**HOLLOW VOICE**

I was curled up reading one of those hard-boiled crime stories—in this case, *Strega* by Andrew Vachss—when the briefest IF mention jumped out at me:

> Lily took us to her office, at the end of the corridor. It looked like a kid's playroom except for the computer screen on the desk. I looked at the keyboard—there was no lock-out device. "How do you keep someone from getting into your records?" I asked her.
>
> She laughed, tapping some keys. "Want to play a fast game of Zork before we get down to business?" The screen had some kind of mazes-and-monsters game on it.
>
> "That's all you have it for?"
>
> "Sure," she said, looking at Immaculata as I was an idiot.

Of course, there's probably no such this as a "fast" game of Zork, but it was great to see the unexpected reference. (Actually, this whole series by Andrew Vachss would make a great basis for an adventure game, but that's beside the point.) If you run across any similar mentions in popular fiction, I'd appreciate hearing about it—please let me know the author's name, book title, and the publisher.

In other news, I think you'll find a lot of stuff worth reading in this issue. Neil deMause interviews Amy Briggs, author of Infocom's historical romance Plundered Hearts. Rob Daviau polled visitors to the IF newsgroups about how they went about seeking help when stuck in the middle of a game. And C.E. Forman has compiled his second annual year-in-review report on the state of events in the IF community. Chris has also announced that commitments to a new 'zine will prevent him from continuing to contribute to *XYZZYnews.* His final piece—and interview with playtester extraordinaire Michael Kinyon—will appear next issue. I want to thank Chris for his prolific prose and cheerful devotion to all things IF-related—he has been an inspiration to us all, and his articles will be sorely missed.

Until next issue, happy gaming!

*Eileen Mullin*
*eileen@interport.net*

**Contents:**

# XYZZYnews

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Editorial deadline for Issue #13 is January 31, 1997.

## November/December Top 10 Picks for IF on the World Wide Web

**A Time of Madness**
http://www.dcs.ed.ac.uk/~mc/atom.htm

**Adam Crutchlow's text adventures page**
http://www.public.iastate.edu/~evers/text_adv.html

**Fredrik's Interactive Fiction Starter's Kit**
http://www-und.ida.liu.se/~d91frera/ifstart.html

**Home Page for PilotZIP (Z-Code Interpreter Program)**
http://www.concentric.net/~rbram/zip.shtml

**IF World Online**
http://www.rit.edu/~fxp4258/if/

**Interactive Fiction Online Archive**
http://www.mlab.uiah.fi/~akivela/if/zpletx/

**Jerry's Hugo Homepage**
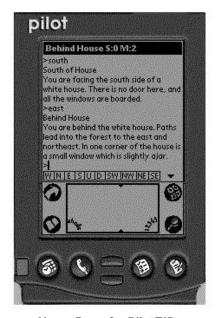http://oak.kcsd.k12.pa.us/~jnichols/hugo/

**Python Language Home Page**
http://www.python.org

**Python Universe Builder**
http://www-acs.ucsd.edu/~jstrout/python/pub/index.htm

**Tolkien text adventure games**
http://www.lysator.liu.se/tolkien-games/adventures.html



**Home Page for PilotZIP**

Eileen,

When I was eleven or twelve I used to take long walks through the barren suburban landscapes outside of Buffalo (back then it was still verging on 'barren rural landscapes' actually). I remember once finding a Star Trek fanzine. It wasn't much, four or five pages of typed and copied stories, rumors (Star Trek the Movie?) etc. I doubt much came of that little 'zine. I think of it, flapping along pathetically in the snow, when I read 'zines on the web. Most of them are merely digital versions of my childhood memory. I'll read it and in a little while it'll be gone after one or two 'issues'. Sometimes they stick around on a page for a long time, never anything new, just those few 'issues,' like virtual detritus washed up on my screen. It's when really good 'zines that fill a hole in our hearts and minds fail that it really saddens me.

Fortunately *XYZZYnews* has *not* failed. That's due to your dedication *and* due to the mass of fans out there that never stopped loving the damn little brain teasers ;). I remember buying a Texas Instruments digital watch from a second hand shop in the early '80s and telling my friend that I was going to start collecting 'antique technology.' I thought this was incredibly clever. Now I find that some of the best games I've ever played are considered 'antique technology.' How did this happen? One minute you're sitting there with your Apple II playing SUSPENDED and the next; whole parades of new companies are making games with flash and dash but no heart or soul. (The writer bursts into tears at this point and it takes some moments for him to regain his composure ;)). I really can't complain though. Obviously the computer industry is driven by money, not altogether bad because if it wasn't I'd never have gotten the privilege of a home computer or playing Zork. It *is* sad though how much is lost with leapfrogging technology. I still think we've not used up the potential of previous systems, but then I've got a soft spot in me 'art for 8-bit machines ;). I am like *sooooo* happy that there is a quality movement to keep IF alive. And if it weren't for Issue #1 of *XYZZYnews* I'd have missed out on the fun! Thanks for hanging in there with your 'zine! The Web has become this big ooey gooey mass of commercial sites with no business on the web (a Zima site for godsakes?) or sites that consist of family photographs and excruciating details of intimate family issues (why not just post family pictures on the bulletin board at the supermarket?). Your page is one of a few that have restored my faith in the internet ;).

Perhaps I should have waited to get sleep before writing this ;), oh well, deadlines, deadlines…Keep up the Great job ma'am!

