IF comp - needs to pay some attention to SCARE.

Because SCARE enables non-windows users to play Adrift games, and Gargoyle is so damn pretty (*Gargoyle made it much more pleasurable to play the Adrift games this time around, and probably contributed to me scoring them higher than in years past - Preferred User, IF Comp Judge 2006*), a number of people are going to use SCARE to play your Adrift game.

So some people use SCARE / Gargoyle / Spatterlight. What's the problem?

The problem is that SCARE is reverse engineered and, while it's reverse engineered pretty darn well, it doesn't mirror the Adrift runner perfectly. If you aren't careful, and if you don't get someone to test your game in SCARE, you may find that it's buggy, or even unplayable in the alternative interpreter.

Could you possibly be more specific?

Yes.

[sigh] Will you please be more specific?

Okay, here are some common problems:

1. **%text%**

%text% is a pretty nifty function in Adrift. You can set up a standard response, then exclude key commands by using the restriction *referenced text must not equal Y* where *Y* is the key command. For instance, you could build a dead room to avoid the dreaded Adrift high score table, where every input produces the standard text *you have died: restart, restore or quit?* unless the player types *restart, restore* or *quit* (where *Y* is these three words), at which point the relevant systems tasks would kick in instead.

Unfortunately, the current build of SCARE (1.3.4, and 1.3.3 for Gargoyle / Spatterlight), checks the restrictions before it associates a value with *%text%*, so any attempt to place a *referenced text must* restriction will cause the programme to crash.

On the plus side, you can sometimes work around this issue using wildcards (*), and it is an issue Simon hopes to address in the 1.3.5 build.

See: <http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=4;t=5636>

2. Overriding system tasks

Adrift lets you override system tasks very easily. Say you can go **north** from *Castle Walls* to *The Moat*. You link the rooms up as a normal (to stop the automap from breaking), then create a task called **north** with the restriction *player must be holding bleeding fish*. In Adrift this works fine. It will let you go north with the fish, otherwise it will display whatever restriction output you've entered, say: *with nothing to distract them, the hungry piranha fish snap at your feet and you quickly retreat from the moat*.

However, when the SCARE player types **north** sans bleeding fish it will just move you north (or if you've used Adrift's built in *Room only if* function it will say *you can't go in that direction (yet)* instead). This is because Adrift looks through the user tasks before the system tasks and user tasks override system tasks, whether they succeed or fail. SCARE just looks for a task that works.

If you want this kind of override to work in SCARE you're either going to have to have one task for going **north** with the fish (a task that moves you north), and one task for going **north** without (that gives you the restriction message), which is double the work, or you're going to have to disable the map and just not use the system task for north.

The different handling of task order is an ongoing, and so far unresolved, issue for SCARE.

3. ALR

The ALR is an easy way of individualising your game, but the responses given by the Adrift runner and SCARE don't always match. More frustratingly, while trying to take a static object in the runner produces the response *You can't take %theobject%! SCARE just states *You can't take that*. The same is true for wearing objects, putting things on objects etc.*

So, while you might have provided the adrift player with a nice rounded world - try to take the umbrella stand in the tourist office and you can use the ALR to *You can't take the umbrella stand!**The tourist rep yells 'Hey, they're for tour guides only!'* - you can't do the same for the SCARE player without creating a separate task for each eventuality. Again, this means a lot more work.

Is this going to be fixed? Well, I'll quote Simon: *ALRs are an abomination! Using one is akin to using a tactical nuke where a scalpel would be appropriate* and then I'll take a rough guess in the general vicinity of 'no'.

That sounds like a lot of work, is the extra effort really worth it?

I'm sorry, did you not see how pretty Gargoyle is?

<http://ccxvii.net/gargoyle/screenshots.html>

Use.
It.

Hook, Line & Sinker

By Chenshaw

2. The Line

Background:

In the last newsletter, I introduced this three part series as a guide toward writing games that will keep your players, and you, interested. I'm not an expert, but I've written a few games, I've played a few games, and I read and written a lot of non-game material. So here I am trying to put down a few of the things I've noticed about what to do, or not to do.

The first instalment was 'The Hook', and it focused on the title, menu options, introduction and first room of the game. These are the things that are most important to capturing the interest of a player. However, this is only a tiny part of the entire game. There is still lots left that needs to be written, and this is where problems due to boredom or confusion can creep in. The body of the game is what I'm calling The Line - the long reeling in of the player toward the eventual conclusion(s).

The problem

Introductions and conclusions are easy to visualise when writing a game. They are in many ways discreet parts of the story, and can stand on their own as set-piece scenes. If you have an idea for a story, chances are the beginning will be very clear to you, and the conclusion (even if you don't think about it very much at first) will also be pretty clear-cut once you tackle it.

If your introduction is to lead the player into the game, directed by you to a particular setting, mood, atmosphere, or whatever, then the body of the game should reflect the introduction. It doesn't necessarily have to be seamless - the introduction can really stand out, and I think that can be the most effective type of introduction - but there should be continuity. There should be a natural progression, and this progression is going to be particular to the storyline.

In traditional fiction, the author can lead the reader by the nose, this way and that, backward and forward in time, back and forth between characters. This means that the story can be told in series of scenes. These are generally delineated by chapters. With IF, this is more difficult. Even with CYOA games, the player is going to have, and should have, some control over the direction of the game (otherwise it wouldn't be interactive). But you can still write the game as a series of sections, and you should still lead the player through the story.

Scenes

I am going to suggest that IF can be written as if it was made up acts and scenes, with mini-beginnings, middles and ends. At least this is how it can be conceived during the writing process. For example, a room is a scene. The scene can be populated by objects and characters, just like in a story. Also like traditional fiction, a scene is populated by actions. People generally dislike 'empty' rooms - rooms with no interactive possibilities, rooms that are identical to each other, rooms that are there merely to get the player from one place to another in the name of realism. Whatever people have to say about realism or mimesis, fiction is NOT REAL. You are still setting a stage. And setting a stage means that everything has to have a function, whether it's to set a tone or move the plot. If someone asked you in a job interview to describe your own room (I actually had this happen), you would want to describe it in a way that best describes YOU. You will pick out things that reflect your personality, your habits, etc. (okay, you will probably not mention the dirty clothes and rubbish in an interview, but you get what I mean). Scenes in IF should be seen in the same light.

Treat each room, or room group, like a scene, and it should:

1. add to the tone of the game
2. reveal something about the game, character and/or plot
3. give the player meaningful actions to carry out
4. hold the player's interest with creative writing

Acts

Acts are like stages of the plot. So, in a detective story, the introduction might set the tone, setting, PC character, and perhaps the first part of the plot. The next part, Act I, could be the gathering of some clues. So you have a beginning (the player looks for clues), a middle (the player finds the clues, perhaps with puzzles, character interaction, etc.) and an end (the player has found the clues and is starting to piece things together). These clues may be misleading. Act IV might begin with the PC realising the clues are misleading, finding out why she was misled in this way, and deciding what to do about it. And so on.

So, how to do this without forcing the player along a particular path? Some games do have a single path, which the player must discover through trial and error along the way. I don't see that as a problem, necessarily, as long as alternatives are catered for with responses or failure endings that are appropriate for the story (multiple endings will be discussed in the third instalment, although they do of course have some impact on the player's decision to continue with the story through the middle). Where this can hang up is when bugs and GTV issues prevent the player from continuing down the prescribed path, causing frustration and QUIT commands.

For games that are less prescribed, the division of the story into Acts needs to be more creatively thought out. In our detective story, perhaps it is possible for the player to learn that some clues are misleading from the outset, by getting a tip-off. In this case, so the clues aren't made completely redundant, it may be necessary to make them useful in other ways than simply misleading the PC - perhaps the clues allow her to learn about her foe or about the crime in other ways. A big problem I see in games is redundancy. You have an idea what's going to happen yet you have to go through certain motions which aren't of any real use, because that's how the game was written. If your game has this possibility in it, think hard about 'necessary' actions that may not be so necessary in some cases, and give

them multiple functions or meaning. It's more complicated, but pays off.

