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The Newsletter of the ADRIFT Community

Issue 36 - September 2007

Hello and welcome to the newest (late) edition of the newsletter. I will be your host, Lumin! As I'm sure everyone already knows, David Whyld recently (well, three months ago) stepped down as the editor, and since no one's been able to replace him in these dark, slow times, I've gallantly taken it upon myself to pick up the slack (sort of) and begin a new golden age of prosperity. (not really.)

Because learning new things is hard, I didn't bother figuring out how to turn this into a PDF, or even glancing at a PDF prog...I mean, uh, I sought to purposely immolate SPAG with a plain text format. Or something.

Because originality is also hard, I'm otherwise keeping the newsletter almost exactly the same, with the same title and features David or KF or whoever came up with. I HAVE had a few ideas for new things, but time will tell if I get around to it or not. For that matter, time will also tell whether the new newsletter itself becomes a regular thing or dies a slow, lonely death, but hey! Enough with the inspiring peptalk huh? Let's get on with the show:

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EDITORIAL

Excuses, Excuses

Right now, you ask pretty much anyone why they haven't worked on a game lately, and they'll say something like, "Gee, well Adrift 5 is coming out soon, so I'm waiting on that. It's not...it's not because I'm too slow/busy/lazy or anything, there's just no point in writing a game in 4.0 anymore."

Now I hate to be the one to say it, but this is a TERRIBLE excuse. Sure, games always take a lot longer than expected to finish, and there are days you just don't feel like working on them so it's good to have a convincing reason ready in case someone asks you about the delay (this is also important for newsletters), but come on, surely you guys can do better than this. Let's examine the problems with this excuse:

1.) The fact that Adrift 5 is coming out soon is not a fact. Its release date been 'right around the corner' for a long time now, and could very well be there for a long time to come. The new version is probably taking a lot longer than he expected to finish, and I'm sure there are days he just doesn't feel like working on it. I'm not trying to criticize Campbell here or anything, and I don't think anyone else should either. (let he who is without unexpected delays cast the first stone, etc. etc.) But what I'm trying to say is that at this point there's no telling WHEN it will be out, so it's certainly not a good idea to sit there twiddling your thumbs for an unknown length of time when you could be writing a game with the perfectly functional version we have now.

2.) The version we have now is perfectly functional. Good games have been written on it in the past, good games COULD be written on it right now, and it will be easily possible to write good games on it in the future. Even if Adrift 5 is leaps and bounds beyond what we have now, isn't a stubborn refusal to use the "old" version a lot like refusing to drive your five year old car because you'd rather have a shiny new one that's coming out next year? The new car may be nice to look forward to, but in the meantime the old one can get you where you're going just like it always has.

3.) So, worst case scenario: the game you begin today isn't finished by the time 5.0 rolls out. Um, who cares? It's not like the current generator and runner will be eradicated from the face of the Earth. I'm sure there were people making games with 3.9 when 4.0 came out, and I'm sure there were people who continued to use it even afterwards. In fact if a decent-looking game written with 3.9 came out today, I wouldn't hesitate to play it. Would you?

In some cases I realize there might be legitimate reasons for preferring to wait, such as having an idea that would otherwise be very difficult to implement, but surely there's no reason to dedicate all your writing time to fantasizing about the day when you can. If you can't write your Epic Masterpiece That Will Redefine IF As We Know It just yet, then put it on the shelf for now and work on something else that doesn't require a bunch of bells and whistles. To go back to the car analogy for a moment, you don't want to let your driving skills get rusty - or worse, lose interest in driving at all - just because you HAD to have the new one and nothing else would do. Or to put it plainly, when Adrift 5 is finally released, it won't do anyone any good if in the meantime everyone stops writing, stops reviewing, and stops posting, because at that point it will become very easy to stop caring.

ADRIFT FORUM DIGEST 8 - Stefan Donati

With the usual slow summer months; and the death and resurrection of the newsletter itself, it's not surprising that this forum digest is only modest in size. Speaking about myself, I'm looking forward to the IF Comp, which hopefully will give us all some intriguing games to talk about.

Programming Help Player checking if Characters are in a Room (<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/f/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=6107>) The thread deals with a specific example by ksb, who asks whether his method is done right. The example and answers are helpful for general information about the handling of invisible objects and/or characters.

Object on object (<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/f/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=6173>) Cowboy asks about the best way of using "use object on object" commands. Instead of using tasks, revgiblet suggests to include some variables, so as to prevent malfunctioning uses of tasks.

