InsideADRIFT
the newsletter of the ADRIFT community

Issue 16	May/June 2004

Contents

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Issue 17 due out June 2004

News and announcements

Open source generator proposed

The author of SCARE, the ADRIFT Runner clone written in C (see below), has asked on the Forum what our views would be if an open-source generator were created. Simon Baldwin (Tedswippet on the Forum) has gained a pretty detailed understanding of the inner workings of the TAF format and is therefore in a better position than most to put forward such a project.

The idea would be to make a compiler that would take a text file, in the format of a slightly expanded module (AMF) file and compile it into a TAF file. An obvious advantage here is that such a compiler would be portable making it a relatively straightforward process to produce versions for other systems like Mac and Linux.

This could be a hugely significant proposal in the development of ADRIFT, but I am slightly uncomfortable welcoming it unreservedly without hearing Campbell Wild's take on the idea. The response on the Forum was rather mixed, with Mystery the most vocal of the sceptics defending the position that this was basically taking money from Campbell's pocket. Mark TIlford (ralphmerridew, developer of jAsea) commented that he was against this at the current level of ADRIFT, but would like to cooperate with Campbell Wild on development in the future.

SCARE 1.3.1 for Windows is announced

David Kinder has released a new Windows version of Simon Baldwin's SCARE ADRIFT runner clone and Uli Kusterer a Macintosh version. This was until recently based on the jAsea JAVA runner, but has moved on a bit.

SCARE is created in ANSI/ISO C, and the source code is made available for porting to different systems. There are currently versions of SCARE at the IF Archive for Linux, Windows and Amiga. With a Mac version around as well, but not in the Archive, this could soon be the opportunity to rebut the old complaints of

Editorial

OK, I know I wrote last month that the new release would be out soon – as far as I can see it will, but Mystery is still involved in the testing process. We all just have to be patient as it will in the end hopefully give us a more stable product to use.

We have also had the Spring Competition, congratulations to DavidW on his win. I was very satisfied that we had four worthy entries and would like to thank the authors and those who judged for their efforts.

Contact

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

Find the newsletter at: http://www.insideadrift.org.uk/

InsideADRIFT merchandise

You can now purchase an exciting InsideADRIFT mug, if you so desire.

The store is really not fully operational, if you are interested look at **www.cafepress.com/insideadrift**

ADRIFT being only on Windows (at least for playing).

Graphics are now available and a really nice touch is that it will seamlessly run ADRIFT 3.9 and later (those files with a .TAF extension, something the original doesn't do.

Those of us owe a debt of gratitude to those who are putting such effort into creating resources that broaden the playing market for anything we create.

STOP PRESS:

Simon Baldwin has released version 1.3.2 of SCARE in May.

Among the new and fixed features in SCARE release 1.3.2 are:

- The ability to run Adrift version 3.80 games, as well as version 4.00 and version 3.90 ones.

- Fixes for loading problems that prevented 'Doomed Xycanthus' and 'The Caves of Morpheus' from running in previous versions.

- Updated task handling to solve problems found by Emily Short when reviewing 'The Woods are Dark'.

- Assorted performance enhancements, and reduced memory consumption.

The return of O.A.R.S.

Mystery has been handed the baton as webmaster of the Online ADRIFT Reference Site (OARS) . That excellent source of ADRIFT information originally created by NickyDude.

Although with her other commitments, both on and offline, Mystery cannot set a deadline for the site to be up and running, I have seen some of her early work and believe she will be carrying on in the same helpful manner that the site had before.

Coupling this to her continued efforts to create an ADRIFT game that is also a workbench for testing all aspects of ADRIFT, which is coming on but can never be a speedy process, we all have to be grateful for what Mystery if managing to do. We will have to be patient this Summer when she spends much of her time teaching her sons to play the guitar and drums. Good luck with that!

Competition news roundup

InsideADRIFT Spring Competition 2004

Many congratulations to DavidW for his victory in this competition. His entry "Shards of Memory" won just ahead of Mystery's "Curse of the DragonShine". My thanks also to Eric Meyer for "Wax Worx" and Lee Paten (sfzapgun) for "Someril", the other entries that completed the line up.

Drifters birthdays

May 2004

1 Incoming (23); bluemoon (34)

6 gamerfreak1020 (16)

8 ShogunNZ (31); Kojiro (22)

10 gscbw (21)

11 fairyale (21); azurestone (20)

16 Ray (58)

31 Heal Butcher (30); CowInParachute (15)

June 2004

6 En Kerklaar (18); Mattaius (18); Seciden Mencarde (15)

13 The Amazing Poodle Boy (34)

15 Matt (Dark Baron) (15)

16 Blakk Matt (18)

19 NickyDude (35)

21 Kinvadren (21)

25 Cannibal (34)

Events Diary

May 15, 2004
InsideADRIFT Issue 16 out today
The May/June Issue of InsideADRIFT should be out today.

22-29 August 2004
InsideADRIFT Summer Minicomp 2004
There will be a Summer Minicomp in August. Entries in 22 Aug, judging ending 29 Aug.

InsideADRIFT Summer Minicomp 2004

I have been conducting a consultation process to fine tune the rules for my next competition which takes place in the August. My idea is that it will be a different type of Minicomp, with the writers able to choose the type of game they want to enter.

You can enter a small game written in the week before the judging takes place, a game limited to a small number of rooms and, most controversially of all, my build a better maze Minicomp.

The idea behind adding the maze comp was simply to give people a chance to think what is it that people don't like about mazes, and what can be done to make them more stimulating. I am discussing this later in my big idea piece.

Wider IF community events

IF Art Show 2004

This is an annual event where the entrants basically create a piece (of fragment) of IF as an exhibit in an art gallery. This event has been going for a few years and the shows from previous competitions can be seen at http://members.aol.com/iffyart/

As far as I know there haven't been any ADRIFT entries, but that doesn't mean there won't be.

Third IntroComp

The IntroComp is an IF competition where the aim is to write the start of a new work of interactive fiction. The entries, which can range from a title up to a full game, must be in by the 18th of July this year, the catch being that to claim your prize a complete version must be release within one year.

