InsideADRIFT

Issue 11	November 2003

Contents

Issue Details

November 2003 edited by KF

Issue 11   (Volume 2 no 2)

Next issue out on 29th Nov 2003

Includes an interview with Roger Firth of "Cloak of Darkness Fame".

News and announcements

Campbell's back and working on ADRIFT

After his marriage last month, Campbell has returned to us and set to work on trying to squash the bugs. With assistance, primarily of Mystery and tech, ADRIFT 4.0 release 42 went into the start of a rigorous beta testing process at the end of September. Campbell decided to free release 42 for us on the 7th October 2003 with a host of bug fixes listed in the release notes. So far the signs are good that this release has sorted some of the issues that had blighted release 41.

It was proposed that a testing game should be produced that would be designed to run through as many ADRIFT features as possible. This would allow for a quick standardized checking procedure, but there will still be a need for testing old games for compatibility as well as testing that no glitches have been introduced to the authoring of new games.

(Release notes are on page 7 of this newsletter)

Hanadorobou releases his final ADRIFT game

The good news is that Hana has released a new game "Three monkeys one cage" a science fiction multiple puzzle game. The bad news is that he also announced that it will be his final work produced with ADRIFT.

This is a sad occurrence for all have the interests of ADRIFT at heart, Hanadorobou having produced, "The PK Girl", the highest ever placed ADRIFT game in the Annual Interactive Fiction Competion.

It has been unfortunate to see his disillusionment growing with ADRIFT as things as his work was frustrated by some of the bugs that caused so many problems. The hope is that we will all be encouraged to go that extra mile with our games to make them of a standard to be acclaimed outside of our group. Good luck Hanadorobou, we all wish you well in whatever projects you work on in the future, hope TADS2 allows you to accomplish all that you wish to.

Editorial

Computers, don't you love 'em!

On the evening after I uploaded the last newsletter, my PC decided to fall over rather heavily and I have lost a fair bit of data. Then I turned on my laptop, which I hadn't used for a while, went online and had a little case of a virus.

Ten hours later I got rid of the infestation and am now writing this on the laptop. The other machine is working well enough for me to get a bit of data off it.

Hopefully you have all tried my ADRIFT version of the newsletter that I put up last month. It was an interesting experiment moving the text into the different format, but did it work? Judging from the responses I have seen it probably isn't something worth pursuing.

Contact

Send any suggestions, requests or comments concerning InsideADRIFT to editor@insideadrift.org.uk

Find the newsletter at:

http://www.insideadrift.org.uk/

Drifters birthdays

November

2 tsm_paul (27)
4 Lannly (19)
7 quantumdaimon (24)
11 Malym (35)
15 CJCole (33)
22 AgapeIncognito (30)
25 DuoDave (37)
27 Cowboy (47); Kel-nage (16);
**   qkara (24); desilets (57)**

Campbell Wild also thanked Hanadorobou on the forum for all of his bug reports and suggestions and said "it will be a great shame to lose you to this community".

With the fact that DuoDave and The Amazing Poodle Boy have started to direct their efforts towards other IF systems, there must be concern that we are losing some of our most skilled authors. As if to confirm this rather negative view, Marno has also announced that he's moving across to TADS2 because of the problems he has hit in developing an ADRIFT game.

ADRIFT Facts and Figures

DavidW, continuing his attempts at providing a hugely informative site, has now published a detailed breakdown of ADRIFT game statistics on his website. He has listed all the ADRIFT games he has found (well over 100) broken down in order of the filesize, and also number of rooms, objects and tasks.

It is one of those incredible works where you wonder why anyone would waste their time doing it, but you then spend time looking through it. The statistics were apparently put together from the information available via the jAsea Java runner. Already included are the games from the Third ADRIFT One-Hour Competition. The pages can be accessed via http://www.shadowvault.net/facts.html

Competition news roundup

In the ADRIFT world the autumn has come through with a couple of unheralded competitions to help us pass the time.

The ADRIFT End of Year Competition 2003 is still in limbo as it doesn't get under way for a while. I have posted to the forum for expressions of interest to enter and, although the response hasn't been overwhelming, there have been intentions to enter from DavidW, Woodfish and the Amazing Poodle Boy. Mad Monk and Mel S are hopeful. Sadly Mystery's house move makes her an unlikely entrant.(http://www.kfadrift.org.uk/comp_win_03.html)

Third ADRIFT One-Hour Game Competition was announced on 9th October by Woodfish, much to my surprise! It was one of those competitions where you have one hour (on your honour) to write the game.

For those with a sense of the historic, a game escaped from my hard disc and into the competition. There were a total of 13 entries including an amazing 3 from Davidw. Judging began on 17th October. (Full details were announced on the forum http://www.adrift.org.uk/cgi/lb/ikonboard.cgi?s=3f8914273275ffff;act=ST;f=1;t=2211)

InsideADRIFT Awards

As I announced in the last newsletter, at the end of this year Drifters will get the chance to vote for their favourites in a number of ADRIFT categories.
This really will only work if people bother to join in. Awards will be useless if there are only five votes.