Game Design, Writing Techniques Perspective in IF (<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/f/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=6123>) Based on a discussion on RAIF, phkb asks the forum members about their opinion on the most engaging perspective for writing IF. The second person perspective seems to be favoured.

Player Preferences Introduction (<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/f/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=6217>) Most games have an introduction, yet there is little information on what one should include, or to what extent the story should be explained. There are already a few answers, but as the discussion is still ongoing, I encourage everyone to have their say!

COMING SOON

Richard Otter tells us a little about his game...

After losing interest in all things ADRIFT for most of the year, I'm back writing again (sorry about that!). Why I lost interest will be part of a planned new exciting mini-series for the newsletter entitled, "At The Start of 2007 I Completely Lost Interest in ADRIFT and Didn't Write Anything For Most of the Year".

So, carefully blowing off the dust I excitedly opened ADRIFT and what did I find? My brilliant IFComp07 game was little more than a rough outline; damn! Basically, it would not really stand a cat-in-hell's chance of completion in time; double damn! I thought for a moment and decided to shelf that and save it for next year.

So what did I look at next? I picked up an old half finished one room game I've been messing about with for a couple of years. In this game you play the part of the Captain of a Flower Class Corvette in 1941 and you are currently located in the North Atlantic. The 'Flowers' can be described as wet, cramped, lively vessels and actually unsuitable for the role of convoy escort. At the time it was all Britain had available in largish numbers, after nearly 3 years of war.

Two ships from the convoy you are escorting have just been torpedoed, one tanker and a cargo vessel. The fire from the tanker is still visible; hopefully you will be able to look for survivors soon. At the moment only one thing occupies your mind - you are hunting for the lurking U-boat.

This idea interested me for several reasons. All the action takes place in one room and that challenge fascinates me. This is a period in history that has always held my interest being a time when, in Europe at least, we stood alone against the evil that was just over the English Channel. Finally, it gives me the chance to do something slightly different although it is really just a variation of a treasure hunt.

Will I get it finished? Probably not, but it has got me opening the generator again.

DRIFTER'S SOAPBOX

Washed Into the Deep by a Tsunami of Depression and Anger - MrPetrov

Yes this was ripped straight from the forum but it's the reason you're getting a newsletter in the first place, you know? - ed.

On this lovely Sunday morning as I settled in to begin coding it struck me that I'd spent a vast amount of time working (diddling about) on my own Works In Progress and almost none playing and enjoying those that had been lovingly made by others. I saved my feeble progress on WIP XIII ("After the War") and clicked over to the main page of the site in the expectation of finding dozens of unreviewed, unplayed, and unspoilt products of true ADRIFT mastery awaiting the tremulous touch of my greasy little fingers.

And what should I find? The most recent game on the list is Brain in Jar's "The Angel, The Devil, and The Human" (hereafter referred to as TADAH because it looks cooler than TATDTH or ADH). This particular game has occupied this position for as long as I can recall. I realize that I have been rather spoiled by my excursions into the depths David Whyld's Shadowvault but I rather expected better from the vibrant... er... well... living community of Drifters.

A few more clicks revealed that there hadn't even been one entry for the summer competition. I was washed into the deep by a tsunami of depression and anger. I wanted to immediately post some sort of barbed invective that would finally stir up the great and silent college of ADRIFT players and creators and drive them ashamed into the light to face up to their own lassitude and indolence. I wanted to cry, "Lotus Eaters! Odysseian Children! Bear fruit, fig tree, or I'll smite thee!"

Right after I finished the safe-cracking puzzle in WIP IIX ("The Canadian Job").

And figured out how to spell Odysseian, because MS Word is flipping useless.

I, of course, didn't post any such thing. Instead I drove down to the Osco to get some sterile Q-tips. You see I have this terrible thing just *stuck* in my eye. It's in there all the time now. My doctor says it's something called a...what is it... (shuffles papers, looking for ten-thousand dollar hospital bill)...oh yes. A beam.

I think that there is some other forum that I'm not yet aware of where all of the intelligent, well-spoken (written), and highly creative people who made all of those early ADRIFT (and Quest etc.) games and turned IF from a hobby done on Tuesday nights in dank basements into a legitimate hobby done on Sunday afternoons in unfurnished spare bedrooms go to discuss and expand upon discussion in a manner worthy of the Royal Society. I'd love to post on this secret ADRIFT forum. I, of course, have nothing to say and less to contribute, but that's neither here nor there. I'd just like to hear what other people have to say. And then deride them as stupid newbies. And use the Zero key instead of an O. Because that's fantastically clever, right?

