



Inside
ADRIFT

**The Newsletter Of The
ADRIFT Community**

September/October 2006 - Issue 31

contents

Editorial	3
Hot Off The Press	5
ADRIFT Forum Digest	11
In The Hot Seat [Interview with C. Henshaw]	14
Making A Good First Impression by David Whyld.....	23
Hook, Line & Sinker (<i>part 1</i>) by C. Henshaw	26
Off The Rails	32
Critics' Corner [The Haunted Horror House; Pestilence; Shelter; The Wonders Of Science].....	40
Latest ADRIFT Releases	49
Reference	50
Contributions	52
Looking Ahead	53

Editorial

Here we have it – issue thirty-one and still going strong.

As you might have noticed, the newsletter has been given a bit of a makeover this issue. I fully intended to do that last issue but it's amazing just how fast deadlines creep up on you when you're not looking. One moment you're thinking 'oh, six weeks to go, *plenty* of time' and then the next thing you know it's the day before the publication date and you haven't even proofread the thing! But this issue I'm (a little) more organised so hence the fancy text effects and the general *nice*ness boost for the newsletter.

Of course, not everyone likes fancy text effects and the likes, so there's also a plain text format version of the newsletter available and a taf version. Yes, a

taf version. So you can play the newsletter like an ADRIFT game if you're so minded. All the various versions can be found at

<http://www.shadowvault.net/newsletter/31.htm>

David Whyld

HOT Off The PRESS

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

The Black Sheep Returneth

The black sheep of the IF community, Howard Sherman (aka Malinche), recently wrote an article at online gaming site Adventure Classic Gaming which unsurprisingly had the IF community up in arms:

<http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/features/219/>

It seems Mr Sherman, who styles himself alternatively “Grandmaster” and “Implementer” (stop snickering at the back) believes himself to be the last person writing IF. A claim that no doubt comes as quite a surprise to all of us who have been writing IF for years. He further goes on to make wholly unlikely claims that he has sold (or “moved” is the word he uses) 150,000 copies of his games; a remarkable amount, particularly considering the commercial market for IF died out years ago and finding a microscopic needle in a haystack the size of Kansas would be easier than finding someone who likes his games. If anyone reading this has even seen one of Mr Sherman’s games in a high street store, please let me know. Apparently there are

150,000 copies out there but, funnily enough, I've never seen even one.

Hourglass Competition

: The Results

The ADRIFT-only Hourglass Comp (AKA The 4th One Hour Comp) concluded at the end of August/start of September and had a total of thirteen entries by eleven different authors, three of them with the debut games.

The results in full:

- 1) **The Long Barrow** by Chensaw
- 2) **Quest For Food** by Lumin
- 3) **Herr Doktor von Nördlingendinkelsbühlhündchen-am-Rhein** by The Mad Monk
- Three Minutes to Live** by Ren
- 5) **Smote** by Robert Street [aka Rafgon]
- 6) **Dancing Even Him?** by Richard Otter
- 7) **Boiled Eggs** by Anna Fruen [aka Sprite]
- 8) **Choose Your Own Three Hour Adventure** by David Whyld
- 9) **Rolling The Dough** by Richard Otter
- 10) **The Road Leads to Nowhere** by The Dominant Species
- 11) **Over the Edge** by Ren
- 12) **The Skydiver** by Fenris
- 13) **Pilfers** by Daniel Budle

SCORE BREAKDOWN:

The Long Barrow = 6.27

5 8 6 4 9 8 5 5 5 7 7

Quest for Food = 6.09

5 7 4 8 8 8 8 4 8 3 4

Herr Doktor von Nördlingendinkelsbühlhündchen-am-Rhein = 6

7 7 6 5 6 7 6 6 5 4 7 6

Three Minutes to Live = 6

4 5 9 5 4 5 5 8 9 6

Smote = 5.67

5 4 7 4 7 7 5 7 3 7 6 6

Dancing Even Him? = 5.64

5 6 8 2 7 4 6 5 6 7 6

Boiled Eggs = 5.58

6 6 7 7 5 6 6 7 4 3 4 6

Choose Your Own Three Hour Adventure = 5.41

6 8 4.5 5 6 7 6 7 1 4 5

Rolling the Dough = 5.36

6 5 7 6 4 7 4 4 4 6 6

The Road Leads to Nowhere = 5.25

6 8 9 3 4 5 2 6 4 5 4 7

Over the Edge = 5

4 6 8 3 3 4 3 6 2 8 8

The Skydiver = 4.18

3 4 6 3 4 2 3 5 4 7 5

Pilfers = 3.63

1 4 6 3.5 4 5 4 3 7 1 2 3

IFComp 2006

Due to commence in just a few days (29th September is the official deadline for submitting games, with the competition itself actually beginning shortly after), the IFComp is upon us once again. This year there have been no less than 118 (!) submissions, although if the ratio of submissions to actual entries holds the same as it has for the past few years, the total will probably be a third of that.

Let's hope so anyway. While 118 new games would be a pretty amazing thing, finding time to play them all in the 6 week judging period for the comp would be a challenge to say the least.

At the time of writing this, the known ADRIFT entries are:

Requiem by David Whyld

The Sisters by Revgiblet

Unauthorised Termination by Richard Otter

A New IF Forum?

There was recently a lengthy debate on Recreational Arts Interaction Fiction (more commonly known as RAIF) when someone suggested the idea of relocating the newsgroup to a forum.

Now this isn't the first time the idea has been suggested but, unusually, this time it didn't meet with *quite* the level of scorn it has in the past. A few of the RAIF crowd actually ventured that it might not be a bad idea. Others disagreed quite vehemently at the very idea of it and before you knew what was going on, the whole thing had devolved into one lengthy debate on the

pros and cons of a newsgroup versus a forum... thus neatly ignoring one of the main questions posed, which was “what would be a good way to attract more users to the IF scene?”

Ironically, as the debate was progressing, and one of the features of a newsgroup upheld as an advantage – namely the lack of moderation – someone called ‘IF Troll’ went and posted half a dozen offensive and insulting messages on the newsgroup. The messages are there now for all eternity and can never be removed. Lack of moderation an advantage? Decide for yourself...

On a more positive note, two new IF forums sprang up during the debate:

The Interactive Fiction Community at <http://www.essell.org/ifforum/index.php> which seemed initially to be quite active but has since died out.

The Interactive Fiction Forum at <http://www.intfiction.org/forum/> This proved quite a bit more popular and even had an active userbase at one point, though things have quietened down considerably since then.

Whether either of the forums will succeed is still pretty much open to debate.

RIP: The Reviews Exchange

Unfortunately, the Reviews Exchange is no more. Originally edited for five issues by yours truly (David Whyld in case you're wondering who's writing this) and then for four more by Robert Street, it has sadly ceased to be. To paraphrase an old Monty Python sketch: “it is an ex-reviews exchange...” Hopefully it might return at some point, but in the meantime I’ll be including reviews for ADRIFT games in the Newsletter. Reviewed a game and want it including? Send it to dwhyld@gmail.com

What games are reviewed this issue? Turn to page 36 to see.

The 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.

August's Writing Challenge was won by, of all things, a newcomer to the scene. Take a bow, Ravells.

September's Writing Challenge, which closes on 30th September to make way for October's, has the following:

Location: *morgue*

Contains: *cadaver, bloodied knife, laughter, various chemicals, coffin*

ADRIFT Forum

Digest

By Stefan Donati (Shuarian)

We had some interesting topics on the forum, and thanks to the Hourglass Competition 2006 also finally saw some new games. Maybe the IF Comp will bestow us with even more Adrift games?

