

## HOLLOW VOICE

It's a good thing I never considered direct mail as a way to make a living.

At times, I'm just terrible at holding up my end of a correspondence. Gifts may languish for months before I send out a thank-you note. And while I never mind taking on freelance work, writing and sending the invoice at the end is a chore I constantly dread.

That's why I owe David Dyte such a debt of thanks for all his help with preparing and sending out the prizes for the winners of the 1997 XYZZY awards. He researched prizes for the winners — we considered trophies before deciding on medals — then coordinated everything from finding a vendor to do the work to having the medals designed and inscribed to actually mailing out the medals to all the winners. All I had to do was write a check — and even that took me forever and a day! :-). So I'd like to take a moment to publicly thank David for his invaluable assistance; there will certainly be a seat of honor for him at next year's online ceremonies!

One other interesting note I wanted to point out in this issue's introduction is a cute Unix shell that I understand has been around quite awhile but that was new to me — the Adventure Shell, available in C source code by John Coker (see <ftp://ftp.gmd.de/if-archive/shells/advsh.tar.Z>) This custom shell makes using Unix a real adventure; you need to search for and locate magical items that in turn enable you to run programs and execute the other commands you want to perform. Best of all is the "xyzyzy" command that returns the user to the home directory — if that's not intuitive, then I don't know what is. :-). A big thanks to Urpo Lankinen for sharing this!

Until next issue, happy gaming!

**Eileen Mullin**  
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## Issue # 16 Top 10 Picks for Interactive Fiction on the Web

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**Cascade Mountain Publishing**

<http://www.cascadepublishing.com/>

**Guilty Bastards**

<http://www.geocities.com/hollywood/academy/5976/guilty.html>

**The Explore Adventure Series**

<http://www.jump.com/joe/explore.html>

**You Be The Hero**

<http://t2.technion.ac.il/~site>

**Teaching and Learning With Interactive Fiction**

<http://k12s.phast.umass.edu/~desilets/>

**The 4th Annual Interactive Fiction Competition's Website**

<http://www.ifcompetition.org/>

**Welcome to HTML-TADS**

<http://www.tela.bc.ca/tela/html-tads/>

**Bob Turkee's Interactive Fiction Link Page**

<http://www2.netcom.com/~bobturky/games.html>

**The Giant List of Classic Game Programmers**

<http://www.dadgum.com/glist/list.html>

**Inform for New Writers**

<http://www.placet.com/int-fiction/>



Opening screen at the You Be The Hero site.

In issue #14, I printed examples of references to text adventure games discovered in non-IF materials sent in by readers ("Spot the IF Reference"). The following two letters provide some additional examples.

—EM

Dear XYZZYnews,

Two more references to "a maze of twisty little passages, all alike," only one of which I can quote:

From *Taltos*, by Steven Brust (pp.158-159):

"We made out way through the corridors of the Halls of Judgment and well as we could, which wasn't very. What had been a single straight, wide corridor had somehow turned into a twisty maze of little passages, all the same. We must have wandered those little halls for two or three hours, getting more and more lost, with none of us willing to admit it. We tried marking the walls with the points of our swords, keeping to the left-hand paths, but nothing worked. And the really odd thing was that none of the passages led anywhere except to other passages. That is, there were no rooms, stairways, doors, or anything else."

There is a reference to the Maze somewhere in Terry Pratchett's "Witches Abroad," but I lost the slip of paper that I wrote it down on, and I've returned the book to the library. Oops.

—Howard Liu  
ifnews@gamestats.com

Dear XYZZYnews,

There's a reference to Adventure in Larry Niven's novel *Destiny's Road*.

One of the characters describes the ecological system of the planet Destiny by saying "We seem to be in a bunch of twisty little ecologies, all different." Verry hard to miss: made me almost fall out of my chair laughing. :)

—Allen Short  
ashort@iname.com

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### Infocom bugs, continued

Dear XYZZYnews:

Here's an interesting one from Infidel (off Masterpieces):

>put all in pack  
knapsack: You take the knapsack off and place it in the cigarette pack. As it settles in the cigarette pack, the cover flaps open.  
farewell note:  
There's no room.  
cigarette pack: How can you do that?

>i  
You are carrying:  
A farewell note  
A cigarette pack  
The cigarette pack contains:  
A knapsack  
The knapsack contains:

A rope  
A canteen

>version  
INFIDEL  
Copyright 1983 by  
Infocom, Inc. All rights reserved.

INFIDEL is a trademark of Infocom, Inc.  
Release 22 / Serial number 830916

The Infocom Bugs List mentions the "container bug" in Infidel — putting the knapsack and the chalice in each other at the same time makes them disappear. It works with the knapsack and the cigarette pack too. You can trigger it with the amusing sequence:

>put sack in pack.  
put pack in sack.

Shades of Dr. Seuss!

—Joe  
jcmason@uwaterloo.ca

Dear XYZZYnews:

Suspended bug: Iris (the one who can see) can be used to describe all rooms.

There was something that you plug in so that can see the room that you are in. Anyway, have one robot (e.g., Poet) plug in the device, then direct that robot to follow another robot (e.g., Sensa), then move Sensa. Poet will forget to unplug the device, and you can then view the descriptions of all rooms, including the ones that are in the section that requires the wedge for access.

Perhaps stranger that such descriptions exist... or have I missed something?

8^ p.  
—Peter Ferrie

Dear XYZZYnews:

I have found a bug in Spellbreaker which is not listed on the bugs list:

If you have water in the bottle then casting tinsot on any

body of water except for the one in the Oubliette will give the message "The water and bottle freeze and shatter into a million pieces!" and destroy the bottle even if the bottle is not in the same room or if it is inside the closed zipper.

If that's not clear, here's a concrete example. At the Enchanters' Retreat I dropped the bottle which contained water. I then blorpled the earth cube and went west then south to get to the Ruins Room. I then cast tinsot on the water there and received the message about the bottle shattering. Going back to the Enchanters' Retreat I found that the bottle was gone.

I found this in version 87/860904 of Spellbreaker.

—Paul  
rizzo@best.com

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## Second that emotion

Dear XYZZYnews:

I read both Neil de Mause's critique and Laura Mixon's response.

I feel the difference in the emotion of her game (which I have tried a bit) and "regular" IF is in the way it is presented. The Erasmatron forces the emotion on you like it was trying to say "Look here! Emotion! We have determined emotion is important so we're going to stick it in your face and base the entire game on it."

Emotion works best when it's subtle and finds its way into the readers' hearts through unexpected paths. The emotion in Shattertown is predictable and completely superfluous. If you want emotion in IF play Babel.

Shattertown is a noble attempt at best and a waste of time at worst.

—Lawrence Noc-Woon Kwong  
lnkwong@midway.uchicago.edu

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## Inquiring minds

Dear XYZZYnews,

It was a huge surprise to me that there are people out there who still cherish the ol' text adventures, as I thought everyone migrated to DOOM/QUAKE land...

A long while ago, I was putting the finishing touches on a horror text adventure game (a real horror game, not the cheezy "you see a ghost here" games). I was writing for the PC DOS platform, but then Wolfenstein 3-D came out and killed the text adventures off.

