IFN MAGAZINE

WELCOME to Interactive Fiction Now!

In this occasional web-based magazine, you'll find a wealth of information about Interactive Fiction gaming today. Covering a wide variety of Adventure gaming styles, from *Zork* **to** *Riven*, **from** *Tomb Raider* **to** *Starship Titanic*, **we'll be looking at anything involving and immersive.**

In this first issue we look at the imminent release of *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*, the first foray into the world of Zork since *Zork: Nemesis* last year. In an exclusive interview, we talk to Laird Malamed, director of ZGI and talk about this latest episode.

This year also sees a celebration of Zork's 20th Anniversary. In association with Activision, ex-Infocom implementors Marc Blank and Mike Berlyn have released a brand spanking new piece of text-based interactive fiction using the Inform engine. We speak to the imps to find out how Zork: The Undiscovered Underground came to be written.

We also review the recently released *Broken Sword II: The Smoking Mirror* and the long-awaited Sequel to Myst -- Riven.

So, please! Enjoy yourselves, and feel free to email me here at Interactive Fiction Now *<comments@if-now.demon.co.uk>* with your comments and suggestions.

LARA CROFT RETURNS

Digital pin-up Lara Croft is set to storm back into the games market this month in Tomb Raider II. For those of you who may have been off the planet over the last year, Tomb Raider is an action/adventure game starring Ms.Croft, the daughter of an English aristocrat.

Tomb Raider 2 is currently due for release on 28th November 1997. We'll be reviewing the game as soon as the code is finalised, so keep an eye on the IFN website for details of our coverage…

Tomb Raider II is only available in demo format at present but is due for release at the end of November 97. Core promise the game will be 50% larger and boast an improved engine, higher resolution images and dynamic shadows.

Lara herself has also had a makeover since last year's release. This time she appears resplendent in leather jackets and wetsuits and with all manner of boats and skidoos to tear about the place on. With more new enemies to fight than any of us would dream of shaking a stick at, we're in for a treat this Christmas.

FULL CIRCLE IN THE GREAT UNDERGROUND EMPIRE!

Following on from their considerable success last year with Zork: Nemesis, *Activision have been busy. Returning to a style more in keeping with its textual predecessors, Zork: Grand Inquisitor will offer something wholly unprecedented: the first pictures of the White House and other major landmarks in the Great Underground Empire.*

IFN caught up with the director of Grand Inquisitor, Laird Malamed, to ask about the new Zork...

IFN: How does the Zork: Grand Inquisitor story relate to Zork: Nemesis and the text-based games?

<u>**Laird Malamed**</u>: *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* is based on the entire Zork series (except *Return to Zork* which is in the future). The time frame for the game

is 1067 GUE, 101 years after *Spellbreaker* and *Beyond Zork* and 118 years after *Zork: Nemesis*. The title character of the game, the Grand Inquisitor is the same role that closed the Forbidden Lands in *Zork: Nemesis*. During the game, the player (another nameless, faceless, gender-neutral adventurer) must find three lost treasures from the series (the Coconut of Quendor (*Beyond Zork*), a cube of Foundation (*Spellbreaker*) and Yoruk's Skull (*Zork: Nemesis*)). The player is also paired with the 3rd Dungeon Master, the successor to the Dungeon Masters of *Zork III* fame.

The overall tone of the game is between *Return to Zork* and *Zork: Nemesis*, close in feel to that of the text adventures.

IFN: I understand the same Zork: Nemesis engine is being used for Zork: Grand Inquisitor. What improvements have been made?

LM: The engine is now full screen width (as opposed to 512 pixels in *Zork: Nemesis*). Also, an inventory system has been added, along with a spell book, new menu bars and a auto-filling map.

IFN: Is there going to be ambient music, as in Zork: Nemesis?

LM: Yes. Mark Morgan is doing the music again.

IFN: The extra touches in Zork: Nemesis, such as the classical artwork incorporated into the scenery, added a great deal to the "feel" of Zork: Nemesis. Are similar devices being used in Zork: Grand Inquisitor?

LM: *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* operates on many different levels. All of the components, sound, color, music, voice over and cut scenes help tell the story of magic vs. technology. This conflict is represented by a variety of different elements (red banners vs. blue magic effects, organic versus machine, etc). We also have more characters to interact with that help populate the world. However, we are not placing any classical artwork in the world because most of the game occurs underground.