—Joe Nowakowski
equinox@buffnet.net

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To begin:

I can honestly say that your newsletter has brought back some of the best gaming memories I've ever had. Brand me a geek if you so feel, but Infocom has undoubtedly made a difference in my approach to computer games. Yes, I consider myself old-school; I can't afford, run, or get into many of the industry's recent games.

I have yet to see the PDF format, but I fully enjoy the text-only version—after all, I like text-based games, no? I enjoy the reviews and interviews, when I recognize the interviewee.

—Mischa Krilov
mkrilov@tiger.lsu.edu

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Eileen,

Have only just discovered *XYZZYnews* in the Web. Being an interactive fiction fan since at least 1983, I can truthfully say it's like a breath of fresh air. It's great to know my favorite computer gaming genre is still alive despite the graphics revolution…

Here are some bugs that have occurred in versions of Infocom games that I have played, but are not on your latest bug list. I'll have to check the details later in order to find out the version numbers (if possible; my Deadline, Starcross and Planetfall reports are based on Commodore 64 versions I haven't played since my C64 went to that great computer room in the sky).

Beyond Zork: The hourglass and arch, combined with the chest, can cause the game to lock up on you if used together, and if you haven't opened the chest previously. Here's what happened to me: I used the hourglass to travel to the Plaza's past, and opened the chest. I went through the scene at the Fields of Transinfinite Splendor, but when the unicorns sent me back, I was not sent back to the right place. Rather, I was sent back to some strange room, where the only room description was "There's

(my character name) he∂re." The game then locked up at that point.

Deadline: First off, in my old C64 version, I could PUT [object] IN [character], for example PUT PENCIL IN MS. DUNBAR. When I looked, I would get the message "Ms. Dunbar is holding: a pencil." Rather odd considering she will refuse the pencil if you give it to her in the normal fashion. I haven't found the bug in the LTOI version yet…

Is Mr. Robner's ghost haunting the estate? A bug (or series of bugs) in my C64 version would seem to indicate so. I would SAY TO MR. ROBNER 'WHERE IS GEORGE,' and I would get a response like "I haven't seen him yet." or "I last saw him a few minutes ago. I don't know where he went, though." (Incidentally, Mr. Robner's ghost reports seeing the other characters at the same time you last saw them. I typed WHERE IS GEORGE to the game, as opposed to a character, and got the response "You last saw him a few minutes ago"). When I typed ASK MR. ROBNER ABOUT GEORGE, however, I got the response "Mr. Robner isn't here!"

I could also type SAY TO MR. ROBNER 'FOLLOW ME' and get the response "I would rather not." Though if I said MR. ROBNER, FOLLOW ME, I would get the response that he wasn't there.

Finally, here's something that's definitely a bug.

```
>KILL MR. ROBNER
With a lethal blow of
your hand, Mr. Robner
falls dead.
```

Since Mr. Robner is already dead before the game begins,

this is particularly weird. So far, I haven't noted the Mr. Robner bug(s) in the LTOI version… Also, I noted that even if Sergeant Duffy is away at the lab awaiting analysis results, he will still show up if you try to arrest someone or something. In Witness, you won't be able to arrest anyone until Duffy returns from the lab.

Hollywood Hijinx: I haven't tested to see if this works in the LTOI 2 version, but in my C64 version, you could JUMP from the Cannon Emplacement, and end up in the ocean inlet, thus providing an alternative to the gap in the stairs puzzle. You won't get the ten points, however.

Starcross: Again, from my old C64. You could climb into the viewport of the Starcross or the alien ship, but wouldn't be able to climb out. You'd get the response "Super-brief descriptions," as if you had typed the SUPERBRIEF command. There'd be no way out other than restarting or restoring…

Planetfall: This is probably present on more than just my C64, but here goes. I tried turning Floyd off in any room with a door. I did the following:

```
>POINT AT DOOR
"You go first," says
Floyd.
```

Since Floyd is turned off, he should not respond to my actions at this point. Similarly, when I pointed at any other object in the room while he was turned off, he would give a confused look. Also, Floyd, like the adventurer in Enchanter, will hand you things if you ask for them, even if your load's too heavy to normally accommodate them. This made solving the rift puzzle a tad quicker…

Plundered Hearts: These bugs are present in both my LTOI version and my old C64 version. You can take the hat out of the Library by throwing it through the window. It isn't particularly useful elsewhere, though. Lafond is present everywhere you go, in a manner of speaking. If you refer to him as "bewigged man" and not as Lafond, you'll get all of Lafond's responses. If you say EXAMINE BEWIGGED MAN, you'll get a description of Lafond. If you say BEWIGGED MAN, TELL ME ABOUT THE RING, you'll get Lafond's response "An impressive crest, is it not? I've thought of making it my own."

Finally, attacking the "bewigged man" anywhere except the Ballroom or the Balcony will get you Lafond's "Consider this a warning, my love" reaction the first time, and get you killed the second. If you attack the "bewigged man" at the Balcony, you'll be told "You can't reach Lafond." If you attack the "bewigged man" at the Ballroom, you'll get Lafond's humorous reply…

I've tried quoting descriptions of other characters such as Captain Jamison, but as far as I know, Lafond's the only one who has a 'double' (who, in this case, answers to the name 'bewigged man'—which, by the way, is suggested to the player in the ballroom dance scene with Jamison). A very odd bug, indeed. (To get it to work, you have to say "bewigged man," not "Lafond" or "man").

