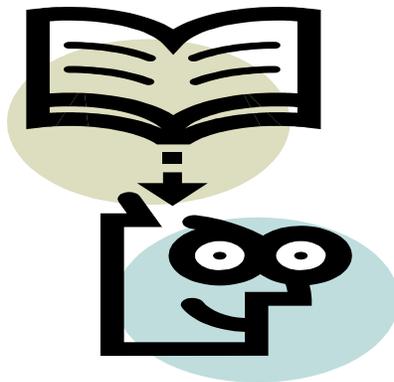


Reviews Exchange

Issue 4
(May 2005)





Contents

Welcome to Issue 4 of the **Reviews Exchange!**

Several of the games reviewed in this issue are those entered in one of the recent IF competitions – either the *Inside ADRIFT Spring Comp* or the *Spring Thing 2005*.

For the first time, the index below is linked to the rest of the document so no need to scroll through the pages to find what you're looking for – simply click on the link and away you go!

All the games reviewed in this issue can be downloaded in one zip file from: <http://www.shadowvault.net/rex04.zip>

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Authority

By Eva Vikstrom

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Real Life

Platform: Inform

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/authority.z5>

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Authority was entered in the Spring Thing 2005, a competition whose main requirement is an entry fee. Now an entry fee is the sort of thing likely to discourage anyone not *really* dedicated to writing a game because, at the end of the day, it's money. It's not a *lot* of money and hardly the sort of thing that even the most destitute of people are going to struggle to scrape together, but it's still money you have to spend for perhaps no comeback of any kind. It's also the sort of thing likely to discourage anyone from releasing a game which isn't anywhere near ready.

In theory anyway...



Authority got off to a bad start. The first version I downloaded displayed the room description at the top of the screen and then a yawning emptiness. No prompt to type commands, no response to anything I typed and not a thing displayed beyond that room description. The second version, thankfully, had this annoying little bug fixed. On the downside, it just introduced a whole new assortment

of them, some minor, some not so. All infuriating. In hindsight, I think I might have been better off sticking with the original version.

The introduction was dull and lifeless and left me thinking that if I wasn't playing this game as part of a comp and intending to review all the entries, I'd have probably taken one look at it, shot it off to the recycle bin without pause for thought and gone hunting for something a bit more exhilarating. An introduction should grip the player, make them feel like they're about to embark on a game which is going to really blow them away, not make them wish they'd tried something else instead. Aside from being dull and lifeless, it wasn't even very well written, leading me to suspect that the writer's first language is a long way removed from English. Didn't she get an English speaker to at least test it for her? The evidence would indicate not.

Does it get better? Well...

Annoyances arise all over the place. There are several items in the first location which can't be taken and instead display a truly annoying message: "Don't try to take the [object]". *Why* can't I take the object? At least give me a reason, don't just hit me with a default response and leave it at that. There also seem to be a large number of ashtrays scattered around the premises which either serve no real purpose (I've nothing to smoke so the obvious purpose is gone) or one that I didn't stumble upon. I'm also kind of doubtful that many outdoor locations even *have* ashtrays. I certainly can't remember seeing any in the real world myself. Is the writer confusing them with something else?



From bad to worse...

Yes, it gets worse. Some of the location descriptions are just so woeful, you wonder why they're even there. This is Home:

“You live in a simple one-room flat in Suburbia.”

Wondering where the rest of the description is? Me too. I saw that and suspected that I was somehow playing in some super terse mode of the game where all the depth and emotion has been stripped from the location and you're just left with the bare minimum. But nope. That's the description in its entirety, all ten words of it.

Other locations just read like a shopping list of what they contain. Little attempt has been made to inject any life into them and reading them is often no more interesting than reading a shopping list.

Conversation

Authority uses a set of dialogue options for conversation which is a conversation system I'm usually quite fond of. It beats the “ask [npc] about [subject]” method hands down which generally devolves into desperately trying to figure out what obscure subjects you need to question the NPCs about. So when a game has the dialogue options conversation system, I breathe a sigh of relief. Usually anyway. But not this time. Here you get a panel opening along the top of the screen with the dialogue options in. And the replies? Well, they show up where the rest of the text shows up so a typical conversation has your poor eyes darting from the top to the bottom of the screen and then back again just to follow what's going on. How this sort of thing was ever considered to be a good idea I can't imagine. Then again, as the rest of the game is remarkably sub-standard, at least the conversation system is in good company.

The more I played *Authority*, the more I was convinced it had been written very quickly and then sent off to the comp without more than the most basic testing. As well as being a very tedious playing experience, the game doesn't really seem to go anywhere. The locations are lifeless and lack any kind of depth and the NPCs could have been replaced with cardboard cut outs and it's doubtful anyone would have been able to tell the difference.