Awards timetable

Initial – opened a thread launching this and asking people to put forward their ideas for categories.
Current - announced the categories that being contested (see below) and asked for nominations, one thread per category.
30 November – the 3 top nominations in each category will be announced (trying to remove the dafter attempts to rig the vote).
6 December - The voting period starts.
31 December – voting ends.
4 January 2004 - The award winners, along with the winner of the ADRIFT End of Year Competition, which will be game of the year, will then be announced. There will be an online ceremony, probably on the MSN ADRIFT group chat.
Due to the international nature of our group, I will post on the forum asking people to select from three possible time spans for the ceremony.

ADRIFT Halloween Minicomp 2003 has sadly now been abandoned by DavidW as he feels, probably correctly, that the Third ADRIFT One-Hour Competition had stolen it's thunder and reduced the need for it. I am sorry to see this competition fail to take off as it was a good idea, I would certainly propose we keep it in the future.

The Annual Interactive fiction competition is at the judging phase, where the authors find out if their hard work is appreciated by the great unwashed masses out there.

The 2003 IF Competition is now into the final stages of the judging period. Rather disappointingly all of the intentions to enter have resulted in just 30 actual entries to the competition. Even sadder is that there is just one ADRIFT game entered, "Sophie's Adventure" by David Whyld (DavidW).

All votes must be in by 15th November. All timings are set to 11:59 Eastern Standard Time on the stated days. All the details are at http://www.ifcomp.org/comp03/

Italian One Room Competition is still taking place

http://www.avventuretestuali.com/One_Room_Comp/ORGC2003/Orgc2003_eng.htm

Forum news

New forum rules posted Mystery has adapted a new set of forum rules to give a bit more guidance as to what is acceptable behaviour. The aim is to discourage some of the more antisocial things that happen on the forum, including personal attacks on others. This will hopefully guide us towards being a more welcoming group when others come visiting the forum.

There has been some discussion over the initial banning of the word newbie, as it is sometimes considered derogatory, and now states there should be "no newbie bashing". Rather embarrassingly it was pointed out that the forum itself describes new users as newbies.

InsideADRIFT Awards nominations requested

Following last months request for ideas for categories for the Awards the decision was that my initial ideas were fine, so I have now posted up the categories in a thread each for Drifters to decide who they want to put to the final vote. The idea is that there will be three nominees to choose from in the December voting. More details of the Awards are on page 3 of this newsletter.

Drifters Toolbox: XnView

Events Diary

October 24, 2003

DavidW's ADRIFT Halloween Minicomp 2003 - entries in

~~ADRIFT Halloween Minicomp 2003 has been announced by DavidW to fill in all those spare hours we all have in the autumn. The competition is limit to games with 20 or fewer rooms and unsurprisingly it has to be on a Halloween theme, though there is a bit of debate as to what this needs to be. Entries need to be in by 24 October, with the judging completed by midnight on 31 October. Full details are posted on the forum in the Halloween Comp thread.~~ CANCELLED

October 25, 2003

InsideADRIFT Issue 11 out today

The November issue of the ADRIFT newsletter is due out today. **(Hopefully as you are reading it!)**

October 31, 2003

DavidW's ADRIFT Halloween Minicomp - judging ends

 CANCELLED

November 15, 2003

2003 Interactive Fiction Competition

All votes must be submitted by the end of the day.

November 29, 2003

InsideADRIFT Issue 12 out today

The December Issue of the ADRIFT newsletter is out today. This is the last one to be issued in 2003.

December 21, 2003

ADRIFT End of Year competition 2003: entries in and judging starts

This is a competition for any game made using the Adrift Interactive Fiction Creation System that was released during the calendar year 2003.
The entries must be sent to

Thought I'd this month go for a small graphics program that I have been using for a number of years. XnView is a utility for viewing and converting graphic files. At it's simplest it is a great image browser, but the ability to manipulate images and save them in a different format is a boon for making the best use of your graphics. A bonus for those for whom English and French aren't their mother tongue is that XnView gives you a choice of over forty languages.
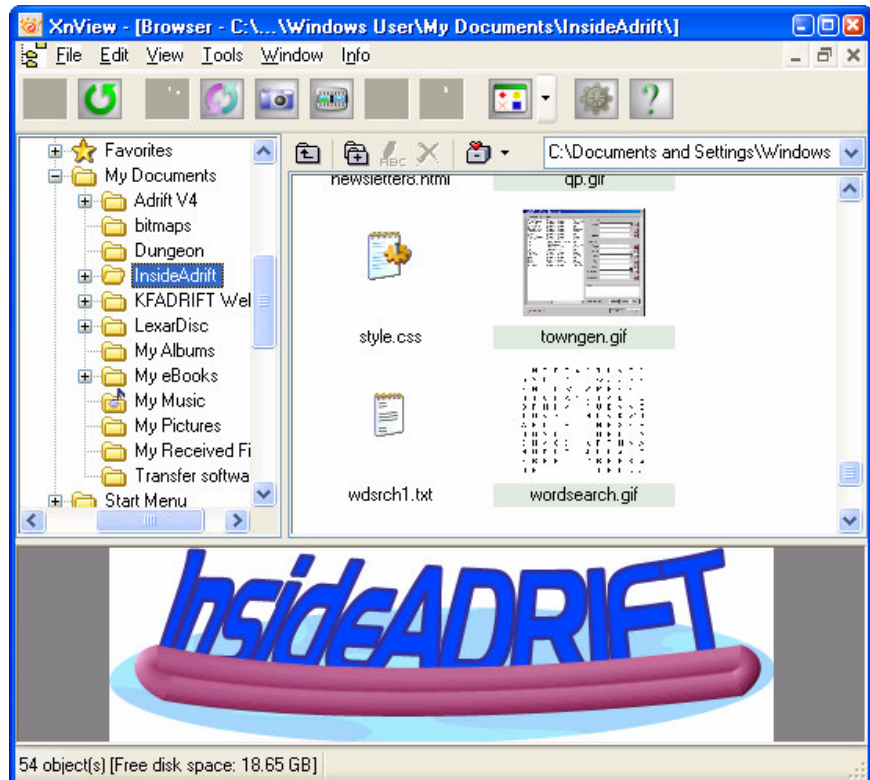
Although it can simply be used as a way of looking at images it also has the ability to make slide shows or create web pages of thumbnails. I am probably doing it a disservice by missing out some other major feature, so I'll leave you with the list of features from the website (http://www.xnview.com)