IFN: At this stage, I've only seen early sketches. Will the actual game graphics be closer to the style used in Zork: Nemesis or these "cartoon" like images?

LM: The process for completing the art has gone as follows: A pencil sketch is drawn and approved. A basic color treatment is applied (the "cartoon" images you mention). These are used as palette guides by the 3D artists. The final art looks similar to that of *Zork: Nemesis*, but also reflects the lighter tone of *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*. By the very process of 3D, the final art look much more photorealistic than the paintings.

The Monastery

IFN: **What development tools are you using during development of Zork: Grand Inquisitor?**

LM: On *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* we are using lots of different tools. *Visual C++*, *Visual SourceSafe*, *Adobe Photoshop*, *After Affects*, *Illustrator*, *3D Studio Max*, *3D Studio R4*, *Soft Image* are the main staples. We are also using lots of internally developed tools as well.

IFN: **Zork: Grand Inquisitor will have the first non-verbal images of the White House from Zork I. Are you worried about satisfying everyone's expectations?**

LM: In some regards, I know that everyone has their own images of the White House, and there already has been some debate on the web. In looking at the old games and speaking with Marc Blank, I feel comfortable with the White House images in the game. They reflect the feeling of the original text adventures.

IFN: **Who is involved with the Full Motion Video (FMV) sequences for the game? Is Joe Napolitano directing again?**

LM: I directed the live action this time around. Our video producer was Mark Levinson (*Home Alone*, *Mystic Pizza*) and George Bloom (*X-Files* Promotions) was the technical director.

The Dungeon Master's Bedroom

IFN: How about Activision's plans for continuing the Zork saga? Will the same engine be used in future games, or is Z-Vision now due for an overhaul?

LM: First off, *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* is the first of a new trilogy. Part of the reasoning of moving the series to the year 1067 is that this time frame is not discussed in any *Zork* game. I felt the period between 948 (*Zork I*) and 966 (*Beyond Zork* and *Spellbreaker*) was pretty crowded. Not much happens before *Zork Zero* and the 1200's are referred to by *Return to Zork*, so that left us with the 1000's. The next two games will follow sequentially, although they will be sequels more in theme than in cliffhanger.

In terms of engine, we haven't made any decisions for the technology of the next game. I have to finish this one first!

IFN: Did you speak with any ex-Infocommies with regard to the project?

LM: I've spoken to Marc Blank, Mike Berlyn and Mike Dornbrook over the past few months.

IFN: Will there be any Zork: Grand Inquisitor paraphernalia or merchandise?

LM: Definitely.

IFN: How important will audio detail be in Zork: Grand Inquisitor?

LM: Extremely. Audio is a great storyteller and lots of characters are heard via audio because they are totemized or in the case of the dungeon master, in a lamp. Plus, everything you do the game generates audio feedback.

IFN: What will be the required spec/price/size of Zork: Grand Inquisitor when finished?

FEATURE

LM: Pentium 90, 8 Megs of Memory, 4x CD, 16 Bit video, 16 Bit Audio, Windows95. 30 Megs Hard Drive, minimum install.

IFN: **How will the puzzles differ in complexity from Zork: Nemesis -- will they be harder or easier?**

LM: The puzzles in *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* are more like those of the text adventures. You must use lateral thinking to figure things out. For example we have magical umbrellas that are holding a scroll. The solution to the puzzle is to use a thunder spell to fool the umbrellas into opening. We have shied away from find a code and enter it into a control panel puzzles. Our best puzzles are more involved with the environments themselves.

IFN: **Which locations from the text-based Zorks can we expect to see in Zork: Grand Inquisitor?**

LM: Port Foozle, Hades, The White House, GUE Tech (although it was only referred to, never visited), Underground Highway.


Hades

IFN: **Is the gameplay segmented, as in Zork: Nemesis's different worlds approach?**

LM: Not as much. There are different worlds, but they are more cohesively tied together, like the original *Zork* games.