Don't take my meaning wrong. The ADRIFT forum is alive and kicking and we've done a fine job of keeping the L33t kids out. But you have to admit that it has been, and could be, better.

Action is always better than complaint, or so they tell me. I therefore resolved to put forth my best effort and, with the assistance of Mr. Jar, Mr. Whyld, Nickydude, KFAdrift and all the other good people hanging on by their fingernails, to begin to produce again. Of course there's no way that I'm ever going to finish any of my projects before the return of Ozymandias so that takes the whole making-games-that-are-fun-to-play thing right out of the picture. I mean, for Bog's sake, the only progress I made on my own summer comp piece is a half-assed diagram on post-it note. I think I was going to do something with an island. Either that or a really circuitous subway system. It's hard to say.

That led to the second option. There's nothing like a little peer review to get the old creative juices flowing. A little while back there was a contest on the writing forum where we were asked to review an imaginary game. The Inevitable David Whyld posted the first or second entry of the comp (I forget and the thread has been removed). DW has been reviewing games ever since some adventurous little fish used its soft and weirdly formed flippers to drag itself up onto the muddy banks of the prehistoric ooze-puddle and coded a really awful one-room locked-door puzzle with incomplete descriptions and no win state. After his entry I didn't even bother to post a good job or a wow onto the thread. I just backed away. Like my brother used to say, "You can't compete with the Bomb, baby!" And then he'd usually punch me in the groin. Thanks for the sterility, bro.

David "The Bomb!" Whyld, I will say, is the *reviews guy*. He's responsible for most or all of the reviews that I've bothered to read (sorry, everybody else) as well as his exhaustive work on Shadowvault. DW is a keystone of IF and ADRIFT especially. It's time, though, for some of us regular folks to step up to the plate and give back. Pick a game or, for that matter, a clever entry in one of the writing comps, and tell us how you feel about it. Enter the darn writing comps. Think up your own writing comps. Vote for the writing comps (and for me). And also make games. Really. I mean it. I'll try too.

Don't be afraid if your games suck. Think of how much fun it'll be to make the half dozen most IF-literate people in the western world play guess the verb for four hours just to find out you never finished the damn thing in the first place. Do you like fire, breasts, and explosions? Well, text isn't good for any of these things, for the most part. But see if you can do it anyway. After all, a game which reads like a rejected Miami Vice script and plays like a one-string banjo at the bottom of the pool is still a damn game, in the end.

Please take note that I reserve the right, as should we all, to sarcastically deride all bad games and personally insult their creators. It's more fun that way. If you can't take criticism then you shouldn't write. If you're afraid of criticism then it's time to expose yourself to a whole lot of it. Build up a callus, so to speak.

People Should Write More Reviews (aka You Should All Be Ashamed :colbert:) - Lumin

Needless to say things in our little community have been kind of slow lately; for almost an entire year, even. We seem to be experiencing a record low in the amount of forum activity, game releases, and reviews. Now while those things are all closely related to each other, I'll be mainly talking about reviews here, or rather the lack thereof.

Obviously, games are far and away the most important of the three, since that's kind of the whole reason we're here in the first place, but it would probably be ineffective (not to mention hypocritical...*cough*) to write a long tirade about how all the lazy so-and-sos who aren't publishing games on a regular basis (read: everyone but Mr. Whyld) should get off their behinds and get to work.

I think it's clear by now that WIPs are wily little beasts that consistently avoid even the most dedicated attempts to finish them. They know every trick in the book when it comes to stalling and confusing and frustrating would-be authors, so it's no surprise that many of us rarely, if ever, manage to haul a completed one on over to display on the Adventures page. However, even if you're never able to bag a game, there's still something that you (yes YOU!) can do to help and encourage those that have.

"That sounds awesome!" I hear you, or a voice that sounds remarkably like yours, exclaim inside my head. "Lumin, tell me what I should do!!!11one!!!"

Well, that's simple. Let's say you play a game you really enjoy; what better way to say 'thanks for all the hard work, and also everyone else should play this' then to write a few paragraphs detailing exactly why you loved it so much? ("Great idea! Lumin you are a genius!") Glad you like it! Because surprise surprise, in essence that's all a review is. Though this probably would have been a much more interesting reveal if I hadn't already said what I'd be talking about in the first paragraph... ("That's okay Lumin, you are still wonderful. In fact I want to come over, make you a sandwich, mow the grass, and fix your car! Also buy you a pony!")