It has the following feature list:
Import about 400 graphic file formats
Export about 40 graphic file formats
Multipage TIFF, Animated GIF, Animated ICO support
Resize
Copy/Cut/Crop
Adjust brigthness, contrast...
Modify number of colors
Apply filters (blur, average, emboss, ...)
Apply effects (lens, wave, ...)
Fullscreen mode
Slide show
Picture browser

competition@kfadrift.org.uk, arriving no later than 15:00hrs GMT on Sunday 21 December 2003. I will then try and get everything together for judging to commence that evening.

January 04, 2004

ADRIFT End of Year Competition 2003 Judging ends

Judging ends today, with marks to reach KF by 15:00hrs GMT on Sunday 4 January 2003.

January 10, 2004

InsideADRIFT Issue 13 due out today

The January/February issue of the ADRIFT newsletter should be out today.

February 28, 2004

InsideADRIFT Issue 14 due out

The March issue of the ADRIFT newsletter should be available today.

April 18, 2004

ADRIFT Spring Competition 2004: entries due in

This is a competition for new ADRIFT games, there is no limit on the game size except that it should be less than 400kb OR if larger it should be hosted elsewhere and a link supplied. More details will be posted later. Judging will take place in the 2 week period to 2 May 2004.

May 02, 2004

ADRIFT Spring Competition 2004: judging ends and results

Batch convert
Thumbnail create
Screen capture
Contact Sheet create
Multi-page file create (TIFF, DCX, LDF)
TWAIN support (Windows only)
Print support (Windows only)
Drag & Drop support (Windows only)
44 languages support (Windows only)
And many many other things...

XnView is provided as **FREEWARE** for private non-commercial or educational use (including non-profit organization)

Think piece by DavidW

"The Great Dry Patch Of ADRIFT"

A funny thing occurred to me when I happened to glance at the main ADRIFT downloads page the other day. I thought: "hey! There's a lot of games here written in 2003. And there I was thinking that no one wrote games anymore!"

And indeed, it seemed at first that there *were* a lot of games on the downloads page for 2003: 26 in total. A pretty decent amount for a community the size of ADRIFT, particularly in light of the fact that the IFComp 2003 – from a community numbering in the thousands - garnered just 30 entries.

But then I took a closer look at the games and noted that the bulk of them were mini-games. 16, in fact, of the 26 turned out to be mini-games written for one competition or another and of the remaining 10 a couple – "Lara Croft & The Sun Obelisk" and "The Woods Are Dark" – had been released previously (though the former title in a considerably different version). The actual total of new full-sized ADRIFT games released in 2003 was 8, which was actually the sole output of a mere 5 writers: 3 for myself, 2 for Mel S, 1 for J J Guest, Syke39 and Driftingon apiece. This all worked out at slightly less than 1 game per month. Not an especially impressive showing considering how easy to use ADRIFT is and how many people there are registered on the forum.

Why so many people yet so few games?

Reason 1 – "I'm waiting for a stable version of ADRIFT" or "I'm waiting for the bugs to be ironed out"

I've heard this stated as a reason quite a few times. From various bug reports by various ADRIFT members posted over the last year or so, you might be forgiven for thinking that the latest release of ADRIFT is so completely full of bugs that it crashes

The (big) idea

Testing is good

OK, that may not exactly be news, but many do not take testing seriously.

A game that starts off with a string of spelling mistakes will not get you much of an audience, and if you have errors in objects or commands your game may be unplayable.

That doesn't mean spelling is the only problem, guess the verb is probably the main irritation for players. The author can play test all they like, but a tester may have a completely different idea of what to do with an object!

As was discussed with playing the IF Comp games, most players will give up a game in 10-15 minutes if it doesn't appeal to them. Testing can make the difference so don't be afraid to ask for **and act on** advice from testers. Losing out because the player is stuck in room one is a waste of your time writing the game, and testing will only improve a game.

every time you touch the keyboard. Or maybe it's even worse than that. Yep, maybe ADRIFT is so buggy these days that the mere "thought" of writing a game with it is enough to get it to crash.

Or maybe, just maybe – and here I'm going out on a limb just a little teensy weensy bit – it's got a few bugs that aren't really anything disastrous and 99% of them can be avoided with a little bit of effort.

Part of me suspects the latter of these might actually be the truth. Granted, there *are* bugs with the latest release of ADRIFT but the majority of these are fairly minor and you could write an entire game without coming across a single one. I know. I have done.