IFN: **Finally, are you treating Riven: The Sequel to Myst as a direct competitor? What advantages do you think Zork: Grand Inquisitor has over games like Myst and Riven?**

LM: I don't see *Riven* as a direct competitor in terms of gameplay. *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* is about *Zork* and exploration via problem solving. As I understand it from seeing the demo at E3, *Riven* is in the same model as *Myst*. For me this means exploration based entertainment. *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* is much more of what adventure players think of as an adventure game. I don't feel that *Myst* players necessarily call themselves adventure game players in the way that *Quake* players will call themselves action game players. For many, *Myst* is their only computer game, so the notion of a genre does not apply. Now certainly, lots of adventurers played *Myst* as well. *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* will really appeal to that category of *Riven* players as well.

IFN: **IFN would like to take this opportunity to thank Laird Malamed and Activision for giving this exclusive interview on Zork: Grand Inquisitor, which is due out in November. We'll be reviewing the game in the next issue.** IFN

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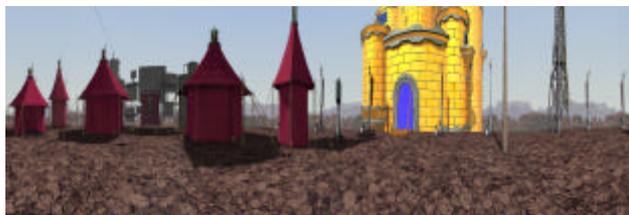
Hot on the heels of *Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars*, released last year, comes this new episode in the adventures of George Stobbart from Revolution.

Revolution's reputation is considerable: their three previous games were all landmarks: Lure of the Temptress, Beneath a Steel Sky *and, of course,* Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars *last year. Indeed,* Shadow of the Templars *introduced new standards for story-line and animation in the adventure genre, with a healthy balance of problem solving and plot with a whizz-bang graphics engine.*

In view of the accolades already under their belt, great things were expected of Revolution in '97. Thankfully, they've delivered the goods once again.

Joining up with Nico Collard once again, the story runs that George returns to Paris to discuss an archaeological find with Professor Oubier. The plot thickens, however, when George is knocked unconscious and Nico mysteriously paralysed (via blow-dart) and kidnapped (via large henchman). As the game starts, George is tied to a chair, semi-coherent in a room in dire need of the fire brigade. But, of course, that doesn't stop our hero, and, with you as his guide, he is soon off gallivanting around the place once again with the aid of Philippe, whose help you grudgingly enlist early in the game.
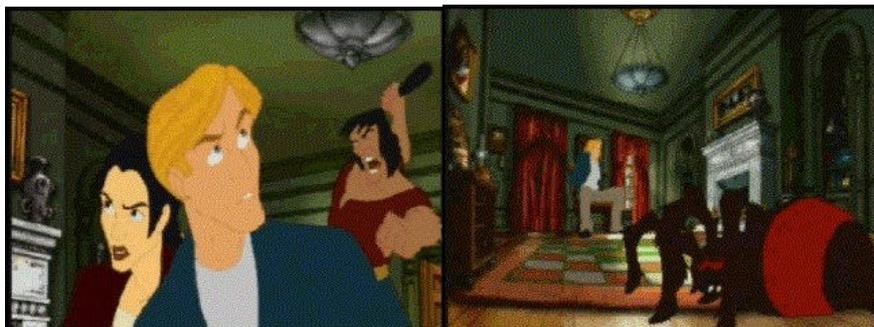

Smoking Mirror wastes no time in developing the intrigue

Broken Sword: Shadow of the Templars was nothing if not cosmopolitan. The main character is an American tourist in France and his love interest is a French journalist (and that's just the start). The first game took us to Ireland, France, Spain and the Middle East. Smoking Mirror continues the globe-trotting with excursions to Paris, London, Marseilles, the Caribbean and the jungles of Central America, switching roles between Nico and George as the sinister plot of Ancient Mayan folklore develops.

Revolution have been working hard on the game engine too. For those with slow CD-ROMs and small hard-drives, a low hard-drive space requirement and improved CD-ROM transfer has been introduced. Those with monster PCs will benefit also, however, as hardware accelerated video cards can now be used to full effect.


The use of CD audio during game installation is still quite rare, and makes the chore less tedious. The in-game audio is generally improved in Broken Sword II, too. For this, Revolution employed the services of Barrington Pheloung, noted British composer, to compose and produce over two hours of original music for the game.