For complete details of the competition you should go to http://www.xyzzynews.com/introcomp/

Forum news

The forum was a much more stable entity in the early weeks after the last newsletter was issued.

There were some quite interesting discussions, apart from the one on a possible open-source generator. One that got a fair bit of attention was one on possible formats for the next ADRIFT Minicomp.

There was also a lively discussion on how best to deal with some fairly scrappy games, barely deserving that title, that have appeared on the ADRIFT adventure downloads page. Opinion was something had to be done, but what was very problematical as it really would have to come from Campbell Wild.

Also getting plenty of responses was that regular favourite, the forthcoming games thread.

The (big) idea by KF

Mazes can be fun!

Maybe this is just being cynical, as I am not normally a great advocate of mazes, but I wonder if part of the problem is that we have too rigid a view of what a maze is.

I take the view that a maze is a series of locations where the player has to navigate their way through to an end point. That can cover a very ordinary garden maze, but could equally apply to a blazing tower block, with smoke and flames causing many obstacles to the players escape. This illustrates an important point that mazes can be in three dimensions as well as two.

One of the problems seems to be that players have now adopted standard techniques, such as object dropping, to map the maze and make it much easier to navigate.

In the Summer Minicomp I have made this an option, and, as you can make up to three games to enter, why not give it a go and see if you can make a better maze.

Drifters toolbox

Automated Composing System (ACS) reviewed by KF

Hands up those of us who want to include music in our games but haven't a clue how to write it!

OK, well I have my hand up, but for quite a while now I have been using this piece of Japanese software. It was actually linked to from Ambrosine's Game Creation Resources web page (http://www.ambrosine.com/resource.html).

In compose mode you can select from a large range of music styles, the program creates a piece of music in that style. You can select more than one style at once, in which case the program cycles through them. If you select that option it will play the piece straight after creating it, otherwise you can have it silently produce a number of pieces.

Once the program has produced something that you like, switch to edit mode and you can fiddle with the instruments used or use a wizard to make general changes to the style of your piece.

The output MIDI files can be included directly in your games and tend to be something around 10 or 12Kb in length for 2 or 3 minutes of tune.

You can also use Convert mode which brings in a piece of music that you already have loads it and converts it to the style you have selected. This morning I converted a bit of Beethoven to Ska for an interesting effect.

While the music produced isn't going to win any prizes, it is quite effective. The program is shareware and the trial version will

ADRIFT recent releases

This will hopefully be a new regular feature, bringing you the details of recently released games, as described by their authors on release. The details listed here are as posted on the ADRIFT adventures page on Campbell's site

Sparks' Adventure (sparksadventure.taf 1 Kb) By Iain Campbell, released 08-05-04

You play as Sparks, an adventurous young boy in search of treasure. This is my first game, expect a sequel.

Shards Of Memory (shardsofmemory.taf 116 Kb) By Davidw, released 02-05-04

You awaken with no memory of who you are or where you are yet slowly but surely your story will unfold. An ancient evil has returned to the world and only YOU have the power to stand in its way... [winner of the ADRIFT Spring Comp 2004] [genre: dark fantasy]

The Woodfish Compendium (compendium.zip 47 Kb) By Woodfish, released 02-05-04

The definitive collection of all Woodfish's releases, updated, with bugs fixed - plus a brand new short adventure. Contains "Topaz", "Saffire", "Forum" and its sequel "Forum 2", "The Game To End All Games" and a *brand new* release, "ImagiDroids".Also contains walkthroughs for each. Comments to driftersmonthly@hotmail.com - thanks!

allow you to produce 30 pieces before registration is required. The charge to register is $35, and I would have to say that it isn't the most wonderful system for support, much of which is Japanese, but it is great fun.

To take a look at this software go to:

http://hp.vector.co.jp/authors/VA014815/music/English/autocomp.html

You can check out some examples of what is produced at:

http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~HB9T-KTD/music/English/Studio/Midi/Sample/index.html

"At Home with the Underdogs" by J. J. Guest

Part 2: The Underdog's Underdogs

Nick Montfort, in his book **"Twisty Little Passages"** cites Graham Nelson as estimating that "more than sixty commercial works of interactive fiction developed with **The Quill** were released during the mid-1980s". I would put that number much higher. For those too young or too American to remember, **The Quill,** and **The Graphic Adventure Creator** were two programs developed during the 1980s to allow people to create their own works of IF in the comfort of their own homes. The spiritual ancestors of **ADRIFT,** if you like. Of course, my computer, the **Acorn Electron** was considered too flimsy to support **The Graphic Adventure Creator,** so they dropped the graphics and released it as simply **The Adventure Creator (or AC)** for the **Electron.** I jumped on **AC** the moment it came out, having previously written several games in BBC Basic, but despite all the hours I spent working with it, when I should have been out in the fresh air, I never released anything commercially. But many, many people did. The release of **AC** and **The Quill** revolutionised the 8-bit text adventure market. The floodgates opened, and suddenly everyone was making and releasing home-made games with hand-drawn covers (more than likely duplicated using Dad's work's photocopier) and available through tiny adverts in the back of **Electron User, BBC Micro User** and **Crash,** the aptly-named magazine for the **ZX Spectrum.** Beta-tested, no doubt, by long-suffering mothers and siblings, chock full of guess-the-verb, guess-the-noun and guess-the-author's-favourite-TV-show, these games were, as Nick Montfort rightly points out, the computer game equivalent of folk-art.

Many 'Drifters might remember my ill-advised attempts to convert a game called **Stranded on Iloofrax** to **ADRIFT. SOI,** by Matthew O'Donnell, was one of four games by different authors

Description Display After <CLS> (clear.taf 1 Kb) By Mystery, released 30-04-04

This is an example of how to auto display room descriptions after <cls> has been used. It also gives an example of how to auto display alternate room descriptions as well.