What venues are out there for me should I decide to dust off the game and finish it? Should I even bother?

Thanx loads!

—Dave  
dadametz@uhc.com

*As you might guess, I'll take issue with your blanket statement that the Wolfensteins of the world have killed off text adventures. I think you'll find a willing crowd of play-testers for the asking on the Usenet newsgroup rec.games.int-fiction. From there, it's up to you how much you'll take their feedback into account in creating a final version for general distribution to the IF community. —EM*

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Hi Eileen,

I've been reading XYZZYnews since number one, and I'm a big fan of it, lots of nice interviews.

Anyway, I'm writing this because I was recently rummaging through some old papers (old indeed, as I threw away some copies of TRS-80 Magazine ;) and discovered my collection of NZT/Status Line. I think it is complete (I have 22 issues), and I'm willing to scan them into PDFs, and the if-archive seems an obvious spot where they should go. Question is, you know if there are any legal constraints?

Thanks a lot. Keep the good work!

—Rafael Oliveira  
rafaelg@pobox.com

*I would assume that Activision currently holds the copyright on these materials. You would need to ask permission from the company before you could legitimately reprint their material.*

—EM

Hey Eileen,

I had worked with the Adventure Game Toolkit a while back, and while digging through archives on the Net to find it, I came across a link to your XYZZYnews site. It is very nice, but I'm a bit confused.

What exactly is interactive fiction? Just any "game" that employs only text, or is there more? I'm trying to work on a browser-based game where many people can all interact in a fictitious, self-running environment — and it's all text (and if I finish, it'll be free for public access).

Does this fit the definition?

—Rod Jackson  
rodjackson@bigfoot.com

*Sure, your Web-based IF games still sounds like IF to me — and I've no doubt you'll find an eager audience if you promote your game to rec.games.int-fiction when you're done. —EM*

# Parlez-vous Nalian?

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*Lucian P. Smith (lpsmith@rice.edu), author of The Edifice, was awarded the 1997 XYZZY Award for Best Puzzle for the game's language puzzle. In the following article, he describes how he developed and built this compelling feature into The Edifice's plot and gameplay.*

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One of the better gaming decisions I've made in my life so far was to set up the second level of The Edifice so the player would have to learn a new language. It seemed natural enough — after all, what characteristic of early human development is more important than the ability to communicate with others? This article attempts to trace that idea from its initial spark to its final implementation. I'll address the code in pretty general terms here, but I've re-coded this puzzle as a separate module for anyone interested in exploring it in greater detail and uploaded it to GMD, where you should be able to find it at:

`ftp://ftp.gmd.de/if-archi ve/programmi ng/i nform6/exampl es/nal ian. i nf`

Not all of the instances described below are in that module, but all the tricky parsing is. If you have additional questions after reading this article and perusing the module, please feel free to e-mail me directly.

Before introducing the new language in the game, it was necessary to set up the proper context. All great discoveries are driven by necessity, so I made the scenario pretty basic: your son is sick, and needs Feverleaf, which you can't find in the forest on your own. Enter Stranger, who, the player should suspect, might have some.

At this point, I could tell the player's goals were going to be twofold — first, they would have to communicate to Stranger that their son is sick, and secondly, they would have to discover Stranger's word for 'Feverleaf', so they could ask for it.

But a language with just the words, 'son', 'sick', and 'feverleaf' would be pretty dull. At the opposite extreme, I wouldn't want the player struggling through a 5,000 word vocabulary just to find those three words! So the vocabulary I chose had to be large enough to be interesting, but not so large as to be overwhelming. I also had to keep in mind that I'd have to code up responses to every reasonable sentence the player constructed, so I wanted to keep that number within reason.

I turned to nouns first. The basic three pronouns were a necessity; I decided that one word was sufficient for he, she, and it, and also chose to ignore plurals. 'Son' and 'feverleaf' were necessities, of course, and I included a few other items in the area — 'home/hut/house', 'weapon', and 'panther' (since I'd given Stranger a

panther skin to wear, it only seemed logical that he would be proud of the fact that he managed to kill it, and would want to tell the player so.)

Adjectives were next — ‘sick’ was one of the basics, along with my, your, and his/her/its. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ seemed pretty basic, and I rounded those off with ‘strange’ (his probable adjective of choice for the player), and ‘dangerous’ (his adjective of choice for himself).

For verbs, I included ‘give’ and ‘take’; these terms seemed to be necessary for an exchange to take place. If the player shows up with a weapon, Stranger gets angry, so ‘leave’ and ‘threaten’ were logical next choices. Once the player starts to communicate fluently, ‘understand’ would seem to be important, along with ‘see’ for good measure. Throw in ‘is’ with ‘yes’ and ‘no’, and I’ve created myself a rudimentary language!

Creating the actual words was really rather fun. To ease the translation process, I gave each part of speech a common ending, with the exception of putting a few different options in for nouns. This led to logical connections between the words for ‘I’ and ‘my’, for example, further easing the player’s task. To keep the language even more consistent, I tried to keep common words short, and I had fun with some of the roots — ‘panther’ and ‘dangerous’ have the same root, for example, and the word for ‘understand’ comes from the words for ‘take’ and ‘I’.

For grammar, I kept it simple — there is none. No new word endings for different parts of speech, and no significance attached to word order. This makes Nalian a poor choice for creating complex sentences, but I wasn’t planning on doing that anyway.

At this point, I was ready to start coding. Since most of Stranger’s speeches would come from player input, I first needed to figure out how to correctly parse player input. Standard Inform parsing techniques were wholly inadequate to the task at hand, so I turned to the Inform properties ‘grammar’ and ‘life’. Unfortunately, I had to copy some code here, but this wasn’t terribly extensive. I got Inform to tell me where the player’s sentence began and ended, and set up a loop to deal with each word of player input.

There were four possibilities for each word the player typed, and all four needed unique responses: The word could be Nalian, ‘English’ (understood by the parser), gibberish (not understood by the parser), or punctuation. The appropriate responses would be recognition for the first, partial recognition for the second, bewilderment for the third, and the last should be ignored.

The first order of business was to check if a typed word was in Nalian. After a brief unhappy experiment with byte arrays, I turned back to the old mainstay of IF programmers: objects, rooms, and containers. Each Nalian word became an object, stored in a new ‘LanguageRoom’. A container called ‘Sentence’ served to collect

player input — any time a word-object was matched, it got dumped into the 'Sentence' bucket — the new repository of player input.

Gibberish words were easy to recognize — I got a value of '0' for any word not in the parser's dictionary. English words were similarly simple — any non-zero value not caught by my earlier 'Nalian' check.