Left to Right, George, Nico and Professor Oubier
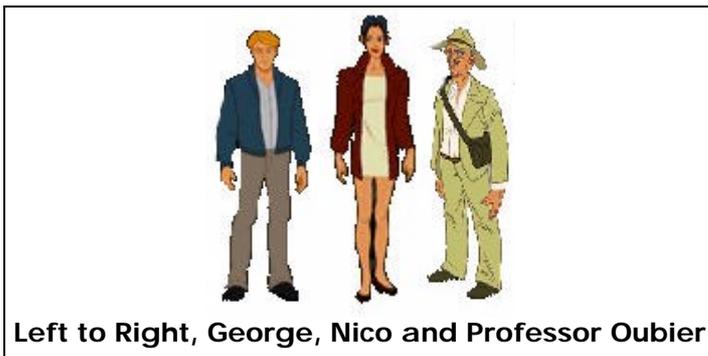
The game is relatively moderate in terms of its consumption of resources: a basic install requires only 50MB (compare that with 75MB minimum install for Riven: The Sequel to Myst and 150MB+ for Bladerunner).

Broken Sword II is well worth your money. If you enjoyed the first episode last year, you'll find plenty of improvements in this sequel. Even if you don't like cartoon style graphics, for gameplay value alone, Smoking Mirror deserves its place on adventurers' Christmas lists this year. **"IFN"**

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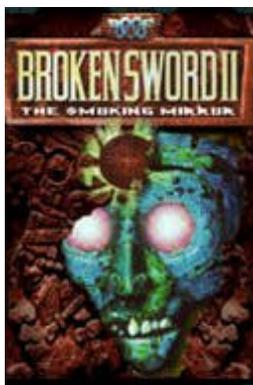
An excellent and engaging game with unusually close attention to plot. Fair but taxing puzzles will keep you coming back for more

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How do you follow a game like *Myst*? In the four years since its release, *Myst* has sold three and a half million copies worldwide and earned Spokane based *Cyan* a whacking $130m[†].

Yet there is more to *Myst* than economics. In 1993, CD-ROM games were in their infancy. Those which did try to make use of the technology often produced a poorer, bloated version of their floppy-disk-based counterparts. *Myst* paved the way for other game developers by using the

"*We* Myst *You!*"

medium in the only way that mattered to game players: to make the game more immersive and realistic.

Any game subtitled *The Sequel to Myst,* then*,* is bound to come under close scrutiny from the computer media. Indeed, some game reviewers seem to have thoroughly enjoyed *Riven*-baiting, accusing *Cyan* of ignoring the last four years' technological advances in computer graphics, of making a game which is just "more *Myst*".

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[†] Source: Wired, September 1997

This is true of course: *Riven* is based on *Myst*, but it's also so very much more than *Myst*. The game has gained a sharp and compelling plot and whilst the familiar *Myst* interface has been retained, the puzzles are considerably more mature. No longer does the player find themselves reading a code on the wall in one room and typing it into a keypad in another. Complex, real-world systems of steam-generators and mechanics give rise to problems which strategy alone - rather than memory - will overcome.

As the writers themselves point out, *Riven* is to *Myst* what Tolkein's Lord of the Rings was to the Hobbit, and this is an accurate analogy. "*Riven* was inspired by many things," says producer and co-writer Rand Miller, "but it was a much more purposeful work than *Myst*. Before creating a building, for example, or an animal or tool, we wanted to know who built it, why it was built, what materials it would likely be made of and other details." It is this level of detail which comes across so strongly as you play the sequel, and which many adventure-game players have been seeking since the demise of Infocom.
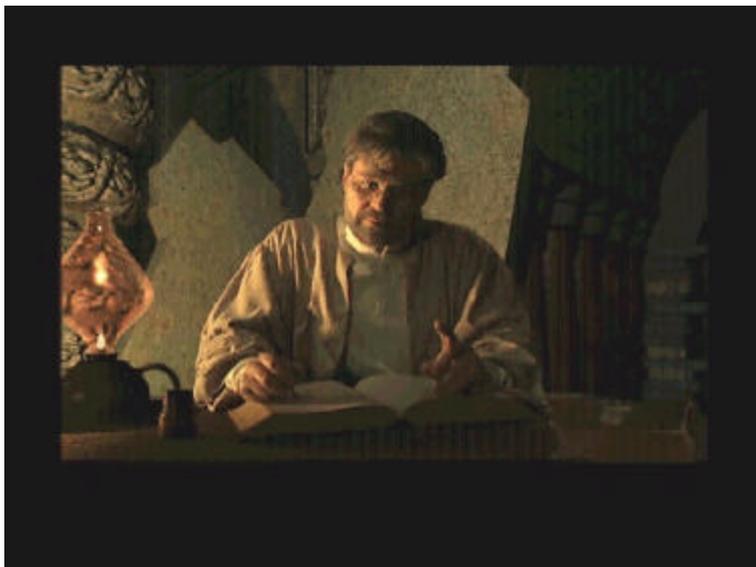
As in its predecessor, *Riven* is not merely composed of rendered images, but backed by an incredible backdrop of context-sensitive music and sound effects. And unlike in many games, these are entirely to the benefit of the game experience. Indeed, the soundtrack improves on *Myst* a great deal. Whereas *Myst* had atmospheric sound, the music in the sequel seems to be blend so well with the visual imagery as to emphasise the atmosphere already suggested by the graphics. The net result is to draw you even further into their world.