Movement

Above all, the division of a story into acts, chapters, or what-have-you allows the story to be moved in a particular direction. If it is your intention to merely have the player wander around until the conclusion suddenly just happens, then you don't have to worry about this, but in my opinion, any good sized game is going to need progression from introduction to conclusion. If your game is plot-driven, movement is essential. Whether this is through set-pieces or a more freely rambling game play, thought needs to go into the progression of stages in the game. If your plot is to come to a conclusion, wrapping up all loose ends and the like, it will only make sense if the player understands how they got to that point. This is managed through the writer's direction of the player's movement through the story, in the way that best fits with the plot. I won't try to think of a list of rules for doing this, but I feel that it is something that must be uppermost in the mind of the writer - critique your own writing and ask yourself if everything the PC can meaningfully do in your game is being put to use.

Puzzles

One complaint that is often made is that some games include actions or puzzles that have little relation to the story, or aren't necessary to it. If you are engrossed in a long game with a complicated plot, you are going to expect puzzles to get you somewhere. Having puzzles for the sake of it is a VERY BAD IDEA. It is particularly bad because it is so tempting (I know, I've made the mistake myself). Unless the plot is simply to solve puzzles, they must not actually seem like puzzles.

I would suggest that puzzles (and by that I mean the complicated, several-tasks type puzzles, not the 'put the right thing in the right slot' puzzle) are treated like an act in and of themselves, even if they overlap or are part of other scenes or acts. Your puzzle could have a beginning (you learn that a character has information you need to get, so you get to know the character) a middle (you have to entice the character, with your knowledge of their wants and needs, to tell you the information) and an end (your actions bear fruit, and the character tells you what you need to know). This doesn't feel like a puzzle, but it is.

Puzzles are essentially something that you have to figure out. It isn't obvious, or it wouldn't be a puzzle. Therefore, players are going to make mistakes. I think a problem with some games (my own included) is that the writer needs to realise that there are more puzzles in their game than they actually planned. Anything that requires the player to perform a series of tasks in a particular order is a puzzle, and should be treated like one during writing. This means thinking about the mistakes players will make trying to figure out what to do, and helping them by making their mistakes obvious and appropriate to the story so they will keep trying until they get it right.

Puzzles can make or break a game. In IF they move the plot, they provide interest and intellectual stimulation, and in many games are indispensable. They are also a huge trap for the writer, and must be treated very carefully.

Conclusion

Rather than thinking of a game as a long wandering series of puzzles sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion, it may help to write it as a series of acts and scenes,

which move the story along like a conveyor belt. Don't let your story stagnate and lose cohesion - make sure that it follows on from the introduction and leads to a conclusion, with rooms, objects, characters and actions all having a purpose and a clear reason for existing. Think hard about the puzzles in the game, and situations that may not seem like a puzzle, but which nevertheless must be treated as one during writing, and realise that puzzles, too, must move the story toward its eventual conclusion.

IFComp 2006

by David Whyld

Initial thoughts before playing any of the games...

There are more games this year than in the previous few years. Quite a few more in fact. 44 in all. 2005 had 36, as did 2004; 2003 had just 30; 2002 had 38; it's way back in 2001 (before I started following the IFComp) that there were more games. So the total of 44 for 2006 is positive in one way. Of course, as three of those entries are by the guy widely regarded as the worst IF writer of all time, it's not quite as positive as it may at first seem. And then there's the fact that half the games are Inform games. Who's going to bet that a good number of them are written with Inform 7 by people 'learning the language'?

Very few TADS games this year, just two in TADS 2 and three in TADS 3, compared to a whopping 22 in Inform! The Inform 6 and Inform 7 games were all lumped together but even so, either seemed a lot more appealing to the IFComp entrants than TADS. It seems the ease of use of Inform 7, even in beta format, is seen a better thing than the overly complex TADS. It'll be interesting to see if Inform 7 continues to dominate the Comp in future years or if its newness is the main reason for its success.

...and after playing a few of them...

Only one ALAN game, one Hugo game and one Quest game. While Hugo is considered to be on a par with Inform and TADS (couldn't say myself as I haven't used it), it still seems surprisingly unpopular. ALAN is now up to version 3 but not proving very popular either. Then again, I had problems getting last year's sole ALAN entry to run (constant crashes) and this year's entry's colours settings and fonts seem to be non-customisable, so maybe people are reluctant to use it when more stable alternatives exist. As for Quest...? Well, I suppose it's nice to see a Quest game in the IFComp as there was once a time when I considered Quest (with a huge amount of improvements and a completely redesigned GUI) to be a viable alternative to ADRIFT, but based on the latest Quest game and its general lack of polish, not to mention the flaws in the system itself, I don't think Quest's reputation is going to increase in leaps and bounds as a result. There's apparently a new version of Quest out shortly and not a moment too soon.

ADRIFT? Five entries. Equal to last year's, although again we've had the pleasure of Slan Xorox releasing his bugfest with ADRIFT. Gee, we drifters sure are blessed to have such a

persona using our system to create his 'masterpieces'. Still, I suppose I should look on the positive side of things. Whatever faults my own game has, by comparison with Xorox's game I've written a masterpiece.

I see three (count 'em! Three!) games by none other than Paul "I've quit IF 'cos you're all a bunch of losers" Panks. He's achieved the rather remarkable distinction of coming last place in both of the last two IFComps (last and third last in last year's), and this time he looks set to outdo himself. While it was tempting to play his games and write lots of derogatory things about them, I decided to resist the urge this year. No doubt every other reviewer will give them a slating anyway so I thought I'd save myself some time.

Of course, even Panks isn't guaranteed last place this year. One of the game's I tried wouldn't work at all; one was in some horrible Java program that made my eyes ache just looking at it (seriously, a font that small is never a wise move); another was in a foreign language which probably isn't a very clever idea considering most of the judges are likely to be English speaking and not able to read it. But hey, it didn't work for me anyway so the fact that it's written in a language I don't understand is kind of irrelevant.

...and after playing them all...

Was the IFComp better this year than the previous years? Did the extra games make this a more memorable year than 2002, 2003, 2004 or 2005? Hard to say.

Overall, I enjoyed the games I played more this year than for the previous few years. But note the phrase "I enjoyed the games I played". This year, I was a little more harsh in disqualifying the games I wasn't going to play, thus leaving me with the games that, initially at least, seemed playable. The unplayable messes, the bugfests, the games written by a certain someone who I shan't name here... all these got abandoned after the first few minutes due to their sheer naffness. So what I was left with in the end was just the cream of the crop.

Not an especially impressive cream, though. No game scored a 9 this year; there was just a single 8; two 7's; six 6's; four 5's... so just 13 games out of a possible 44 got a score of higher than 4 this year. Not exactly anything to write home about.

Games I didn't play for whatever reason

As there were more games this year than the previous few years, and I didn't manage to get through all of the games in the last three IFComps, I decided to be a little harsher in disqualifying the games I wasn't going to play and review this year. Most of them I quit within five minutes of starting them (some I didn't even play at all), long enough, I felt, to sort the bugfests from the proper games. I think most of the reasons I've given for not playing any further into the games are valid, but if you're writer of one of them I'll understand if you disagree.

"Another Goddamn Escape The Locked Room Game" by Riff Conner - Not a joke game as I'd guessed from the title, but... sigh... a satire. You're in a locked room and you have to escape. I tried to find enthusiasm for playing it but couldn't.

"Enter The Dark" by Peter Shushmaruk - First thing I noticed: it doesn't understand X for EXAMINE. I'm sure the last Alan game I played (the sole Alan entry in the IFComp 2005)

understood X so why this one doesn't is a bit of a mystery. Next thing: the colour settings don't seem to work. There's an option to change the defaults (I like white text on a black background) but for some reason they don't have any effect. The colours stay black text on a glaring white background. Final thing: the font overrides *do* work, but as soon as you exit out of the game and go back in, they've reset themselves to the defaults. Seems Alan 3 still has a few teething problems. Oh, and there doesn't seem to be a VERBOSE command meaning I need to type LOOK every time I return to a location so I can see what's there. All in all, more trouble than it's worth.

"Fetter's Grim" by Paul Panks - Because it's Paul Panks. He's written the worse games in both of the last two IFComps (heck, the worst *two* games in last year's Comp) and I haven't the patience for his efforts any longer. As every game he writes is essentially the same anyway, feel free to read my reviews of "Nina" or "Ninja II" and just substitute this game's title for one of them.

"Green Falls" by Paul Panks - See reason for "Fetter's Grim".