With punctuation, however, I ran into a problem — I was getting '0' again. In addition, any attempt I made to try to put punctuation 'words' into the dictionary resulted in failure — sometimes it even caused Inform to not recognize commas and periods at all any more! My solution for the contest was to hack the library. I found that the routines 'FirstWord' and 'FirstWordStopped' were throwing away any punctuation information they came across, so I changed this behavior for my calls to these routines from 'grammar' and 'life', being sure not to change the default behavior for normal library calls. Even this turned out to be inadequate, however. One of the bug reports I received from participants in the 1997 IF competition was that when the player tried to ask Stranger questions in Nalian, Stranger failed to understand them. This turned out to be because while Inform separates commas, periods, and quotation marks from the words they adjoin, it does not do this for other punctuation. Hence, the input:

```
>SAY "NA BEN LALSE, " TO STRANGER
```

gets separated as:

```
SAY " NA BEN LALSE , " TO STRANGER
```

and the input:

```
>SAY "NA BEN LALSE?" TO STRANGER
```

gets separated as:

```
SAY " NA BEN LALSE? " TO STRANGER
      ^^^^^^
```

Since 'lalse?' was different (to Inform) from 'lalse', the parser was failing to understand the latter as valid input. After a plea to the newsgroups, Torbjorn Andersson kindly answered and told me I could use the routine 'LanguageToInformese' — a routine commonly used for foreign languages! In this case, it was a simple matter to convert question and exclamation marks to periods, since I was ignoring punctuation anyway.



At this point, I was able to flag English and gibberish words, and had all Nalian words stored in 'Sentence'. Now came the hard part: coding responses to the various sentences!

Examining the vocabulary to this point, I found that Nalian had a 25-word vocabulary. Not too large, but let's see: accounting for all possible three-word sentences results in 25 times 24 times 23... 13,800 potential sentences! Yikes! Clearly, I was not going to be able to code up 13,800 responses, so I had to resort to more devious methods.

First of all, I set up responses for when there was only one word in Sentence. 25 responses were a lot, but manageable. Next, I reorganized the remaining sentences, putting verbs first, then nouns, then adjectives. For sentences with no verbs, I assumed an implied 'is' between the noun and any adjectives in the sentence (Sentences with nothing but strings of nouns or strings of adjectives could be dealt with with a simple response indicating puzzlement, and a general clue as to how to better use Nalian; likewise with sentences with more than one verb.) Since the presence of the word 'is' now didn't mean anything, if my routine found 'is' in the Sentence with other words, it could just throw it out and start over. In the same manner, the presence of the word 'yes' wouldn't change the essential meaning of the sentence, so I could throw that out, too.

So, with eight nouns and eight adjectives, that meant only 64 responses — some of which could be concatenated, and some of which had to be expanded. Nouns and adjectives which were crucial to communicating the player's plight were singled out (son, sick, feverleaf, and my) so that my routine would assume the player's sentence was basically correct if it contained the important bits of information — Stranger is, after all, working to understand the player. However, to prevent abuse of this concession, I made Stranger unable to understand sentences that were more than five words in length, complaining that he couldn't follow your terrible accent all the way to the end. This allowed the potential sentence "Yes, my son is sick," to be understood, but not sentences of any greater length.

For sentences with one verb in them, I focused my responses on one noun that followed. With my reorganized sentences, this meant that Stranger was more likely to pick up on certain key words than others, if the player tried more than one. By leaving them in, though, I could tailor certain responses to acknowledge more than just two key words. For sentences with only verbs and adjectives, I gave a general response that essentially told the player that his sentence didn't make much sense without a subject. With six verbs and eight nouns, this meant 48 basic responses here, some of which, again, were concatenated, and some of which were expanded. (For example, when the player used the word 'son', it was important to check if the word 'my' was also used, to distinguish the boy standing next to Stranger from the player's sick child.)

Finally, I had to deal with the word 'no'. By this point, I had already written the bulk of Stranger's responses and was getting rather tired of it. This one simple



word opened up a whole new unwelcomed vista of potential — so I cheated. If the player used the word ‘no’ and a verb, Stranger took that as a command not to do that verb, and just stood there. If there were no other verbs in an otherwise reasonable-sounding sentence, Stranger simply acted disinterested. This was not ideal, but I really didn’t want to code up *another* 64 responses for the nouns and adjectives. Even so, in the end this section takes up 52K.

In the setup above, I showed how I had to condense Stranger’s vocabulary so that the number of responses I had to code up was manageable. In actually writing the responses, however, I had to expand his vocabulary conceptually so it could express everything I wanted it to.

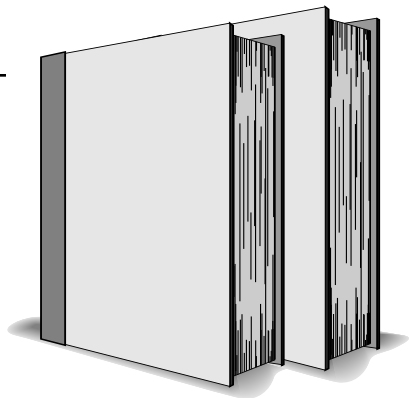
One trick I used was to use ‘yes’ as an emphasis word. “I am dangerous,” then, became “I am yes dangerous.” To de-emphasize like sentences, I’d leave out ‘is’ — “I dangerous.” ‘good’ became the embodiment of every positive force in the universe, and ‘bad’ became the opposite. Generally, every word became much more than its original English counterpart.

Also, I tried to use a lot of body language. With this context, individual words would be (hopefully) easier to figure out. When the player spoke just one word, I often had Stranger mime a response that illustrated that word. I also decided that nodding meant ‘yes’ to both of them, and shaking one’s head meant ‘no’. This cleared up another problem I had had — when Stranger asks the player a question, how should I respond to the Inform verbs ‘yes’ and ‘no’? Printing out ‘you nod your head,’ and ‘you shake your head,’ before giving Stranger’s response turned out to work nicely here — and also meant I had to add three new verbs, “Nod head,” “Shake head,” and “Shrug.”

Finally, I had to code up responses to the player showing Stranger things, or pointing at items. This was almost laughably easy, with a mere dozen items on that level. Unfortunately, this was where one of my game-crashing bugs showed up, if the player showed Stranger an unexpected item (like pointing in a direction, for example.), due to the way I cross-referenced the verbs ‘Point’ and ‘Show’ (If there was no default response for one, it called the other, and visa versa. Oops.)

So, with all this analysis, have we discovered why this puzzle was so popular? Probably not. The analysis points to areas where it could have gone wrong, but not to the essence of what made it fun. Having not solved it myself, I am in the unique position of knowing the ins and outs of the puzzle intimately, but not having ever directly experienced it. I didn’t even know if someone *\*could\** solve it, or what paths they were more likely to take if they did! However, as best as I can figure from talking to people, I think the basic reason it was fun was that it let the player figure out a system, and then manipulate that system to produce a desired result. Making the system interesting and responsive were essential, but the basic concept is inherently intriguing, I think. I could be lalse, but that’s the way I unen it. ☒

# Book Review



## ***Game Developer's Marketplace: The Definitive Guide to Making It Big in the Interactive Game Industry***

by Ben Sawyer, Alex Dunne, and Tor Berg  
Coriolis Group Books, 1998. US\$49; Can\$69.99  
728 pages, includes CD.  
ISBN: 1-57610-177-0

Anyone who's harbored idle fantasies about creating the next *Myst* would probably be drawn to this title while browsing at Barnes & Noble. None of the topics covered in *Game Developer's Marketplace* focus specifically on designing text adventure games or the history of such games, unfortunately — despite the tome's hefty length — but it's useful for gaining valuable insights about the industry as a whole, especially if you're considering computer game development as a career choice.