The Legend of Zelda:Link's Arrival DEMO 2 (extended) (linksarrivaldemo2extended.taf 2 Kb) By Adam Dundas, released 29-04-04

An extended version of the original

INVASION (invasion.taf 0 Kb) By Adam Dundas, released 26-04-04

You are a colonel marine exploring a lost alien hive,you have found the hive and are face to face with the alien queen genre:horror

chairtest (chairtest.taf 0 Kb) By NObodyNOWHERE, released 16-04-04

This is a very small code demo of a chair that breaks when used, then is repaired when you ask a repairman to fix it. This is done using three tasks. No ALR or variables. As per the request of a message board user.

Imagings Demo (imagings.zip 4 Kb) By suture, released 11-04-04

A technical demo of the project I'm currently working on. If you've read my post in the forum, then you know about my troubles with the weather cycle. You can use the debugger to move to the room 'Church Road' and view it for yourself, or you can just play it through. I am looking for constructive criticism, so I'd request the latter. Thanks, everyone, and enjoy! By the way, the game seems fairly abstract and plotless; this is all part of the

released on a single cassette by **Potter Programs,** a company based in a cul-de-sac in Surrey. It was written with **The Quill,** and is a veritable grab-bag of wacky ideas. You play a scientist who, whilst testing a newly-invented teleport, winds up not at the other end of his laboratory but on the small planet of Iloofrax. There you will encounter such wonders as Gangron, the one-eyed witch, a giant mechanical cat, a machine that changes the weather, and a system of tunnels inhabited by a "rather thin gnome" who will follow you around as long as you are carrying the gibbleberry jam sponge-cake. Useful items are to be found scattered about everywhere without rhyme or reason, the aforementioned cake, for instance, is just lying around in the forest. Stranger still was **Inner Space,** an anonymous l written game in which you take on the role of a coma-stricken car crash victim trying desperately to regain consciousness. The game takes place in a derelict and largely deserted small town, an atmospheric place of dark alleys and rubbish heaps, that is actually the PC's own psyche. This sparsely populated landscape is peppered with bizarre incongruities; glass tunnels hovering in mid-air, an Indian Fakir with six arms, and a marble statue of Tom and Jerry in mid-chase.

Many of these home-grown games were clearly influenced by popular TV shows of the time. **SUDS,** by David Edwards and released by **Riverdale** in 1986 was a text adventure in four parts that spoofed the four major British soaps, Emmerdale Farm (renamed Emeroyd Farm), Coronation Street (Abdication Street) Crossroads (Cross-Eyes) and Eastenders (Dead Enders). These games were full of woeful puns, some of which were crucial to solving puzzles. According to Merlin's successor Pendragon: "For instance, upon climbing a tree I discovered a herring which I duly smoked over a war women's campfire. Hey presto, I had a red herring. However, this has a particular use which I will leave for you to discover. Later in the adventure I had to pour a bucket of cement over some relatives who were blocking my path to the next section. Of course, the result was to cement relations."
SUDS was swiftly followed by **American SUDS** which spoofed, among others, Dallas. This masterpiece of interactive fiction began: "Welcome to Dullas! Here you are at South Pork Ranch, home of the zaniest bunch of soap weirdoes you are ever likely to meet. The place is in a bit of turmoil with rumours that old Joke Spewing is still alive. Your task, Just Revolting, is to find your pappy. That's if you can overcome the devious script and the machinations of your brother, Booby, his wife, Spam, and your dipsomaniac wife, Pseudo Helen. Have a nice day!" So much for the introduction. Let's skip forward to the game: "You are standing on the helipad" begins the first description, "To the north, south,

story much, much further in. For now, it won't make much sense.

Amnesia Kid (amnesiakid.taf 10 Kb) By MadMax, released 09-04-04

All you were going to do was go shopping with your mom. But no, you had one of your amnesia attacks and forgot where your house is. All you want to do is go home, but along the way you end up being a model citizen, experiencing magic stuff, running errands for a crazy scientist, and much much more. Fun for the whole family (except there is this one part where you get a porno magazine, thats the worst part)

east and west is a neatly manicured paddock. Miss Smelly wanders by, her spare head tucked under her arm. 'Have a nice day,' she twitters as she disappears down the drive."

The **Acorn Electron** was by no means the only computer to be blessed with such home-grown masterpieces. I can remember reading with deep feelings of envy the review in **Crash** magazine for **The Bimbles,** a **ZX Spectrum** game spoofing the British childrens TV show **The Wombles.** Priced at £3, **The Bimbles** heralded its arrival as "The game no-one's been waiting for." The reviewer went on to describe some of the more interesting NPCs one can expect to meet playing the game: "The first of the loony characters you meet is Great Uncle Buggeria who strains through his 36 pairs of spectacles to utter, 'Puss will get greasy if she is not sheltered from the rain' to which Fungo quite rightly retorts, 'Oh, shut up you doddering old fool', whereupon the Great Uncle drops dead." I have now played this game via an emulator and I can assure you that the same standard of humour is sustained throughout.

Sometimes when I read threads on R*IF devoted to **Zork** or **A Mind Forever Voyaging** I feel a little left out, having grown up without these masterpieces. On the other hand, I now have everything **Infocom** released on my hard drive, along with the complete works of **Level 9** and **Magnetic Scrolls.** And I have to admit they're good games. Some of them are great games. But would I have exchanged my mis-spent youth among the underdogs of IF for one spent in the great underground empire?

Not on your nelly!

J.J.Guest Feb 29th 2004

Interview: Paul O'Brian questioned by KF

This issues interviewee is the editor of that vital organ of the IF community SPAG, a newsletter that packs in loads of news and game reviews. Having started on 15 May 1994 today represents the tenth anniversary of that first issue.

That first issue was mostly packed with reviews of some of the games included in the Lost treasures of Infocom *package, with many of the reviews from Stephen Granade. Paul O'Brian has been editor since issue 18.*

Paul, thank you very much for agreeing to answer a few questions for InsideADRIFT.

My pleasure -- thanks for inviting me!