Every system will always have a certain amount of bugs no matter how carefully it's tested but I've never yet come across a bug that I wasn't able to avoid by saving my game files under different names and, above all, being *careful*.

Try it and see. If you press a key and your computer explodes as a result of this I'll admit I was wrong.

Reason 2 – "I'm a perfectionist. I won't release the game I've spent 10 hours a day working on for the past 16 years until I'm at least 101% happy with it."

In which case you're never likely to finish a game.

While we all like to have games that are brilliantly well written, have intricate and thoughtful puzzles, a storyline better than anything Shakespeare could come up with and the kind of amazing plot twists that people are going to miss the new Matrix film just to stay home and discuss – there isn't, at the end of the day, any reason to be *that* much of a perfectionist. People aren't going to play a game and then automatically give up because partway down the 84th page of text you've missed out a comma, or shortly after they've been playing for 18 solid hours you introduce a new character who isn't entirely believable, or that puzzle you just used didn't *quite* have the spark of originality that will have people remembering it a hundred years from now.

If such people exist, forget them. They have impossibly high standards and nothing you ever do will satisfy them.

Perfection is overrated, in my humble opinion. Sure, no one wants to play a bugged game or one with a storyline they've come across half a dozen times before. But not everyone is looking for perfection. Some people just want to play a game.

And then there's the fact that, perfectionist though you might like to think you are, if you spend hours working on a game then it

ADRIFT 4.0 Release 42

Bug Fixes

- Control Panel collapses and expands to correct size if window bars non-standard
- 'Get all' doesn't try to take objects from within others if not explicit
- 'empty' on it's own doesn't crash Runner
- 'I are' grammar error corrected when nothing to drop in 1st Person
- Control Panel doesn't crash Runner when movement restrictions are based on object state
- Deleting objects updates Player starting object correctly
- Modules: Move all held objects to Hidden now imports
- Events not running problem sorted when tasks run
- No assumption to take objects before putting if task overrides
- Task failing restrictions override putting and dropping
- Removed redundant output when task overrides put if object not understood
- Put command requires reference to an object to put it on
- Incomplete Put command doesn't crash Runner
- Removed ambiguity comments when not required
- 'Message if task tried again' overwrites general tasks
- Tasks can override dropping when the object is static
- Response for taking static objects reverted to what it used to be
- Cannot hit with static objects
- Better ambiguity handling for default responses
- Proper output when trying to take objects worn by characters
- Shortcut to change colour changed from Ctrl-C to Ctrl-A in NBTW

should be released. Did you spend all those weeks struggling with it only to consign it to your dusty hard drive and never let it see the light of day again? Are you happy that no one will ever see your game beside yourself? Don't you want recognition for your hard work?

There's also the fact that the longer you work trying to make a game perfect, the less perfect it will become. No one is ever going to write the perfect game and no matter how good your finished project is, there will *always* be room for improvement. So what do you do – go back to the game once it's finished and rewrite it a dozen times till you're happy with it? Or just release it?

Release it.

Reason 3 – "I'm worried by what people will think of my game"

So what's the best way to handle this – don't release your game at all, no matter how much work you've put into it? Or go ahead and release it and *see* what people think about it?

Option 2 wins out for me every time.

It goes without saying that no one wants to release a game that everyone is going to hate. What we want is to release a game and then have people fall over themselves telling you how amazing they thought it was, and years from now (a la "Photopia") people will *still* be talking about in awed whispers. Is that sort of thing going to happen to your game? Who knows? The only way to find out is to *release it*.

If you're unsure whether your game is good enough or not then have someone test it for you beforehand.

Reason 4 – "I don't have time to write a game"

How much time it does take to write a game? About the same as the length of a piece of string.

Writing games depends a lot on who is writing them: how much free time they have; how fast they write; whether they're happy to churn out the first thing that occurs to them or if they're more of the slow, thoughtful sort; how big the games they're going to write are; where they get their ideas from…

And so on.

Let's do a little maths. How big is a fair-sized game? Actually that question is about as easy to answer as the one with the piece of string but let's assume, for the sake of argument, that a fair-sized game is 20 KB (not included sound or graphics) under V4 of ADRIFT. Now, how long on average does it take to write 1 KB of

- Hidden routes on map properly hidden if map background coloured
- Versioning information stored properly in TAS files
- Restriction that variables must be compared to other variables now ok
- Removed ambiguity issues when opening/closing objects
- 'It' passed including prefixes, not just object name
- 'put all on X' now works
- Must have an object defined if you select start position in or on another
- Tab selects between Male & Female at prompt
- Spellchecking on task restriction box
- Static object locations properly reset between TAS restorations

game? It varies on the person writing the game but let's agree on an hour. So in your average month – working on the game once per day – you could write an entire 20 KB game without too much trouble at all. Then you spend the next month testing the game, playing it through to make sure you haven't made it unfinishable, ensuring that everything is nicely logical and pleasing.

So a 20 KB game from start to finish takes 2 months? Maybe some people write slower than others and so 3 months is closer to the mark, or maybe even 4 months. Agree on 4 months.

At the time of writing there are over 300 members on the ADRIFT forum. Let's go on the assumption that only a quarter of them actually care about writing a game (the total is probably far lower). If each of those 75 drifters wrote just 1 game every 4 months that would equate to 225 games per year – a sum greater than the entire total of ADRIFT games ever written.