The book is divided into four major sections; the first, focusing on the planning basics of game design and a brief history of computer game and video game companies, is of the broadest interest to all fledgling game programmers. So, even if you consider game development more of a time-consuming hobby than a potential career choice, you'll find useful tidbits in these first seven chapters. Of these, chapters 5 through 7 will be the most interesting for interactive fiction fans considering game development for fun and (possibly, but not probably) profit.

Chapter 5, "Refining Your Design," tries to come up with some simple answers to questions like "What makes a game successful?" Its discussion of problem-solving and the role of puzzles in a game is good food for thought; while you may not come away with any earth-shattering insights, it will probably help you better consider your audience's needs and interests when you plan your game's puzzles along with their overall difficulty and various outcomes.

I turned to Chapter 6, "Storytelling, Design Details, and Interface Design," right away because of the title. The focus on graphical game interfaces is annoying — for IF-only developers, anyway! — but the chapter does touch on some good issues that any good programmer worth his or her salt should consider. These range from how well a work of fiction can be adapted to an interactive game to how to give your characters depth.

Chapter 7 is devoted entirely to tips for successful game design. This is the only chapter where I found a specific mention of text adventures; it also touches on all kinds of other specific game genres and gives a very general overview of the design challenges of each.

In the second major section of the book, the authors turn their attention to how one can gain financially from an interest in computer games — namely, how to get a job with a big-name entertainment company or how to pursue venture capital to fund your own startup. I liked the job-hunting tips in Chapter 9 the most; this practical advice would apply to just about any industry, but the chapter also includes capsule descriptions for the many different staff positions that play a role in developing a commercial computer game — many of which, I have to admit, were new to me.

The third major section is a bit scattered, but is meant to address market research and legal issues that affect game development, from the demographics of game players to intellectual property rights. Finally, the resources section in Part IV — listing software utilities and contact information for game publishers, among other tidbits — is reproduced in electronic form on the book's enclosed CD.

The book's overall tone comes across as very casual and laid-back, a friendly approach that — like a lot of other Coriolis Group Books — could stand to use much more tightening and editing, but which makes for an easy read. ☒

—Lauren Meckler

# International Game Developer's Network (IGDN) Conference

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by Lucian P. Smith ([lpsmith@rice.edu](mailto:lpsmith@rice.edu))

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**D**uring the weekend of March 13th, I attended the International Game Developers Network (IGDN) Conference in Austin, Texas. What follows is what I learned and observed from that experience. I highly recommend that if you ever get a chance to go to one of these things — a smaller conference, like this one was — go for it! It's truly fascinating, and you'll learn a lot about the computer gaming industry.

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## General impressions

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**Informal.** These people are not your corporate types. The “old hands” in the industry were dressed nicely, but nobody wore a suit. The majority of those under 30 wore T-shirts. The name tags had your first name emblazoned in a huge font, underneath which was your last name, in a much smaller font. Under that it either had your company affiliation, university ('Rice', in my case), or your lunch choice (which had me temporarily wonder if I was getting a particularly bland lunch.) Nary a 'sir' or a 'mister' was to be heard for the duration of the weekend.

**Young.** The old hands I spoke of earlier were few and far between, and comprised maybe 10 to 20 percent of those in attendance — and I'm including everyone who looked like they were much over 30 in this category. I'd guesstimate the average age at maybe 27, the median at 25. However, there were precious few “newbies” like myself there. Most of these people had been in the business for years and knew the trade.

**Male.** The males outnumbered the females maybe 10 to 1. Interestingly, this ratio seemed to extend across all age groups; the number of women in the industry doesn't seem to have changed much over the past few decades. Even more noticeable was the lack of racial diversity; I think I may have seen one black person and a couple of Hispanics out of about 300 in attendance.

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### Hear for yourself!

Several of the speeches given at the IGDN conference in March, and described in this article, are available for audio playback online. You'll need the RealAudio plug-in (available from <http://www.real.com/>).

Chris Crawford's talk is at:  
<ftp://www.kesmai.com/audio/crawford.ra>

and Jim Dunnigan's is:  
<ftp://www.kesmai.com/audio/dunnigan.ra>

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**Unsettled.** As people talked about their jobs, I began to realize just how volatile the gaming market is. People seem to work at one company for maybe one to five years before moving on; whether this was by choice or by force was harder to determine. There seemed to be an inordinately large number of small bands of people who would form small companies, create a game, and then try to get some big-name publisher to pick it up. I also heard about a conference called Computer Game Developers Conference where people with the games find the people with the money, and from there try to get funded for the year ahead.

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## Issues of the day

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The most frequently voiced concern I heard at the conference was the complaint that the market is being driven by clones, and that the more creative and unique games aren't being funded. The other hot topic under discussion was what to do about online games. In addition, many people were wondering about gender-inclusive gaming — why this was so rare, and how to encourage it.

While I heard much discussion on how to deal with these issues, I didn't hear any that were wholeheartedly endorsed by the crowd at large. I heard plenty about direct publishing, and general acknowledgment that the Internet could change the publishing industry, but no one ventured further to say how that might play itself out. It seemed that just about everyone had ideas about online gaming, but no one could point to any that have worked really well yet or even to the satisfaction of those involved. There is money being made in these endeavors, but nothing seems to have emerged as an industry standard yet. It seems obvious what people are doing wrong, but it is still unclear how to do things right. Whoever does, though, is likely to make a lot of money. Gender issues in games weren't resolved either, but I'll talk more about that later.

So now, on to the speakers...

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## Keynote speaker: Alex St.John

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Alex worked for Microsoft for many years before leaving to join the gaming industry, so he had a slightly different perspective to share with us.

What are companies? Are they their hyped product? Or are they the hype? What really endures — any one given product, or the process?

One half of all applications running on personal computers at any given time are games. This should translate into incredible leverage for the gaming industry — but it doesn't. Entertainment doesn't leverage anything, at least not in the manner of Word, Lotus, and others, with their continual upgrades, which you pay money for.

Leverage comes in the form of platforms. Why do we run games on top of existing operating systems, which are designed to do tons of extra things we don't need? Why not model the arcade games?

The main point is this: Game companies right now live or die by their latest product. This is no way to run a company. If we want to keep some of our leverage from our last product, we need to find a better way to keep customers.

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## Roundtable: Gender-inclusive games

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Richard Garriot wasn't around to talk about "Ultimas: Past, Present and Future" (he was busy dealing with his Ultima Online class-action lawsuit), so I decided to stop by this roundtable, with facilitator Sheri Graner Ray. Sheri is the president of Sirenia Software, and was described as "one of the pioneers in the field of designing girls' games." Sirenia Software apparently hasn't produced any games yet — I did mention the gaming market was volatile, didn't I? — but she used to be director of product development for Her Interactive and produced three games there, including "The Vampire Diaries." Previously, she worked with Origin on the later Ultimas, among other games. Most of the examples she gave were from her experiences with U7:Serpent Isle, although she did talk briefly about why vampires appeal to female players.