Programming Help

Items required to exit room, different response for each item

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=4;t=5565>

In this scenario, the author wants to restrict the player's movement so that the PC can only leave certain rooms if he's in possession of three specific items. If the player tries to leave the room without meeting the requirements, a custom message should appear telling him which item(s) are still missing.

Are reusable events possible?, Can an event be re-triggered by a task?

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=4;t=5468>

Explains how to reset a task so it can be reused again later on.

Game Design, Writing Techniques

Presentation

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5439>

Should the default look of the Adrift runner be changed by authors? There appears to be many different likings, but it was agreed that a consistency within the used display design is important.

Player Preferences

Control Panel

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5437>

Do players normally use the control panel when they play Adrift games? The respondents rarely use it, if at all.

Miscellaneous

Switching PC characters

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5686>

This thread lists some games which made it possible for the player to switch characters, and asks how this could affect the gameplay.

Can horror IF be truly scary?

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5619>

This thread wants to know if horror IF games can be scary; this in contrast to just being surprising. Many people argued that horror IF can be compared to static IF, which for many can be scary. It was also noted how sound and visuals greatly influence the atmosphere in modern video games, though.

Writing vs Playing

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5536>

What's the ratio between the time forum members spend on writing games, in comparison to the time they spend on playing IF games? The answers to this question varied greatly, presenting the whole possible range.

Introducing IF to a wider audience

<http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/iB/ikonboard.cgi?act=ST;f=1;t=5474>

As IF has become more accessible to the general audience, how can more players be attracted to it? And is IF really ready for the average computer player?

In The Hot seat

Interview with C. Henshaw

This month we have none other than the delightful Miss Henshaw here to answer a few questions about life, the universe and something called ADRIFT...

Q

First of all, who is Chenshaw? Tell us a bit about yourself.

A

I'm an American ex-pat, having lived in Britain over 9 years; first Scotland for three years, then London and area for 6 years. I came here to be with my husband, who is English. I'm a student and I work part-time. Unfortunately, my work and my studies are not related - I work (self-employed) as a digital photographer specialising in the digitisation of archives, manuscripts, drawings etc. as well as associated cataloguing when

required, and I'm doing my PhD in archaeology (one year to go still). I'm turning 30 this year, so I often feel I really should be finished with uni by now!

No kids, but I do have a cat and several tropical fish. I have a Myspace webpage (www.myspace.com/pchenshaw) and a research website – not even near to being finished though – (www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~tcrcnmh/Akhsiket) with more info about who I am and what I do.

Q

You seem to like one room games (your last two games have bothered featured just a single room) – what is it about them that appeals to you?

A

My first couple games (**House Husband** and **Silk Road Secrets**) were both fairly large games for a beginner. Large games are unwieldy and difficult to keep momentum on, take forever to test, etc. So I started writing one-room games for my own pleasure – to have something I could work on that I could actually finish in a satisfying way. The first one (**Laboratory R.A.T.S**) wasn't written with the intent to release it, but in the end I released it as a one-room 'demo'. The whole experience was better than I expected, and most people were very favourable in their opinions of it, so I wrote another one (**Makeshift Magician**). I'll probably continue to write and release one-room games as and when I get ideas. I would definitely recommend this as a good way to cut your teeth on game writing – get stuff out there, get feedback, do it often.

Q

The IFCOMP 2006 is looming (in fact will be almost underway by the time this issue of the newsletter emerges). Any plans to enter? Or if not this year, next year?

A No plans. I have found this summer to be too busy to be able to make any kind of deadlines. Maybe next year – it will definitely happen eventually.

Q You won the Intro Comp with **Silk Road Secrets: Samarkand To Lop Nor** by quite a margin. Is this likely to emerge as a full size game one day?

A Yes! It was well on it's way when I had a major problem with the generator (some of you will remember my panicky posts about this last year). It took me awhile to get back to it after that, even though I was able to restore almost everything with Campbell's help. I haven't done much on it lately, but it's in my mind a lot – I'm still keen on the storyline and characters/setting. I do have some issues concerning puzzles and their naturalness to the story, allowing flexibility within a fairly prescribed storyline, etc. which have thrown up a few barriers to moving forward.

Q What other games are you working on now? Tell us a bit about them.

A I often start and quickly abandon games, usually after wasting about 4 hours on them. I have two that I'm working on which I started recently, which I think will go the distance:

Divine Harbour, a thriller set in a mental institution [David, I think I submitted an introduction for this issue?], and **The Cousin** (I haven't decided on a final title), where a woman has to go back to her childhood to solve a mystery.

Both of these are fairly serious games (although not in the comedy genre, humour in **The Cousin** will be tongue-in-cheek and a bit sarcastic). Both will be much longer, and more comprehensive story-wise than the games I've released or entered in comps over the past year. They also feature well-developed characters and storylines, with an emphasis on plot development rather than individual puzzles.

Q

Have you tried any of the other IF languages – Tads, Inform, etc?

A

I started out using Tads, which was my introduction to IF. I wrote about 75% of **House Husband** with Tads, then re-wrote it with ADRIFT before I released it. I found it frustrating that my game writing/coding was constantly being blocked by my minor mistakes such as a missing semicolon or curly bracket. I haven't used it since 1994. I haven't tried any of the others – I don't have the luxury of time to learn more than one system now!

Q

What are your views on the idea of commercial IF? Do you think it might one day become a reality again or is it just a pipe dream?

A

I think it's a pipe dream, honestly. Enough freely available IF is being written at the moment to keep most people busy. A few writers here and there might get people to pay for their game(s), but I don't see it happening as a general trend, and I don't see people making a living out of it.

Q

Would you ever consider trying your hand at a commercial IF game yourself? If so, would it be ADRIFT that you chose to write it in or another

system?

A I wouldn't even consider it!

Q Assuming you had unlimited time to work on a game, what would your ideal game be like?

A I suppose in a way, **Silk Road Secrets** is my ideal game, and because I don't have unlimited time, it is taking forever to finish (and that's just the first of three parts). Long but broken up into manageable parts. Good background story with believable characters and plot. A sympathy with the PC and his/her goals. Interesting, well developed setting, without too much repetition. Natural direction through the game which gives the player a sense of independence while at the same time making sure the plot progresses. I could go on!

Q Which IF (ADRIFT or otherwise) games have you played lately and which would you recommend?

A I am embarrassed to say that I have played very few games this year. I played all the games for the Writing Challenges Comp, but none of them really stand out in my mind. When I have time to sit down and do IF stuff, I'm usually working on my own games. So I can't really recommend anything, although some good reviews of recent games have come out, which I intend to play one of these days.

Q

Where do you see your game writing going over the next few years? More one room games? Larger, ambitious projects? Or moving on to something else?

A

As I described above, I will continue with the one room games, although there's nothing in the pipeline at the moment on that front. And I am working on longer games, so there's no real change. I imagine over the next year, I'll have less and less time for IF, as I start writing up my research project, and once I finish I'll have to join the full-time job brigade, so who knows what'll happen then. My only ambition really is to get Silk Road Secrets finished and beta-tested over the winter.

Q

ADRIFT 5 will be on us soon. What features do you hope it has? Or are you content with ADRIFT 4 and will be sticking with that for the foreseeable future?

A

I'm not holding my breath for v.5 in that we could be waiting a long time for its release. I am looking forward to it though, as it seems like a lot of the little annoyances with the generator that aren't barriers to writing but do make life harder, will be sorted out. I don't have a lot of technical knowledge, so I don't have any of my own personal recommendations (I don't know what is or isn't possible to change in a program like this for example). I do think that its release will result in a lot of newbies coming to ADRIFT, and hopefully some oldies who've given up a bit to come back and start experimenting.