Now, 225 seems like a fantastically high amount. Let's assume two thirds of them never get finished. That leaves 75 games. This year there have been 8 full size ADRIFT games released. What happened to the other 67?

Reason 5 – "I'm not sure *how* to write a game so I've never bothered"

Then ask! There's a whole forum-full of people eager and ready to help. If you have a question, ask it. If you're worried about coming across as a clueless newbie, don't be. Everyone was a clueless newbie at some point. And some still are. No one's going to bash the head in of some newbie just for asking a question that they *probably* should have known anyway.

The above is just a few of the reasons why people don't seem to write that many games. I'm sure there are many, many more.

Interview: Eric Mayer questioned by KF

Thank you for agreeing to answer a few questions for the

Failed game intros

Cannibal explains the background

Here's some blurb about the intro that might be of interest!
1918 was intended to be the third adventure I wrote. It was also to be pitched into the IF Comp 2003...but somehow, after months of thought and planning and very little writing, the game seemed to lack any depth and spark. The puzzles were almost non-existant and I am no fan of non-puzzle IF. If I want to read a story then I pick up a book. I prefer an adventure to feature elements of both and 1918 wasn't cutting it. The story was to unfold in three parts, with each part overlapping. The first part was set during 1918, where you had to escape the trenches and find refuge in nearby woods during a heavy German counter attack. Here, you stumble across dozens of slaughtered men but manage to save the lives of several of them. The second part was set to be in London, during the 1920s, where you are down on your luck, drinking and gambling and have to outwit a criminal gang. This would have lead you to the third part where you return to France, during the 1940s, working as an agent for British Intelligence and you find yourself back in the woods where you finally face to truth of that fateful night in 1918. The truth that it was you who had mistakenly opened fire on your own troops.
Cheers
Cannibal

This is the intro

France
1918
Outside St.Quentin
Another volley of shells slam into the trenches, hurling bodies, spraying flesh and blood. Nightmarish screams ring through your ears as you take cover. There are shouts from your commanding officers to make ready and prepare

newsletter. I thought that you could provide an insight into not "merely writing IF", but also into being a "proper" writer.

Q1. *Perhaps I could start by simply asking when you started out writing mystery stories., and to perhaps give a bit of background on yourself and the stories.*

I've always been writing something, but for a long time my fiction tended to be SF and fantasy. It also tended not to get published. Actually it had a spotless record of not getting published. So partially heeding some advice I'd once read, to the effect that ten years of rejection slips is nature's way of telling you you're not a writer, I concentrated on essays and articles, with which I had much better luck.

Mind you, I'd once had a nice rejection note from Ben Bova at Analog. I wasn't half bad. So when my good half teamed up with my better half, and co-author, Mary Reed, then I (we) finally sold something. Mary talked me into writing mysteries with her after we were married. She'd, on her own, sold to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, among other places, and that was where we published our first co-written short story, "The Obo Mystery" featuring our modern Mongolian detective, Dorj. This was a bit more than ten years ago.

I had read a lot of mysteries, from Sherlock Holmes to Simenon's Maigret series and John D. McDonald's Travis McGee, but didn't know much about the nuts and bolts of planting clues and so forth. Probably still don't! So I am always very careful, when asked about my writing, to specify that I am not exactly an "author" but a "co-author." At any rate, we are closing in on twenty published short stories now and have four novels in print.

Our novels are set in Constantinople, in the sixth century, a fascinating period when the classical, pagan world of ancient Rome was mutating into the Christian, medieval world. They feature John the Eunuch, Lord Chamberlain to Emperor Justinian; we had written about John in a series of short stories before the first novel appeared. Given the exotic setting and our liking for the fantastic, I think these verge on fantasy, or have some of the feel of fantasy, even though we research very thoroughly and insist on being accurate in our historical details. The most recent novel, which appeared in February from Poisoned Pen Press, is FOUR FOR A BOY. There's also a new story about John in Mike Ashley's collection The Mammoth Book of Roman Whodunits, from Constable & Robinson in the UK, with a US edition from Carroll & Graf out soon.

Q2. *You have made the move from the printed word to interactive fiction for some stories. How do you decide which is the more*

for the impending counter attack. The rain continues to pour down, soaking you to the bone. Knee deep in water, you wipe the mud and tears from your face and, as the artillery bombardment finally ceases, you peer over the top of the trench.

The night sky is burning...and beneath the orange glow and swirling relentless choke of smoke, there lays a rain streaked land, chaptered with devastating horrors, a brutal and hellish cesspit, the very soil ripped and carved asunder with miles of dug trenches and coils of barbed wire. Amongst the mire and the craters bodies are sprawled and broken in uniforms with colours and flags bloodied beyond recognition. There are severed limbs to be held up in glorious triumph and there are faces half chewed away by rats to be marked as great sacrifices for a few feet of rutted land...

German infantry pour across no man's land, yelling, screaming. Your gun jammed three days ago and you have no weapon with which to fight. Thunder booms and lightning shreds the rain soaked night as gunfire erupts from the British lines and the Kaiser's men are peppered and shredded. Explosions crack the night sky and the ground shudders beneath your feet as the enemy artillery opens fire once more. Wave upon wave of soldiers cross towards the trenches...