A recurring refrain in this roundtable was, "Females represent 52 percent of your potential market. Why not pay attention to those aspects of your game design they feel is important?"

The first thing she said was: Males are visually stimulated, females are emotionally and tactually stimulated. Attach electrodes to guys and show them a car chase scene with no context, and they react. Females won't. Put a kidnapped child in the front car and a mom in the back car, and the females will react too — and not just because of the mother/child relationship. Give a gun to the woman in the back, and the females will cheer along as she shoots at the kidnappers. Violence, excitement, flashy graphics, whatever — a female will tend to be bored rather quickly unless a reason is given. She quoted the line, "A woman needs a reason for violence, a guy only needs a place." (I had heard the line elsewhere applied to a different subject, but no matter.)

Her most controversial statement — to me, at least — was that people don't want to role-play people of a higher social status than they are. Conversely, people don't mind playing people of a lower social status. In U7:SI, there were a variety of characters you could choose between. The females invariably picked female characters. The males picked anyone. There were also interesting divisions along race lines: Blacks picked black characters, while whites picked anyone. The largest demographic group that chose to play the black female character? White males.

I'm not sure I agree with this, although it's an intriguing hypothesis. The observed behavior is what it is, but I'm not sure it implies what she thinks it implies. As my wife pointed out to me in a discussion we had later, it may be that when a guy plays a girl, he doesn't have any problem playing her 'like a guy' — she becomes a tomboy, is all. The female, on the other hand, doesn't want to play a guy like a girl; she would want to play him like a guy, and this would take more effort than she wants to expend in something that should be entertainment.

There are other reasons I'm not sure I buy the 'higher social standing' argument. There are, of course, many scenarios where the player plays someone of a *much* higher social standing than they are. Kings, emperors... even an active and respected member of a community. This doesn't seem to have any bearing on anyone's comfort level with role-playing that character. Or consider the issues with the tables turned — imagine a game set in a matriarchy, for instance. I may be alone here, but in this setting, I would suddenly feel awkward playing a female of any social ranking, let alone one of high status. I would imagine females would have no problem playing those characters. Likewise, in this same society, I think females wouldn't have problems playing a male, while males would feel compelled to play the male. It's hard to pinpoint where this awkwardness comes from, however. It may be that I feel instinctively that the social rules of behavior would be different in this society, and that I would be lost trying to play 'like a female' within it. This feels close, but I'm not sure I've pinned this down yet.

Other things that tend to be more important to female players: exploring relationships between people and their environment. Exploring alternative pathways of resolution. Finding endings that are mutually beneficial to the parties involved.

It turns out that both boys and girls play the same computer games up until the age 8 or 10, at which point the boys continue on (to games like 'Doom', more than likely), while girls tend to stop. As time goes by, females are socialized to never consider using computers for entertainment, but only for work. Sheri conducts a lot of surveys where she asks women questions like, "What would have to be in a computer game before you would buy it?" All too often, she'll get the response, "I work with computers all day. Why would I want to be on them more, in my free time?" If you think about this, this is dumb. Ask a TV studio exec if she caught the latest Seinfeld episode, and she won't say, "Ugh. I work with TV all day. Why would I want to watch it in my spare time?" It's a completely different experience. But females have been indoctrinated to associate using computers only for work.

Other trends: Males tend to approach conflict resolution *mano-a-mano*, strength vs. strength. Females try more to resolve conflict through compromise and/or manipulation. A female player will try to work out a happy ending for *someone*, not even necessarily her own character; she can be willing to sacrifice her own character if she knows the fortune of another character they care will take a turn for the better.

One disclaimer: Sheri told us, about halfway through one of her talks on this subject that usually someone will say, “But isn’t that just good game design?” Bingo. The trends outlined above are not universal, by any stretch of the imagination. By incorporating into your design aspects that will appeal to the stereotypical female, you appeal to a huge swath of males, as well. If you can do both well, you only serve to widen your game’s appeal.

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## Brian Moriarty: ‘Entrain’

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*[Note: Unlike my other write-ups of the conference speakers, here I’ve largely reported Brian Moriarty’s speech verbatim — as far as my illegible notes and faulty memory could allow, of course.]*

“Hi, my name is Brian Moriarty. Welcome to the premiere of my ‘98 rant.”

Brian’s talk was the only multimedia presentation I saw. Throughout the duration of his talk, he showed a video accompanied by a deep, rhythmic music. He started off by explaining what was in the video. First, he showed us the final scene from ‘The Great Train Robbery,’ in which a man lifts his gun, points it at the audience, and fires. The next scene was from ‘Duke Nukem’ and showed a guard approaching the player, getting shot, and then writhing around on the ground. After that, the video went into a continuous loop, with one second of the Train Robbery shot, and one second of Duke, each second punctuated by a silent gunshot.

Entrain (en tran’), v. t. 1. To carry along. 2. To trap. From MF ‘entrainer’ = en- + ‘trainer’ to drag, trail.

When Brian was in the fifth grade, he went with his class on a field trip to visit a small restored town. While most of his class went off in one direction, he wandered instead across the street into a little shop. Inside, he saw walls and walls of antique clocks, and an old man behind the counter. “Notice anything strange?” the man asked him, smiling. Brian looked around carefully, but couldn’t figure out what the man was talking about. “All the clocks are ticking at once.” Astonished, Brian listened, and found it was true. “How’d you do that?” he asked, impressed by the trick. The old man shook his head. “I didn’t do anything. The sound of the ticking teaches them to beat in time.” Wondering, Brian watched and listened to the steady “tick, tick, tick, tick, tick,” for another minute. Then he realized something else. It was about five minutes before four in the afternoon. Slowly piecing it all together, he asked the man, “If they’re all ticking together...does that mean they all chime together, too?” The man smiled. “Stick around. The place fills up.” Sure enough, within the next few minutes, the place began to fill with tourists, including (fortunately) his own tour group. And sure enough, on the hour the clocks exploded together in a wondrous cacophony of chimes, bells, and music.



That's entraining. But this describes not only the entraining of the clocks to each other, but also of the tourists to the clocks! The town itself pulses to the rhythm of the clocks in that shop. Brian imagined for us a frontal wave of effect from that epicenter of entrainment, from the bakery across the street filling up with people ordering coffee and danishes a few minutes after the hour, to the rush on the bathrooms a predictable time beyond that, either or both of which could become entraining events of their own, perpetuating the wave an unpredictable distance from the clock shop.

But back to the video, which, along with Brian's steady voice, had been entraining us and pulling us into the talk. Brian's original idea for his talk was spurred by a particular game whose effects had pulled him in very unwillingly. "You write games, don't you? Why do you people put out games like Postal?"