Granted, you're not going to love every game you play; some will be mediocre or just plain bad. If the former, provided the author is a reasonably balanced individual they'd likely still appreciate positive feedback on what they got right combined with constructive criticism on what they got wrong... 'constructive' being the key word there. And believe it or not, writing that sort of review can not only be good for the author but good for YOU. I've always approached reviews as a writing exercise in and of themselves. Being able to recognize what works and what doesn't work in a plot or puzzle or character is the first step to writing a good game yourself.

In the case of a 'just plain bad' game...well, it can sometimes be hard to tell whether the latest 2k masterpiece is an unfunny joke thrown together in less time than it took me to write this paragraph, or a genuine effort by an author who means well but Just. Doesn't. Get it. As such it's probably best to err on the side of helpful advice there too, even if your snarkier sides wants you to 'advise' them to smash their computer and never write anything ever again.

"But Lumin, surely it would be best to utterly destroy anyone who has written a bad game!? Also anyone who has ever opposed you, until the streets run red with their blood even unto the horses bridles, by the--" Oookay, that got weird fast. Um. I think that's enough with the voices for now. ("Awww..." Shut up.)

ANYWAY, it wasn't my intention here to go too much into the TYPE of review you should write, my original point was that if you'll just sit down at your computer and set your mind to it, it doesn't take all that long to write a review at all - surely not even a fraction of the amount of time it took to write the game you just played, which some poor author labored endlessly at just to release to the resounding sound of crickets chirping. While I haven't done much in the game authoring department myself, I've written my fair share of static fiction and I know how the writer's mind works: when you pour your heart into something and then put it on display, the only thing that's worse than having it savagely picked apart is having it ignored. We WANT feedback, CRAVE it, even NEED it if we're expected to continue doing what we're doing.

Now, whenever I say something like the above there's usually some self-styled artist that gets all huffy about it, loudly declaring that write for themselves only and care not a bit what their audience thinks, or whether they even have an audience, but I don't think they're being truthful with themselves. If you really don't care if anyone plays your game/reads your story/looks at your picture/whatever, why put it up on the Internet for all the world to see? For that matter, why bother creating it in the first place? I've had plenty of characters and scenarios that were MUCH more entertaining inside my head, not to mention much easier to keep there than to try and put down on the computer. For me, and I suspect for many authors, the writing part is the most unfun part of writing. The reason you put up with all the tedium and the endless tweaking and the times when something doesn't work so a sizeable chunk of something else has to be ripped out and completely redone is not just because you have this idea you're in love with but because you'd like nothing better than to share it with somebody else. And to have those somebody elses then turn around and make it abundantly clear that they don't care enough to

take two minutes to say something nice (or even something mean) about it, well...that just sucks.

But just two minutes? I'm obviously exaggerating there, right? Well, yes and no. To be sure, writing a full-length review would take longer than that, but you can give an author some feedback in other, quicker ways. To begin with, how long would it take to go to the forums and say, 'hey guys, have you played game X? What'd you think about it? I liked it because of blah blah blah'. (Coincidentally enough that would also help that 'low forum activity' thing I mentioned in the very beginning.)

Secondly, who ever said a review had to be 'full-length'? (And what defines that anyway?) I'd happily showcase something just a few paragraphs long here in the newsletter, and if you don't have the time for even that, I'd like to point you to a little something called the 'Adventures' page on the main ADRIFT site. See all those games? See how almost none of them have comments attached, and as such sorting by rating can lead to wildly misleading results? See where I'm going with this? Of the 182 games currently listed, less than a third have any comment at all, and the ones that don't just get shoved to the bottom of the barrel. (Case in point: The PK Girl, which I KNOW many people liked, sitting all alone and ignored on page seventeen.) In the time it takes to write one to three sentences and then click a mouse, you can give an author a friendly pat on the back (or yes, even a kick in the nether regions if you really feel they deserve it...) and at the same time be a great help to any newbies who might come wandering in just looking for good games to play.

In short: next time you play a game, there really IS no excuse not to give a little feedback on it, and it's high time we as a community (NOT just David for once...yes he rocks but it shouldn't be his job to do EVERYTHING) stepped up and stopped ignoring the efforts of the people who are responsible for us having a community in the first place.