Q

What are your views on the idea of a collaboration with other drifters? Do you think you'd make a good collaborator?

A I like the idea of collaboration in theory – although in my experience, there's always one or two people who don't hold up their end, and keep the whole thing from working out. At the moment I wouldn't want to commit to something unless it really was just a few hours of effort. The idea broached on the forum not long ago about a game which is essentially a collection of mini-games is a good idea, and I might be interested in writing something for that, as it would stand alone if the collaboration didn't work out.

Q Do you think with version 5, ADRIFT will gain more of a standing in the IF community than it has had in the past? Or will it still be seen as the system people use if they can't or won't use a programming language?

A I think ADRIFT really appeals to newcomers, and that won't change with the release of v.5. The problem with that is you then end up with a lot of substandard games being released (and I'm not saying they are all substandard – it's usually the ones that are released without being beta-tested, by people who are not really part of the ADRIFT community, and lets face it, most newbie games aren't the cream of the crop). So that is going to continue to have a negative effect on the standing of ADRIFT. That said, there are of course experienced writers of ADRIFT games who get fairly good to very good reviews in IF comps and, to a lesser extent, on general release. If ADRIFT 5 can encourage the more experienced writers to up their output, then the standing of ADRIFT will increase. If v.5 makes it easier to bypass some of the current pitfalls with ADRIFT, then the games in general, presumably, will be better implemented, and that will also raise the standing of ADRIFT.

No matter what, die-hard programmers will probably never want to use ADRIFT. But who cares? What matters really is how good the end result is, and it seems ADRIFT 5 will have a positive effect on that.

Q

What do you do away from ADRIFT (apart from change your avatar picture on an almost weekly basis!) ?

A

Hmph! I'm not the only one who changes often (I'm looking at you KF). I'm a pretty boring person mostly – I'm what I like to call 'studious' as opposed to 'sporty'. So ADRIFT is a good hobby for me, as it involves reading, sitting, and typing on a computer. The problem is that I have to do all those things all the time anyway, so my patience with it gets a bit thin at times. Other things I like to do: read all kinds of books, play my guitar (very occasionally), lay about in the garden (and some gardening), get some exercise (jog, play tennis, gym) or watch TV/films. I used to study art (my first idea of a career), so once in a while I get out the oil paints or charcoal and do something to hang on the wall or for a friend. I LOVE to travel, although I have little money to do it with. I like having friends over for BBQs, drinks, or whatever, or going to the pub.

Q

Which is the favourite or your own games and why? Was there anything about it you wished you'd done in a different way or extras that you wished you'd included at the time but didn't?

A

Of my finished and released games, my favourite is Laboratory R.A.T.S. I really identified with the setting, the puzzle and the PC. I know a one-room, single-puzzle game doesn't appeal to everyone, but I tried to make it interesting with NPCs and some background information about the scene. I also like it best because it has depth, even though it is quite small. Not just the background story, but the fact that there are things to learn by examining the environment. In fact you can only complete the game by examining things in detail, as that's where all the clues are held.

I wish I had made a hint system for it, and that I had made more and better interactions between all the characters. GTV issues that arose for players

came about because I wasn't clear enough in directing the player in how to determine the sequence of tasks that needed to be completed in order to solve the puzzle. I'm quite satisfied with it's length – I don't have any ideas whatsoever for continuing the game or making things more complicated.

AUTHOR PROFILE

Full Size Games:

- 1) 17 04 05 **House Husband**
- 2) 10 08 05 **Laboratory R.A.T.S.**
- 3) 11 02 06 **The Makeshift Magician**
- 4) 18 03 06 **Glum Fiddle**
- 5) 12 08 06 **The Long Barrow**

Short Games:

- 1) 21 05 05 **Silk Road Secrets: Samarkand To Lop Nor**
- 2) 21 05 06 **Point 2 Point**

Awards:

Silk Road Secrets: Samarkand To Lop Nor came 1st place in the Intro Comp [2005].

Glum Fiddle came 3rd place in the Writing Challenges Comp [2006].

The Long Barrow came 1st place in the Hourglass Comp [2006].

Making A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

by David Whyld

It seems really obvious when you think about it, but part of what makes or breaks a game is our first impression of it. This might be the introduction (if that's what you first see of the game), or it might be the blurb describing the game on a website. If either is bad, you'll probably move on to another game and not even try it.

First impressions make a lot of difference. For myself, I've lost count of the amount of games that I've quit immediately after reading the introduction because it was either poorly written or riddled with spelling and/or grammatical mistakes. There are also an equal number of games that I've never even downloaded because the blurb on the website I saw them on didn't make them sound anything special.

An example of the former might be:

Helo. U are agent 007. it is ur job 2 kill all teh zombees in teh house. If u are it 3 tims you is ded. good luk.

Believe it or not, but that isn't something I just made up to prove a point. It's the actual intro from an actual game. (The infamous **Death Agency** by Jin if you're interested.) Really makes you want to continue playing it, doesn't it?

And then we have the blurbs on websites that make the game in question sound so bad that it's doubtful anyone will bother downloading it in the first place. You might see something like:

Hi this is my first gam. Its not been tested cos i didnt ave time and its probably not much good but let me know what you think of it. please dont bash the game cos its my first one and it took me an hour to write.

That isn't a genuine example as such, but I've seen a variety of blurbs for games similar to that before. None of which make me want to play the game.

Read the blurb again and ask yourself – is a blurb in which the game's author admits his game isn't much good and hasn't been tested, only took an hour to write, and where he actually mentions it's his first game likely to be a good game? Of course, it could be good but the evidence kind of indicates otherwise. For me, whenever I see a blurb stating that it's the writer's first game, the what I immediately think is "oh, it's bad and he knows it's bad so he's making a point of telling everyone it's his first game so they'll go easy on him".

It's never easy making your first game sound promising, irrespective of what you think about it. You don't want to come across as someone proclaiming his game is the best thing since sliced bread (and risk everyone avoiding it because of how overbearing you, a newcomer, sound), but neither do you want to people to read the blurb to your game and just dismiss it outright.

You also don't want to work on your game for months and months, test it thoroughly, fix all the bugs and errors that come to light, release it... and then find no one wants to play it because the blurb isn't very good.

A blurb should:

- * be interesting.
- * grab the potential player's attention.
- * show your game in as favourable a light as possible.

A blurb shouldn't:

- * sound like the writer is apologising for his game (i.e. "this is my first game and it's probably not very good". If even the writer thinks the game is bad, what chance is there that anyone will want to play it?)
- * contained spelling mistakes and/or grammatical errors. Seriously, if you can't even write a few sentences without a mistake, what hope is there for your game?
- * be overlong. It should be a few lines, a few paragraphs at most. If your blurb is five screens long and is detailing the entire storyline of the game, you've included too much detail.

Hook, Line & Sinker

1. The Hook

by C. Henshaw

The problem:

What is it that keeps a player working away at your game – struggling over those GTV issues, overlooking various typos and bugs, because, let's face it, rarely does a game ever come out completely perfect. Some people prefer a free-flowing plot, others like more direction, still others prefer a puzzle-fest while some of us like a well-written story. How can you please everyone, without running the risk of pleasing no one?

I am not going to attempt to give a real answer to that question, as I think it is impossible to please *everyone*. Someone will always find a problem, find it too difficult, too easy, impossible to run on SCARE, or a multitude of other reasons you may or may not have control over.