Out of an urge to answer that question, he had planned a lovely diatribe: He would show examples of movies from the '40s, culling examples that showed that era's propensity to show violence for violence's sake. He would compare that to today's computer game offerings, catering to similar tastes and appeal. Then he would show how movies evolved past that, taking violence out of the spotlight, and enabling the industry to create wonderful works of art. In a dazzling final montage of video, he would show great scenes from *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, *Star Wars*, and other great movies, and say that computer games had that same potential for greatness.

But first things first: the spectacular video montage. He worked up his two-second loop, and sat down to watch it. And started to think. And think. And he realized that what he had to say, at its basic form, was nothing more than snobbery.

But why does 'Postal' and its ilk bother him so much? Are players touched by the violence, or does it pass on by? What is the job of the gamewright?

Rhythms and patterns exist in all games, if you watch. Watch someone playing a game sometime. Not the game itself, lest you be sucked in, but the player, and the space around him or her. Watch the rhythms emerge, and how the player and the game interact. It will become clear that a game is really an entrainment engine. The job of the gamewright, therefore, is to reinforce patterns, and dampen dissonance.

Once you get into multi-player games, the job becomes more difficult. Like a phase-locked loop, multiple oscillators must all be entrained to the same phase. You must therefore give lots of feedback, generated from the game itself and from the other players, to teach the gamer how to play the game. The goal is fun, and shared intelligence.

*[At this point during Brian's talk, the constant 2-second video began to change. The pulsing remained the same, but the picture began to shrink, slowly, eventu-*

*ally revealing behind it a turning kaleidoscope whose sections were those same two images of gun shots.]*

Brian's wife, unlike Brian himself, may easily be classified a baseball fanatic. One day, she convinced Brian to go with her to a game because the Monkees were going to perform beforehand. What he found was one of the most astonishing examples of a multi-player game he had ever seen. Not on the field, mind you, but in the stadium itself.

Many stadiums and franchises have claimed to have started the craze known as the "wave," but legend has it that it was started by a fan known as "Crazy George" Henderson. Crazy George was known for dressing up wildly, and getting the fans to cheer just as wildly. One day, he managed to get the entire 22C section to stand together at once, and cheer. As they sat down again, section 22B stood up and cheered. 22A was soon to follow, as the newly-born wave crashed down towards the field, and proceeded to sweep around the stadium, all the way back to section 22C — who, of course, stood up and cheered again, restarting the cycle.

Why is the wave fun? We're wired for it. Are fans particles or oscillators? "I call them: Customers!"

Violence in games is like dissonance in music. It can be a valuable tool, if used correctly.

Brian and his wife have had tickets to the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Generally, they played a lot of old standbys — Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, and so on. One day, they had on the program, "Symphony no. 1, by Schnittlie," who turned out to be a Russian composer. This was its premiere performance in the United States, and Schnittlie himself was in the audience. They started off with something traditional — Handel, maybe. Then the conductor raised his baton for the beginning of Symphony no. 1.

What followed, as one reviewer noted the next day, had only happened once before in the Boston Symphony Orchestra Hall, when Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" had premiered some 50 years earlier. As wave after wave of unadulterated Russian angst poured out of the orchestra, wave after wave of horrified Bostonians fled the hall for the safety of their cars.

This was no traditional piece, of course. At one point, the entire percussion section went on strike, and held up picket signs. And the cacophony was rather intense.

By the end of the piece, maybe 50 Bostonians remained; Brian and his wife were among them. They gave the orchestra and Schnittlie a standing ovation — Brian not so much for the piece itself, but for the effect it had had on the Boston cognoscenti.

*[By this point, the shrinking picture had given way entirely to the turning kaleidoscope, centered on a pulsing white light in the middle.]*

But now think about “The Rite of Spring.” The cacophony was just as intense for those first listeners, but today it is an accepted part of the standard symphony repertoire, and we have learned to appreciate the dissonance. And why? Because Shostakovich used his dissonance with integrity. And once we understood it, it added an intensity it could not have had otherwise.

When we put violence in our games, do we use integrity? It’s useless, if we have no justification for it.

*[Here, the kaleidoscope itself disappeared, leaving only the pulsing white light in the middle of the screen.]*

Those who criticize violence in computer games don’t really know what all that exposure to screen violence will do to people. But we don’t know either! There simply isn’t evidence that clearly shows the effects. But all multiplayer games are lessons in how to get along. And therefore, we must use violence with integrity.

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## Chris Crawford: Demi-languages for non-techies

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Many of us know or have heard of Chris Crawford; for the past six years of his life, he’s been working on the “Erasmatron,” a designing engine used to create interactive worlds filled with people who interact on a much higher level than most games. Although I personally have not been able to get his Erasmatron to work on my Mac, a recent review of ‘Shattertown Sky’ in XYZZYnews (*see issue #14*) was, shall we say, less than favorable. I heard him talking to someone before his talk, and he said (of the Erasmatron), “Well, we’ve sold three units...” Shattertown Sky, while an interesting experiment, does not seem to be bringing in the customers, at least not yet. But for all that, he has an amazing amount of material on his Web site (<http://www.erasmatazz.com/>), much of it insightful. It seems clear to me that if he wants to sell the Erasmatron in high quantities, he’ll need a much better gaming environment than he has now. And he is, indeed, working on such a beast, based on Arthurian legends (so Whizzard better get “Avalon” out soon ;-)) which might fit the bill.

But enough of that. What he talked to us about didn’t quite fit with my concept of “game design,” which was what this track was supposed to be about, but it was, nonetheless, interesting.

His philosophy seems to be that if you want to create games which are also works of art, you will need to create a bridge between the “two cultures” — the science/engineering folk, and the arts/humanities folk. To illustrate this point, he said, “If I say, ‘The ides of March are upon us!’ what do you say?” There were scattered

replies of “Uh, Julius Caesar?” He shook his head sadly, grinned, and said, “’Aye, Caesar, but not gone.” Hmmmm.

These two cultures, he says, have been wed in shotgun marriages between Hollywood and Silicon Valley, with less-than-stellar results. What he proposes is a new way of looking at programming languages, one that abandons the whole sense of being general purpose, and which “tricycle-izes” the language — makes it into a toy. That’s what he’s done with the Erasmatron, and that’s what he told us we could do, too.

What follows are the specific points he told us about what his language did to make it more accessible to artists.

- No data typing. There’s no generic data for the user to type — they get numbers, then specific things to work with (like “actors” and “rooms”).
- No compound data structures. I took no notes on this, maybe because I don’t know what compound data structures are in the first place.
- No looping or branching (!). Well, this is only partially true. There are structures in the language that loop and branch, but the user doesn’t have to know this. There are built-in functions like “Pick the best actor that \_\_\_\_\_” that loop, and there is a “script” that branches, but the concepts are opaque to the artist.
- No subroutines. None that the artist can program or get to, at any rate.
- A New Lingo. Instead of using the phrase “the array of characters,” the program has a “cast.” Instead of a “database,” it has a “history book.” These terms make the artist more comfortable with what they’re working on.
- A “break with tradition.” Why do we compile things? Because we used to take punch cards down to the librarian, who would feed them into the computer later. But there’s no need to do this; the Erasmatron “compiles” continuously, since we have plenty fast-enough computers.
- An intuitive interface. It’s impossible in the Erasmatron to get syntax errors — it’s all done with mouse clicks. Chunks of code are clicked on and copied over to where they need to go by the programmer, and come with default arguments. If something is “unspecified,” it gets a special screen syntax — it’s underlined; the only thing on the screen that looks like that.
- No acronyms. Spell everything out; you’ve got the space.
- Use type styles, fonts, sizes, etc. to communicate. Underlining has already been mentioned; other things are true here, too, like coloring actors’ names one color and “events” another. Sound is also used in certain special instances.