Q1. I always tend to start with this one. What brought you into the

Failed game intros

Lab of Horrors

This was a game I worked on for the End of Year Comp, surprisingly I didn't finish it.

Well, it is finally here, the day you are going to die. You have been on death row for eleven years while the lawyers played out their parts in the appeals process, even though you have been resigned to your fate for most of that time.

It is strange how, as your fate has been set, you have managed to be able to sleep well. Perhaps it is the fact that you believe that your sentence was just, even though it was an accident that Sally-Anne was killed. You had been out in the backyard, playing around shooting beer cans off the fence with your handgun.

The bitter irony was that Sally-Anne was walking past, just three days after she had dumped you for Jerry MacArtney, one of the local cops, and was felled by a stray shot. Noone believed that you hadn't meant to do it, after all the motive was clear and Jerry, with the support of his colleagues, was pretty determined to make it stick.

It is six in the morning and you have just eighteen hours until the unltimate punishment is due to be carried out. the only way you will see tomorrow is to have the plea for clemency, being made on your behalf, granted by Governor Henry Shrubb. Given Shrubb's record of granting only one plea for mercy, out of the 87 who have faced death, you are not going to expect anything from him.

Do you have a game that has hit the rails, but you would like to share with the community? If so, send it in to me.

world of interactive fiction (and keeps you here)?

Probably the best and most complete answer to this question is the first editorial I wrote for SPAG, in issue #18. The short version is that after my dad introduced me to Zork in the early Eighties, Infocom became one of my teenage obsessions. Then, in the early Nineties, my interest in IF was reawakened by Activision's release of the Lost Treasures of Infocom collections. I was discovering the Internet right about the same time, so one of the first searches I did was on "interactive fiction"; that led me to the newsgroups and to the discovery that IF is still alive and thriving, with a whole range of tools allowing people to write works just as good as or better than anything Infocom ever produced. Playing and writing new IF games was a dream come true for me.

As for what keeps me around, I think it's a combination of things. Certainly, I'm still fascinated with the medium of IF, and I love seeing it continue to grow and evolve. In addition, editing SPAG and writing the Earth And Sky series have proved to be rather tangible commitments to participation in the IF community -- even at times when I've felt like drifting away, I've found myself unwilling to leave SPAG rudderless and my game series incomplete. Finally, the IF community contains some of the most interesting people I've encountered in any social sphere. Being around such bright and creative people can feel a little intimidating at times, but it's so rewarding.

Q2. The SPAG newsletter is a valuable resource for finding a wide range of reviews for the whole community. Does it currently meet the targets that you have for it and do you have more aims for the future?

Heh. "Targets." I've never been inclined to set goals for SPAG, because it would drive me crazy to have specific aims for something that is largely out of my control. My only real goal is to hustle up enough reviews every three months to produce a viable issue of the zine.

Thanks to SPAG's legions of volunteer contributors, I've always been able to reach that goal, though sometimes it's meant stretching the definition of "viable" a little further than I'm comfortable with.

Remarkably, SPAG has survived for 10 years (as of May 15th, 2004), and that's only because people continue to be interested enough in its project that they still want to submit and read IF reviews. I'm really not sure what the next ten years will hold for it. I'll probably hand

off the mantle of editorship at some point, though I'm not sure when that will be. In the meantime, I don't plan any major

changes to SPAG --

I think it's working pretty well in its current format, so aside from some possible improvements to the web site or any spiffy new features that occur to me, I'm planning to stay the course.

Q3. Editing a publication that survives on input from others can be stressful. Do you find that people are keen to write or do you have to twist arms regularly to get sufficient content?

You know, I think both are true. I believe that people are quite keen to write *in theory*. That is, the idea of writing a SPAG review appeals to a lot of people, and that's why I receive work from such a variety of contributors. However, what's also true is that people approach IF as a hobby, maybe one of many hobbies occupying their free time. So IF already exists as just a little slice of most people's time, and when writing a review is a little slice of that IF time, it's very easily delayed or abandoned. This is perfectly understandable, of course, but what it means is that most people need a little nudge to reignite their interest in writing a review for SPAG. I post these nudges a few weeks before each issue comes out, and I try to make them varied and somewhat entertaining, but ultimately, their purpose in life is just to serve as a little reminder and motivator for anybody with the intention of reviewing a game for SPAG. I think I'd get a lot fewer submissions without those little reminders, but that doesn't mean people aren't keen on the idea of writing reviews.

Q4. The interactive fiction community is an odd group, so often supportive yet also often aggressive in their arguments. Do you believe that this is all part of the healthy debate of a lively group or unnecessary conflict that detracts from its aim of producing games?

Neither. Both. I'm not sure I accept the premise of the question, actually. Certainly I've seen aggressive arguments on the newsgroups, but I'm not sure I'd call that a trait of the interactive fiction community per se. In part, I think it's a trait of Internet conversations everywhere, though of course the degree of vitriol can and does vary depending on the forum and the topic. I've seen my share of people who I think of as IF community members aggressively pursuing a point -- sometimes I don't like it, and sometimes I take some pleasure in it, depending on how much I agree with the point and how much I think the target deserves the aggression. I've been guilty of it myself from time to time. However, I wouldn't say there's some monolithic IF community that can be characterized as "aggressive" --

what we call the "IF community" is really a very loose agglomeration of people collected around a bunch of different

loci, containing personalities that range from enthusiastically friendly to dismissively sarcastic. There are also a couple of downright vicious people who haunt the newsgroups, but I don't really think of them as members of our community so much as forces interested in wrecking whatever positive energy exists in it.

In any case, I tend to be annoyed or dismayed by most of the aggressive arguments that appear in IF fora, whether they be from established community members or from other people charging in and tossing around accusations of elitism, intellectual stagnation, provincialism, or what have you. However, my experience is that those little flamewars tend to be a rather small fraction of the mainstream of IF discussion, most of which is polite, friendly, and often thought-provoking.