Saying that, there *are* some games out there that are considered, in general, to be very good, by a large number of people across the board. So it is possible to get it right, as you probably already know.

There are several components to story-telling that can be analysed here, in relation to retaining the interest of the reader, but I'm going to limit my own analyses to the three main aspects of any story or game: the Hook, the Line and the Sinker. Okay, I'm using a clichéd phrase, here – usually associated with embarrassing moments of gullibility. But I think it makes for a nice mantra, and after all, you are trying to get your readers/players to take you

seriously. In this article, I'm focusing on the Hook: capturing your audience with the first bite – and making it difficult for them to get away. I'm going to admit that some of these things I've only thought of now, so don't go looking at my games to find examples of everything – in fact these articles draw on dissatisfaction with my games, and musings on how I could have made them better.

Note to authors:

I will assume that you know how to use the ADRIFT generator. You are fairly literate, and know how to put a sentence together. You have played a few games, and have a good idea of the norms and trends in interactive fiction in general. You have a few good ideas in your head. What now?

Not only do you want other people to finish (and like, perhaps even adore) your game, but *you* wouldn't mind having fun writing it. If it is fun and interesting for you, it is more likely to be fun and interesting for others. Okay, it doesn't have to be 'fun' – it could be a horror story - but the chances of you finishing your game if you aren't fired up is probably pretty slim. Pride over a good introduction, characters or scenarios taking on a life of their own – who wouldn't want to keep writing?

Of course, there are things that need to be taken into account with interactive fiction. For example, in normal fiction, you are not expecting to have to interact with any characters or environments. You are expecting the story to lead you down a path of the author's insightful choosing. With a game, you have to have an active interest in moving the story along, rather than passively letting the story move itself. With normal fiction, once you get past the front cover, all books pretty much look the same. Interactive fiction also often looks the same right from the start, but it doesn't have to – fonts, colours, effects, sounds, images, all these things are there for the creative author to play around with. Presentation is very important – and anything out of the ordinary will strike up interest.

Titles:

What is the first thing you normally see in interactive fiction? There are two methods to start off the game, but both usually have the title and author first. Is your title any good? Is it new and different? Does it sum anything up? Have you used font size, type and colour, effects, spacing, etc. to make it express anything? The best games usually manage to tick these boxes.

Entry to the game:

Okay, the title isn't such a big deal. But it can make the player sit up and take notice if done well. Next there are three general methods for getting into the game itself 1. a menu, 2. an introduction, 3. a room description. Now of course, 2 and 3 usually come straight after 1, but I'm talking first impressions here. There are pros and cons to all of these, and I am going to inject some personal opinion here.

The menu option:

The only downside to the menu option is that it has the effect of breaking in and destroying whatever mood you've created with your title effects. If you have no effects, then you don't need to worry. But it is kind of like having a contents page after the first page of Chapter 1 in a normal book – just seems a little out of place. However, I am going to put forward that the menu start is the best of the three options because 1. it shows that the author has put some time and effort into laying things out for the player, 2. it makes it easier, usually, to play the game, 3. it gives you the option when restarting to go straight to the game, rather than making you go through an introduction that was only meant to be seen once, and will probably be ruined if seen over and over again.

So, how to keep the menu from ruining the mood? Why not try making it fit with the mood (and I've never tried this myself, but I think it could work). Make it unobtrusive. Or put in a graphic which includes the menu options using colour and texture. The below text took me a whole 2 minutes to write and organise – it's a bit basic, but maybe a little better than being assaulted with a huge list of options in size 14 font with little formatting at all...



The introduction:

Of course, you don't *have* to have a menu, and if it isn't your style, no one is going to rate your game badly because it isn't there (probably). The second-best option is to start with an introduction. It's a good method (although second best, of course). Just remember that everyone is probably going to

have to see it more than once. Every time they start the game, that introduction is going to be either read or skipped over. So don't make it too long, if that's the case. How would you like to have to 'press any key' ten times, or scroll through pages of text before you can get to the game? However, that is for the Line, not the Hook. The Hook is only concerned with the first read-through.

Whether or not you start with the introduction, or make it an option in a menu, it goes without saying that it is usually a good idea to have an introduction before the first room description. Why? One dictionary definition is that it is a preliminary part leading to the main part of a book or musical composition. In order to capture the interest of your reader (they are a reader at this point) the introduction must *lead* them. One of the best examples of a leading, and riveting introduction I've seen is in *Unravelling God*, by Todd Watson:

Unravelling God starts out with just one line – '**All around you is desolation, torture, and... (press any key)**'. Could you *not* press any key? Of course not!

'Pain.'

A second or two wait, and the introduction begins.

One word on an otherwise blank screen. '**Pain**'. It's the visual effect. You are already starting to understand what kind of game this might be. It's already having a psychological impact. This is a simple device, but very effective. It's different. It's not at all subtle. It grabs you.

The introduction continues this slightly shocking narrative with a description of hell. A well-written description of hell, and the PC's involvement with it. What more do you need, really? It hooked me. It showed the important things an introduction needs to show: what is going on (you are in hell, and then wrenched out of it) and what questions or problems need to be addressed (How did you get there? How do you keep from going back? What is the purpose of being wrenched out? What is the significance of hell to the story? Etc.). It doesn't have to tell you your name, address or employment history – it has to get you *in the mood*.

I'm not saying you can't hook a player with a normal block of text – but something has to be different about it. And there are only so many ways you can describe offices, bedrooms, laboratories, jail cells, fields, woods, yes,

even seventh levels of hell. Room descriptions do not hook anyone. Introductions are where you can really exercise your creative and inventive powers, and for that reason, I believe, are a must-have.

The room description:

You can, of course, start off your game with a room description. It's inadvisable, but no one is going to stop you. There are ways of incorporating an introduction into your first room, using tasks and ALRs, but that is just a more difficult way of creating what I've already talked about. I'm talking here about starting a game with a repeatable room description. Anybody remember the frustrations of being in front of a log cabin with a mailbox in front of it, or whatever it was? Classic retro style, to be faced with a room, objects, a couple things in your pocket (or maybe not even that), and then expected to find your purpose by simple exploration.

I'm not saying that it's impossible to do, while keeping the player interested, and getting a good review out of them. But it's not very sophisticated and smacks of laziness. The player doesn't know why he's making the effort to explore/escape/talk to character/travel from room to room.

That isn't to say, however, that a room description is nothing, and isn't essential to the Hook, because it is – that first room is your first glimpse of the 'real world' of the game – the environment in which to act out the problems or adventures set up in the preceding introduction. Assuming the room is well-implemented (all visible objects can be examined, etc.), how do you create a stimulating environment? As I said before, it isn't easy to make unique, interesting descriptions of bog-standard rooms like bedrooms, offices, tunnels, etc. Your introduction may negate that by imbuing your otherwise boring room with special significance (an alien sits behind the cheap metal desk of the interrogation room, which you know is actually on a spaceship).

The first room must have purposeful action in it. This can be things going on (people interacting around you, things happening in the background, etc.), or, better, things that are interesting from an exploration point of view. This may be to explore the objects in the room itself, or puzzles such as escape scenarios, but they shouldn't be so difficult or time-consuming that the player is stuck in what should really be the Hook part of the game (we'll get to the Line in the next article) too long. The first room could also be set up as a

really good view of the next room – say you are in a field which doesn't have much to explore in it, but you can see paths which will lead you to interesting places.