"Initial State" by Matt Barton - It's a Windows game. Sorry. But if people are going to persist in writing their games in this way, they need to get used to people not playing them. Oh, and it doesn't understand the X command for EXAMINE. Explain to me one way a system like this is better than any of the proper interpreters out there and I'll consider reconsidering.

"Labyrinth" by Sami Preuninger - I've never been fond of puzzlefests and this was one. The first puzzle involved playing a randomised game of counters with a fellow called Ray which put me right off playing the rest of the game. Maybe if there had been an option to skip the game of counters, I'd have tried the rest of the game but as I didn't see one, I didn't play any further.

"Legion" by Ian Anderson - For some reason which probably seemed like a really good one to the author, this game overrides the default colour settings and won't let me change them back to what I want. Bad move. Off to the recycle bin with you.

"PTGOOD" by Sartre Malvolio - Funnily enough, there are people who enter deliberately bad games in the IFComp every year. Sartre Malvolio, aka Slan Zorax, aka Zorax (or Patient 1151 of the local lunatic asylum as he's probably more commonly known) is one such person. Why do they do it? Beats me.

"Requiem" by David Whyld - My own game. Strictly speaking, I *could* still review it but I suspect my review might be a tad biased...

"Simple Adventure" by Paul Panks - See reason for "Fetter's Grim".

"Tentellian Island" by Zack Wood - Miniscule font. Absolutely tiny. I was literally leaning forward in my seat and squinting at the screen in order to be able to read it. As there's no option to change it that I could find, and the game is written in, of all things, Java, I decided to push it to one side.

"Visocica" by Thorben Burgel - Wouldn't work. I double clicked the icon, something flashed

on screen, then it shut down. Normally I'd have posted a message on a forum or newsgroup asking for a solution to this, but as the walkthrough for the game was in a foreign language and the game itself some horrible Windows things instead of a proper interpreter, I decided not to bother.

"Yasmina's Quest" by jalbam - 1) It was in a foreign language which I don't understand so couldn't play. 2) I couldn't figure out how to get it to run. Double clicking on each of the icons didn't do a thing and there were no instructions.

And for the games I **did** play, the scores:

1)	"The Elysium Enigma" by Eric Eve	8.0
2)	"Floatpoint" by Emily Short	7.1
3)	"The Primrose Path" by Nolan Bonvouloir	7.0
4)	"Aunts & Butlers" by Robin Johnson	6.6
5)	"Tower Of The Elephant" by Tor Andersson	6.5
6)	"Tales Of The Travelling Swordsman" by Anonymous	6.4
7)	"Moon-Shaped" by Jason Ermer	6.3
8)	"Unauthorised Termination" by Richard Otter	6.2
9)	"Game Producer!" by Jason Bergman	6.1
10)	"The Sisters" by Revgivlet	6.0
11)	"Delightful Wallpaper" by Edgar O. Weyrd	5.3
12)	"Madam Spider" by Sara Dee	5.1
13)	"The Bible Retold" by Celestianpower & Justin Morgan	5.0
14)	"Star City" by Mark Sachs	4.2
15)	"Carmen Devine: Supernatural Troubleshooter" by Rob Myall	4.1
16)	"Fight Or Flight" by geelpete	4.0
17)	"Man Alive: Part 1" by Bill Powell	3.7
18)	"Man Alive: Part 2" by Bill Powell	3.6
19)	"Strange Geometries" by Phillip Chambers	3.5
20)	"Lawn Of Love" by The Santoonie Corporation	3.4
21)	"Pathfinder" by Tony Woods	3.3
22)	"A Broken Man" by Geoff FortyTwo	3.2
23)	"Mobius" by J. D. Clemens	3.1
24)	"Polendina" by Christopher Lewis	3.0
25)	"Hedge" by Stephen Richards	2.3
26)	"The Wumpus Run" by Cheryl Howard	2.2
27)	"Ballymun Adventure" by Brendan Cribb	2.1
28)	"Beam" by Madrone Eddy	2.0
29)	"Sisyphus" by Theo Koutz	1.1
30)	"The Apocalypse Clock" by GlorbWare	1.0

The number before the decimal point is my actual score; the number after a way of determining which I felt was the better game if there were games with the same score. So a 2.5 is better than a 2.4, and a 2.4 is better than a 2.3 and so on.

A quick note on my scoring:

10 = Masterpiece, best damn game I've ever played. Never awarded a 10 yet because no matter how good a game is, there's always the chance that a better one will come along one day.

9 = Brilliant.

8 = Very good.

7 = Good.

6 = Above average.

5 = Average. (Strictly speaking, on a score of 1-10, 5 and 6 are both 'average', but I consider 5 to be 'average average' and 6 to be 'above average'.)

4 = Below average.

3 = Poor.

2 = Very poor but got a few redeeming qualities (though only a few).

1 = Terrible, terrible game. Poorly written, buggy, prone to crashes, uninspiring storyline, etc, etc. Avoid at all costs.

Played but not reviewed

Mainly because I ran out of time...

"The Bible Retold" by Celestianpower and Justin Morgan - A biblical epic? Hmm... Can't say I really care for the subject matter but I suppose at least Jesus doesn't have hit points :) . Seemed okay but, well, biblical games just aren't my thing.

"Fight Or Flight" by geelpete - Started off with one scene and then switched to another. Neither were very interesting. As I was running out of time when I came to this game, I didn't go any further with it.

"Xen: The Hunt" by Ian Shlasko - I played the previous Xen game from last year's IFCOMP but never really cared for it. This one I started playing but after reading the recap of the first game - bizarre just doesn't describe it - I didn't play it for much longer.

And a few random awards doled out to authors who really should have known better:

The visually challenged PC

... for "The Ballymun Adventure" which features a hall full of students but EXAMINE STUDENTS reveals I DON'T SEE ANY STUDENTS HERE.

*And how was I supposed to figure *that* out?*

... for "A Broken Man" which requires me to wear a tutu in order to steal a key off a little girl (yes, really) and then glue a man's bottom to the toilet seat in order to kill him (yes, really).

Nice writing but what the heck was it all about?

... for "Man Alive 1" which... well, didn't seem to make any sense. At all. Not one bit. Definitely not.

Not very nice writing and what the heck was it all about?

... for "Hedge" which... well, didn't seem to make any sense. At all. Not one bit. Definitely not.

Nice title, shame about the game

... for "Carmen Devine: Supernatural Troubleshooter" whose author impressed me with his willingness to enter a game with such a cringe worthy title in the Comp, but didn't impress me with anything else about the game.

Shot itself in the foot

... for "Aunts & Butlers". One of the best games in the IFComp... if it had been written in a proper IF system and not a custom one.

Er... this doesn't work

... for "Visocica" and "Yasmina's Quest" (later disqualified from the IFComp because it had been previously released) which didn't even work at all as far as I could tell. Could well be the finest games in the Comp, but as they don't work I guess we'll never know.

Why disabling UNDO is never a good idea

... for "The Wumpus Run". Seriously, why?

Why including a maze is never a good idea

... for "The Wumpus Run". Seriously, why?

Why it isn't a good idea to remake retro games and enter them in the Comp

... for "The Wumpus Run". Seriously, why?

There are proper systems out there, so why are you still writing your games in this godawful way?

... for Paul Panks. Just because.

A few teething problems?

... for "Enter The Dark" which didn't have a verbose command, understand X for EXAMINE and whose default colours couldn't be changed. Despite being written in Alan 3. A proper programming language. What gives?

Leave the defaults alone! (part 1)

... for "Legion" which changed the default colours and wouldn't let me change them back.

Leave the defaults alone! (part 2)

... for "The Travelling Swordsman" which changed the default colours but, thankfully, let me change them back.

OFF THE RAILS...

by David Whyld

Sometimes games just don't work out the way we intend. They start positively, they seem like they might well become masterpieces... and somewhere along the way it all goes wrong.

Here's one of mine:

Fallen Angel

Your audience were looking at you with wide eyes and rapt attention as you finished your tale.

"... and *then* I beat the devil spawn with the Flail of Holiness and sent its foul corpse to the Nether Hells for all eternity and after *that* I led the armies of the Free in their assault on the Darkheld city of Baneghast and *finally* I brought the Evil Titan to his knees and *then-*"

There is a sudden ringing sound. You curse.

"... and *then-*"

Another ring.

You sigh "-then the bell on the counter started ringing. I'd better go and see who's here. Back in a minute, kids."

Stories of your past pushed aside for the practicalities of your life *now*, you step from the alley at the back of the comic book store, sigh again, and emerge from behind the counter.