    ...you hear the cries to retreat... Shells continue to pound the British lines, screeching from the rain drenched sky, unfurling splintered agony and destruction, without pity, without remorse, tipping down from the burning heavens, bombardment upon bombardment, death upon death, hour upon hour. You lift yourself from the mud and the dirt. There is no one alive. There is no one left.

Fallen soldiers lie half submerged in murky water, dead from shrapnel wounds, dead from starvation,

suitable format and have you ever considered adapting your stories to IF.

As it happens I discovered IF at an inconvenient time, just as Mary and I were selling our first novel. My writing hobby suddenly became part of my paying work. I've been a freelance writer for almost a decade, doing mostly legal writing, articles for legal encyclopedias, and the like. Thus, to be a candidate for a game an idea has first to be simple enough to be a short game which I might have time to write, and must not be something that I should be writing for possible publication such as the next mystery novel. (That sounds like an ADRIFT restriction). That does leave open any SF and fantasy ideas I have because we've not sold anything in that field. Since I do like to write SF and fantasy If gives me a welcome opportunity to do so.

I think almost any idea could be suitable for IF, but you have to take a different approach. I have adapted some fiction to If. My first Alan game, my learning game, was a rather silly exploration of a murdered Roman senator's house and contained some of the descriptive elements used in our Byzantine stories. (It isn't on the Archive but can be downloaded from our home page) Then this summer I took an old ghost story, The Thorn, which had never found a home, cut it up into location descriptions, objects, dialogue, narrative, and plugged the bits into the Adrift generator. It produced a game very quickly, albeit not much of a game.

As if I didn't already know, the experience taught me that a game is much different from a story. Or should be. The writer has to cede some control to the player. That's tough to do sometimes, especially when, like me, you've spent so long learning how to get control of your stories! I have done games on rails and enjoyed some done by others, but I don't consider such games the ideal.

An aside here -- making a story into a game can expose flaws in the logic and motivation. In a story the author can order the protagonist to, say, go into the dark room alone, but in a game the player has to be motivated to want to order the protagonist to do it. If it seems like a silly idea, or there's no reason aside from advancing the author's desired plot, the player won't necessarily cooperate.

Stories with a strong visual element are good candidates for If because players will explore and examine things and read descriptions and that is easily programmed. In fact, after trying to teach myself to cut down on description and only give "telling" details I find it hard sometimes to engage in all the description of unimportant details If calls for. In If, of course, part of the game is discovering which details are important. I would some time like to

dead from disease.
You vomit, bringing up a paltry meal from days ago...
Narrow trenches, shrouded in heavy smoke, slash a broken land of filthy horrors. Around and inside, filling your mind and ripping at your soul, are the most ghastly and gut wrenching screams that you have ever endured.
You must escape from this madness, you must flee...
With No Man's Land to the east, you can head south, southeast, east or west through the trenches.

If you have an intro or just an idea you think Drifters might enjoy, why not send it in to InsideADRIFT.

write a game set in the world of Byzantium, just because I think, if nothing else, the descriptions of the world would be interesting. Sixth century Constantinople would be fun to explore.

Q3. *I remember your early ADRIFT game "Lost" which was going to be in the Spring 2001 Minicomp, and I thought might have won, until being hit by one of the earlier ADRIFT bugs. How frustrating was it when that error message popped up? Those interested can read a review at (http://brasslantern.org/reviews/text/loststark.html)*

I was so new to Adrift I wasn't surprised. Didn't know it was a bug. I figured I was bound to get something wrong and that was it! But I didn't want an unplayable game permanently available as part of a contest, which is why I withdrew it. Can't see it beating the entries by DuoDave or Heal Butcher.

Q4. *It is fair to say that you have a profile in the IF world away from ADRIFT. Having written an interesting article for Stephen Granade on "Easy' Interactive Fiction Languages: Languages for the Non- Programmer", which compares ALAN with ADRIFT, do you feel that we are still some way from a true beginners system that is still useful for experienced users?*

To be useful to both beginners and experienced users I would imagine an authoring system would have to feature a GUI that produced code which could be tweaked. I doubt many real programmers would want to use a system where you can't, if necessary, get at some code and I doubt that anyone could program a GUI that would allow the freedom and flexibility offered by coding. At some level the maze of menus and windows and check-off boxes become more complex than the code!

Quest does produce code, but personally I don't like the feel of either the GUI or the code (or the interpreter) and the system seems to suffer from the problem where using the GUI is as difficult as the coding would be. I understand Plugh, the GUI for Tads2, is still progressing though. A system that produced code could, I think, be useful even for an experienced programmer, by allowing the easy but time consuming bulk of a game to be laid out more quickly.

Something often overlooked in hard/easy discussions is that the "hard" authoring languages do a lot automatically. For example, all the attributes that come supplied. In Inform, writing that an object "has scenery" will automatically make it so it can't be taken and doesn't show up in the room description. Writing "has scenery" isn't necessarily harder than finding the appropriate menu to make something scenery and checking off a box.

So sometimes a GUI will just make "easy" the stuff that's already

"easy" in the "hard" systems while the really hard stuff -- well, I haven't been able to figure out Scurvey Sock Puppet's menu based conversation for Adrift any better than the menu based conversation system one for Inform!