Conclusion:

I apologise to those who hoped for concrete answers or formulaic strategies – they may be out there, but I'm much more interested in the underlying understanding of what makes a good introduction to a game – and of course, none of this will really work if it is ridden with bugs or typos. Nothing breaks the mood of the game like repetitious action, especially in the opening scenes. Play games, note what is good or bad about them, why you did or didn't continue playing them, and take note for your own games. Read reviews.

Most people start with the beginning. If you can be proud of your beginning, are excited about it's impact possibilities, then you will be much more likely to keep up the momentum as regards plot and implementation. Things are also much easier if you know what the main plotline is going to be, before you create your beginning – and it will probably be better for it. But that is another discussion.

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.



A.L.D.F.A.

(A Last Damn Fantasy Adventure)

A Last Damn Fantasy Adventure (ALDFA for short) was intended as the third and final game in my comedy fantasy trilogy which began with **YADFA (Yet Another Damn Fantasy Adventure)** [2002] and continued with **ONNAFA (On No Not Another Fantasy Adventure)** [2002]. (There was also **ASDFA (A Short Damn Fantasy Adventure)** [2003] which featured several of the characters from the first two games, though was never counted as a proper sequel to either.) **ALDFA**, tipped for release sometimes in 2003, was going to be bigger and better than the first two, with a stronger storyline, more NPCs, more puzzles, more replay value... but somewhere between coming up with the idea and actually beginning to write the game, it just got lost.



Introduction

The prison cell is dark, dismal, dank, damp and quite a few other words beginning with the letter "d" that you are too thoroughly depressed at the time to think of. Through a small window (barred) you have an excellent view of the yard outside the prison where the locals are busy erecting the gallows.

"Cheer up," says Oott. "It could be worse."

You stare at him angrily. "How could it be worse?" you ask, the strain showing as you struggle to think up of a way to get yourself out of this no-win situation. "We're trapped in an inescapable prison cell in a land where the locals are convinced we're devil worshippers. They're going to burn us at the stake tomorrow at dawn. And we've failed in our mission and the whole kingdom is going to be destroyed as a result! How could it be worse?"

Oott shrugs, takes out his pipes, lights it, and pops it into his mouth. "Well, they could have taken my pipe." He puffs it for a bit and fills the top of your already pungent cell with choking smoke rings. Then he says, "I wonder where you went wrong?"

"Me?"

He nods. "Figures. You were in charge, all the decisions were yours. I mean, I tried to help you out from time to time but it just didn't seem like you were listening to my well-rounded advice. I could have predicted things would go pear-shaped from day one. But did you listen...?" He shrugs again. "Still, kid. I've got me pipe so I'll live."

"Until tomorrow morning when they hang you," you point out.

Oott shrugs once more. "Why don't you tell me what you did wrong and maybe we can figure something out."

"How will that help us?"

"It'll give us something to talk about before the..." Oott grimaces and sucks on his pipe some more. "Go on, kid. Tell me your story."

You consider shooting off some bitter insult, but remind yourself that Oott did offer to help you out of the goodness of his heart (or the chance of making a whopping great profit actually), but an offer of help is an offer of help and you'd have been foolish to turn it down.

Besides which, you're kind of curious yourself as to where things went wrong. It all seemed so simple to begin with. Certainly easier than defeating an evil wizard or an ancient dragon. All you needed to do was deliver a message to an important official and...

* * * * *

Rancid nudges you. "I wouldn't go to sleep right now, sir, if I was you," he

says. *"The King tends to hang traitors who fall to sleep while waiting for him."*

"But I'm not a traitor," you protest.

"You will be if you fall asleep."

So you elect to keep awake, wide-eyed and eager-looking and see just what it is the King has commanded your presence at his castle for. You haven't had much to do with the King since the time you rescued his daughter, the Princess Isabelle, from the clutches of an evil sorcerer. In fact, you'd thought the King wasn't even aware you were still alive. But then came the summons...

And here you are, in the Great Hall. Waiting to see the King.

"What do you think the King wants, Rancid?" you ask.

Your ever depressing butler merely shrugs. "Something life threatening, no doubt. He wouldn't call on you for anything pleasant."

Which is pretty much what you had figured out for yourself.

* * * * *

"Greetings again," says the King, reclining on his elegant throne and with a glass of port in one hand. "How have you been?"

"I-"

"Good, good." The King gestures to his chancellor. "Spiridon, fill him in, there's a good fellow."

Spiridon, who looks every bit as unpleasant as when you last met him, steps forward. "I regret to say that we have a problem. And-"

"And I'm the only one in the world who can sort it out?" you hazard a guess.

"Actually no. You're..." He consults a list. "Number 675 on our list of worthwhile candidates. We saw the other 674 yesterday but felt that there was a chance they might fail. So, we decided to call you after all."

"Oh."

"No need to get disheartened, son," the King says, sloshing back his port and idling swinging a leg over the throne arm. "The others were big, brawny heroic types. You can understand why we left you to number 675."

You just nod.

Spiridon takes over. "News has recently come to light that Baron Darkstone has returned to Harrended. Now, you may or may not be aware of this, but Darkstone is not a nice person. In fact, it'd be fair to say that he's a complete rotter. In fact, in relation to a mangy rabid pit bull terr-"

"He's a git, Spiridon," interjects the King. "We're clear on that. Get on with it." He flashes you a glance. "After 674 times, you can understand this becomes a bit boring."

Spiridon sighs but goes on. "Anyway, Darkstone has shown up in the city of Rot and announced plans for an invasion of Harrenden. Needless to say he has to be stopped. Which is where you come in."

You gulp. "You want me to k-kill Baron D-Darkstone?" you say.

You've heard of Baron Darkstone of course. Everyone has. He's the most thoroughly horrible fellow in the history of Harrenden, an evil warlord who maims, kills, slaughters and butchers everyone he comes across. He's reputed to be half-human, half-demon and all-bad. Even goblins are appalled at his underhanded tactics and these are the sort of creatures who would eat a nun in front of her family.

On another note, Darkstone is supposed to be unkillable. Normal weapons won't harm him and even magical ones have to be really, really enchanted to break through his armour. Then there's his spells. And his bodyguards. And...

"No," says Spiridon. "We don't want you to kill him."

You start breathing again.

"We considered that plan to begin with but we felt you'd get slaughtered," says the King. "And while there was every chance that you might dent Darkstone's sword with your neck and thus make him easier for our assassins to get, we also felt that you might be better off doing something else."

"Such as recruiting the heroes," says Spiridon, picking up smoothly from where the King leaves off. "The last time Darkstone threatened Harrenden, he made several very powerful enemies. Now, while none of them individually are a match for him, all three together might well prove to be his match."

"Who are these heroes?" you ask, determined to make a useful contribution to this meeting even if it is just asking a question that was going to be answered anyway.

"The first is Gulgrinn the Smash, a giant barbarian berserker reputed to be the deadliest man in the land with an axe. He's been locked up in a cell in Nalbor for the past five years for fighting with dragons in the city centre. You'll need to spring him out of his magically sealed cell before the Narborians get around to executing him.

"The second is Alakora the Swift, an amazon of great prowess, wondrous fighting skills and-

"And a cleavage to die for," says the King wistfully.

Spiridon glances at him and the King does red.

"Sorry, did I say that out loud?" He gulps some more port. "Er, ignore me. On you go, Spirry."

'Spirry' goes on, "and the third is a wizard who goes by the name of Um."

"Um?" you query.

Spiridon nods. "No one knows why he chose such a strange name for

himself and as he has a tendency to turn anyone into frogs who asks it's doubtless to remain a mystery.

"Now, all three of these need to be recruited to our side before Darkstone becomes his attack. It is imperative that they be ready to confront him when needs be."