Q5. The ADRIFT community can tend to feel that we are often on the margins, getting a few scraps from the wider group. I suspect this can partly be attributed to the fact that when working with the mainstream languages RAIF is the place you go for discussion, in contrast the ADRIFT forum provides us with a dedicated support group. Do you think this gives an appearance outside ADRIFT of us being different and standoffish?

Hmm. I'm not sure I have an answer for this. Just as I don't believe there's one dominant definition of the "IF community", I'm not sure there's a dominant perception of ADRIFT forum users. Even if there were, I don't think that I'd know what it is. For my part, I think of the ADRIFT forum as one of the loci I mentioned above when I was calling the IF community a "loose agglomeration." Others include raif, rgif, ifMUD, alt.games.xtrek, and the SPAG subscriber list. Because I tend to follow the int-fiction newsgroups and (to a lesser extent) ifMUD, I'm not terribly aware of what goes on at the ADRIFT forum, but I've never thought of that as ADRIFT users' fault -- it's just divergent interests. I suppose it would be nice if everybody had a common gathering place, but as long as there's some cross-pollination, I'm not bothered, and certainly it's never occurred to me to take offense at the ADRIFT forum's existence separate from the int-fiction newsgroups. After all, what's on the margins depends solely on what you define as the center.

Q6. I was just looking at the list of back issues, it is an impressive list and makes our 16 issues seem very small. Does it become easier the longer things go on for? (KF asked hopefully)

Easier? Well, the inescapable fact is that coming up with good original content takes work, both for you and for your contributors. That truth never really goes away. However, I do think that the more good issues you produce, the more you gain a reputation

as something worth contributing to. So maybe it does get a little easier to elicit submissions as time goes on. I sure hope so, anyway.

Q7. As usual, I will end the interview by asking you what you are currently working on, and what you are looking for in the future for yourself and interactive fiction?

I'm working furiously on Earth And Sky 3 in hopes of having it ready by the fall. Speaking of which, it's been a lot of fun to spout off and I appreciate the opportunity, but I think I'd better get back to coding now...

Competitions – who needs 'em? Part 2

A response from DavidW

The completion of last month's on what the role of competitions was in the ADRIFT community.

Of course, it's best to win and no one likes to come last so in a way I guess competitions encourage people to try harder with their games than they would otherwise. If you're just going to release your game to the general populace and might never receive feedback on it, you might consider missing a few things out just to get it done more quickly. So entering a game in a competition means games of a higher quality than otherwise?

You'd think so, but past experience tends to indicate that, for the most part, people take little effort in ensuring their comp games are any better than their non-comp games. I've played some comp games that are very good, but then I've also played a lot of comp games that are very bad. Some are so bad you wonder why they ever got released in the first place; sometimes the game in question has such glaring errors in it right from the very first location that you find yourself sitting there and staring in dismay at the screen that someone ever considered it worthy of entering in a competition.

Of course, in comp games it's not always possible to cover everything. In particular if you're writing a one hour game, you won't have the time to deal with every guess the verb issue which arises and corners will necessarily have to be cut in order to get the game done within the required time limit. Sometimes, unfortunately, the cutting of corners results in a game that is practically unplayable. The latest one hour comp produced at least three that I really had to force myself to play and I was left with the feeling afterwards that these games had been written purely for a joke, albeit not a very funny one.

But like I said before, I like comps. Over the past year or so, competitions have comprised the bulk of the Adrift games written. Take them away and the sum total of full sized games released last year might not even hit double figures. True, a lot of the games written for comps are bad and should never have seen the light of day in the first place, but they also produce good games.

So… considering all the above, are comps a good idea? Do they leave the community with few full sized games to get their teeth into and instead leave it with nothing more than minute efforts that were thrown together in the space of a few hours and probably not even tested? If there was never another competition, would the world of interactive fiction suffer as a result?

In all honesty, the community – particularly the Adrift community – could manage without the majority of its comps. The only comp that the whole IF community would be worse off without is the IFComp, which is pretty much the only way someone writing Adrift games is going to get recognition from outside the island that is the Adrift community.

But would the Adrift community suffer as a result of no further comps?

In a way it would, because comps – even the one hour comps (or maybe *especially* the one hour comps) – produce decent games. Take them away and the community would be worse off for their loss.

At the same time, the community would survive. Up until the last year or thereabouts, there were few comps in the Adrift world and of the few that *did* exist, they didn't get a whole lot of entries. Two comps in 2001 had just a single entry; the end of year 2002 comp had just two. Recently, things have improved to the point where the number of entries generally exceeds the minimum requirement by quite a bit. The end of year 2003 comp had a minimum requirement of three entries but got six. Hopefully this year the number of entries will have increased again.

So do we need competitions in the Adrift community?

Points for: they produce lots of games; they encourage people to write games who otherwise wouldn't; they keep interest in Adrift alive and flourishing; they give the impression to the rest of the IF community that Adrift is producing lots and lots of games (whereas the truth of the matter is that fewer full size games are being written now than ever before).

Points against: they produce a lot of bad games; they drag people away from writing their full size games and they lose focus and never return; too many comps means less prestige from

winning (after all, if there was one comp a year and you won it, it would be a big deal; if there was one comp every week, winning wouldn't be as big a deal as you'd be forgotten 7 days from now).

I guess what it all comes down to is the individual. Some are fond of comps; some dislike them. Some feel that more comps would be a good idea – maybe one every month; some feel that less comps would be a good idea – maybe one per year and leave it at that.

Myself, I love comps. I don't feel that more of my time is spent writing comp games than anything else I write. I don't feel that, bad games aside, the community suffers as a result of too many comps. While I certainly wouldn't like a comp every month, I certainly wouldn't like as few as one a year either. What I most like about comps, though, is that they motivate people to write games. Consider how many people have written games for comps that have never written a full size game (7 in the latest comp out of 12 writers) and you begin to see that without comps, you wouldn't get half as many people writing games full stop. Some people have problems with full size games and will probably never write one no matter how long they struggle with it. But along comes a comp where they realise that whatever they write is going to be judged less harshly than it might otherwise be judged and they find the willpower to actually go ahead and write a game.