In any case, pass these along to Graeme Cree and other bug-searchers, and see if they can find any of the above-mentioned bugs.

—Chris Lang
MKST21C@prodigy.com

# Romancing the Genre

## An interview with Plundered Hearts author Amy Briggs

*by* **Neil deMause (neild@echonyc.com)**

*XYZZYnews:* So how did you, a mild-mannered English major, wind up getting hired to implement for Infocom? And what have you been doing since leaving?

*Amy Briggs (AB):* It's a little deceptive to claim I'm a "mild-mannered English major" because I had been a physics major for a while in college, and had taken a few computer science classes in addition to theater and English. By the time I graduated from college, I had played several Infocom games, plus several Scott Adams' games—they really were the best combination at the time of cutting-edge technology (we may snort now, but for       the home computer user they were) and good stories. Admittedly, my programming skills were less than several of the other Implementors who were there when I was, but I knew my way around the computer.

After college I did the standard what-to-do-now? drifting, and finally decided to mooch off a sister who was living in Massachusetts, figuring I could drift as successfully in Boston as in the Midwest. As I packed to move, a friend pointed out that Infocom was located in Cambridge, and I joked, "Well, I'll get a job with them, writing games." The week after I arrived in Massachusetts, Infocom advertised for Testers—the people who tested the games in the early stages to make sure that the programs and the puzzles worked. I wrote Infocom a cover letter that I blush about today, telling them basically what I've just written above, including the coy phrase, "I have a ridiculous sense of the sublime." Amazingly enough, the letter worked (although they asked me what that phrase meant during the interview, and I stumbled out something incomprehensible), and three weeks after I arrived in Massachusetts without a plan for my life, I started work at Infocom.

I threw myself into the company, as most of the employees did. I worked (if you can call playing a game "work") 10-12 hours a day, and on weekends I taught myself ZIL, the programming language, and mocked up a little game, which, when they went to hire another Implementor a year later, got me the job. I have to mention that Steve

Meretzky was instrumental in pushing me and showing me how to do everything from compiling ZIL to insisting that I be taken seriously.

When I left Infocom, I had planned to write the Great American Novel. I was asked, "why can't you write the Great American Interactive Novel?" to which I responded that characters are the stuff of great novels, and that realistic character was a great weakness in interactive fiction. That novel didn't get written, but now I find myself looking at character again. For the past few years I've been in graduate school, chasing a PhD in cognitive psychology. I study how people understand stories; my dissertation looks at how people understand characters in novels.

*XYZZYnews:*  Do you ever have people recognize your name and, say, approach you to ask for tips on what to do with the laudanum?

*AB:*  I occasionally get fan mail, even in my ivory tower. I haven't been asked for hints in years, which is good, because I doubt I could play the game successfully myself anymore.

*XYZZYnews:*  I get the sense that a lot of the humor and creativity of the Infocom games was a product of the atmosphere and camaraderie of the Imps. Do you think that can ever be re-created, or has the business of computer games changed too much?

*AB:*  Definitely, the atmosphere of Infocom charged the games. Creativity, breaking bounds, and all-around "do it if it makes someone laugh" were encouraged. We were all young, creative, humorous, enthusiastic people, we loved what we were doing and we enjoyed our own games more than anything—and that shows in the games themselves, I believe. I include not just the Imps in my "we," but the testers, the programmers who designed the interpreters, and even, yes, even the Marketers, who served as jovial (and sometimes not so jovial) antagonists to the Imps' rule-breaking.

Certainly the business of computer games has changed dramatically. A typical Infocom game was a bunch of words on a simple screen, and the creative efforts were put into the story, the puzzles and the descriptions, not into gorgeous pictures, sounds, interesting ways to move around in the environment. The constraints of running on the Commodore 64 in a fashion helped the games be richer, I believe, than if we had been writing then for the Pentium Pro. The minute the creative process requires a committee, something is lost—and with rare exception, few individuals can construct a modern game largely by themselves. Maybe that's one reason why Myst is so good—it was largely written by brothers, right? As far as you can get from a committee, without one person doing everything.

But to answer your question, I don't think that the particular atmosphere of Infocom can ever be re-created, because it was rather a fluke in the first place. This is not to say that an equally creative, charged, exciting—but different—group couldn't happen again, since lightning strikes in different places.

*XYZZYnews:*   So what made you decide to do a romance-novel game? You certainly seem to have a flair for the genre—did you read much romance before writing Plundered Hearts?

*AB:*   I wanted to write a game that women like myself would enjoy, and I enjoyed romances. Actually, even more than romance, I enjoy historical fiction, and that's a genre that's still largely untapped in the game industry, unless you count Castles, or the medieval side of Dungeons and Dragons games. I'm not sure why that genre has been ignored—I think we decided at Infocom that a historical romance would be a little more focussed at a particular audience than historical fiction. Also, I very definitely wanted a female protagonist, and I wanted to play with the humor of being a romantic heroine—typically passive and docile, with at most "spunk"—in a situation where she has to take the reins.

*XYZZYnews:*   Any particular reason you decided to have multiple endings?

*AB:*   Well, in an ideal world there would have been whole multiple story *lines*, where you determine your fate throughout the course of the game. As it was, I spent one-third the time that the game was in testing editing it down to fit the Commodore 64, so I had to make do with different endings.