I've never been a fan of religious games, whether from the fact that I just don't find the subject very interesting or simply because I'm not a religious guy at heart. So when I had the idea for *Fallen Angel*, I initially rejected it.

I think the problem with it was that, at the time, it was intended as a serious work. I'd just finished a large comedy game and fancied tackling something a little... darker. Edgier. The idea of a fallen angel, barred from Heaven for some transgression (the details of which wouldn't be revealed until later in the game... mainly because I hadn't thought of them at the time) seemed like a nice dark (and edgy) theme for a game. But then the whole religious aspect started to bother me. And if there's one subject you can guarantee people will get heated up over, it's religion. The idea of an angel fighting and scheming to win his way back into God's good books probably wouldn't go down well with any religious players.

So I stamped the idea "NOT NOW. MAYBE LATER" and pushed it to one side with the intention of *perhaps* coming back to it one day if I could find a different angle for it.

Some time went by and, inevitably, I found myself browsing through all the unfinished games on my hard drive. As you do. There were several that eventually became full blown games in their own right (a used curtain shower ring salesman who gets bitten by a vampiric hitchhiker and becomes one of the undead, albeit reluctantly), several that are still languishing and are unlikely to see the light of day any time soon (a cadaverous game show host called Terrence the Zombie who kills contestants by 'accident' in order to boost ratings, anyone?) and this one.

Fallen Angel.

I ummed and aahed over the game for a while. (I say 'game' but what it actually was was more 'a page or so the introduction' [which is what you've just read above with some major amendments] 'and some notes on how the game *might* progress'.) It didn't look very promising. But then I wondered if it might work better as a comedy. Religious folk might cry blue murder at the idea of a serious religious game (Jesus with hit points just isn't a wise move), but a *comical* religious game could well work.

The introduction I had - which contained a lengthy rant from the player about the unfair (in his opinion) injustices which had been served upon him - was re-written. The player's band of unsavoury characters (his henchmen, if you will) became a group of bored school kids who often stop by the comic book store he works at to listen to his tired stories of how things used to be in the Good Ol' Days *before* the Big Guy took exception to him and booted him out of the Pearly Gates. (In the original version of the game, the player worked in a graveyard. I guess the graveyard angle could still have worked, but a fallen angel minding the counter in a comic book store struck me as more comical than him working as a gravedigger.)

And the game was on again.

It progressed quite well for a time. I did the first two scenes - with the player in the comic book store dealing with a Satan-worshipping customer (kill him and you lose a little of your angelic heritage) and then a flashback to just why he was booted out of Heaven - and then seemed to find myself struggling with the rest of the game. I had a vague idea how things

were to go - namely with the player tricking his way back into Heaven by pick-pocketing a key to the Pearly Gates from a visiting fellow angel fallen on hard times - but the game itself appeared to be grinding to a halt. I started wondering about the big picture:

- If the player manages to find his way back into Heaven, what then? Does God forgive him and he takes up the angelic job again?
- Does he try to overthrow God?
- Does he have a change of heart and realise he's better off behind the counter in the comic book store?

Usually I don't tend to concern myself with the big picture, content to get the game done, play it through a few times, fix any inconsistencies that jump out at me, and then release it. But here, perhaps because of the religious angle (would it still offend people even if it was seen as an obvious comedy and not to be taken with anything approaching seriousness?), I found myself strangely reluctant to continue writing the game. I struggled on with it for a while longer, but then admitted that it really wasn't going anywhere and my best bet would be to put it aside again and wait for inspiration to strike...

A year later and I'm still waiting.

Fallen Angel isn't a game I've abandoned for good. One day, I intend to go back to it, finish it, release it... and hopefully weather whatever religious backlash there is.

One day... or maybe I'm just not cut out to be writing a religious game.

Critics' Corner

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Game: **The Amazing TV Caper**
Author: **Bryan Peterson**
Released: **16th October 2006**
Platform: **ADRIFT 3.9**
Download: **<http://www.shadowvault.net/games/tvcaper.taf>**
Review by: **David Whyld**

Another game from a newcomer to the ADRIFT scene and another that, unfortunately, I'm going to be writing a largely negative review about. The game actually sparked off quite a debate on the ADRIFT forum when it was released; not for anything positive alas but for some of the decidedly non-obvious commands it requires to complete. Now guess the verb is something anyone who has played a few IF games will be familiar with; it's the sort of thing that anyone who has written an IF game of their own has probably incorporated into said game without realising. It's one of those things that seems to pop up from time to time and never go away and even the most careful writer can find themselves falling foul of it. But I think I can honestly say that I've never encountered guess the verb quite on a level with that found in this game.

The premise of the game is simple: someone has stolen your TV and you need to get it back. How you go about this is... well, the way you go about it is to open up the game in the ADRIFT Generator (i.e. cheat) because there's no way you'll make any progress with it otherwise.

One of the earliest things the player needs to do is go to the toilet. This is about a minute into the game and was as far as I got without opening up the game in the Generator and cheating. The required command is (and I'm not spoiling a puzzle for anyone by telling you this because I'd bet money no one would ever figure it out on their own) is MAKE PITSTOP. Huh...? Why not USE TOILET? Why not PEE? Why not a dozen and one other commands? But MAKE PITSTOP? How is anyone ever expected to figure out something

like *that*? I'd grudgingly admit I've heard of the phrase before but I'd never think to type it in a game. It's akin to OPEN DOOR not working but PLACE HANDS ON THE DOOR AND CAUSE IT TO OPEN being required instead.

Unfortunately, it gets worse. I see later commands required in the game are EMBRACE EMILY, ASK SHANNON TO ELABORATE and (my favourite) ASK LEO IF HE'S SEEN EMILY. Now at no point in the game is it hinted, even vaguely, that commands like this might be necessary and none of them (with the very slight exception of EMBRACE EMILY) are things anyone is likely to try. Even relatively straightforward commands are impossible to figure out due to the game's strange wording of them: GIVE RING TO Shannon won't work but PRESENT SHANNON WITH RING will. By the look of things, no other commands apart from those absolutely required to finish the game have been included so it's not like the game is even going to steer you towards the right command if you persevere. It's hard to imagine just what the writer was thinking when he included commands like this without even a brief note to indicate to the player that they'd be needed. If his intention was to write a game that was impossible to finish without cheating, he's certainly succeeded.

Unfortunately, guess the verb isn't the only problem with the game. Numerous items and people mentioned in room descriptions aren't implemented; items have to be referred to by their full name to be referenced so if you see Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance, you'll need to refer to it as that (including the apostrophe and colon) before the game will understand what you mean; there are frequent spelling and grammatical errors.

Then there are the directional problems. Most of the directional commands are IN and OUT, which makes movement kind of strange. Moving IN from your living room takes you to the Java Joint coffee house, which I'm guessing *isn't* actually inside your living room. Funnily enough, moving IN again from the coffee house takes you back to your living room. An impossibility surely? At other times, exits appear only after certain actions have been carried out, though there is never any kind of logic to the way this happens or any indication that it will happen. Wondering where the stairs from your bedroom to the front room have gone? Simple. You haven't made your pitstop yet.

Then there are the truly bizarre "guess what to do next" problems. The ASK SHANNON TO ELABORATE command is expected without any kind of prompting and responds with the player asking Shannon what kind of payment she expects in return for her help. *What* help? Elsewhere, the command GET RING FROM SQUIRT has me attacking Squirt, yet nothing like KILL SQUIRT, ATTACK SQUIRT, HIT SQUIRT or similar commands will work.

Playing the game with the Generator open to get you past the many problems isn't a fun way to play a game unfortunately. I keyed in commands one after another for a while but in the end it just wasn't worth it to keep on playing. Even allowing for the fact that this was a first game by a newcomer, it would need a huge amount of work to raise it above a dismal rating of 1 out of 10.

1 out of 10

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Game: **Locked Out**
 Author: **Loner_Games**
 Released: **30th September 2006**
 Platform: **ADRIFT 3.9**
 Download: **<http://www.shadowvault.net/games/lockedout.taf>**
 Review by: **David Whyld**

Blurb: "Today was supposed to be a great day. Until you locked yourself out of your house... "

There are times when I dread games by newcomers to the IF scene. On one hand, it's nice to see some fresh blood and there's always the lingering hope that this one might be someone who actually knows how to write, has a decent idea for a game, has tested it thoroughly beforehand, has checked his spelling and grammar, has made a genuine effort to make his debut game the best he possibly can... unfortunately, there are those newcomers who seem to throw together a game in half an hour and upload it the moment it's done without even testing it first. Which category does this game fall into? Well...