This isn't to say Adrift isn't great for beginners (and some of us are permanent beginners) but I don't see it as being helpful to an experienced programmer. Mind you, it might be fun to use, because it is a different writing style. Now, my own ideal system naturally would be if Adrift spit out Alan code.

Q5. *I was looking at your "ADRIFT Games Recommendations" from 2002 on BrassLantern and was wondering if you have any more recent ADRIFT games that you have liked.?*

I don't manage to play everything and may have missed some good ones, but I thought J.J. Guest's TO HELL IN A HAMPER was a practically perfect little single puzzle game. It's not just a puzzle though, because the puzzle turns on the highly amusing character of Mr. Booby and his startlingly capacious overcoat. Then Tod Watson's UNRAVELING GOD took an on the rails approach, generally, yet used the game aspect to great effect to add an extra bit of reader involvement to an already thought-provoking story. I also enjoyed Cannibal's THE WOODS ARE DARK. Game play is simple, but enough to feel like a game and the story and descriptions are quite involving.

Q6. *So in conclusion I am going to ask the usual what are you currently working on question, be it IF or static fiction?*

Right now we're doing final revisions on the fifth John the Eunuch mystery, FIVE FOR SILVER, which will be published in spring 2004, meaning that it is probably time to start plotting SIX FOR GOLD. Aside from the mystery series I have mostly bits and pieces. Scraps of code in four different languages which are either abandoned learning exercises or the starts of games depending on how optimistic I'm feeling. I keep telling myself to stick to gradually piecing together a larger game, but whenever I return to my files after a few weeks, or months, I can't recall what I'd programmed or exactly what the code I wrote was supposed to do. It isn't just games that suffer this fate. I've been working on a modern day mystery novel for five years!

Thank you very much for your input, I am sure you will have provided readers with an interesting insight onto someone less tied in with ADRIFT.

Review by DavidW

Asylum by Mel S

Asylum begins with you waking (quite predictably) in an asylum. You have no memories of how you came to be there or even your own name, although a quick look around your room indicates you might well be called Mr Tanakian. Wander around the asylum itself and you'll encounter the other patients but it's clearly not a large place you're confined in as I only found three others besides myself.

Aslyum is a likeable enough game without ever really being anything special. It lacks the humour of Mel S' comedy games - The Evil Chicken Of Doom, Escape From Insanity and Dance Fever USA - and the ease of use of The Lost Mines but it has a kind of charm all the same. The conversation system is a nice idea although as it never seems to change and characters respond with the same default answer every time you speak to them it doesn't work that well.

Guess-the-verb strikes in a few places, most notably in the task involving trying to distract Leroy: a cord was plugged into the wall which I wasn't able to pull out yet I was able to unscrew - something that would never have occurred to me if I hadn't been carrying a screwdriver! There is no hints system in the game (always a bad thing) although an unintentional one helped me out a bit. Upon examining a pillow in one of the other rooms I was told it was empty unlike the one in my own room. This came as quite a surprise as I hasn't even examined the pillow in my own room at that stage!

One thing that is usually the bane of Mel S' games - the dreaded "use object on object" command - was mercifully absent here which made a refreshing change. Then again, as I spent most of the game wandering around with an item I was unable to find a single use for it maybe wasn't such a great thing. At least when an author uses a similar method for solving puzzles in every game you tend to expect that sort of thing and be ready for it. When he suddenly changes and different methods are used, it often becomes confusing figuring out what those methods are!

Progress is pretty difficult. I came across several points in the game where I was stuck and no matter what I tried it just didn't seem to work; obvious things like giving the cross to the guy called Jesus failed miserably. This isn't a big game so maybe the author figured that people wouldn't encounter too many problems with it and hints weren't necessary but I, for one, would have dearly loved a little guidance somewhere along the way.

Logic: 7 out of 10

Guess-the-verb with the cord was a long way from logical but

everything else in the game - at least that I've encountered so far - was nicely straightforward.

Problems: 6 out of 10 (10 = no problems)
Guess-the-verb reared its ugly head as well as the unintentional hint with the pillow.

Story: 4 out of 10
No background at all, and just a few short lines telling you the current situation. Admittedly, a game which begins with the player not knowing anything about himself would be pretty much ruined if it came complete with a detailed background but I'm sure there are better ways to set the scenery than this.

Characters: 5 out of 10

Three other patients in the asylum, as well as a nurse and a doctor. Leroy is quite interesting and the conversation system a nice touch but a few changes to what the characters say from time to time could have made it quite a bit better.

Writing: 5 out of 10

Average for the most part.

Game: 5 out of 10

A likeable enough game with a few rough edges that clearly could have done with a little more work before the finished version was released.

Overall: 32 out of 60

Reference

Now we move onto the most complicated part of ADRIFT, we start

on Tasks. Here the manual introduces us to the different ways to add a command to our games.