- Sniffers, scanners, and testers replace the standard debugger. These routines are running all the time to check for errors. In the “rehearsal,” run-time errors are avoided by “poisoning” invalid choices, but the programmer is notified what happened. Should a player come across an invalid choice, they would never see it.

So there you have it: how to make your own Erasmatron in 12 easy steps. It’s certainly an interesting idea, but I remain unconvinced. Frankly, I don’t see anything in there that couldn’t today be replaced by a team of two — one programmer and one “artist.” In fact, that’s what *is* happening in the industry right now. With that, too, you get the advantage of being able to change the “default” behavior, which you simply can’t do with the Erasmatron. (Well, not unless you’re Chris Crawford.) While I applaud the effort to “chunk” certain aspects of programming, I still think there should be a way to get at the lower levels of the language if need be. Inform, frankly, is an excellent example, and I believe TADS to be, too. You can program in Inform all your life and never need to put in “Tetris,” but it’s still there if you need it. There are precedents for forcing one’s creativity down tightly-constrained channels (the symphony and the sonnet being two good examples of this), but eventually you’ll need to break the conventions if you’re to come across a Beethoven. And the Erasmatron makes no allowances for these types.

But I’d be happy to be proved wrong.

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## Jim Dunnigan: ‘What Computer Game Designers Forgot’

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Many years ago Jim Dunnigan founded SPI, a war-gaming company that was extremely popular in its heyday. I believe he now works for a computer gaming company, while collaborating with the military on war games on the side. I missed the first part of his talk, since that was when I finally cornered Brian Moriarty and got him to sign my Trinity map, so I’ll start with a few things he said that I jotted down as I was getting into the swing of his talk.

- “Games have about the half-life of snow.”
- Wargames are a niche market.
- The next pattern: the game as a movie.
- Non-violent games have a bigger potential market.
- Interest vs. fun
- A formula isn’t enough.

At this point, Jim started talking about ‘Rapid Application Development’. This means you churn out a bunch of game prototypes and follow up on the ones that go over well. At SPI they had a monthly magazine, part of which was a new war game. This meant they had to come up with new concepts on a regular basis! Jim was able to put together a game in a day, and had to a few times when someone else backed out at the last minute, and a deadline loomed. He told us not to use the Hollywood model — we’re forgetting the game part. We have to keep people entertained within the interactivity.

As part of the Rapid Application Development rubric, we shouldn't be afraid to steal ideas. At SPI, they had a big Sears' catalog-type book in which were compiled the various rules they had developed for all their games. So there was a section on movement, a section on terrain types, a section on conflict resolution, and so on. So, if someone was having trouble coming up with interesting movement patterns, all they had to do was flip to the appropriate section of the book.

We should also do extensive analysis of all our projects — especially the failures, if only so we don't repeat the same mistakes the next time around.

Jim listed some possible areas the industry hasn't explored yet, which do well in the book market: historical detective novels, historical romances, and soap operas. And another piece of advice: don't put all your eggs in one basket — develop those prototypes, and go from there. Try to avoid the Hollywood model, which is driven by fear.

Based on Jim's talk about Rapid Application Development, I have a great job opportunity for all you IF programmers out there. Find a likely game company (remember, new ones start up all the time) and convince someone that your skills would be perfect for game development. With the ability to quickly and easily develop a game or two in all text, massive amounts of time and money won't need to be spent on graphics in the create/test/refine cycle that most adventure games need to go through. Or, if adventure games *don't* go through such a cycle (and certainly some games out there seem like it), convince them how much better their games will be if they can be easily tested at first! Tell 'em Jim Dunnigan sent you.

FYI, Jim Dunnigan has his book, "The Complete Wargames Handbook" online at <http://www.hyw.com/Books/WargamesHandbook/Contents.htm> Chapter 5, "The History of Wargames" includes a fascinating section on the history of SPI.

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## Personal: Conversation with Brian Moriarty

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Since I knew Brian Moriarty was going to be at the conference, I came prepared — I brought my Trinity map (from the LTOI II packaging, unfortunately — I never had the original) and a certificate I had designed for him to sign as a prize for the IF Competition (<http://www.bioc.rice.edu/~lpsmith/ruby.jpg>). I was way nervous, and I might have chickened out had I not brought the certificate with me. After all, I couldn't deny someone *else* his signature! So, after stalling through lunch and then losing him afterwards, I jumped at the opportunity to corner him when I saw him later, fearing he would disappear completely if I lost him again.

Brian was... grumpy. There's really no better adjective for it. When I told him I wrote text adventures, he said without hesitation, "I'm sorry." He grumped about Cornerstone, he grumped about adventure games today, he grumped about the low quality of my LTOI map. (I am now the proud owner of a brown map saying "There are better maps! —Brian Moriarty") Still, underneath the grumpiness was

a great deal of kindness. He offered to mail me a “real” copy of the map, and took my name and address. And, sure enough, a few weeks later, I received a package from him in the mail. He hadn’t been able to find any individual copies of the Trinity map, but, by way of compensation, he sent the original maps from Wishbringer and Beyond Zork instead, both signed. Do you see me complaining? No, you do not.

Brian wasn’t much of a conversationalist, and neither was I, but fortunately there was someone else there to whom I am eternally indebted, who kept the conversation up and going. A few of the topics that came up:

- Had Infocom kept going, one thing Brian would have wanted to see improve was the parser. As good as it got, it could never pass the “Here, sit down and type something,” test.
- Another dream of Brian’s was the all-sound game. He doesn’t believe that even now the technology exists to create it, though. One problem he sees is that if you’re physically sitting in front of the computer, there’s a big monitor staring at you, and you simply can’t have it black — there’s too much expectation built up around it for that to work commercially.
- He firmly believes that Cornerstone killed Infocom. The games were still selling, but Cornerstone lost so much money that the company as a whole could no longer support itself.
- As Infocom was being dismantled, some scavenging went on. Details omitted to protect the guilty ;-)

Brian now works at Mpath Interactive (<http://www.mpath.com>), and although he didn’t talk specifically about any particular projects he was working on, I’ve since discovered that he was Dani Bunten Berry’s boss before she passed away recently. (Brian has set up a Web page memorial for her at <http://www.mpath.com/dani/>) She had been working on updating her classic game Modem Wars to be playable over the Internet; I presume this project is still underway. Overall, I found Brian to be a fascinating character, and was glad I was able to meet him.

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## For more info...