There were problems right from the start which indicates that if the game was tested, it wasn't very thorough testing. There's a door but EXAMINE DOOR doesn't work. You can't OPEN the door, either, and, best of all, attempts to UNLOCK it result in the game telling you off for not using proper English. Apparently the word UNLOCK isn't considered good English. There are also some wooden swings here that, likewise, can't be examined. On the plus side, there's a wooden box that *can* be examined. And opened. Inside are some emergency supplies and a baseball.

Emergency supplies? Yep, that's what it said on screen. Unfortunately, attempts to take them either by typing the word correctly, incorrectly or just trying to get the supplies doesn't work.

Italicised text in another location advises me that I can WALK DOWN THE ROAD to a neighbour's house, but while the text might think this, the game itself has other ideas because the command doesn't work. DOWN doesn't work either.

An event seems to trigger in a few locations but it doesn't make a whole lot of sense:

BLUEJAY FLUTTERS IN .
 YOU POINT OUT SOMETHING TO TIGER YOU THOUGH WAS A BLUEJAY, BUT IT
 TURNS OUT IT WAS JUST YOUR EYES PLAYING TRICKS.

Aside from the obvious spelling and grammar errors, who is Tiger? An actual tiger? A pet? A bizarrely named best friend? Whoever he/she is, they're also invisible because attempts to examine or talk to them don't work.

Several locations list exits that don't exist so making your way around is unnecessarily

complicated. One location tells me there is lawn to the east and west, but I can only go to the west. Another has a forest to the south but won't let me enter it.

I wasn't intending this review to read like a shopping list of the game's faults, but there are so many things wrong with it, and virtually nothing right, that that's just what it turned out to be. Total time spent playing was around fifteen minutes (which was pretty much all I could take of the game) and then I was yearning for something else. I know ADRIFT is easy to use, but it's not easy to write a decent game in... and this game is an excellent example of that.

1 out of 10

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Game: **The Mystery Of Brackly Hall**
Author: **C. Patrick**
Released: **2000**
Platform: **Web-based point and click**
Available: **<http://www.rinkworks.com/adventure/index.cgi>**
Review by: **David Whyld**

Blurb: "Lord Brackly's dead, but no one can find his secret vault, rumored to contain the bulk of his very wealthy estate. His will leaves it all to the one who can find it. Can you?"

"The Mystery Of Brackly Hall" is an online point 'n' click text adventure featured on the Rinkworks site. The last Rinkworks game I played - "Escape From St Mary's" - I wasn't too impressed with, mainly due to the command lag the game suffered from and its annoying habit of making me repeat commands for no apparent reason. But the Rinkworks' games seem surprisingly popular - at least, there are several hundred people who have finished each of them, according to the site's Hall of Fame - so I decided I'd try another of their games. This time I'd pick one of the easier games. "The Mystery Of Brackly Hall" was the one I chose.

The game playing interface is split, with text telling the player which action he has just carried out on the left hand side of the screen and the location description on the right. Below this are a number of options - two to six seems about standard - detailing what you can do in the location, although some of these options will only become available if you happen to be carrying a certain item (i.e. if you come to a locked door and need a specific key to open it, no option to open it will be displayed unless you're carrying the key in question). The options are preceded by a clickable link which performs the command for you, thus making it possible to play the entire game with nothing more than a few mouse gestures and button clicks. Finally, at the bottom of the interface we have the items the player the carrying. (I'm guessing they're displayed like this because there's no inventory command.)

Customisation is minimal, which is a shame. I'd have liked to change the colours of the

game (black text on a white background has never been a favourite of mine) and while the option is there to override the colour settings in my browser, it's rather more trouble than it's worth so I left it as it was. The option buttons can be changed, from a single click to a box which needs to be filled in and then a further button clicked to carry out the command. But as this doesn't add any real functionality to the game, and instead just doubles the amount of clicks required to perform a command, I left it as it was.

If there's one problem with only a limited number of options being presented each time, it's that more often than not the one thing you want to try isn't covered. Here, the writer has done a pretty decent job of anticipating what the player will type but, inevitably, there are times when you really want to try something and just find you can't. Now in a regular text adventure, if you typed something the writer hadn't covered you'd get a default message which varied depending on the system you were using. Here you don't even get the option to try.

Mostly when this occurs, it's when you come across an item you'd like to take with you, but find you can't. I discovered a room full of interesting items - spears, swords, carvings, etc. - yet while I had the option to examine them to my heart's content, I couldn't pick any of them up. There were also a few locked doors I found which I'd have liked to have tried smashing down but, unfortunately, it wasn't to be.

At the other end of the scale, there are the times when an option is presented to you that you might never have considered trying otherwise. In a text adventure, this would be the dreaded guess the verb. Here it's just strange to say the least. While crossing the lawn outside Brackly Hall, I was presented with an option to take off my shoes and enjoy the grass between my toes. This I did. And received an item for my trouble. Would this have ever occurred to me to try in a regular text adventure? Nope. For one thing, it's the kind of command that you're unlikely as heck to try. For another, I never even knew I was wearing shoes because they're not listed anywhere in my inventory. (Granted, it's a fair bet I wouldn't have gone to this Brackly place barefoot, but generally when items aren't listed in an inventory which is displayed permanently on screen, it's easy to assume you don't have them.) Another location had me putting an item I'd found elsewhere on a mat*, which is something I never would have thought to try in a million years.

* I don't really consider this a spoiler as the option to put the item on the mat doesn't show itself unless you have the item, so it's not likely you're going to visit the location with the mat, see that it's possible to put an item on it, then go hunting for that item.

There is no load game facility here, just a save game facility for when you quit (and which over writes itself each time). Hopefully this means that the game is impossible to put into an unfinishable situation; if it is possible, then you'd end up having to replay the entire thing from start to finish every time you got stuck. Different save slots, to allow the player to jump back and forth between different parts of the game at ease, would have been a nice touch. As would a hints option. The game also suffers from the lack of an UNDO command, the basic staple of almost every text adventure system out there. There's a part in the game when you find a machine that will teleport you right back to the maze (more of this later) if you mess up with it - twenty or so locations away! This can happen quite a few times, at least it did with me, and the time it takes to backtrack from the maze to the room with the machine in seems longer each time. An UNDO command would also have been a

godsend.

And a transcript command would have been nice. Of course, I could always copy the text off the screen and paste it into a Word document or something similar, but this is hardly practical. So my normal method of making a transcript while I play and then writing a review of the game based on the transcript couldn't be done this time.

While you're able to pick up items, a great deal of items as it happens, you're not able to drop them - unless this is specifically listed in the text as an option, but that only happens if dropping the item is a requirement of the game and not just because you feel dropping it. Using items tends to be pretty much hit and miss: sometimes an option in the text will indicate you can use a certain item in a certain location (whether this had previously occurred to you or not is another question), yet if there's something you'd like to try out with an item that isn't covered, you're out of luck. In a way, this kind of game is an uneasy cross between roleplaying gamebooks like Fighting Fantasy and proper text adventures; it offers more variety and choice than a gamebook ever could, as well as the text changing depending on things you've done and extra options appearing if you're carrying a certain item, but lacks the true freedom that a text adventure offers. (Admittedly, text adventures don't offer true freedom at all, but good ones can offer the 'illusion' of freedom, i.e. when you're able to type in pretty much any command you want and have the game give you a proper response to it, which is the next best thing.) Here, you're constrained by the limits of the system, and while it's a clever system itself, its limitations become more apparent the longer you use it.

The game itself is a standard treasure hunt-type game, the kind of thing that has been done to death in the past but, if done well, can still be a decent game in its own right. You wander from location to location, pick up items, open doors (as is usually the case with games like this, there are a number of locked doors around the place but, fortunately, the keys to them are always conveniently around the place, too) and solve puzzles. Few of the puzzles you solve will ever seem by themselves to lead you closer towards the goal of the game, but bit by bit, if you solve every puzzle to come across, and use every item, and unlock every door, you'll get there in the end.