Why Reviews Are (almost) Completely Pointless - Corey Arnett

Have you ever watched one of those shows on television where supposedly objective people critique the latest movie, book or music? How often have you seen this apparent objective person go on to totally bash one of your favorite movies? Ever seen good reviews of work that you thought was a complete waste of time? This happens to me all the time, which is why I never pay attention to such critiques. I am perfectly capable of deciding on my own whether a specific work is worth my time. I know what my interests are and will tend to avoid those things which don't pique those interests.

For example, I absolutely hate thrash metal music so I know I'm not going to like the latest Slayer release so I won't waste my money on it. I despise those corny romantic comedy movies so you won't see me wasting my time going to a theater to see one. And you certainly won't find any Harlequin Romance novels in my bookcase. Even when it comes to computer games I know what I like and I stay away from the stuff that I don't. I like third person shooters, simulation and strategy games. I don't care for sports games so you won't see NFL Madden 2008 on my computer. And so it is with Interactive Fiction. So long as a given work of IF comes with a short blurb about what it's all about and maybe even a tag telling me what genre it is, I think I can decide for myself whether a game is worth my time or not. Besides, no matter how much the reviewer claims to be impartial, it is always the case that reviews will be subjective rather than objective.

Let's take probably one of the most reviewed works of Interactive Fiction of all time, Photopia, as an example. Photopia came in 1st Place in the 4th Annual Interactive Fiction Competition in

1998 and was written by Adam Cadra under the name Opal O'Donnell. I am going to assume that the reader has already played Photopia before, but if haven't you can get it at the author's website at <http://adamcadre.ac/> in the Interactive Fiction section. I think all fans of Interactive Fiction should play this game. Not because I think it is especially great, but because it illustrates my point about reviews perfectly. Of course, I have played it and I won't tell you what my thoughts on it were (that would be like me giving the game a review), but suppose we look at some of the reviews that have already been written about it.

At the IF Ratings Website: www.carouselchain.com/if/comments.php?rategame=254 there are many comments on the game. Not exactly what most would call reviews but subjective opinions on the game nonetheless. In essence, mini reviews.

Let's have a look at what some people had to say about Photopia. Here are some of the comments that were made about the game:

"Beautiful and extraordinarily written; a true masterpiece that mines the human heart, and one of the greatest IF achievements ever."

Wow! That already sounds like one of those sappy chick-flicks that I wouldn't pay \$0.10 to see. Based on this comment I would probably not even download it. Here is another:

"This is story in the purest sense of the word. The reader is confronted with the limitless realm of possibility juxtaposed with the harsh reality of circumstance, as the story weaves through the happy labyrinth of IF play. As the inevitable ending made itself apparent, I kept looking for a way to change the choices made earlier, knowing, as in life, how futile that sometimes is. The story is a joyous tear-jerker, and well worth the read."

This sounds like something Roger Ebert would say. Sure, you get the idea that the game is well written but the whole "...joyous tear-jerker..." bit might put some people off. Most of the comments are quite positive but there are some who were less enthusiastic:

"If one were to abuse an IF system to make a game of pac-man, even if its an excellent game of pac-man, it just shouldn't rate well as interactive fiction. This is similar. It's less interactive than one of those old "choose your own adventure" books, and I wasn't entertained enough by the story to play out more than a few scenes."

Clearly this person was not as taken with the prose as others were. Here is another comment from someone who didn't really care for the game:

"It's NOT interactive fiction. It's just mediocre fiction. The piece does perhaps open up IF to a wider audience-- English Teachers, Performance Artists, Suicidal Poets, etc... yet I fail to grasp how so many people can think that this is the #1 all time greatest piece of IF. It neither represents nor takes advantage of the medium very well."

Obviously the person who wrote this comment feels a bit jaded. And how about this comment:

"Considering the reputation this game has, I was kind of expecting a masterpiece. Instead I found quite a tedious game. It's very well written but there's very little in the way of gameplay here: most of the commands are so obvious and straightforward it often seems like you're not even playing a game at all but reading a book. I played through to the end not because I liked the game but just to see if it got better as it went along. It didn't."

There is an important word in that last comment: Reputation. Sometimes a particular work's reputation is all the review that is necessary. How about this lofty comment:

"Not just the best IF, but one of the best computer games I have ever played, period."

I don't know about that, but it should be clear by now just how subjective reviews really are. Just because you read some bad reviews of Photopia would you decide not to play the game? If you were more of a puzzle-fest type player would you not even give Photopia a go because it is obviously very linear with practically no puzzles? It should be quite obvious to most people that the opinions of others have very little impact on whether someone is going to like a particular game or not. So why is there such an emphasis on reviews when it comes to Interactive Fiction?