Take comps away from the Adrift community and the community would definitely suffer as a result. So while comps might produce bad games, they also produce lots of games, good ones amongst them, and sometimes you just have to take the bad with the good.

Roll on the next comp!

Game reviews

This issue all of the reviews are for the entries in the InsideADRIFT Spring Competition 2004. The first three reviews are provided by DavidW as he judges the other three entries. Then we finish off with Tech's review of DavidW's winning entry "Shards of Memeory"

"Sommeril" by Lee Paten (szzapgun)

ORIGINALITY: [7] PLAYABILITY: [3] MECHANICS: [4] ENTERTAINMENT [4]

To say the beginning of Sommeril was strange would be a wild understatement. The game begins with a kind of dream sequence (although whether it's a dream or really happening I couldn't in all honesty say) involving a pair of bizarre beings who hand you a book. The next thing you know, you're falling through the air. You drop the book and land naked at a junction of a truly unusual town. Told you it was strange, didn't I?

The strangeness continues, indeed increases, as you wander around. At one point I found a giant fried egg the size of a circus tent; at another a glass eyeball the size of a Volkswagen suspended from a dead tree. While I've played some strange games before and enjoyed them, in Sommeril the strangeness just seemed too… strange. Too bizarre. The setting was like a leftover from a bad nonsense poem and left me, for the most part, wondering if there was some kind of private joke here that I was missing.

Sommeril is a game devoid of hints - never a good point as people will get stuck in even the easiest of games and lack of hints is generally one of the things that encourages them to give up. In many places, the unhelpfulness of the game becomes all too apparent. In a tavern, I came across a SORROWFUL SEA CAPTAIN and a RAVING SEA CAPTAIN (yes, the names were in capitals for a reason I never could quite fathom out, as were the names of many - though not all - items) and I wasn't able to refer to either of them as 'captain' but instead had to type out the entire description. This made for some tremendously tedious gameplay while I tried, without any success, to figure out just what I needed to do with them. In truth, interaction with the NPCs in the game, of which there are a fairly reasonable amount, is often awkward and frustrating. The simple "talk to [name]" command doesn't work and instead the writer has gone for the more difficult "ask [name] about [subject]" with the result being that while there are a lot of NPCs in the game, finding a subject you can ask them about is an almost impossible struggle. A few pointers as to what they could be asked about would have been a blessing.

Bugs? A particularly odd one with the pile of dust had me baffled for a while. Examine the dust and you see there's a ring there. Try to take the ring and you're told you can't. Why? Beats me. But examining the dust again now lets you take it. Odd to say the least, and as the ring is required to finish the game it's a little disappointing that the writer didn't notice this glaring bug.

I'm sorry to say that it didn't take long before I was reduced to looking in the walkthrough. Not to imply that Sommeril is a difficult game - it isn't, it's remarkably easy if you just have the patience to stick with it - but that I rapidly tired of it and felt like giving up. For me, bizarre games only work if the bizarreness is intriguing. In Heal Butcher's The Wheels Must Turn, the bizarreness works well because the player is never really sure just what is going on and the setting, which actually comprises the interior of a hamster cage for the most part, is described so strangely and vividly that you have to keep playing just to see what happens next. I didn't experience any of that when playing Sommeril, I'm afraid. The setting is strange and unusual, but also not very interesting. The descriptions, while adequate, never really bring the locations to life. Most of the time spent playing I had no clue what I was supposed to be doing and seemed to wander from place to place with the vague hope that I might stumble across something that would shed some light onto matters. Unfortunately I didn't. I just became more confused.

It's difficult guessing what the writer was going for with Sommeril as it seems to be an uneasy mix of fantasy, horror and the downright bizarre. It doesn't succeed at any one genre especially well and while competently written, it left me with the feeling that bizarre for the sake of bizarre just doesn't work.

"To Curse of DragonShrine" by Mystery

ORIGINALITY: [5] PLAYABILITY: [5] MECHANICS: [5] ENTERTAINMENT [5]

Following a lengthy and somewhat clumsy introduction in which the player becomes accused of murdering a girl called Jenny O'Brien and has to flee from his accusers, The Curse of DragonShrine starts properly once the player arrives at an abandoned castle. Or seemingly abandoned at any rate.

I have to admit that the introduction to The Curse of DragonShrine didn't impress me a whole lot. It seemed very rushed, as if the writer had tried to cram several pages worth of text into a far smaller space (to prevent the player having to read an overly lengthy introduction?) and the people accusing the player of murdering Jenny O'Brien came across more as rather

dense country bumpkins than anything else. Fortunately, things pick up a little as the game moves to the castle where the aforementioned curse comes to the fore.

The castle itself is large and contains quite a fair number of locations. Unfortunately, the majority are empty of more than the most basic of descriptions and while a large number of locations makes finding the items you need to progress more difficult, it's also a tad disappointing being able to wander around this many locations with so little to do in them. A few NPCs - of which the game seriously lacks - could have been added to these empty rooms for some much needed depth.

The main aim behind the game is to find the body of Jenny O'Brien (yes, she is dead after all) and bring her back to life by use of several potions which, quite conveniently as it happens, are lying scattered around the castle in easy to find places. Actually, the 'easy to find' bit is probably a bit misleading as you actually need to find several different potions and combine then into a fourth potion in order to get anywhere. I remember finding this especially frustrating as I never found any reference to more than one potion being needed and expecting the player to realise that three potions had to be combined in a cauldron and then stirred with a spoon to produce a fourth potion struck me as a particularly cumbersome puzzle, and not one people are likely to figure out. Of course, I suppose clues could have been scattered around the game but, if so, they weren't scattered anywhere that I looked.