Repeated text seemed to be a problem at times, often repeated for things that really should only have happened once. A few times this happened in location descriptions, other times in commands I carried out. I found a knife in one location and then happened across a door and noticed an option presented itself to me to try picking the lock with the knife (this hadn't even occurred to me to try, but anyway...). I tried picking the lock with the knife and got:

"You insert the knife into the keyhole. There is a tinkling noise as something falls out of the lock on the other side of the door. Uh, great. That was really helpful."

When I tried this again, I got the same response. Apparently there are lots of somethings on the other side of the door which continually fall out of the door. A flaw in the system? Or just sloppy game writing? I'm guessing the latter because other locations showed me that the system can certainly display different text for repeated commands.

By far the most frustrating aspect in the game is its maze. Yes, a maze. The curse of all things text adventure finds its way in here and, if anything, is even more irritating and

annoying than usual. What makes the situation worse, from my point of view, is the game's constant comments that the maze is frustrating and how you don't like mazes. It's like the writer sat down one day and wondered what he could possibly include in his game that would be guaranteed to make as many people as possible quit. The answer was, naturally, a maze. "And," he decided, "even more annoying than a simple maze, I'll keep making reference in the text to how annoying it is. That's sure to get lots of people quitting and ensure any review written of my game is far more negative than it might otherwise have been." Now, if this had been a game by someone who clearly didn't know what a terrible, terrible thing mazes were, it might just about be acceptable. But a maze by someone who knows how frustrating mazes are? And even makes a point of mentioning it again and again? You have to wonder at people sometimes. (As it happens, I'd be curious to know how many people quit playing this game when they came to the maze.)

But, anyway, I solved the maze. With a pen and graph paper and a lot of muttering and curses. As mazes go, on one hand it's less of a pain to solve than some I've been through as the locations are different enough so that, if you keep careful notes of which location has which bit of scenery in, you ought to be through it without too much trouble; on the other hand, this not being a regular text adventure, the maze is made harder due to the tried and tested technique of not being able to drop items in certain locations to enable you to map it out more easily. But like I said, the locations differ enough that this doesn't become too much of a problem. Of course, the maze doesn't play fair. Paths through it wind around each other so if you head east then back west, you don't necessarily find yourself back at the same location. Reading the text carefully in each location certainly pays off.

On the Rinkworks site, the game's difficulty is given as 2 out of 10 which I assume is meant to be incredibly easy. Is the game incredibly easy? I wouldn't have said so. There are no overly difficult puzzles to get stuck with, but the way the game is set up means that you'll spend a lot of time trekking back and forth and it's very easy to miss significant things. Not to mention the fact that the maze is a pain to solve and even when you solve it, it takes a while to get from one side to another when you need to try something new out. Myself, I'd have gone more for 6 or 7 out of 10 for difficulty. Or is the 2 out of 10 difficulty rating meant to be in comparison to other Rinkworks' games? If so, I'd hate to see what a 10 looks like...

Part of the difficulty is down to the fact that some of the game's puzzles can only be completed after a certain amount of time has passed. Likewise, new items will appear in locations in later stages of the game, though there's little indication this will happen so most of the time it's simply a case of backtracking over the same locations time and time again until you find that something has changed. A good example of this is the spade which isn't available to begin with but which shows up later on. I passed through the location in which it eventually appears several times, didn't discover anything worthwhile, and so never thought there was any reason to return there later on. It was only as I was making my way to another location that I happened to pass through this one... and there, lo and behold, was the spade. The previous half a dozen times I'd passed through there, the spade wasn't to be seen and yet now it was. (It was actually dropped by a gardener who had previously been using it to dig a hole so it's not like it mysteriously appeared out of thin air but, even so, how was anyone ever expected to figure that out?)

The design of some of the puzzles, coupled with the game's habit of only making options

available when you're carrying certain items, adds another level of difficulty. Another level of frustration, too. Yes, I'm probably overusing the word 'frustration' when writing this review, but there are parts of the game (the maze can take a bow here, as well as the machine which teleports you back to the maze without any warning) that seem designed solely to frustrate the poor player. I got past the majority of the puzzles not by managing to figure out what I needed to do with them (although in my defence, a few I did actually manage to figure out... no, really) but by sheer repetition. A good number of puzzles I solved by the tried and tested technique of trying everything. When that didn't work, I tried everything again. And again. And again... In the end, with there only being a limited number of options available, I got the better of the game.

There are some red herrings in the game which further crank up the frustration level. There's a chapel in Brackly Hall and several mentions by various NPCs that the vault you're looking for, in which rests the fabled treasure of Lord Brackly, is actually somewhere in this chapel. So I spent quite a while examining things, moving the cross one way or another, messing around with the candles (even receiving a hint that I needed some matches to light it), and in the end not being able to figure anything out. As it happens, you can't do anything in the chapel and it's there just to get you to waste your time on. Hmm...

There was less lag with this game than the previous Rinkworks' game I play - "Escape From St Mary's" - but the lag was definitely a constant factor the entire time I was playing. Sometimes it didn't seem too bad - a brief flicker of the screen and the command was processed - whereas other times the delay was a second or two. That might not seem like much overall (after all, quite a few text adventures that I remember playing on my Spectrum and Commodore computers years ago had a similar delay due to their lowly processing powers), but it seems to slow the game down in places and, particularly when you're retracing your steps in order to try out a new idea, or navigating your way through the maze, it can often taken what seems like an age to get from A to B. A modern text adventure system would allow you to zoom from A to B a lot faster, and standard SAVE and LOAD commands would speed things up even more.

Despite the largely negative tone of the review, I actually found myself liking "The Mystery Of Brackly Hall". Frustrating game though it frequently was, there was also a certain feeling of satisfaction from managing to solve a puzzle (even if the solving was either accidental or done through sheer dogged persistence as opposed to actually reasoning things out) and an even greater feeling when I finally solved the game. It took me a whopping 1,779 moves (Rinkworks has a neat Hall of Fame on its site which records how many commands you entered in order to complete its games), of which I suspect half was me wandering around that damn maze. Still, the maze aside and the game's other frustrations with it, this wasn't a bad game at all. I'm not sure I'd have the patience to play another game of this size, and certainly not one that was larger, but it was a likeable enough game in its own right.

6 out of 10

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Game: **The Sisters**
Author: **Revgiblet**
Released: **1st October 2006**
Platform: **ADRIFT 4**
Download: **<http://www.shadowvault.net/games/sisters.zip>**
Review by: **David Whyld**

Blurb: "You wake up in your wrecked car, vague memories of swerving to avoid hitting a child in the road. But now the girl is gone, leaving only a trail of footprints into the dark woods... "

(NOTE: I was a tester for this game, a fact that complicated this review as I found when I'd written it that I'd commented on several things that were in the first version of the game but which had been removed or changed in the finished IFCOMP version. Thankfully, the removals/changes were largely positive so I shouldn't grumble.)

"The Sisters" is a horror/mystery game which starts with the player running his car off the road after narrowly missing hitting a young girl. With the car too damaged to be driven any further, it's up to you to make your way out of there and make sense of what has happened.

Leaving the car and exploring a bit, you find yourself in a wood. You've got a bleeding gash on your head but, as lucky chance would have it, a first aid box just so happens to be lying on the ground. What are the odds...? Good job it was there, too, otherwise you'd have been in a bit of a predicament due to bleeding to death from the gash.

There's an annoying bug while descending a steep decline. If you have a penknife with you with the blade open, you fall down the decline, land on the blade and die. Funnily enough, if you drop the penknife before trying to descend, you *still* land on the blade and die. Clever penknife. Why this puzzle was included in the game at all I don't know. There's no way of knowing beforehand that trying to climb down the decline with the penknife open would result in you dying and no reason to assume you'd need to close the penknife at this stage (it can't be used when it's closed after all) so it's a fair bet that you'll end up dying here before realising what you need to do.

The game uses ADRIFT's built in end game sequence which doesn't allow UNDO and instead makes you restart the game when you die so you have to reload from your previous saved game position. Definitely a point against it. Hopefully this will be fixed when the new version of ADRIFT comes out.

The majority of the game takes place in a large mansion which you stumble on after leaving the woods. This has the usual prerequisite of locked doors which you need to find keys for (what large mansion doesn't?) as well as a number of other puzzles to figure out. Some I managed on my own, some I only got to with the aid of the walkthrough. Even the ones that stumped me - getting open the urn being one that springs to mind - were fairly obvious and I'm annoyed I didn't solve them on my own.