*XYZZYnews:*   In addition to the setting, obviously, Plundered Hearts is different from a lot of other Infocom games in the story-ness of it—as you yourself said at one point, it's more about people than things. (Certainly it's the only Infocom game that borrows a puzzle from "The Princess Bride.") There's recently been a move among current authors to make IF more like stories, less like puzzles—how much do you think IF can, or should, emulate written fiction in this regard?

*AB:*   To start, a wee correction: I didn't borrow that puzzle from the Princess Bride, but from a book called *The Sherwood Ring,* by Elizabeth Marie Pope. It was one of my favorites as a child.

I mentioned above that I felt constrained by the lack of ability to do character in IF, especially so in a romance. How can you "fall in love" with a handsome stud who is literally programmed to respond to only a few pat phrases? I don't think that IF should entirely veer away from

*games* into *stories.* As a consumer, I don't like *reading* on a computer screen, I'd rather curl up with a book. But for a game, something that engages my attention in a different way than being buried in someone else's decisions and experiences, I am willing and interested in sitting at the computer.

*XYZZYnews:*     You're one of the few well-known women in IF, something that's become  notable again in recent years. For example, of 27 games entered in this year's Short Interactive Fiction Competition, every one was written by a man. Do you have any ideas why IF has tended to be written mostly by men? And was it odd to be one of the few women at Infocom?

*AB:*     I think computers in general are still a male-dominated phenomenon. Not to say that there aren't women interested in programming or designing with computers, and that there aren't more now than there were 10 years ago. I could rattle off a bunch of pseudo-sociological and pseudo-psychological theories about why, but I don't have any actual data.

I didn't think it was odd to be one of the few women at Infocom, I was just me. But maybe you should ask the men if it was weird for them to have a woman in their midst.

*XYZZYnews:*     Do you still keep up with IF, or computer games in general? If so, are there any games you particularly liked recently (text or graphic)? What direction do you think Infocom would've taken (or would you want it to have taken) had it continued?

*AB:*     I have played Myst, and loved it. 7th Guest is next on my list, when I have the time. Other than that, I'm woefully out of date with computer games (as the titles that I've played show—isn't 7th Guest several years old now?). I've heard there's a large underground of shareware all-text adventures, but I've never tapped into them.

The second half of your question is more difficult for me to answer. I'm a bit too pragmatic about the fact that Infocom *did* close down (or was closed down, depending upon one's view). Like any other games company, if miraculously Infocom didn't depend upon selling games, one would hope that they would continue to write original, creative, fun and engaging games, that sometimes would *hit* and sometimes would not, but which would always be new and different. Given the increased capabilities for graphics and sounds, the ideal 1997 Infocom game would have integrated puzzles and experiences using those graphics and sounds. They would continue to push the envelope of experience and enjoyment. ✪

# IF in 1996
## *The Year in Review*

*by* **C.E. Forman (ceforman@postoffice.worldnet.att.net)**

You liked it so much last year that it's back again!

The first thing you'll notice is that this year's column is significantly longer than 1995's. This is due to both a more meticulous recording of details on my part, and a substantial increase in the number of details to meticulously record.

By the way, happy anniversary to everyone! Our favorite hobby turned 20 years old last year!

I can't help but comment on how much the IF community has grown in just a couple of years. When I first discovered r.*.i-f, TADS was the hands-down pre-ferred language, Inform 5.2 had just been released, Curses was the hottest game on the archive, Busted was the only other major Inform release out there, and I seem to recall an inordinate number of posts about "phone calls from the future" (what *was* that thread about anyway?). Was all this really only two years ago?

At any rate, I now give you… 1996, the year in IF.

## January

The Broken String, a punk-rock TADS adventure, becomes the first IF release of the new year.

This year's IF competition is announced. The final deadline is set for September 31. Vote counters and beta-testers are selected, with the first beta session in May.

## February

Four new TADS adventures (Frustration, Golden Fleece, The Holy Grail, and The Mission) are uploaded to GMD by Jim MacBrayne.

*Acorn User* magazine announces that Graham Nelson will be writing a monthly column on adventure games and Inform.

## March

To celebrate Graham Nelson's new column, *Acorn User* magazine announces an Inform competition. The deadline is set for the end of summer, and Graham is appointed as judge.

SpiritWrak, Dan Yu's Enchanter-esque adventure set in the Zork Universe, becomes the first new Inform title of 1996.

Neil deMause's time-travel/history adventure Lost New York is released.

Bob Newell uploads the IF Authorship System FAQ.

Activision unveils Zork Nemesis for both DOS and Windows 95 platforms. The Macintosh version is due out later this year, as is a port of Return to Zork for the Sega Saturn. Planetfall 2, announced early last year, still floats in software limbo.

# April

Gumshoe, an Inform detective story by Mike Oliphant, reaches the IF archive.

Version 2.1 of Kent Tessman's Hugo compiler is released.

Gerry Kevin "Whizzard" Wilson announces that voting for the IF competition will begin October 15 and end October 31.

On the third anniversary of the Inform language (April 30th), Graham Nelson unveils the source code and manuals for Inform 6. Executable versions for various platforms follow shortly afterwards.

# May

IFers discover rumors of "Zork: The Movie" on a film studio's Web site detailing planned projects. The film, if made, has an expected release date of 1998.

# June

Andrew C. Plotkin releases the Bergman-esque Inform game So Far.

Version 2.0 of the Frotz Z-Machine interpreter (which supports sound and graphics) is uploaded to GMD.