Conclusion

It wasn't long before *Authority* just lost any kind of appeal for me and I simply quit. Funnily enough, the game file included a walkthrough yet such were my feelings for the overall quality (or lack of), that I didn't even bother looking at it. A walkthrough is something I resort to when I'm struggling with a game I either enjoy playing or at least like enough so that I'm curious enough to see what the ending is like. *Authority* is neither.

Maybe I'm being unfair but I expected a lot better from a game entered in a competition like the Spring Thing. I expect a few classics and a lot of drivel from the IFCComp because that's a free comp and has a tendency to attract entries from people who haven't even learnt the English language let alone know how to write a game in it, but something made me think that the Spring Thing entries would be different. Not so with *Authority* alas, a game that would have given the lowest placed entries in the IFCComp 2004 a serious run for their money.

1.5 out of 10

Bedlam
By Mark Whitmore

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Real Life

Platform: Adrift 3.9

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/bedlam.taf>

.....

In brief: your son is playing music incredibly loud and you've got a hangover. Trying to stop it would be a good idea.

Ever feel you're playing a game that the author just couldn't be bothered to finish? Welcome to **Bedlam**.

Now as this is a review and not just a list of all the game's faults, I'll mention them briefly. Part of the reason for this is, alas, that if I went into any great detail regarding its faults, this review would be ten times the size it is.



In brief then, the worse faults:

- * You can't leave the bedroom at the start of the game unless you type "stand". Turns out the player begins lying on a bed but as the author didn't think to mention this, it's not likely you're going to figure it out without some serious persistence.
- * Undescribed items. Too many to list even briefly. **Bedlam** is riddled with them. The bathroom is particularly annoying as it includes four items but only one that produces any meaningful response.
- * Guess the verb. The curse of poorly written text adventures rears its ugly head once more. In some locations, "take" will work but "get" won't. In others, items are clearly visible but can't be picked up with either. Items generally need to be referred to by their full name – i.e. "bottle of pills" instead of just "bottle" or "pills" – otherwise the game doesn't understand what you're trying to do.



- * Unchanging descriptions. Three terrible offenders here. There's an axe lodged in a tree which is still there even if you remove it and drop it in another location. Your son, Tony (who can't be examined or spoken to or, indeed, interacted with in any way), is burning an anthill (can't be examined either) with a magnifying glass. Yet even though you can take the magnifying glass, the room description still lists Tony as burning the anthill with it! Then there's Tony's bedroom which is described as an unholy mess even after you've cleaned it (with a

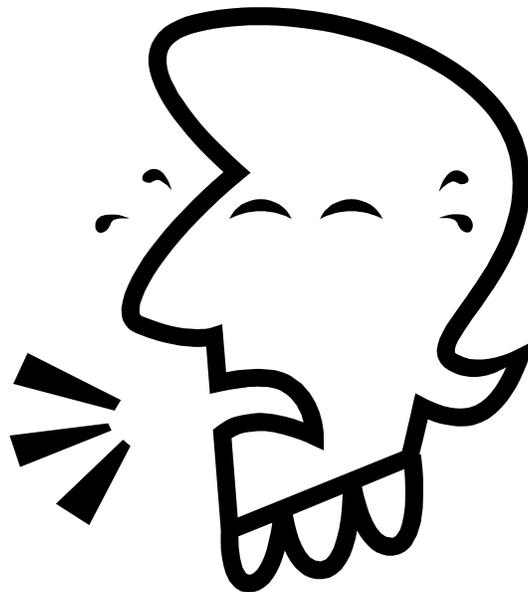
couple of items, incidentally, that you're not even carrying). The sheer level of testing that this game must have undergone is pitiful.

* Items that can't be taken no matter what. There are some clothes in a washing machine but you can't take them. This happens in a few other places as well.

* Shoddy item descriptions. Not just shoddy as in the sense of "poorly written" but shoddy as in "You can't see inside [the fridge], since it is closed. The fridge is open." This same lack of quality game writing is apparent several other times as well and really makes you wonder how even the author could have believed this game was ready for release.

And yet...

Yet it's got a kind of charm to it. The writing is a darn sight better than you might expect given the other, and numerous, problems with the game. It's comical and amusing in parts and the introduction (which bears little relevance to the rest of **Bedlam**) was nice, although the constantly ringing alarm clock *does* get a bit tiresome after a while.



Does that make the game's other shortcomings forgivable? Hardly. In a way it makes them even more frustrating. If the author was some talentless fellow who couldn't string two words together without one of them being wrong, the sheer amount of mistakes would have been



pretty much what I'd expect from him. But the standard of writing shows that here is someone who actually has some skill at writing. Unfortunately what he has in writing skill, he clearly lacks in programming skill as **Bedlam** has got to be one of the buggiest games I've ever played.

A major rewrite might go a long way towards making this into the game it should have been in the first place but as it was first released way back in 2001, it's a fair bet that the author has since moved on to other things.