There is an interesting twist at the end of the game which wasn't quite what I had expected. As I explore the mansion which makes up the bulk of the game's locations, I

found myself coming up with the theory that I was actually a ghost of some kind and that the girl I had seen was perhaps my ghostly daughter. As it happened, I was wrong and the ending quite surprised me. It also left me feeling slightly confused about certain things in the game. How much of what happened had *really* happened and how much was in the mind of the player? Actually, part of me felt that the twist in the ending where some things were explained was left interesting than the ghost story idea that had seemed to be the theme before then.

Overall, I found "The Sisters" to be one of the better ADRIFT games I've played recently and, despite a few rough edges (and deaths by penknife notwithstanding), well worth playing.

6 out of 10

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Game: **Unauthorised Termination**
 Author: **Richard Otter**
 Released: **1st October 2006**
 Platform: **ADRIFT 4**
 Download: **<http://www.shadowvault.net/games/unauthorised.zip>**
 Review by: **David Whyld**

Blurb: "You are a senior investigator with the police force of what is basically a totalitarian state. On a world where nearly all forms of crime are punishable by execution, you have been called on to investigate someone who has been unlawfully killed. "

I'll start with a disclaimer that I was a tester for this game so reviewing it was complicated by the fact that I had already seen what it had to offer, yet had to play it through again just to see what had changed. I won't list the changes I noticed between the first version I played and the finished IFComp version (that wouldn't be fair), except to mention that they improve the game play side of things quite significantly. A number of annoyances I noticed have been fixed and another aspect of the game changed entirely for the better.

In "Unauthorised Termination", you play the part of Epsilon-Beta, a senior examiner at the Centre of Examination on the planet of Morbian. A senior examiner seems to be some kind of investigator/executioner for those who break the law and need to be punished. And this is in a society where almost every crime is punished by termination. The 'unauthorised' termination of the game's title involves the death of one Gamma-Sigma which you are assigned to look into. Only when you start to investigate the death, you find there's more to it than meets the eye.

Where the game excels is in its depiction of the aliens who, for a change, actually seem genuinely alien and not just thinly-disguised humans with silly names. In appearance they are robotic and have little warmth and personality, but rather than hinder them it made them seem all the more believable. Their strange liking of simple personal belongings,

appropriate to their level of achievement, is another nice touch. In a world where even the powerful seem to make do with nothing more lavish than a single, barely furnished room, I guess a pebble or rock seems like something to aim for.

Travel is via teleporters for the most part, as the game is broken up into many smaller parts making conventional travel only possible in a limited number of locations. Using the teleporters is easy, though can sometimes be frustrating as, for example, the teleporter from one location will only allow access to certain other locations, and the teleporters from there only allow access to certain others, and so on... So it's sometimes a pain finding the teleporter you need to reach location X when you're at location Y and quite often you'll need to visit A, B, C, D, etc, before finding the teleporter which leads to where you want to go.

I preferred the setting of this game to that of the writer's IFComp entry of 2005 - "Escape To New York" - and found myself preferring the main character as well, even though I was playing the part of an emotionless robot. Uncovering what has happened to Gamma-Sigma, and the larger conspiracy that you stumble on during the investigation, is quite straightforward to begin with, though gets difficult further on in the game. The more of the game that opens up via the teleporters, the harder it is to find your way around. I wasted more than a few moves at one point in the game going back and forth from one teleporter to another trying to figure out what I needed to do next. Fortunately, help is provided and this gives you just enough information to get past the harder parts.

"Unauthorised Termination" wasn't my favourite game of the IFComp, but it was a nice enough game in its own right and the setting was certainly a refreshing one after the rather mundane settings of so many of the other entries.

6 out of 10

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Game: **Winter Wonderland**
Author: **Laura A. Knauth**
Released: **1999**
Platform: **Inform**
Download: **<http://mirror.ifarchive.org/if-archive/games/zcode/winter.z5>**
Review by: **David Whyld**

I think I picked this game for the title more than anything. And the fact that it had a 5 star rating on Baf's Guide. But mainly for the title which, for some reason I can't quite put my finger on, just oozed cuteness.

The setting is simplistic but charming. The 'winter wonderland' of the title brings to mind a cheerful little Christmassy game complete with singing elves, fairies and the like. While I didn't encounter singing elves, I did find several fairies. In one location they're playing a game; at other times they'd pop up seemingly at random and pelt me with snowballs. All

very twee but, at the same time, charming in its own right.

The aim of the game isn't revealed at first. The game begins with you, a young girl, at the side of your sick brother. A quick conversation with your mother and you're sent off to the village tavern to get some pudding. Nearby there's a toy shop which might prove a decent place for you to buy your poorly brother a nice present assuming, of course, you can find some money to buy it with.

There was only one part here, in the prologue of the game, that gave me any real trouble. I'm used to trying the TALK TO CHARACTER style of conversation first when encountering an NPC who can be spoken to, but when using it here in the tavern, I got a response that:

ONE OF THE VILLAGERS WAVES AT HANNA-MAE FROM ACROSS THE ROOM. AS SHE STARTS ACROSS THE TAVERN FLOOR, SHE CALLS BACK TO YOU, "SORRY, GRETCHEN! BACK IN A MOMENT!"

I tried this a few more times, in case the 'moment' was a literal one, but unfortunately not. Hanna-Mae seemed to be continually distracted by other customers in the tavern and had no time for me. In fact, the solution was a pretty easy and simple one - using a slightly different style of conversation - but confusing because of the fact that one style worked fine whereas another gave me a misleading message.

"Winter Wonderland" doesn't have graphics as such but it includes a few pieces of ASCII art. Normally I'm not too fond of this kind of thing, but here it worked a treat:

Simple yet nice. Quite nostalgic, too, as the title 'graphic' reminded me of the graphics in retro games from years ago (this being back in the day when ASCII graphics would have been considered pretty much state of the art as far as graphics in computer games went).

Another effective use of ASCII art is the little compass at the top right hand corner of the screen which provides a handy way of telling at a glance where you are. Of course, the exits are always listed in the text but I found myself frequently glancing at the top of the screen to familiarise myself with the exits from my current location than reading the text to see which way I could go. While in other games I've played, it's seemed distracting having to glance from the text at the bottom of the screen to the top to see where I am, here it seemed perfectly normal. The compass also aids in making a map; while not necessary, I found the map useful to keep track of things and ensure I hadn't missed anything. The game takes place over a good few locations - over seventy in total - and a couple of times I seemed to miss key exits that I didn't discover until making a map later on. Which isn't to say that the layout of the game's locations is confusing - it isn't (aside from the maze, of course) - just that in a game which features more than X amount of locations, keeping track of them all, and your location in them, is harder than it might at first seem.

While most of the puzzles were well clued, I found a few that seemed a little unfair. Without the hints - excellent hints for the most part, generally giving you a nudge in the right direction though seldom spoiling the puzzle by telling you its solution outright - I doubt I would have got very far in the game at all... and as a result, missed out on a very, very good game indeed.

A few of the puzzles that confused me, and which had me using the hints to get past, were the one in the cottage involving the rings on the glass dome. I couldn't seem to figure it out no matter how hard I tried. Maybe there were clues to tell me what I was expected to do, but if so I never came across them. The other puzzle I struggled with was the one relating to the maze... although considering my general dislike of mazes and my eagerness to get through them as quick as possible and with as little trouble as possible, it's highly likely the puzzle wasn't really that hard and my difficulty with it more down to the fact that I Just Don't Like Mazes.

Yes, there's a maze in the game, generally one of my least favourite aspects of IF games and high on my list of "things to quit over". Fortunately, this maze was encountered quite late on in the game, by which time I was really enjoying the game. So when I saw the maze I didn't immediately quit, fire the game off to the recycle bin and go hunting for something a little less maze-orientated (my usual reaction upon encountering a maze), but instead gritted my teeth, muttered a bit and then went and entered it anyway. In all honesty, as far as mazes go, this one is fairly tame. The exits are cleared labelled (in the main text as well as the helpful compass arrow at the top of the screen), there are none of those hideous occasions when you go east and then go back west and find yourself in a totally different location, and the few times when the maze warps and returns you to an earlier location it's right at the start of the maze so you can easily get your bearings again. I'm still not fond of mazes at all, and would have preferred this game to have been maze-free, but at least this maze bugged me far less than any other maze I've encountered for quite a while.