Activision announces its new IF compilation, Infocom Masterpieces. This new package includes all the games in Lost Treasures of Infocom (LTOI) 1 and 2 except Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy and Shogun; Activision no longer holds the rights to publish these adaptations of Douglas Adams' and James Clavell's work. This collection includes the elusive Leather Goddesses of Phobos, which was left out of the LTOI collections. Most noteworthy is the inclusion of the top three 1995 competition games in both the TADS and Inform categories, plus a manual penned by Gerry Kevin Wilson.

# July

David Kinder joins Volker Blasius as co-maintainer of the IF archive at GMD.

High-Energy Software—the distributor of TADS—is closed down. Mike Roberts announces that TADS will be released as freeware, with the manual.

Hugo version 2.2 is completed and released.

# August

Super AGT, an expanded version of David Malmberg's and Mark Welch's adventure language, is announced as a work-in-progress.

One year after the release of MST3K1, the MST3K1 Silver Screen Edition is uploaded to GMD.

Andrew Plotkin spearheads production of an IF CD-ROM containing all the major IF releases, shareware and freeware.

# September

An interpreter to play Level 9 ("The Other Infocom") text adventure games is uploaded to the archive, and receives very favorable attention.

Inform 6.04 and 6.05 are completed.

Graham Nelson announces the winners in Acorn User's I-F competition. The top three entries were BSE, by Chris Smith (1st place); The Wedding, by Neil Brown (2nd place); and Leopold the Minstrel, by Jamie Murphy (3rd place). Runners-up included Transporter, by Andrew Laker; Wearing the Claw, by Paul O'Brian; and Black'n'White Rag, by Jonathan Nowell.

Activision announces that the long-delayed Planetfall 2: The Search for Floyd will in fact be completed. Steve Meretzky, author of Planetfall and Stationfall, is off the project, and the plot and design have undergone complete revisions.

Due to problems with the beta-testers' FTP site, the IF competition deadline is pushed back from September 31st to October 10th.

# October

The I-F competition deadline is again moved back, this time to October 15th.

Time: All Things Come to an End, a time-travel Inform game by Andrew Phillips, is unveiled.

AGiliTy, the first interpreter allowing AGT games to run under non-DOS platforms, is released.

The original TADS C source code is uploaded to the IF archive at GMD, along with the full manual.

The 1996 IF competition entries are uploaded. Voting begins on October 20th, with the deadline for votes set for November 30th, and winners and prizes to be announced the first week of December.

The Wedding, the second-place winner in Graham Nelson's Inform contest, arrives at the GMD archive. The first-place winner, BSE, follows not far behind.

# November

TADS creator Michael Roberts releases Perdition's Flames, originally a commercial game, as freeware.

MaxTADS becomes the first independent TADS run-time interpreter.

*Computer Gaming World* names Zork as the all-time best adventure game, and 13th on its all-time best games list.

Return to Karn, an Inform-based sequel to a Dr. Who episode, by Patrick Wigfull, appears on the IF archive.

Night at the Computer Center, an Inform game by Bonnie Mierzejewska, is released.

Gareth Rees uploads the source code for Christminster, along with Release 4 of the game.

# December

Votes are tallied, and Kevin Wilson posts the results of the 1996 IF Competition. The top three places are claimed by The Meteor, the Stone and a Long Glass of Sherbet, by Graham Nelson; Tapestry, by Dan Ravipinto; and Delusions, by C.E. Forman (that's me, that's me!). Filling fourth through sixth place are Small World, by Andrew Pontious; Kissing the Buddha's Feet, by Leon Lin; and Fear by Chuan-Tze Teo.

Sierra Online's newsletter praises TADS as a design system, suggesting that writing a text adventure is a good step toward a job as a professional game designer.

Inform 6.1 and the 6/3 library are published, making Inform multilingual. According to r.a.i-f posts, work has begun on translations to Italian, Russian and German.

*XYZZYnews* announces the first annual XYZZY awards. Voting is in effect until February 1, 1997.

# General Trends

Interest in IF has grown substantially over the past 12 months. There was a far more active competition this year, with 26 entries compared with 12 in 1995. As

Magnus Olsson put it, "I have a feeling that it's changed character a bit, being no longer an underground movement but rather something on the fringe of the main-stream. I also have a—rather vague—feeling that we've reached some sort of break-even; that we don't need to be so concerned about the survival of the genre at the moment."

Almost no one would argue this, and it does lend some degree of validity to Graham Nelson's criticism of the acronym "SPAG." During the second quarter of the year, there was even some discussion about the possibility of having too much IF, after a large number releases—Broken String, the four Jim MacBrayne games, Lost New York, SpiritWrak and Gumshoe—all within a four-month period. 1996 saw the release of 46 I-F games, far surpassing 1995's 21 entries. Increased traffic on r.*.i-f has also furthered the growth of open commentary and criticism, and in fact a number of full-length reviews were posted to r.g.i-f earlier in the year. Baf's Guide, the web's largest collection of I-F reviews, has seen updates on a more-or-less regular basis.

On the language front, Kent Tessman's Hugo compiler is starting to get the recog-nition it deserves. More than once the benefits of this easy-to-use language have cropped up in the perpetual "TADS versus Inform" debate. The SoftWorks AGT compiler also made quite a comeback this year, with a couple of AGT competi-tion entries and numerous whispered works-in-progress, not to mention the AGiliTy tools that finally allow AGT games to break free of the confines of a PC-exclusive environment. Use of David Baggett's WorldClass library for TADS is also up from last year.