"Don't look so worried, kid," the King says. "The other 674 heroes we sent should do most of the work for you so it'll probably be just a simple case of tying up a few loose ends. Give him the message to deliver, Spirry, and let's get this done with, okay?"

Spiridon hands you a sealed message and orders you not to open it. "Deliver it to an official in Narbor and it will gain the release of Gulgrinn from his cell; in the jungles of Barabara it will gain you passage to where Alakora can be found; in the magic-blasted plains of Gangrene it will open the portal you need to access to reach Um."

"That's quite a lot for one piece of paper," you say.

"It is indeed. Now, I don't believe we have anything else to discuss. Do you have any questions?"

"Well actually-"

"Good, good. Speak to the chap outside and he'll point you in the right direction."

You start through the door, noticing as you do that the King and Spiridon have already started talking about the next 'hero'. "- who we up to next, Spirry-" "-the kid who cleans the public toilets in the local school-" "-good. Glad we saved the real dregs for last-" and then the door slams shut behind you and you miss the rest of what was no doubt a riveting conversation.

* * * * *

Outside in the corridor you find a dwarf you recognise waiting for you.

"Otto!" you cry.

"Nope," he says.

"Er... Toto?" you guess.

"Nope."

You wrack your brains. "Er, er... Toot?"

The dwarf gives you a disgusted look. "Toot? What kinda bloody name is Toot? Bah! If me man and pa had called me Toot I'd have taken a brick ter the pair of 'em."

"So... what is your name?"

"Oott," says the dwarf. "Good proud dwarven name."

"Oott?"

"Yeah. You got a problem with that?"

Remembering the way Otto and Toto - who this dwarf bears a

remarkable resemblance to - took to 'problems', you quickly shake your head.

"What are you doing here, er, Oott?"

"You need a hand, kid. Clear as mud. Delivering messages and the like? Way too complicated for the likes of you."

"How'd you know about my mission? The King and Spiridon have only just finished telling me about it."

"Stands to reason. It was either that or they'd got you to kill Darkstone and - no offence, kid - but you ain't the sort of fellow I'd pick to deal with that nasty piece of work. Nah, you need a real psycho to get that sort of job done. Someone terrifically good at fighting who ain't got a care in the world and doesn't mind going up against some bloke wot once headbutted a dragon 'cos it ticked him off. So, I figured they must have got you for the delivering of messages task. Same as with the last 674 poor schmucks who came through that door. And delivering messages ain't an easy task, you mark my words."

"It can't be any harder than defeating an evil sorcerer and seeing off an ancient dragon," you say. "And I managed them well enough."

"You had help. Me brother Otto for the sorcerer and me other brother Toto for the dragon. And now you got me for the message delivering."

Part of you is dying to ask just why Oott wants to help you with this but another part of you is just too grateful to have a companion on this mission (Rancid having mysteriously disappeared the moment you arrived here). So instead of asking the question that's dying to be asked, you just nod, shake the dwarf's hand, and say, "good to have you on board, Oott."



And that was where the game started proper. The introduction would be skippable – I think it took up about five or six screens in the ADRIFT Runner and was entirely too long to show at the start of every game – and the game itself would begin with our intrepid hero and his dwarven sidekick arriving at a roadside tavern. From here, they could spend some time getting to know the locals (a disreputable bunch for the most part, though vital to the storyline) or venture off along one of the three roads leading away from the tavern to begin searching for the lost heroes.

The game would be similar to both its predecessors in style, though a little darker of content. Neither **YADFA** or **ONNAFA** were very polished games. Far from it, in fact. Both could be left in unwinnable states if the player made the wrong move (and neither informed the player of this, instead leaving him to figure it out himself). Both required some serious guess-what-the-writer-

was-thinking puzzles and both contained a great deal of empty locations where nothing happened and which were just there for no good reason. **ALDFA** would be different. It would be a *lot* more polished; it would have hints provided by your ever reliable dwarven sidekick if it seemed you were taking too long to figure out a certain puzzle; it would be impossible to put into an unfinishable position (in theory anyway); *and* it would have a storyline that made a lot more sense than the first two games.

I wrote a good deal of **ALDFA** before losing interest in it. The Kb count of the latest version still lingering on my hard drive is 140Kb, the bulk of which was written in one mad spurt sometime in mid-2003, with extra bits added to it when I returned to it in 2004 and again in 2005. But while it started off well, it didn't seem to go anywhere from there. Part of the problem, which I can see now with the wonderful benefit of hindsight, is that it lacked planning. Which is a common fault with my games (I'm not what anyone would call a planning kind of guy, but more the "think of an idea, start writing it five seconds later" kind), but much worse here given the scope of the game. **YADFA** seemed like a large game when I wrote it (it being only my second ever ADRIFT game) and it came to 77Kb; **ONNAFA** was 165Kb; **ALDFA**...? Well, the 140KB of it I wrote before losing my way with it represented about a half of the total game. Add to that all the flaws and bugs that would be bound to show up once it was tested, and it's easy to imagine the finished version topping 300Kb. A pretty daunting size for an adventure that I had been writing for a fortnight before even deciding on what the ending was going to be like.

When I pushed it aside for the first time, **ALDFA** was a mess. Parts of the game were playable, but had large gaps in them (i.e. follow the game the way it's *meant* to be played and you'll be fine; vary off the beaten track and you're in trouble (you could wind up in a location that hadn't been written yet, or find yourself in a location that could only be exited with a specific item... which didn't even exist...)). I think the idea I had was to get the game written in very rough form then play through it several times and fix whatever was wrong with it. Only the bigger the game got, the harder it seemed to be to fix the errors without something else going wrong. It also didn't help matters much that I was writing four different parts of the game at the same time – the tavern where the game begins, a city, a jungle location and a wasteland – and bringing them all together into one cohesive whole was beginning to wear on me.

So I pushed **ALDFA** to one side for a while, the intention being to give it a rest until I felt like tackling it again and instead write something else in the

meantime. But **ALDFA** has proved a tricky game to return to. At the moment, there are so many different things going on it, so many things to do, so many loose ends to bring together somehow, not to mention all the game that's already been written and needs checking... that I've done no more than a few Kb here and there and then I'm finding the whole thing too large and confusing and pushing it to one side again.

One day I'd like to go back to it. I'm sure (although this might just be the writer in me speaking here) that there is the essence of a good game in **ALDFA** and that if I could just figure out how to get it finished off, I'd be onto a winner. Also, there's the fact that I've written so much of it – 140Kb! A full size game in its own right – that leaving it lying around forever on my hard drive gathering dust seems a real waste. If for no other reason than that, I ought to see it finished one day.

One day...

Critics' Corner

As the Reviews Exchange has suffered its second demise (hopefully temporary but most likely permanent), this issue we have a few reviews within these hallowed pages.

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Game: **The Haunted Horror House**

Author: **TDS (The Dominant Species)**

Released: **21st July 2006**

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/thhh.zip>

Review by: **David Whyld**

Blurb: "Ben is just your average scientist...until something extraordinary happens that changes his life forever! These two episodes chronicle his adventure so far."

(Warning – container spoilers!)

The second in TDS' serial IF series, **The Haunted Horror House**, as might be gathered from the title, is a comedy. And a parody of other IF games to boot.

The Haunted Horror House follows directly on from the previous game - **The Wonders Of Science** - with the main character, Ben, being transported to another world via an experiment gone awry. As he explores, he quickly discovers that this world is largely a parody made up of a number of IF

games.