If there's one thing "Winter Wonderland" suffers from once the prologue (the part in the village involving the pudding and the shoes) is over with is its lack of direction. You know what the basic aim of therefore game is - to get home - but many of the actions you need to carry out in order for that to happen aren't obvious. Most of my time was spent wandering around looking for the next puzzle that needed solving but never really sure just why I was trying to solve the puzzles. Other than, of course, the fact that they were there and it seemed I wasn't going to be able to progress with the game if I didn't solve them.

There's also a slight annoyance with the way certain of the puzzles have to be completed in a certain order, yet there's seldom any indication that this is the case or what that order might be. Generally it's a case of you trying a puzzle, find you're unable to figure out how to solve it (even though it might seem perfectly straightforward), and then discover afterwards that you need to have solved another puzzle somewhere else before getting the crucial item you need to solve this one. I certainly spent more than enough time struggling with the puzzle in the ice floes area, going back and forth again and again trying to work out what I had to do, before abandoning it to try again later... and then discovered the item I needed for it was in an entirely different location. Navigating my way over the ice floes each time I thought I had the solution to the puzzle figured out, only to discover that I hadn't, was a frustrating experience.

But it's hard to mark the game down for things like that. True, the constant trekking back and forth was frustrating, and some of the puzzles were mind-boggling, but the game itself was a joy to play. The setting was captivating, the writing really made it come alive, and the use of ASCII art a very nice touch indeed; what problems the game has are relatively minor and easy to forgive. Suffice to say, the pros outweigh the cons by a sizeable margin.

9 out of 10

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Game: **The Wumpus Run**
Author: **Elfindor [Cheryl Howard]**
Released: **1st October 2006**
Platform: **ADRIFT 4**
Download: **<http://www.shadowvault.net/games/wumpus.zip>**
Review by: **David Whyld**

Blurb: "Wumpus Hunting will never become "the sport of Kings" ... too many risks involved for royalty (although, they've been known to allow any number of fools, er, adventurers, to partake on their behalf). Let's not be under any delusions here - you could die!"

I never played the original Wumpus game but I have a vague idea what it was about: hunting for some creature called the Wumpus through a cavern system, killing it and getting out in one piece. This is the author's interpretation of the idea.

Unfortunately, I can't much say I cared for it. The introduction is nice, but the game goes downhill quickly from there. ADRIFT's built in map is disabled - never a popular decision with me, particularly in a game set within a maze - which means I had to figure out my way with constant glimpses at the map contained in the game package as I couldn't be bothered to map it out myself. I should probably say that I dislike mazes intensely and while I have many fond memories of retro text adventures, of which this most definitely aspires to be, that fondness doesn't extend as far as mazes. Especially mazes that kill the player off without warning merely by going the wrong way (one location has a hole in the middle which you fall into the moment you enter the room).

There were some strange errors in the game, like when I tried to throw my starblade at the Wumpus:

HMMM ... THE DARK IS STARTING TO GET TO YOU ... WHAT %CHARACTER% WHERE?

THE SOUND OF A STARBLADE SHATTERING ON THE WALLS OF THE CAVERN ECHOES THROUGHOUT THE CAVERNS. SO MUCH FOR SNEAKING UP ON THE WUMPUS ... DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE MANAGED TO WAKE IT UP YET?

YOU SLUMP TO THE GROUND EMOTIONALLY AND PHYSICALLY SPENT FOR A FEW MOMENTS ... COULD THIS BE THE END OF YOUR ONE AND ONLY CHANCE OF BEING SOMEBODY?

UH-OH! YOU ARE ONE LUCKY ADVENTURER ... YOU MUST HAVE MASKED MOST OF THE LIGHT WHEN YOU PASSED OUT, ALLOWING THE WUMPUS TO SETTLE BACK TO SLEEP.

Aside from the obvious mistake of %character% popping up in the text (I'm assuming that should be the name of some NPC), there seem to be four totally unrelated paragraphs there. At another point, I tried throwing the starblade at the Wumpus only to be told that I couldn't do that with the starblade - despite the fact that this is what the game's intro specifically tells me to do! - and when attempting to kill the Wumpus, I was told that that wasn't very nice (ADRIFT's default response when trying to kill an NPC that the writer has forgotten to program a response in for. When the very idea of the game - killing the Wumpus - isn't even covered, you really have to wonder just what kind of testing this game went through). While I'm sure the game *can* be finished, I just couldn't summon up any willpower to keep on playing it. Take a maze, a disabled mapping facility and the most obvious commands not working properly and you have one remarkably poor game.

2 out of 10

Latest ADRIFT Releases

The following ADRIFT games have put in an appearance since the last issue of the Newsletter.

November

17th

Jonathan Grimshaw: Space Tourist by Ren (*re-release*)

October

30th

Ron Weasley & The Quest For Hermione by Captainc22 (AIF)

16th

The Amazing TV Caper by Bryan Peterson

12th

Stardust by Amzie

1st

PTGOOD 8*10^23 by Sartre Malvolio [Slan Xorox]

1st

Requiem by David Whyld

1st

The Sisters by Revgiblet

1st

Unauthorised Termination by Richard Otter

1st

The Wumpus Run by Elfindor [Cheryl Howard]

September

30th

Locked Out by Loner_Games

Ron Weasley & The Quest For Hermione is an AIF (Adult Interactive Fiction) game; the rest are of the more normal IF variety. *PTGOOD 8*10^23*, *Requiem*, *The Sisters*, *Unauthorised Termination* and *The Wumpus Run* were all entries in the recent IFComp. See **Hot Off The Press** for how well they each did.

The Amazing TV Caper, *Locked Out*, *The Sisters*, *Unauthorised Termination* and *The Wumpus Run* are all reviewed in this issue.

Reference

Who's Who & What's What

(...being a list of individual sites within the ADRIFT community...)

General ADRIFT Links

<http://www.adrift.org.uk>

The main ADRIFT website.

<http://www.thepurroughs.com/projects/atts>

The ADRIFT Tutorial. (Written for ADRIFT 3.9 but still mostly relevant.)

<http://web-ring.freesevers.com/cgi-bin/webring?showring=K5G14H>

The ADRIFT Webring.

<http://sourceforge.net/projects/jasea>

The homepage of jAsea, a program that allows people on non-Windows systems to play ADRIFT games.

http://www.geocities.com/legion_if/scare.html

The homepage of SCARE, a clone of jAsea which allows ADRIFT games to be run on non-Windows systems.

<http://ccxvii.net/gargoyle/>

The homepage of Gargoyle, an interpreter for playing ADRIFT games on non-Windows systems (and making them look nicer on Windows!)

ADRIFT Fan Sites

<http://bbben.aifcommunity.org/> - "BBBen? Yes!"

AIF writer BBBen's website.

<http://ccole.aftermath.cx/> - "Christopher Cole's AIF"

AIF writer Christopher Cole's website.

<http://www.delron.org.uk/> - "Delron"
Richard Otter's website.

<http://www.geocities.com/shenanda976/garden.html> - "The Garden Of Life"
Renata Burianova's website.

<http://www.groundchuck.co.uk/> - "Groundchuck"
Jason Guest's (AKA The Amazing Poodle Boy) website.

<http://www.insideadrift.org.uk/e107/news.php> - "Inside ADRIFT"
The home of InsideADRIFT.

<http://www.kfadrift.org.uk/news.php> - "KFAdrift On The Web"
KFAdrift's website.

<http://home.epix.net/~maywrite/game.htm> - "Maywrite"
Eric Mayer's website.

<http://mysite.verizon.net/dlgoodwin/bob/pkgirl> - "The PK Girl"
Hanadorobou's website [home of the ADRIFT game **The PK Girl**].

<http://adrift.sitesled.com/> - "Reviews Exchange"
Rafgon's {aka Robert Street} website.

<http://www.shadowvault.net> - "Shadowvault"
David Whyld's website.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Many thanks to:

Jason Guest for being this month's Hot Seat victim.

C. Henshaw for the second part of *Hook, Line & Sinker*.

Ren for the *Very Quick Guide To SCARE*.

Shuarian for the *ADRIFT Forum Digest*.

LOOKING AHEAD

Issue 33 is due out on Saturday, 27th January 2007. Fancy having your say on a subject? Writing a review of an ADRIFT game? Have an article to publish?

Contributions to dwhyld@gmail.com prior to the above date.