A few awkward instances arose. I came across a ghost who couldn't be referred to as "ghost" but instead "a ghost" which struck me as a strange way of handling things. Another problem with the ghost occurred when she followed me and I was faced with the likes of "The ghost of a young woman hovers nearby; now and then parts of her disappear through the wall. A ghost hovers in from the west." popping up on screen, telling me that the ghost was hovering nearby even before she had hovered in from the west! There was also an unusual occurrence in that a door which I was previously unable to open suddenly opened at a later point in the game without me doing anything to open it. A quick peek at the hints informed me that this is supposed to happen but didn't bother with explaining just why the door had mysteriously opened.

A villain known as Master Dracon is referred to from time to time during the game but I never met him at any point which was a bit of a disappointment because there is very little character interaction possible in The Curse of DragonShrine. In the end, his death (told in a few lines in the epilogue) is clumsily handled.

Despite a few references to him throughout the game as possessing great powers and even endeavouring to achieve immortality and rule over a world of dragons, he is killed by a few local yokels. Hardly a decent ending for the villain of the piece. Although in all honesty Master Dracon isn't much of a villain anyway. Too little time is spent on making him into a believable character and the fact that he and the player never meet doesn't help matters.

All in all, The Curse of DragonShrine was a playable game which felt like it had been written in a great hurry. Not good, not bad, but somewhere in between.

"Wax Wurx" by Eric Mayer

ORIGINALITY: [7] PLAYABILITY: [4] MECHANICS: [4] ENTERTAINMENT [7]

Eric Mayer's first full size game since Doomed Xycanthus is a chilling horror story with splashes of the truly bizarre thrown in for good measure (including, among other things, the talking head of Marie Antoinette). Wax Worx starts off well with the player awaking, unsure of where he is or even who he is. A little exploration and things slowly begin falling into place, although it never really becomes clear what is going on. The explanation given at the start - that you've been locked inside a wax works museum - has an air of untruth about it.

Strange errors arose in several places throughout the game, the most glaring example being in the workshop when I tried - after being completely unable to locate an exit - to open a door. I was asked which door "the wooden door or the wooden door?" and was told, no matter what I typed, that "that is still ambiguous!" Funnily enough, when I carefully re-read the room description I didn't even notice any mention of a door there, wooden or otherwise.

"Wax Worx" is an unhelpful game in many places. In the first location there are three doors yet trying to open any of them results in the annoying message "you can't open the door!" For something as obvious as this (and let's face it, what else are you likely to type when faced with a closed door?) it's disappointing that the default response wasn't catered for a little better. The actual command required to open the door wasn't an obvious one either, particularly in light of the fact that I had been told that I couldn't open the door. Then again, problems with doors pretty much dog this game. Several times I tried to open a door and was told I would have to specify something openable. What did the game think I was trying to do when I typed "open door"? There's also an annoying response ("Given your current

predicament, does that really matter?") every time you try to examine something the writer hasn't anticipated. And while it's nice that *this* time the default response has been changed, it's also equally frustrating that you seem to get this more often than not. When items are referred to in a room description and you try to examine them, you should see something more than a default response. Why put them in the room description otherwise?

On the plus side, the hints system is especially good which is quite a relief as the game itself is difficult. Quite often, commands which need to be typed to get anywhere (putting the nose on the clown) aren't at all obvious and it's unlikely you'd stumble across them without resorting to the hints. (In the example of the nose and clown puzzle, I didn't even have a nose at the time and while I tried a few experimental "make nose" or "create nose" commands, I never hit upon the correct command that was needed.) One of Eric Mayer's previous games had a section whereby the player had to kiss a statue. This game has you putting a nose (which you don't have) on a clown. Such commands might seem incredibly obvious and straightforward to the writer but they sure don't to the poor player.

The game's saving grace is its stylish writing which makes up for the often sloppy gameplay side of things. At times it is genuinely chilling and while a tendency to put silly in comments does creep in and somewhat spoil the general seriousness of the gameplay, the silliness is usually over with quickly enough so as not to ruin Wax Worx completely.

The ending is a strange one, and not a particularly satisfying one either. Then again, Wax Worx is a strange game throughout and a standard, run-of-the-mill ending just would have seemed out of place. All the same, there's a feeling I always have when a game ends badly for the player no matter what route is taken that it makes the earlier puzzle solving and figuring out what is going on kind of pointless. If you're going to die in the end anyway, why make such an effort to avoid it?

But bad points aside (and there were quite a number I'm afraid to say) Wax Worx was well written and chilling. While it could have been so much better, it was nevertheless definitely worth playing.

"Shards of Memory" by David Whyld (Reviewed by Tech)

The Quick Overview

"Shards of Memory" is a dark fantasy adventure written by Davidw. You as the main character, awaken alone on a beach with very few of your memories intact. What memories you still

carry leave you unsettled. From there, you are drawn into the plot through a series of encounters that eventually lead to the restoration of enough "memories" to clearly understand your eventual destination in the story. Many parts of the story appear linear; however, your choices do carry weight on the final outcome. All of the issues that I talk about in the next section are easily removable with more work from the author.

"Shards" has a difficulty rating of "Hard" due to these issues. However, the great writing and well paced plot make a must choice to play if you appreciate the fantasy genre. Just bring along the walkthrough (www.shadowvault.net - Also maintained by Davidw).

If Interactive Fiction followed ESRB ratings, then "Shards of Memory" might carry an "M - Mature" with the content descriptors of "Fantasy Violence" and "Blood and Gore".

The following was written in an attempt to avoid spoilers. However, some might still exist as you recognize situations as you progress through your own experience of "Shards of Memory".

The In Depth Evaluation

Introduced to Davidw's writing through his works in the comedy genre, I gave him recognition due to the good writing and dry wit. I had to give him recognition, like others have, due to the sheer number of games he has released. What I didn't see was a lot of change or growth between each piece of IF he produced. This may be due to the fact that the specific pieces of David's that I previously played are all nearly written in the same genre. Recently with the release of "Dead Reckoning" and now "Shard of Memory", Davidw has shown that his writing ability and sense of story works as equally well for him in more serious genres. So much to the point that I care about what steps he takes when putting together the next ADRIFT piece. Also, I sincerely hope that Davidw will consider going back and making a full revision on "Shards of Memory" in order to further enjoy the ideas presented within.