Manual pages 18: Tasks

Tasks

Tasks allow you to customise your adventures and do things other than the built in functions within ADRIFT. They allow you to specify what the player is expected to type, and carry out certain actions based on this. You can restrict tasks being executed depending on certain criteria.
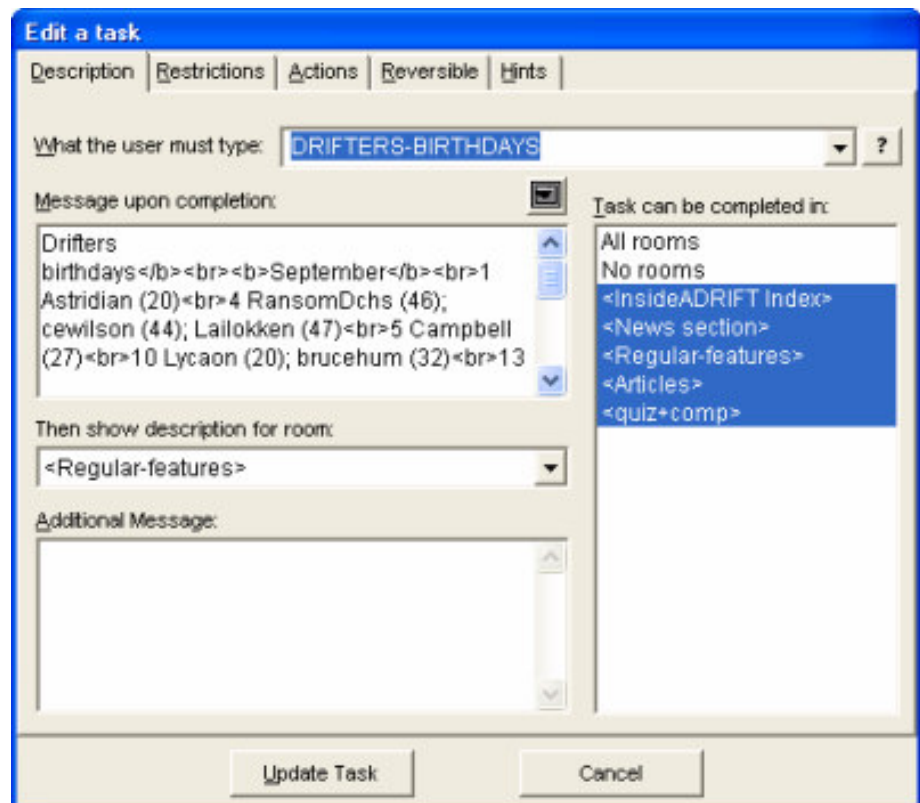
To add a task, either select Add > Task from the menus, or click on the icon. This will bring up the Add a task dialog box.

Task Commands

In the box at the top, What the user must type, you can enter any number of commands. This is what the player must type in the game in order for the task towork. Simply click in the box, and type the command in. If you want to add more than one, press <enter>, and type another command in. To edit an existing command, click the arrow to the right of the box, and select the command you wish to edit. You can then edit the command.

You can override any of the system commands with tasks. For

example, if you entered "north" as the command, and you were in a room which had an exit to the north, assuming all the restrictions were passed, the task would be executed instead of moving the Player in that direction. This is useful if you want to check something before going north, or you wanted to add a more descriptive message when moving the Player from one room to another. (See Overriding System Commands for details.)

Wildcards

It's quite difficult to think of all the possible commands a player can type in order to complete a specific task – quite often the player will know what they have to do, just not know the syntax the game needs to be able to run the task. This is commonly known as "guess the verb". To make it easier to define commands for the user to type, you can put wildcards into the command string. To do this, simply add an asterix "*" where the player can enter any text. For example, if the task was "turn the wheel", you could set the command as "turn *wheel". This would allow the player to type "turn the wheel", "turn wheel", "turn steering wheel" etc. in the game. Basically, it makes it far more flexible, as there's nothing more frustrating knowing what to do, just not know the exact phrase to make it work.

It can sometimes work better to define the task as, say, "turn * wheel" - notice the extra space. This guarantees that there will always be a space after the word "turn" and before the word "wheel". In the example earlier, it would have accepted the command "turn swheel". It is also worth noting that by doing this, the command "turn wheel" would match up, but the space would in fact be matched twice. You can also put a wildcard before the command, e.g. "* turn * wheel" so that it would accept something (or nothing – the initial space will be removed if necessary) before the command, so long as it's separated by a space.

You can add commands to refer to any object, character, number or variable by using References.

Advanced Command Construction

Quite often, wildcards will allow the task to execute if the player types in a command, but it can sometimes be too vague. For example, the command "get * apple * box" would allow the player to type "get the apple from the box", "get apple then look in the box", "get all except the apple from the box" etc. You can see that this could lead to some quite misleading and unintended task executions.

To give a different approach from wildcards, you can use advanced command construction. This allows you to define certain required keywords, then have other optional words and

allow choices between words.

There are three sets of special symbols required for advanced command construction. These are:

• Square brackets, i.e. "[" and "]". These enclose anything that is required in the command.

• Curly brackets, i.e. "{" and "}". These enclose anything that is optional in the command.

• Forward slash, i.e. "/". This separates any choices within the command.

Symbols are recursive, so for example, you could have an optional section within a required section of the command.

An example would clarify this to make it easier to understand. In the example above, you might have a command like: You can see here, from the example commands above, the only one that would succeed is "get the apple from the box"

Clicking on the small question mark button to the right of the command box will give a summary of what you can enter as a command.

[get/take/pick up] {the} [{green} apple from] {the} {large} [box/crate]

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Information is copied and pasted from the manual and while every effort is made to be accurate, there are no guarantees that it is error free.

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