Though 1996 was a slower year for Z-machine developments than 1995, it would-n't do to ignore Frotz as the generally-accepted new standard for Z-machine inter-preters, nor should we overlook MaxTADS as a significant bridge to new plat-forms. Where Infocom excavations hit a dry spell, Level 9 has sprung forward with two major releases of the first L9 interpreter.

Variety of discussions peaked out this year, with long-running, dominant threads including:

### Puzzle-less interactive fiction

The topic was brought up throughout the year, but Joe Mason's In the End was the primary target of post-competition commentary on this issue. It didn't place high, and whether it was actually "puzzle-less" was also debated (as many players had to guess at the author's intentions), leaving the question of the feasibility of full-length puzzle-less I-F unanswered.

### The nature of IF

Threads concerning the identity of an IF game also dominated the groups, with topics ranging from which type of IF is the most "real"; to whether IF, by defini-tion, is a game; to what IF has the potential to be. The contrast of the player as himself/herself versus the player as a generic character filled bandwidth in droves.

### "Preachiness," or messages in games

Two competition entries, Tapestry and, to a lesser extent Delusions, brought this thread out full-throttle during the year's fourth quarter.

### Linearity

With its multifaceted story, complex situations and pure entertainment value, Andrew Phillips' Time: All Things Come to an End breathed new life into an I-F style thought long-dead: the single-path, linear-plot adventure.

### IF collectibles

It's hard to call something less than 20 years old an antique, but IF's 20th anniversary seemed to spark a renewed interest in collecting the original Infocom game packages. Perhaps rec.collecting.int-fiction is just around the corner?

## On the Horizon

Now comes the fun part: what the future holds. Rather than attempt to speculate further on where IF in general is going, I thought I'd provide a sneak peek at some titles that may or may not be just around the corner. Keep your eyes open for (at least some) of the following in 1997:

Akorny

Avalon

Bast

Djinn!

Logomancer

Losing Your Grip

Moondials

Sangsarawardha

Scimitar

Shelton

Sphere

Stuck Mid-Game

Wanderer

Once again, thanks to all the IFers who provided details and offered suggestions for this article! ✪

# Cheat, Beg, Wheedle, Cajole

## ...and other strategies for how we finish IF games

*by* **Rob Daviau (robrachel@aol.com)**

## Help, please!

The IF audience, as a whole, is ashamed, critical, and frustrated. Not by the lack of commercial success of IF or by the fall of Infocom; but rather by the games themselves — specifically, by our frequent need for assistance in getting through them. A quick look at the IF newsgroups shows that a great many people are stuck in different games and are using help of some sort. But how many people need help to get through a game? And how many hints does the average person take? And, if we need all this help getting through a game, does that mean that the average interactive fiction game is too hard? And if we all use hints, why does everyone feel so guilty about the whole thing?

To find out what the IF community thinks about getting help for the games, what kind of help is appreciated, and when do clues get in the way, I recently posted a poll on the newsgroups and received about 50 responses. I also e-mailed several IF authors to see how they feel. I've compiled the results and offer some analysis.

## The average IF player

First, the obvious: an interactive fiction game relies on puzzles to make the Interactive part of the game come alive. And the nature of puzzles is to be challenged, and occasionally stuck. That's the point, isn't it? So it's only logical that we would need a nudge now and then.

In fact, 96 percent of players say they resort to help at some point during a game, with the average IF player needing three hints to solve the average length game. Some 38 percent use an average of three or fewer hints, 37 percent need three to five, 8 percent need more than five, and 15 percent couldn't answer with a number, but gave varying versions of "it depends."

Does this mean the games are too hard? Well, 96 percent of players answer with a resounding no, the games are not too hard. On the contrary, most respondents

were quick to beat themselves up, taking the blame and feeling inadequate for failing to solve puzzles: only 25 percent gave a straight "no," while 10 percent said they were "too lazy", 15 percent said they were "too stupid", and 17 percent said they were "too impatient." Putting some blame on the authors were the 8 percent who said "guess the verb" caused looking at a cheat, 6 percent admitted that their minds just were out of sync with the author, and 6 percent contended that while the games were not unfairly difficult, some puzzles were.

So what causes this high "cheat" rate among players? One factor may be that most IF players (95 percent) play interactive fiction games alone. Those of you who have played a game with a friend will know that two minds are much better than one. Maybe someone in the community can figure out a way to play networked IF games, since over 35 percent of the respondents made a point of saying (without being asked) that they wished they could play with a friend.

## Good help vs. bad help

It was difficult to pin down the type of help most people prefer. In-game hints seem to have the slight advantage (41 percent), even though some feel they are too tempting. As one person put it, "[in-game hints] are like putting a bowl of cocaine next to a junkie and telling him to only take a little when he really needs it." One method praised by several people was the hint-giving demon in "Curses". There were a lot of people who liked making the hints a part of the game itself rather than part of the program that's running it.

Newsgroup postings were the next most popular (25 percent), although there were almost an equal number of people who liked having to wait for a response as those who hated it.

The Universal Help System and Invisiclues both had respectable showings, but walkthroughs and e-mailing the author received little praise.

It was easier to determine the least favored help method: walkthroughs. 62 percent hated walkthroughs, most of them vehemently. The type of walkthroughs that were hated most were those that were a list of commands with no annotation or explanation. Those that had comments fared slightly better. The next two least-favorite methods were in-game hints (18 percent) and newsgroup postings (15 percent). Complaints for these were that they were "too accessible" or "take too long to hear back."