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In addition to the URLs provided in this article, you may want to check out the IGDN Web site at <http://www.igdn.com/>. There you’ll be able to find information about upcoming IGDN events in Los Angeles, Dallas, and San Francisco. It looks like I’ll be able to go to the Dallas event this year, too, so expect another report from me around November or so! ☘



# Spider and Web

release 4

Parser: Inform

Author: Andrew Plotkin (erkyrath@netcom.com)

Requires: Inform run-time interpreter

URL: ftp://ftp.gmd.de/if-archive/games/  
infocom/Tangle.z5

Response to the XYZZY command: "That's not a verb I recognize."

Intrigue. Spy versus spy. Secret hiding places and surprise endings.

If you can figure out how to get to them, that is.

Andrew Plotkin's "Spider and Web" has a bang-up beginning sequence, an interesting give-and-take format with a major NPC, and an intriguing story-within-a-story plot that can't be described well without spoiling the surprise—but ultimately, I was frustrated by the lack of straightforward playability in this game.

While the game's turning point has a wonderful "Aha!" quality to it, it's a point that I never would have gotten to without relying heavily on a walkthrough solution. And although the descriptions are expansive, the characters' dialogue believable, and the plot is richly complex, I was left feeling that I could have done without some of these features if only I could have really *played* more of the game for real, without outside intervention.

The game's beginning does a great job of drawing the player into character — and helping to solve the initial puzzles for you. Your character is a spy who has slipped unseen into an enemy headquarters. As the game's opening unfolds, you discover that you've been caught, and the moves you make are being recounted, in a sense, for an interrogator who demands the details of your break-in. Although you, the player, are seeing these rooms and puzzles for the first time, within the game's narrative the interrogator seems to await your description of how you overcame certain obstacles — even if you have no idea yet how you might have done so. If you take a false step, the interrogator may interrupt you with a crisp counterpoint on why that move wouldn't be feasible, then warn you not to try to deceive him — although at this point you're probably just curious to know how to solve the problem that he wants you to confirm you've solved. The interrogator also manages to

offer many hints on certain steps that you should or shouldn't take before proceeding, which is impressively interwoven into the NPC's dialogue without appearing too obvious.

As the gameplay progresses, you acquire objects that may help you later, play cat-and-mouse with a series of guards, and — probably — spend an inordinate amount of time learning (or trying to learn) to operate a toolcase filled with devices that may be used in conjunction with one another to bypass alarms or get you out of a jam.

You may find, as I did, that the initial novelty of conversing with the interrogator quickly wears off. Your character's responses — no matter whether to a pointed question or a long-winded, half-rhetorical monologue — are limited to "yes" or "no." Although it surely would have been a programming nightmare to account for a larger vocabulary, it strains credulity to see the impassioned speeches the interrogator gives in response, so to speak, to your barely maintained half of the conversation.

I enjoyed the aspect of trying to figure out what my character was supposed to do, given that a certain amount of activity was already assumed to be a foregone conclusion. Your exact mission is trickier to determine as you near the end of the game. Once you enter the enemy laboratory proper, you can either seize the secret papers and destroy them on the spot, or take them with you as you make good your escape. Why dying is a certain failure, you can also wind up with an ending where you "fail to make a difference" — namely, by failing to acquire the secret papers and doing something with them. No points are awarded in this game for solving puzzles.

At one point, your character's survival depends on split-second timing as you need to enter rooms and get out successfully. Saving your game every few moves is the safest way to navigate this dangerous section, but playing too safe throughout the game isn't recommended; you could wind up missing out on important events that move the plot along and will help the story make better sense.

Much of the game's cleverness is best enjoyed after you've experienced the plot's major twist — and which, again, I think is next-to-impossible without outside help — and you realize the significance of text that was puzzling the first time it appeared. While enjoyable after the fact, its prose and clever set-up made for good reading but not, ultimately, for a very satisfying game-playing experience. ☒

—Gillian Pilau

*Below are some new queries I've received recently from readers looking for hard-to-find games, or who are in need of specific help. If you can help answer any of these requests, please don't be shy about chiming in with an answer! — EM*

Dear XZZZYnews,

Do you have any information on how to complete Microsoft Adventure once you have all the treasures and you must exit through the Main Office? I have never been able to find the Main Office. I always end up in the Repository and cannot escape.

Any information would be greatly appreciated.

—Daniel  
rhodan@tir.com

Do you know of any site where an old text adventure called "The Witness" can be downloaded? I think it was an Infocom game. Thank you in advance.

—Andrew Shea  
asshea@ibm.net

I am looking for an old Infocom Mac game called: "Quarterstaff: Tomb of Setmoth," can you point me in the right direction?

—Josh Jay  
josh@ionstorm.com

Wondering if you could help me track down a game I played as a kid... and never finished, of course. I remember only a few things about the game: it involves vampires; it takes place in a castle; mail arrived at various points during the

game; the player needed, at one point, to keep a vial of blood in her/his pocket when s/he went to sleep to buy an extra night in the castle (vampires drank the vial blood instead of biting the player).

I know that's sketchy, but it's all I remember! Thanks for your time.

—Kieran  
gypsyck@ultranet.com

I'm looking for a computer game that is like Dragon Lord for the old Nintendo or Shining Force for Sega. You know the type where you start out a small guy then set out on a quest, kill bad guys, get money buy bigger weapons and armor then kill bigger bad guys and find more money. Then repeat. I prefer low graphics simple cause they go faster and don't take up so much valuable memory. If you can help me or know any one who can then please let me know.

—Mike  
shido@earthlink.net

I'm looking for a *simple* adventure maker for Windows. Thanks.

—Henrik  
HP@sw Hamm.de

Thanks for the great reading material!

I'm really stuck in The Meteor, The Stone, and a Long Glass of Sherbet. If I had Internet access I could look it up, but my days as a student are gone and I thought maybe you could pass my question along to someone who knows (if you don't): How do I get back up from the inverted cedar tree to the ledge? The game's built-in hints imply

that this is possible (and necessary), but I can't seem to come up with the solution. Is there an alternate route I'm not finding? Is there a way to use the rope for that? I tried throwing it over the roots of the tree (which seemed logical), but the game gives back a stock message to the effect that you can't throw it over that. The rope is long enough to reach across, but there's nothing to tie it to before jumping. What am I missing?

OBTW, if I wanted to obtain a legal copy of, for example, the Zork trilogy or Enchanter,, or, for that matter, all of LTOI, how would I go about finding such a thing in an area where the software sold in all the stores is either by Micro\$oft or is a multimedia CD-ROM (either a plotless game that came out last week or some hokey educational or business software nobody needs or wants?) Is there some way I can mail-order any of the old greats at something like a reasonable price? what chains (present in Ohio) would be most likely to carry something like that?

—Nathan Eady

Hello. I just discovered your site and am excited that there are still those who love the best games ever made. I'm in search of a game that I had for my old Apple //e around 1984 or so: Thomas M. Dischs' Amnesia. It came on 4 disks — very big text adventure for its time.

I hope that a PC-compatible version is available somewhere. Any help is appreciated. Thanks.

—Dorian McCann  
Dorian\_McCann@compusa.com