As with most parodies, spotting the original game on which a particular scene is based is part of the fun. A couple I got (one was mine so it would have been pretty sad if I hadn't) but I didn't recognise the others so any hidden jokes in relation to them stayed unfortunately hidden. As is usually the case with parodies, they're only funny if you're familiar with the games they're parodying; the rest of the time, you're sat there wondering just what all the fuss is supposed to be about and if you're missing something. I experienced the latter several times during the game, when I was sure something had just happened that ought to mean something to me, but I couldn't for the life of me see it as anything other than a very strange little scene. Maybe some mention at the start or end of the game, or in an accompanying README file, naming the games that are being parodied might have been a good idea.

The game suffers from quite a few bugs and guess the verb problems, as well as some downright unfairness in the way some of the puzzles are handled. It's possible to put into an unwinnable position very easily (miss an item early in the game and you'll find yourself unable to open a shed later on) as well as having EXAMINE and SEARCH as two different commands and not telling the player that this is the case. I missed an item I needed during my first play because at the time I was using the EXAMINE command exclusively; it was only later in the game when I'd exhausted every other command I could think of trying to make some more progress, that I discovered that SEARCH gave a different response to EXAMINE in some cases. By that time, of course, I'd gone past the point of no return and the only way to get back to the earlier part of the game to try SEARCHing a few things was to restart. At least it's a shortish game so it's not like I had hundreds of commands to re-enter to get back to the stage I had previously been at.

Guess the verb? Yes, some bad examples were at play here. I spent what seemed like an age trying to hit upon the correct phrasing for throwing a rope over a branch. THROW ROPE AT BRANCH, THROW ROPE OVER BRANCH, THROW ROPE AT TREE, THROW ROPE AT BRANCH, THROW ROPE and so on and so forth didn't work. In fact, quite a few times when I referred to the rope as plain 'rope,' the game asked me which rope I was referring to – the rope or the old rope? As there was only one piece of rope in the location, this was kind of strange to say the least. Even more strange, when I found a cookie and tried to throw the rope, the game asked me which rope I was referring to – the rope, the cookie or the old rope? Bizarre. I assume the former problem was because the room came with a built-in

description for the rope when it's been successfully thrown over the branch, and you can also be carrying some rope, hence the ambiguity problems. But quite why the game assumed I meant COOKIE when I typed ROPE I can't imagine. Must be a very strange looking cookie indeed... As it happened, the solution I was looking for was relatively simple, although decidedly misleading. TIE ROPE TO TREE was the command I was after. Which, funnily enough, 'throws' the rope at the branch.

Bugs? Quite a few unfortunately. The guess the verb with the rope notwithstanding, I also came across a shed which I unlocked, was told the door was blown open by an explosion, but which I then had to open before I could go inside. I could also eat the cookie twice, the second time producing ADRIFT's generic response for eating an edible item (no doubt a clear case of a non-repeatable custom task for eating the cookie which doesn't actually eat the cookie...). Another location had a trapdoor in the ceiling which, if you try to open as soon as you come across it, which is the most likely course of action, you'll fail because it's out of reach. You'll then find that even when you're correctly positioned to open it, the game won't let you. Yep, you only get one chance to trigger the task in question, and if you try before you're ready, the game won't let you try again. Ouch. I was forced to restart the game on numerous occasions and also restore from previously saved game positions far more than I would have liked.

I ran into a few more problems at the end of the game (assuming it's the end, as I didn't actually manage to finish it but it seemed pretty 'end-like' if that makes any sense) when I was attacked by someone called Michael Spanner who I was unable to defend myself against. Or, to put it better, who I was unable to fight because the game wouldn't accept any of the combat like commands that I tried. Attempts to kill him met with ADRIFT's default of NOW THAT ISN'T VERY NICE, killing him with the knife with I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU WANT ME TO DO WITH THE BLOODY KNIFE, hitting him with Michael SPANNER AVOIDS YOUR FEEBLE ATTEMPTS, and so on. When he killed me, I was actually quite relieved.

Overall I didn't intensely dislike **The Haunted Horror House** but it was certainly a step down from the first game and just too buggy for me to recommend. It isn't always easy to ensure a game is bug free and guess the verb free, but for one as small as this, it wouldn't have required a huge amount of testing to fix the numerous errors that are present in it. Even a quick run through the game from start to finish should have caught most of them.

One laugh out loud moment saved the game from a more scathing review – when removing a knife from the back of an injured man, he cries out about the knife and so you apologise and put it back in him. If only the rest of the game had been as amusing as that I'd have had few complaints.

3 out of 10

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Game: **Pestilence**

Author: **Richard Otter**

Released: **1st July 2006**

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/pestilence.zip>

Review by: **David Whyld**

Blurb: "How it spread no one could say and everything from the food eaten to animal bites got the blame, but still it spread."

Pestilence is a game about a disease. Of which you are, unfortunately, a victim. The game begins with you heading to a medical centre looking for a cure. A nicely interesting idea, but I'm sorry to say that my enthusiasm waned quickly afterwards.

I never really warmed to **Pestilence** for a number of reasons. The main one was that I, as the main character, often had to carry out some decidedly non-heroic actions to make progress. The first location required me to commit cold blooded murder to gain access to a medical centre where I had gone for treatment; later on I'm required to gas a woman locked in a cell (for which I get a nice score boost even though it's not necessary to perform this action). While I can understand that the player is desperate for a cure, I'm not sure I like the idea of indiscriminately murdering other people to find that cure. I also wasn't too keen on the game's fondness for killing me off so many times in the early stages. I didn't really expect to die so often, or so frequently, and having to restart the game so early into play was a hassle. In hindsight, one of the ways to prevent my untimely demise *did* make sense, but it was only after I had died and thought "but what if...?" that I realised it made a difference. Personally, I'd have preferred not having to die and restart the game to figure out what I needed to do.

The player carries around with him a notepad which fills itself in whenever some clue to the cure is discovered. In theory anyway. One game it seemed to fill itself in fine – which was nice, because it showed I was making progress – yet in another it stayed blank for the most part, even after I found out what I needed to do, and then filled itself in all in a rush.

I wasn't very keen on the way some of the puzzles were constructed, or the way only a certain command will work yet other, equally reasonable commands, often won't. At one point, I was required to put an item on another item to allow me to get through a locked door. I had a number of items, as well as there being a perfectly decent one in the room with me, yet the game hit me with YOU CAN'T PUT ANYTHING ON THE BUTTON whenever I tried to place items on it. Only the relevant item worked and allowed me through the door, but shouldn't the game have at least had a better response than YOU CAN'T PUT ANYTHING ON THE BUTTON if I tried the wrong item? The first time I chanced across the button, I didn't even have the item in question and spent a while trying to put other things on it instead.

Despite my initial misgivings, the game is actually quite playable once you solve the first set of problems and start making progress. There are the usual puzzles inside the medical centre involving opening locked doors and bypassing various hazards, including an infected woman who will tear your throat out with her teeth if you unwittingly stumble into her cell. I died several times at that point, as I didn't realise the woman would attack me until she appeared and killed me, and not expecting her to keep chasing after and killing me every time I tried to run away. Funnily enough, if I opened her door and then either entered her cell or walked away, she'd rush out and kill me, yet if I stood there and did nothing, she left me alone.

There are a few NPCs, although only the lab assistant, like you infected with the Pestilence, has any proper dialogue. He can be questioned about a wide variety of subjects, and while most of these are simple filler, it's nice to find an NPC with so many different responses. He almost seemed alive at one point. Saying that, as the ingredients for the cure are to be found around the medical centre and are reasonably easy to acquire, and the lab assistant actually *knows* what the cure is, I'm kind of surprised he didn't just make it for himself rather than waiting around for me to come along and save him.