## Let's hear from the authors

But how do the authors feel about all of this? After all, hints and help can give away puzzles that they spent months perfecting. Surprisingly enough (or maybe not at this point), most IF authors are very pro-hints. They spent

months—if not years—working on their games and don't want people to give up halfway because of one particularly tough puzzle. Actually, all the authors contacted for this article said they used hints when playing games and one, Gareth Rees, the author of Christminster, has written a few walkthroughs himself, most notably for Jigsaw.

"Not all players can solve all puzzles, perhaps because the puzzle requires some piece of cultural knowledge, or is too hard, or just strikes the player the wrong way," Rees said. "Without hints and walkthroughs many games wouldn't be appreciated to the extent they should be." C.E. Forman, co-author of Path To Fortune, added, "What's obvious to the author may be thoroughly incomprehensible to a player. There's a very fine line between challenging and frustrating. The best games toe that line with the greatest of care. Though they may be hard, they're fair."

Authors see hints as a bridge between their minds and the audiences. Some players can make it all the way over, some need a push in different places. And the same feeling of being "stupid" seems to exist on the authors' side as well. Andrew Plotkin, who wrote So Far, said "Not everybody can solve everything, either because [they're] stupid or I'm stupid (i.e., designed a puzzle badly. :-)"

Neil deMause, who wrote Lost New York, agrees. "[Lately] I've seen a slew of puzzles that are way too hard, requiring not just a flash of insight but practically the ability to mind-read the author's intentions," he said. "I'm deeply concerned that we're falling out of the habit of providing in-game clues. The prevailing attitude seems to be 'I'll think up a really tough puzzle, and if they get stuck they can just use the hints.'"

## Why we need to get over it

So where does that leave us? Well, getting help for IF games is a fact of life and we all need to stop feeling guilty about it. After all, it's the rare occasion where author and player click at the right level for an entire game. Walkthroughs, although almost universally reviled, do help people get through the games when they have no other recourse. And most of the rec.games.int-fiction newsgroup stays alive because of hint asking and giving. What we (authors, players, walkthrough authors, all of us) need to do is focus on making hints work the best they can for everyone. That will be the focus of the second part of this article, which will appear in the next issue. If you have any suggestions to toss in, please e-mail me at robrachel@aol.com. ✪

*This is part one of a two-part article.*

*Here are some queries I've received recently from readers looking for hard-to-find games, or who are in need of specific help. After months of staring at them guiltily in my e-mailbox, I had to finally admit that I'll never be able to catch up on answering them. If you can help answer any of these requests, please don't be shy about chiming in with an answer! —EM*

Okay, here's the problem: several months ago I made the mistake of lending all my old Infocom games to Kim, my girlfriend. Since then, she has become, well, a little obsessed with them at times. Which is just fine with me, except I'm tired of her calling and waking me up every other day at 9 a.m.

"Vern," She'll say imploringly, "how do I save the microscopic space fleet?" Or, "Vern, how do I get the key from around the unicorn's neck?" etc., etc.

Anyway, to make a long story short; could help her (me) out and answer a few questions regarding the game Lurking Horror?

1: How does one get past the urchins?

2: How do you get the mummified hand out of the observation dome and what do do with it?

I'd greatly appreciate any help you may be able to offer.

—Vernon Hedrick
lcvhedri@antelope.wcc.edu

Years ago Infocom published a poster as well as a package insert. The image is a silhouette of a man and a computer. The text reads "A human never stands so tall as when stooping to help a small computer." I am looking for a copy of this poster ( I have the package insert). Do you have any idea where I could get one? If so, please advise via e-mail.

—Yoletta Lieberthal
ylieberthal@email.csun.edu

I am also a fan of old Infocom text adventures. I know Infocom has a new CD out with all the titles on it. But, would you happen to know of a source where I might be able to buy the old individual copies of Infocom games with the original boxes and the special "goodies" that make the adventure seem more real?

—Wayne Chen
waynec@accessone.com

I'm stuck! I have Beyond Zork and have gotten to the ruins and back again but am unable to get any further. I understand that I have to get a "phase razor" in order to cut the outline in the chest to get to the ethereal plains but I can't find it. Where do I get it from? How do I enter the plains and get on with the game?

—Chris Simeon
laserimp@mail.interlog.com

I sure hope you can help me because I can't find anyone else that can. According to the author of RTZ, you need a list of certain items to throw at the bridge so it will sink and rise for you to cross. I have all of the items and threw every one of them at that D—— bridge and it won't come up for me. I am really frustrated! I don't know what else to try. I've read every walkthrough I can find on the web and all they say is throw *everything* at the bridge. I've even called INFOCOM but obviously only robots work there because there is no way to make contact with a human by telephone. The hint line was of no help—it said I would need a minimum of seven objects. Seven! I've thrown 28 or 29 and still no bridge.

—George Ann
gann@aisp.net

I have been playing Colossal Cave Adventure version 1.00 and every time I get stuck in the maze! How do you get out of the maze? The maze that I get stuck in is the one with the vending machine that you can get fresh batteries from, in case there are more then one maze.

Also, my mom and dad talk about how much they liked to play Dracula, a Scott Adams game they used to have for their old Commodore computer. Do you know if that is available anywhere for a PC?