Now, I wouldn't be so bold as to call myself an author of Interactive Fiction but I have released one game onto the teeming masses. It was called Provenance. Now this isn't going to be a plug to play the game, but the reviews that were written about it fit in perfectly with what I am talking about. One person had this to say about my game:

"First of all, I want to say that this game so far has some of the best writing of any IF game I've seen... I would say it was the best writing I've seen in an IF so far, on par with the excellent game Anchorhead...when I think that the game very well could become the best IF game out there ..."

Wow! Sounds like this person really enjoyed the writing. Whoever it was didn't play the game through to the end and may have changed their minds significantly had they, but clearly the writing style appeals to this person. Others, however, didn't find the style of writing to be their cup of tea as demonstrated by this comment:

"...I always laugh at that last sentence. The whole paragraph is incredibly overwritten. So much for good first impressions. Before the game even starts you are hit with even more ridiculous lines such as: 'The sun has breached the horizon and its fervent intensity warms the land, pulling the moisture from the ground in a sinuous miasma that rises up into the atmosphere like languid serpents. ' Yes, the game is literary. Too literary for me."

Well, you can't please them all I guess. Obviously this person didn't appreciate my particular style. And that is my whole point. Would you not play my game because someone else thought the literary style was laughable? Would you be moved to play it because someone else thought that it could become "...the best IF game out there"? I'm guessing that whether you decide to download and play a game or not has little, or nothing, to do with a complete stranger's opinion.

Personally, I'd like to think that I am willing to give just about any game a chance without any more prior information than the title and the genre. If it is well done, and to my particular tastes, then within two minutes of firing it up I will have made up my mind about whether it is worth it to continue. So, why do I say that reviews are almost completely pointless in the title of this article?

Allow me to explain.

I do think that reviews do serve one very useful purpose, and that is to give the author some kind of feedback about their work. Quite obviously, as an author, you cannot please all of the people all of the time. But I often wonder if scathing reviews stop many authors dead in their tracks and prevent them from moving forward and trying to better their style. Even for an author to release a game under a pseudonym does not provide a buffer to the lashing feeling that a bad review will generate. Do such reviews encourage authors to work harder to hone their craft? I doubt it. How many 2KB games have you seen on the posted on the ADRIFT website only to receive a less than encouraging review? Why even bother to review them?

Anybody who spends ten minutes making a 'game' and doesn't even bother to spell check it and then posts it on the internet for all to tear apart obviously doesn't really take writing Interactive Fiction seriously. Why waste your time writing a review of it?

As for games where the author has obviously spent some time working on it, I question the need for reviews as well. Assuredly, there will be those who like it and those who won't. You are not going to get a better idea of how much you are going to enjoy a particular game by reading somebody else's review of it. There is only one way to do that, and that's to try the game yourself. And the nice thing about Interactive Fiction these days is that it is almost always free - all it will cost is your time.

I can, however, think of one good use for Interactive Fiction reviews...they help fill up newsletters. Happy Adventuring!

CRITIC'S CORNER

The Reluctant Resurrectee Platform: ADRIFT 4 Author: David Whyld Reviewer: Lumin

I admit that I felt the 2007 Spring Thing was a bit of a disappointment in terms of both the number of entries submitted and the number of people who bothered to vote, but we did get some good games out of it so I can hardly complain.

David Whyld's 'The Reluctant Resurrectee' (alternately known as 'The Further Adventures of the King Who Wanted to Die But Whose Subjects Just Weren't Ready To Let Him Go'...though I think I'll just refer to it by the first title, or rather TRR) was one of those games, and took second place. It's the sequel to an earlier, smaller work, 'Back to Life...Unfortunately', and while you don't have to play that to enjoy this one, it was plenty of fun in its own right so I recommend it.

When I played the first game I remember thinking how original the puzzles were (as a king who keeps getting resurrected against your will so that you can continue ruling, the goal was to kill yourself in various amusingly inventive ways until you could no longer be brought back), but even that pales in comparison to the premise behind TRR.

This time around you play an eyeball. No, seriously.

I know I've seen at least one other game that has the 'try to kill yourself over and over' gimmick that BtL put to such good use, but I'm sure that TRR is the one and only time in the history of IF that you get to be a sentient eyeball. Talk about taking the 'non-human PC' thing to a whole nother level. (In fact I have a pretty good idea of who's going to win the 'Most Unusual Plot' category at the ADRIFT End of the Year awards...)