The in-game graphics are about as immersive as current PC and Macintosh technology allows, pushing the envelope right the way. Full motion video is used to spectacular effect, also. We get lavish roller-coaster rides over the sea, but we also find little girls turning up unexpectedly in clearings, turning and running from sight. For *Riven* is populated by strange peoples and bizarre animals as much as by mechanics.

Coming on five CDs, *Riven* does push the envelope at a cost, but this is entirely warranted by the detail. The minimum installation requirement of 75MB will not suit everyone, but is sufficiently low to retain the majority of low-spec owners. For those with more beef, there's a 170MB version which is slicker and has fewer disruptions to the gameplay.

To answer the question, then, how do you follow a phenomenon such as *Myst*? With everything you've got and more. With the closest attention to detail yet seen in a graphical adventure game. With *Riven*.
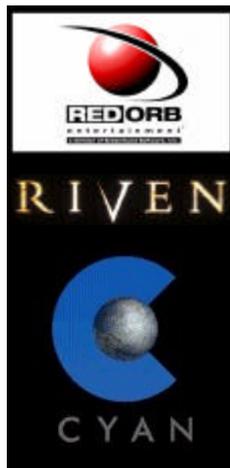
Better than Myst? Yes. Breathtaking detail balanced with atmospheric sounds create a brand new world born of Myst, and yet entirely new.

Probably the most immersive rendered gaming experience yet.

New Excavation

You are standing at the entrance of a narrow, waist-high tunnel that winds out of sight to the northeast. This, you have been told, is the entrance to the newfound areas of the Great Underground Empire. In your left hand hangs a rather unconvincing replica of the traditional adventurer's brass lantern. In the other is an ersatz-Elvish sword of no antiquity whatsoever. Its plastic blade, dull as a bread knife, barely reflects the lantern's dim and uneven glow.

A flash of lightning splits the night sky. As your eyes readjust to the dark, you notice you are no longer alone. Two of the fabled implementors stand before you.

> Marc Blank, tell me about the new game

"Activision approached me before the introduction of Zork: Nemesis about writing a small tie-in text game. The timing was lousy (as was Nemesis, as far as that's concerned - very, very un-Zorkish) so the project never happened.   This time, however, the timing was perfect, and the project went without a hitch.

I still don't think the time is right for a full-fledged text adventure. But a mini-game timed with Zork's 20th anniversary seemed somehow appropriate. And I had a few ideas that had been percolating for a while..."

> Marc, What level of involvement did each of the three of you have in writing the game? Did you and Mike Berlyn just design the puzzles, or did you write the game text (e.g. room descriptions) as well?

"Mike and I designed the puzzles and wrote pretty much all of the text. Some generic responses were written by the programmer. We didn't want to have anything to do with the programming. If we had been asked to write the code, it would have been game over. It was great fun really; quite nostalgic. With the programming taken away, we were left with only the fun parts of the game - design and writing."

> What is your favourite puzzle from the game?

"I'm partial to the Grue Convention. It was my first, and favorite, idea for the game. The puzzles were all designed for the game. Any leftover ideas from the Infocom days are long lost."

> What are you and Mike doing at the moment?

"The company Mike and I founded, Eidetic, Inc., is currently working with Sony on an action game to be released next spring. Sorry, we can't talk about it or we'd have to shoot your web page."