—Emily Johnson
ejohnson@linknet.kitsap.lib.wa.us

I had problems printing out the PDF version of *XYZZYnews* #11: the Acrobat Reader complained about missing fonts and refused to print. I have printed #1-10 under the same setup and have never had any problems. Did you change anything? Maybe you didn't embed some of the fonts which you have embedded in the old issues? Or am I the only one having this problem?

Thanks in advance,

—Dave
h0142kdd@rz.hu-berlin.de

# Announcing the XYZZY Awards

The movie industry has their Oscars, TV its Emmys, advertising its Cleos—all glorious excuses to take a break from creative endeavors and instead engage in some good old-fashioned competitiveness and back-biting. And, in the words of the immortal Cowardly Lion, what do they got that we ain't got? Nothing—at least, not anymore. Not with the inauguration of the first annual XYZZY Awards for outstanding achievement in the field of text-based interactive fiction.

The rules are as follows:

**ELIGIBILITY:** All IF games uploaded to ftp.gmd.de during the year 1996 are eligible for the 1996 Xyzzys. Short games, long games, even games with chicken pox—all will be thrown together into the same bloodthirsty voting arena. A complete listing of all the eligible games (in alphabetical order) is given at the bottom of your ballot.

**VOTING:** Anyone is eligible to vote. You may not vote twice. Voting by dead people, fictional characters, and inanimate objects is strictly prohibited. Authors may not vote for their own games, nor may they threaten, cajole or otherwise intimidate their friends into voting for their games. While it is suggested that you play as many of the eligible games as possible before casting your ballot, we're not going to get ridiculous here.

**CATEGORIES:** There are eight XYZZY categories: Best Game, Best Writing, Best Story, Best Setting, Best Puzzles, Best NPCs, Best Individual Puzzle, and Best Individual NPC. In the first six categories, vote for the game you feel is tops in that respect; in the last two, vote for a particular puzzle and NPC within a game. Vote once in each category, then stop.

**DEADLINE:** All ballots must be returned to xyzzynews@aol.com or XYZZYNews, 160 W. 24th St., Suite 7C, New York, NY 10011, by February 1st, 1997. Ballots arriving after that date will be consider null and void. (Well, null, anyway.)

And now, on with the voting:

BEST GAME: _____          BEST PUZZLES:_____

BEST WRITING: _____          BEST NPCS: _____

BEST STORY:_____          BEST INDIVIDUAL PUZZLE: _____

BEST SETTING: _____          BEST INDIVIDUAL NPC: _____

## Eligible games:

A Night at the Computer Center
Aayela
Alien Abduction?
BSE
Delusions
Don't Be Late!
Fear
Frobozz Magic Support
Frozen
Gumshoe
Hero Inc., Vol. 1
In The End
Kissing the Buddha's Feet
The Light: Shelby's Addendum
Lists and Lists
Looking For Godot
Lost New York

Maiden of the Moonlight
My First Stupid Game
Of Forms Unknown
Past Tense
Pastoral Pitfalls
Phlegm
Piece of Mind
Promoted!
Punkirita Quest One
Ralph
Return to Karn
Reverberations
Rippled Flesh
Silence of the Lambs
Sir Ramic Hobbs and the Oriental
  Wok
Small World

So Far
SpiritWrak
Stargazer
Tapestry
The Broken String
The Curse of Eldor
The House of the Stalker
The Land Beyond the Picket Fence
The Meteor, the Stone, and a Long
  Glass of Sherbet
The Underoos That Ate New York
The Wedding
Time: All Things Come To An End
Urban Cleanup
Vindaloo
Wearing the Claw

*The companion disk for XYZZYnews #12 contains the following game files. It's a good deal for people who have slower modems—at 2400 bps, it'd take a heck of a long time to download the contents of the companion disk. It's also a good deal for people with limited or no access to FTP sites or online services as a source for new games. If you're reading an electronic version of this issue, you can obtain this games disk with a print copy of* XYZZYnews #12 *by enclosing $3.50 for postage and handling with the coupon on the bottom of this page. If you play and enjoy these games, please pay the shareware fees as applicable.*

**FEAR**—As the game begins, you awaken from a terrifying nightmare, relieved that you were only having a bad dream but still realizing that something is not right. Why are you in such constant fear? In this Inform game by Chuan-Tze Teo, every move you make is hampered by near-paralyzing fears, from claustrophobia to arachnophobia. Try not to panic as you make your way in and out of a number of puzzling locations, including a series of dream worlds.

**RALPH**—In the history of IF, there have been games where you are an intelligent computer, a two-headed alien, a holographic fish. In Ralph, you are a dog: the eponymous Ralph, whose life unfolds through a series of quintessentially canine Ralphisms ("Nose wet: check. Fur clean: check. Tail up: check. Sexy.") as you endeavor to do whatever it is that dogs endeavor. There isn't a whole lot in the way of puzzles in this short

Inform game by Miron Schmidt, but who cares? As Ralph, you can bark, chase cats, relieve yourself on small children. All in all, great goofy fun.

**LISTS AND LISTS**—Can you learn to program in Lisp (well, Scheme, actually) from a text adventure game? This Inform game by Andrew Plotkin gives you examples to learn from, and supplies an eight-foot genie who will pose problems for you to solve. And you thought IF was just fun and games!

**OF FORMS UNKNOWN**—Summer on a college campus is rarely exciting, and this year is no exception. In this Inform game by Chris Markwyn, you're a restless college student waiting for classes to start up again. Could those odd dreams you've been having mean anything? Maybe something will come along to entertain you…

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