The atmosphere of the game tied in well with the plot device of only remembering critical pieces of your past. An underused/under implemented verb in the game was "remember" that produces interesting results in key areas. It took several times playing through the game to appreciate the nuance of the genuine effort Davidw made on the atmosphere of the locations. Seamless time shifts are at times subtle. Unless you pick up this kind of thing easily, this device gave a satisfying aha to me as a player the first time I revisited a location only to find it in a

changed state. It gives a real sense of importance of one's goal to understand what the player is attempting to restore.

"Shards of Memory" makes use of a conversation tree system of speaking with other characters in the game. This works well and allows the plot to be moved forward at crucial moments. However, there is more depth in the story than there is depth to the conversation tree. As a player, I felt the need to ask more questions of the encountered characters. I needed to ask more questions about my own loss of memories, objects in the game and more crucially, the relationship between themselves and other characters found or mentioned in the game. Though it is apparent that this information is not needed, its lack describes the general feeling acquired while playing through the game.

The general feeling is that there is so much left untouched as the player is swept through the story. I'll say this again: I know that this taf is already weighing in at 116kb. However, I would not be surprised if Davidw couldn't double this to ~250kb by fleshing in more detail. There were several places mentioned and quickly described where I wished to travel to and explore. The atmosphere begged for the time to be taken from the main plot and used in exploration and interaction with the environment. Along with the fantasy genre usually comes a slew of strange names and events. The distinguishing mark of successful fantasy writing is to make those names come alive to the reader. To make them real and believable to the reader even though they contain the elements of the fantastic. Additional detail can also come in the form of additional time shifts within locations to examine what was and what is.

Davidw's recent releases have forced me into the habit of saving and using the undo command a lot. So I was prepared in this game to restore from several points in the story. I was also looking out for situations that I placed myself in from which there was no recovery. There is no safety mechanism here. You are allowed into hopeless situations without a clue. This is one reason why I assigned the "hard" difficulty rating. Whether the author's choice is to perform some action to keep the player out of these situations is one for the debate forums. However, it is recommended that the author considers giving either clues about the player's predicament, an outright note, or preventing safety measures (possibly implemented in an "easy" setting during game start).

Another issue that increased the difficulty level of the game was that some of the puzzles were "leap of faith" actions given the descriptions and clues previously garnered in the game. Don't get me wrong. They would be normal actions undertaken by the

player given additional incentive. One particular object is used to solve three obstacles in the game. The first use of the object goes with ease. However, the second use of the object is near opaque. The reason for this is that the player is presented into the situation, talked to by another character and then cannot examine either the other character or pertinent objects in the room that will give him a clue as to perform this second action with the object. Quickly later in the game, the player ends in a stalemate in the story because no further information can be garnered that would make the player enter this "leap of faith action". This structure makes it feel that there is a invisible veil between the player and his surroundings causing the confusion on which action to take next. Ensuring that examining the environment subtly points to the right area/action and/or repeated periodic prodding would help break down this veil and lower the difficulty of the overall game. In the example given before, the character who initially talked to the character could periodically repeat his requests to the player while the player was in the room. This would lead the player into more interaction with this character once an impasse and no additional forward momentum in the story was reached. Also in this area is a guess the verb issue even outlined in the current walkthrough.

At one point as I progressed through the story, I knew what my next step was. However, when I took it, the game informed me that I decided against taking that step (entering the forest). On review of the walkthrough, I see that persistence is rewarded. However, I don't see any need to put this kind of obstacle in the path of the player. Initially it works to keep the player from returning along the path he/she came from. However, at this particular point in the story, it only adds to the confusion as to what the next step in the story really is. In this case, it gets worse. The game allowed me to blindly progress beyond this point far deeper into the story.

All of the important objects in the game are implemented as examinable objects. There are many background objects that are not implemented and produce the "You see no such thing." message. The number increases more as the story progresses so it's a feeling (not fact) that this is due to the volume of writing produced and an effort to bring it all together for release.

I enjoyed the combat system employed in the game. Rather, combat was actually part of the story and not the random numbers hack and slash of the default combat system. It worked well to invoke a feeling of despair as I attempted various attacks in a situation I soon understood as hopeless. I needed to restart from a former saved game. This also brings up the other bright

point, previously written as an issue, that the game allows you to continue as far as you can even if you've missed something vital.

The Recap

I have to say that even after all of my discussion on issues that I felt were within the game, I highly recommend to anyone else playing through this game. On top of the writing, it is well paced and has an involving plot.

This game delivers on its genre and has the potential to deliver more. I've played through three times (once to completion with the walkthrough) and I would play through a couple more times to see how omitting or inserting various actions affects the outcome. I look forward to the second installment. Overall, I'd give it 7 out of 10. (Potentially an 8 if additional clues are added to the puzzles. Or a 9 if additional backgroundmaterial is added to the game.)

Reference

We have now started on what the manual calls *Advanced techniques* starting off with *Room Groups* which provide a method for moving a character or object to a random room.

Room Groups

Room Groups are simply a collection of rooms. They are most commonly used as an area to move objects or characters to when you want them to move to a random room.

To add a new room group, click on Adventure > Advanced… and select the Room Groups tab, or click on the button.

This should bring up the following dialog box:

Where Room Groups can be used:

You can move the Player in a direction from a room to a room group. This will have the effect of moving them to a random room within that group if they go in a particular direction. The room groups will append to the end of the room list in the dropdown lists.

In task actions, you can move a dynamic object to a room group. This will randomly move the object to one room of the group.

Also in actions, you can move the Player or character to a room group. Again, this will randomly move them to one room of the group.

When creating a character walk, you can add as a step of the walk, for them to move to a room group. The room groups are appended to the end of the room list drop down. This will move the character to an adjacent room within the room group from where they currently are located. If there are no adjacent rooms within the room group, they are moved randomly to one of the room group. This has the effect of allowing characters to roam randomly within a specific area.

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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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Please send any contributions or suggestions to kf@kfadrift.or.uk.