Even though I smiled a couple of times while playing **Bedlam**, it's really not a game I could recommend to anyone. The huge amount of mistakes the author has made make playing it an almost painful experience at times and there are certainly better games out there.

2 out of 10 (*original was 1 but decided to bump it up a point due to the better than average writing*)



Bolivia By Night

By Aidan Doyle

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Real Life/Murder Mystery

Platform: Tads 2

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/bbn.gam>

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This was the third Spring Thing comp game that I played and it was a far more solid effort than the previous two - **Authority** and **Whom The Telling Changed**.

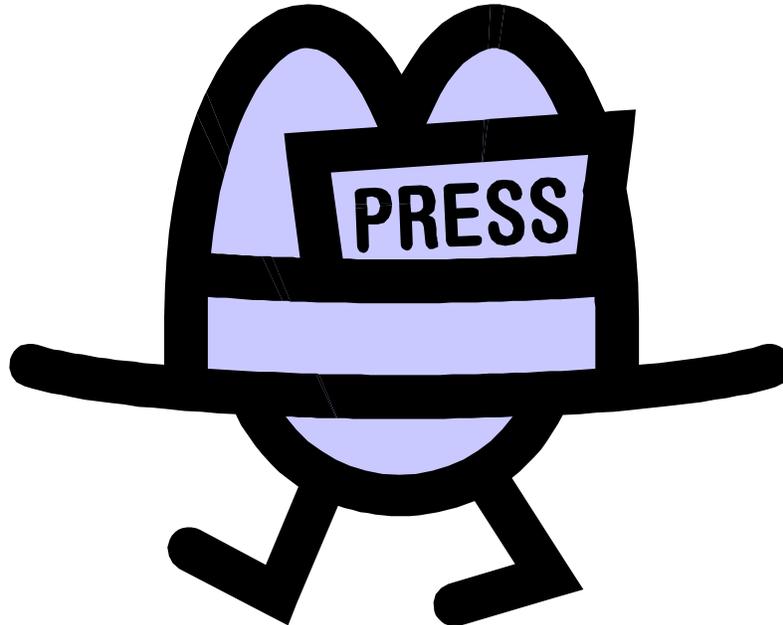
Once past the less-than-thrilling introduction – the author apparently thinks Bolivia is a riveting place to be but the description of it doesn't exactly make me scream with excitement – the game starts properly. A bit of confusion initially arose.

A Man Called David

At the start, the game asked me for my name so, not wishing to play anonymously or be called by a name that wasn't my own, I promptly inputted "David". Big mistake. One of the NPCs in **Bolivia By Night** is called David. So am I. This led to quite a bit of confusion as I arrived at a meeting only to be told that it couldn't start as David wasn't here. But I *was* there. I know I was there because the text on the screen told me so. It was even more confusing when other NPCs kept referring to this chap called David and implying he wasn't even there at all.

Hmmm... pity my parents didn't think to call me Ezekiel. It would certainly have avoided problems like this.

After that bit of confusion was out of the way, things progressed somewhat more smoothly aside for a few annoying little niggles along the way (more about them later).



What's It About?

Not, as I'd first thought, a guidebook about Bolivia thankfully. It seems you're a journalist who happens to live and work in Bolivia and it's your job to be sent all over town to cover stories. These tend to be fairly simple and straightforward stories and involve nothing more complicated than turning up at the relevant location, asking a few easy questions and sometimes taking a photograph.

Taking a photograph... ah, if only it was *that* easy. **Bolivia By Night** is one of those games which seems to delight concerning itself with the pointless minutiae of interactive fiction. Taking a photograph of someone isn't a simple case of typing "take photo". Nope. *That* returns an error message along the lines of there not being a photo here you can take. Surely the writer should have expected someone to type "take photo" and put a response in to cover this most obvious of actions? Unfortunately that's not the end of the problems involving the camera. When you've figured out the guess the verb concerned with taking a photo, you're next told that it might be a good idea to turn

the camera on. Groan. Turn the camera on and take the photo? Nope. Now you need to put the camera in action mode. Double groan. Is putting the camera in action mode a simple case of typing "put camera in action mode"? Hell no. The game doesn't even understand the word "action"! Turns out there's a button on the camera that you need to press and *that* puts the camera in action mode. Can I finally take the frigging photo? Thank heavens I can.



(In fact I was a bit disappointed that the attention to pointless details broke down here because I was quite looking forward to spending another half hour typing out meaningful commands along the lines of "raise arm holding camera", "point camera at target", "check target's head hasn't been chopped off", "check lighting", "check film is in camera"... and so on.)

Murder Most Foul

The game becomes quite a bit more interesting when (spoiler alert!) David gets murdered. No, not me. The other David.