Finding a cure is a simple enough procedure in itself. Simply locate the ingredients, most of which are in easy to find places, find out what the name of the cure is and make said cure. According to another review I read of the

game, the cure varies from game to game, but in the three times I played through it (once just exploring, once relying on the hints to get to the end, once to get a walkthrough done and write my own review), I had to find the same cure each time. Maybe I just got on the bad side of the randomness and it doled out 'artemis' every time.

Overall, while I wouldn't say I really liked **Pestilence**, it's not a bad game in itself. I was surprised by the player having to kill an innocent civilian right at the start of the game – surely a better course of action could have been implemented – and some of the other actions were a little suspect at best, but it's not a bad game overall.

5 out of 10

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Game: **Shelter**
Author: **Eric Schramm**
Released: **6th September 2006**
Download: **<http://www.shadowvault.net/games/shelter.taf>**
Review by: **David Whyld**

Blurb: "Same game, new name. With a few improvements. You have just purchased your first house and find something amiss, just a little something but you decide to investigate. It's my very first game that made it all the way to completion so try not to be cruel. I am already working on several improvements. Updates later. Eventually there will be a second game."

Okay, I'm aware this is a game by a newcomer but even so, faced with *that* kind of blurb describing the game I'm not inspired to play it. A blurb is generally the first thing a potential player sees of a game. It ought to grip the player's attention, make them *want* to play it, not indicate that a) it's your first game, b) several improvements are in the works (which doesn't say a lot about *this* version) and c) makes you sound like you're apologising in advance for the game.

Shelter actually revolves around you moving into a new house and finding a hole in the garage. For some reason that I never really grasped, the player thinks there's something decidedly untoward about this hole and immediately contacts the realtor to complain about it. Then you contact the previous owner

of the house. *Then* you set about finding out who they bought the house from. Why? Is a hole in your garage really *that* big a deal? Granted, if the hole was so big your garage was likely to collapse into it I could understand your concern, but this seems to be nothing more sinister than a normal every day hole.

Anyway, you set out to investigate this hole. Or try to anyway...

I got stuck right at the start of the game. I was in the garage, I had a rope, there was the hole, but that was about as much progress as I could make. I couldn't leave as apparently there weren't any exits. I could examine a few items (though a good number of what I could see wasn't described and just hit me with ADRIFT's default response for whenever you try to examine an item that the author hasn't covered), and of the four hints available none were the slightest help to me. Some referred to items I hadn't discovered yet and puzzles I wasn't even aware of (a common problem with ADRIFT's built in help menu). In despair, I turned to that old chestnut: cheating. And that's when I discovered that there was actually an item in the garage that wasn't mentioned anywhere in the room description. As this was an item necessary to get anywhere in the game, I'm not sure how anyone was expected to make any progress here. How were they even supposed to figure out it was there in the first place?

My problems didn't end there. Once I'd taken a look at the item that was mysteriously there and yet not there, I discovered I'd gained a couple of items. Neither of which I managed to find any use for. Cheating yet again provided me with the means to get a bit further. Unfortunately, this was along the same lines as the last time I got stuck: another item that I needed to make use of wasn't mentioned anywhere. Heck, even when I knew it was there and even when I'd used it, the game still wouldn't acknowledge it was there.

That was as far as I could make myself play the game. Sorry, I understand it's a first effort but this game isn't even playable. Items necessary to progress the storyline aren't mentioned anywhere and the only way to actually beat the game seems to be by cheating. Makes the whole point of playing it kind of... pointless.

As well as all the other negative aspects of the game, the spelling and grammar definitely needed some work. While the text wasn't so riddled with typos as to make it unreadable, there were certainly more than should have been caught by even a brief proofread. Sometimes two sets of dialogue by

different characters would be on the same length which didn't help matters either.

My advice: take the game down, fix the problems with it, turn it into a full size game (6 KB is smaller than most of the games in the recent Three Hour Game Competition, and just two rooms shows a distinct lack of effort), come up with a decent blurb for the game, get it tested, and *then* re-release it.

1 out of 10

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Game: **The Wonders Of Science**
Author: **TDS (The Dominant Species)**
Released: **1st July 2006**
Download: **<http://www.shadowvault.net/games/spooked.zip>**
Review by: **David Whyld**
Blurb: "Ben is just your average scientist...until something extraordinary happens that changes his life forever! These two episodes chronicle his adventure so far."

A short game. Very short in fact. I think from start to finish it took me about ten minutes. While there are a few puzzles in the game, they're relatively easy so even someone like me, who has never been very good at puzzles, didn't have any trouble with them.

The Wonders Of Science is the first part in a series of short games, and aside from a few rough edges it looks quite promising. The player is a scientist called Ben who needs to hand in a scientific article very shortly. Only he has a slight problem in that he's spilt mustard over the article, thus obscuring all the relevant parts, lost the backup copy, and can't remember what he wrote.

While amusing in places, the game had a definite rushed feel to it and little attention seems to have been paid to ensuring it is bug free. Of bugs, it has quite a few*. Saying that, none of the bugs are real crippers in terms of finishing the game, and none are going to stop you dead in your tracks, but they're bugs all the same. Considering the shortness of the game, it wouldn't have been a difficult task to have got rid of the majority of them. The worst offenders seemed to occur right at the end of the game, when there's an NPC

who can't be spoken to and an invisible cage, though there are frequent typos littered throughout the text.

* Although one that I came across when I first played the game seemed to have mysteriously fixed itself when I played through it game in order to write this review.

Unlike the writer's previous two games, both of which were horrors, **The Wonders Of Science** has a few comical moments. It's not a laugh out loud game, though I did grin a little at the 'Mac' and 'BiPod' digs and the robot in the hallway.

Overall this wasn't a bad little game but it could have done with more attention being paid to fixing the bugs and checking the spelling.

5 out of 10

Latest ADRIFT Releases

Due to the Hourglass Comp (AKA the Second Three hour Comp), there have been quite a few ADRIFT releases recently:

- 13 09 06 **Adventure Strike When You Least Expect It** by Cauthon
- 06 09 06 **Shelter (AKA The Hole)** by EricS1965
- 22 08 06 **Rodney & The Princess** by Kaos
- 12 08 06 **Boiled Eggs** by Anne Fruen [Sprite]
- 12 08 06 **Choose Your Own Three Hour Adventure** by David Whyld
- 12 08 06 **Dancing Even Him?** by Richard Otter
- 12 08 06 **Herr Doktor von Nördlingendinkelsbühlhündchen-am-Rhein** by The Mad Monk
- 12 08 06 **The Long Barrow** by C. Henshaw
- 12 08 06 **Over The Edge** by Ren
- 12 08 06 **Pilfers** by Daniel Budle
- 12 08 06 **Quest For Food** by Lumin
- 12 08 06 **The Road Leads To Nowhere** by TDS
- 12 08 06 **Rolling The Dough** by Richard Otter
- 12 08 06 **The Skydiver** by Fenris
- 12 08 06 **Smote** by Robert Street
- 12 08 06 **3 Minutes To Live** by Ren

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.thephurroughs.com/projects/atts>

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

ADRIFT Fan Sites

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

AIF writer BBen'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:

C. Henshaw for agreeing to be interviewed and for the first part of “Hook, Line & Sinker”.

Shuarian for the ADRIFT Forum Digest.

LOOKING AHEAD

Issue 32 is due out on Saturday, 25th November 2006. Fancy having your say on a subject? Write a review of an ADRIFT game? Have an article to publish?

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