> So, is Zork: The Undiscovered Underground our very last outing into the text-based GUE?

"Who knows? If Activision wants us involved in future projects, they know where to find us! To the best of my knowledge, no original Zork author has EVER been asked to work on the new Zork games. This doesn't make much sense to me, but there you have it."

With this last comment, Marc Blank vanishes into the ether. The second man, David Lebling, steps slowly forward.

> David, what do you think?

"I'm glad they at least made a bow in the direction of the original implementors.

INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW

As for what I'm doing, it has nothing to do with games. I'm working on a complete rewrite of a newsroom automation system, formerly called NetStation, now called AvidNews. It's used to edit stories and programs for news organizations all over the world. You can monitor wire service feeds, write stories, do database searches, browse and rough edit your video, produce or direct a broadcast, and so on.

As I write this we are in Beta test, with one site (WFXT here in Boston) on air with the system, and others working in that direction.

The existing system is used by CNN, BBC, and hundreds of other stations and networks. More than two-thirds of the world's TV and radio news is produced on it, but the current version hasn't had a serious rewrite in more than five years and is getting a little past its sell-by date."

With this last, David Lebling shouts "filfre!" and claps his hands in front of your face, causing you to blink in surprise. Opening your eyes, you find yourself alone once again.

> Invoke Laird Malamed

In a puff of gaming magic, the director of Zork: Grand Inquisitor appears before you.

> Laird, What prompted the idea of producing a new text adventure Zork
game?

The idea originated on Zork Nemesis, but never fully got off the ground. We forgot about it until Marc Blank called to see how ZGI was going. Well, one thing led to another and we got approval to do the project as a prequel to Zork Grand Inquisitor and as a celebration of Zork's 20th birthday.

> So, how long was Zork: The Undiscovered Underground in development?

About 3 months of writing, programming and testing.
The majority of the time was taken in writing. Marc
and Mike really put a lot of effort into the design.
I think the game really shows off the old Infocom
humor. Programming was mostly straight forward
although they were a few things that kept Kevin
Wilson up late. He was a real trooper on the
project and even updated the code to respond to some
late bugs once the game was out.

> Were Marc Blank and Mike Berlyn approached by Activision, or was
the idea suggested to you by them? Were any of the other ex-Infocom
staff approached in connection with the project?

Marc came to us this time around. I think on Zork
Nemesis we called him. Anyway, Marc and Mike were
great to work with. It was a real thrill for me
when I met them at E3. Here I am demoing ZGI and
Marc walks up says, "Hi, I'm Marc Blank." When I
told the people I was demoing the game who he was,
they were excited too. Other than Marc and Mike, no
other Infocom employees were involved in the
project.

> How popular has the game been? Have there been many
downloads?

I don't know the exact numbers, but it had something
like 20,000 downloads from Next Generation when they
had an exclusive. The current number is probably
much higher now.

> Are there any plans for further text adventures to be produced, either
as promotion for the forthcoming second and third episodes in the
Zork: Grand Inquisitor trilogy, or otherwise? Is there any scope for
this?

Nothing as of yet, but doing the text adventure was
a lot of fun. I think we all agreed that the Zork:
The Undiscovered Underground met our expectations, so I
would not rule out the possibility of other mini-
adventures in the future.

> quit

Your rank is that of text adventurer.

**Zork: The Undiscovered Underground is available from the New Zork Hotel
at Activision's web site - www.activision.com. Many thanks to Marc Blank,
David Lebling and Laird Malamed for participating.**

Coming Next Month...

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P<small>HEW!</small> Well, that wraps up this first issue of **"IFN"**!

But there's so much more we couldn't fit in...

Next issue, we've an exclusive interview with Charles Cecil, Managing Director of Revolution Software talking about the *Broken Sword* games and the team behind them.

We've reviews of *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*, *Bladerunner and Curse of Monkey Island* and previews of *Starship Titanic, The Feeble Files* and Sierra's adventures in-development, Gabriel Knight 3 and WarCraft: The Adventure.

Issue#2 will be published in December 1997 (check the IFN homepage for confirmation of the exact date).

Release dates permitting, we'll also have coverage of *Men In Black* from Gremlin and *Tomb Raider II* by then too.

And that's just what we've already confirmed...!

So thanks for reading IFN, hope you enjoyed this first issue, and see you next month! **"IFN"**