Not having any arms or legs, let alone a body to attach them to obviously makes the traditional means of exploring a bit difficult, so the first order of business is learning some other ways to get around. Luckily, you're a STURDY little magically animated eyeball, so you can get away with a few things that I imagine might squish a normal one - as becomes clear the very first move of the game.

Don't get too confident though, because there are still a handful of ways to die. And unlike the first game, it's something you probably want to try and avoid. It doesn't end the game or anything (the ever helpful Chancellor Verenor is still there to bring you back, right after executing a random innocent or three) but it's not the goal this time around and the only thing it'll accomplish is racking up the 'Victim' count on the status bar, depending on how many of

your subjects get blamed for your death.

No, this time instead of trying to escape your problems by (re)dying, you have no choice but to man (eye?) up and resolve a host of serious threats facing your kingdom, the reason you were brought back in the first place. Needless to say, at first glance it seems like this might be SLIGHTLY difficult as an eyeball, but you'll figure it out.

While there are a couple of other areas you can access, the majority of the game takes place on a desk, and there are a variety of clever puzzles that involve you trying to manipulate everyday objects, collect information and just generally get around. Eventually there's also a way to summon and communicate with a few of your subjects, though this was part of a set of puzzles that I personally found a little difficult (though I think this says more about the way my brain works than the game itself).

However, once I got past that little snag, the ending was both rewarding and satisfying. And best of all, it left room open for a sequel - IF is one of those rare genres where each successive installment is almost always BETTER than its predecessor, so if David ever gets around to writing a third game in this series I have high hopes indeed.

Starship Volant: Stowaway Author: Christy Henshaw Platform: ADRIFT 4 Reviewer: Lumin

Coming in third place in the Spring Thing 2007, Christy Henshaw's "Starship Volant: Stowaway" is a short sci-fi adventure about...well, a stowaway on the Starship Volant, as you might have guessed from the title. The structure of the game is a bit different from your average work of IF, though the characters, plot, and especially the setting all contain elements that might give anyone who's ever seen an episode of Star Trek a sense of déjà vu. (To me this is a good thing, but your mileage may vary...)

One of the unusual things about the game is that there are multiple main characters. Five of them, to be exact: the captain, pilot, security officer, ship's doctor, and chief engineer. Each of them are given some time in the spotlight when it comes to resolving the crisis the ship faces, and each have distinctive personality quirks and a bit of history that makes the whole process more interesting.

Which leads us to the second unusual thing; a prologue was included to let you get to know the different characters by trying them out at your leisure, chat with other crew members, and do a little exploring on the side. The prologue isn't necessary to play the game, but it does give some backstory, and I highly recommend at least taking enough time for a tour of the ship, since this is an area where the game really shines (and later you may be too busy to enjoy it).

As I said, at a glance the setting is fairly familiar, so while most people won't have any trouble figuring out what transporters and replicators and the like are for, there are tons of interesting little details scattered around in people's quarters and elsewhere that really help flesh out the game world.

Unfortunately that's about it for the prologue; there are no puzzles, nor anything else you can actually DO there, which can make your first impression of SV:S be that it drags horribly, at least until you skip to the game proper. When I first played I suggested to the author that some sort of goal for that part (such as a simple non-pressing task for each person to perform) would improve the pacing, and after a recent replay I still feel that way.

However once the ACTUAL game begins, things move fast as you are switched from character

to character, each with an important job to do. The puzzles themselves could have stood to be more challenging, but I thought the way they were presented was interesting in and of itself; there are a few cases where you do the typical IF thing of searching around and manipulating objects, but most of the time the obstacles you're actually faced with are decisions. The best approach to take with hostile, trigger happy aliens, whether to put moral concerns above the safety of the ship, etc.

I wound up really enjoying this approach, though as I stated the puzzles were a bit too easy for my tastes. The dilemma the ship faced might have been thought-provoking and suspenseful, rather than just mildly interesting if finding the right solutions had taken more work, with tougher consequences for screwing up.

Though of course the above paragraph all comes down to taste, and anyway I suspect that my REAL complaint is that I enjoyed the game and wanted more. Sadly, SV:S is rather brief (especially for a Spring Thing entry) and it seems like just when the plot starts heating up, it fastforwards to the end.

On the bright side, the epilogue left me with the impression that a sequel is in the works, and the setting itself could easily support a nearly infinite number of bite-sized, increasingly improbable adventures for the crew, just like a certain TV show...

Pathway to Destruction Author: Richard Otter Platform: ADRIFT 4 Reviewer: Lumin

Way, way back in the forgotten mists of time (2005 I believe) David Whyld proposed the idea of a Finish the Game comp. The idea was that he'd create six rooms with basic descriptions that could then be added to and elaborated upon to make a full game. The comp did surprisingly well, garnering six entries, all of which were fairly good.

However, Richard Otter's game, Pathway to Destruction, was far and away my favorite, and took first place by a healthy margin as well. I replayed it recently and was pleasantly surprised to see that it had lost none of its charm. I'll admit that a lot of the time I'll make allowances for this type of game, taking into account a deadline that may have forced the author to finish in a rush without much testing, but that was completely unnecessary here. Sure, there were a few flaws that I'll get to in just a moment, but on the whole it's a solid, well-written game that's enjoyable in or out of the context of the contest.

The only real problems I came across (and ones that would be easily fixable, assuming the author was inclined to do an updated version after all this time) were a few guess-the-verb issues that made some of the puzzles much harder than necessary.

In particular, there were a couple of connected puzzles involving a metal bar that I never would have had a chance of figuring out on my own. Luckily, if you don't mind doing things the easy way it's all but spelled out for you in the hints and a 'useful information' topic at the beginning of the game, but in my opinion a far better solution would to have clearer clues in the game itself, and more synonyms for the commands. The same applies to two items in the game, a jewel and a ring, both of which caused me some confusion and could have used more detailed descriptions that at least give you an idea of their purpose and how to use them.

Again, the robust hint system keeps all of this from becoming too much of an obstacle, but I've always found puzzles that all but REQUIRE hints and/or a walkthrough to be a major annoyance.

But don't get me wrong; despite these problems, PtD is still an great game. The writing in particular is excellent, even if the contrast between the six rooms in the beginning with their bent towards fantasy, and the sci-fi city just outside is at first a little jarring. I seem to recall that the contest rules allowed you to modify the original descriptions a bit, which may have helped smooth the transition, but either way it's a minor issue. In fact it may have even added to the sense of atmosphere that impressed me so much. (What can I say, I'm a sucker for the mysterious ruins of an alien civilization.) I only wish the game was a little longer with a slightly expanded plot, because I would have loved it if I could have done some exploring in the city itself, and done a bit more detecting before the end.

At first glance it seems like the author might have tried to add some more content by letting you choose whether you were male or female in the beginning, but after trying both options I would have to write it off as a failed experiment. Nothing about the plot changes no matter what you pick, and in fact the only thing choosing a female does is shunt you off to some bizarre 'grrl power' alternate universe where you worship a goddess instead of a god, you're female, your co-workers are female, etc. Everything else is identical. I don't really see a reason to have included the option in the first place, but it seems like that's something just about EVERY game that lets you pick your gender is guilty of, so I can't really hold it against this one. (I would love to see an IF game with a significant difference there, different solutions to puzzles, etc. though sadly the genre that's most likely to tackle this first would be AIF, and that's not the kind of 'puzzle' I had in mind...)

But even as a small game it's pretty satisfying. Without giving away too much of the plot, I'll just say that Something Bad has happened, and one of the more interesting tasks is to figure out exactly what it was. For some reason I've always been fond of information gathering in IF games (maybe because Anchorhead was my first). There's just something about finding a bunch of scattered pieces and then fitting them together myself that's so much more engaging for me than the traditional 'unlock the door, pull the string, attach the gadget to the gadget and steal the gloves from the gardener' type of situation.

I liked the last puzzle in particular, even though I didn't catch the significance to something the first time through and had to play through again. Oh, and just a warning; you CAN die and after that you CAN'T undo. I guess technically the 'no undo' thing is Adrift's fault for essentially booting you out of the program when you lose, but it's something that's so simple to work around I tend to count it as a mark against the game when it hasn't been. But PtD is short enough that even if you forgot to save it's no big deal to get back to where you were, and strangely enough it was actually kind of refreshing to play a game that gave me the freedom to screw up. (If I want to do something dangerously stupid I should be allowed to, dang it! :P)

Anyway, to recap: couple of minor problems, but great game, great setting...great comp, even. After playing this I'm almost inspired to dig out my never-finished entry and try to do something with it.

LOOKING AHEAD

As I said in the intro, I'm not sure if this newsletter is going to be a regular thing or not, so I can't commit to a release date for Issue 37 at this point. I suppose a lot depends on whether other 'drifters are willing and/or able to contribute...or perhaps even take over for an issue.