Up to this point, **Bolivia By Night** had seemed to be a fairly run of the mill game about a journalist but the murder of the other David gave it a darker twist. You, being the only journalist seeming to do any work, are assigned to the case to try and uncover what happened to him. A lot of this involved much wandering around town and generally hoping you hit upon the right thing to do. I was at a loss several times but, aided by the hints (which are very good), I was able to make progress.

And Then It All Got Rather Strange...

I'd been playing for about an hour to an hour and a half and thought I had the game pretty much sussed out: colleague murdered, find out who did it. Only there's quite a bit more to it than that. The real strangeness started when I met some chap who claimed to be a Guardian of the land and went on at length about dark powers and saving the world and evil forces. This sort of thing seemed quite out of place in the context of the game that had passed before, kind of like watching your favourite cop show and seeing aliens wander into the local pub for a round of drinks. While it's all fine and dandy in a generic fantasy game (and what generic fantasy game would be complete without evil forces and a quest to save the world?), it just doesn't fit into a game which had been, up to this point, quite normal.

And then my Che Guevara t-shirt started speaking to me and my earlier enthusiasm for the game began to wane somewhat. It got, y'know, kinda *silly*. It wasn't helped much by the fact that no one else seemed to hear the t-shirt speak or, if they did, they didn't seem to think it was anything unusual. I've never been to Bolivia before so maybe talking Che Guevara t-shirts aren't anything to get excited over but I sort of doubt it.

Other Annoyances

Thankfully there's nothing else quite as bad as the camera but a few other things about the game ticked me off. Some are just simply bad game design, others are very minor things but annoying all the same.

Several locations in the game aren't accessible in the normal sense of the word. A couple of locations in your apartment can't be reached and trying just hits you with vaguely unsatisfying responses. Enter the

bathroom and you're told "You feel better after using the facilities" while the kitchen just has "Try as might, you can't find anything edible in the kitchen". Surely it wouldn't have hurt to have properly included these locations in the game instead of a few lines of text instead?

There's also a door in your apartment that at first looked like a genuine error arose when trying to open it but instead it just turned out to be a bit of poor programming on the writer's part. Try to go west and you get a message saying "You'll have to open the door to Richard's room first". Type "open door" and you're told it's opened. Try going west and you get the same message again. As it happens, this isn't the bug it first appeared to be as the game is mistakenly interpreting "open door" as referring to another door. "open richard's door" is the correct command. (It doesn't work, incidentally, as the door's locked.)

Overall, I quite liked the game and thought it was the second best in the comp, annoyances and guess the verb issues notwithstanding. I'd have rated it quite a bit higher if not for the weirdness that came about partway through which put me off playing the rest of it.

6 out of 10





Castle Quest

By Andrew Cornish

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Treasure quest

Platform: Adrift 3.9

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/castlequest.taf>

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In brief: there's a castle full of wonderful treasure which you've decided to go and plunder.

There are problems with **Castle Quest** from the very beginning. The introduction does a poor job of setting the scene and while it's at least written competently enough that there are no glaring spelling mistakes or grammatical errors, it's hardly the sort of thing that is going to be winning the author any awards for his literary skills.

Descriptions are basic in the extreme: the welcome mat has the word 'welcome' written on it; the chair is just an ordinary wooden chair; the description of the green button indicates simply that it hasn't been pressed. Those the items that are described; a good few aren't. Are they simply unimportant or did the author miss them? Probably a bit of both.

By far the most puzzling thing about **Castle Quest** is the sheer abundance of items scattered throughout the castle that don't serve a purpose. Now quite a few games I've played have red herring items, i.e. items placed in the game that serve no real purpose other than to confuse the player into *thinking* they serve a purpose. The poor player might spend an age trying to find a use for said item, only to find it doesn't have a use at all. Irritating? You bet. Yet it's the sort of thing that crops up in no end of games all the same. Heck, I've even done it myself on several occasions.

But this is the first game I've played where every single item is a red herring. Yep, every one. Scattered around the castle are various body parts – including a brain, a bone, a skull and several others – as well as weapons, food items, etc that seem to be there for no other reason than the writer felt like putting them there. Did he originally intend to write a larger game and was going to include a use for these items at some point? Who knows...? I finished the game with a score of 50 out of the maximum possible score of 50 and carrying a dozen or more items, not one which I managed to find a use for. There are no darkened areas in the castle so no need for the lantern and as there are no enemies to defeat in combat, there's also no need for the weapons either.



There are no actual puzzles in the game but several points where making a wrong move can kill you off without any kind of warning. Frustratingly, there's often no way of knowing what the right and wrong things to do are. Here's a great example: in the Brass Hall, you come across two levers: one blue, one black. Pull one lever and it kills you. Pull the other one and you move on to the next part of the game. How do you know which is the correct lever to pull? You don't. It's just a case of pulling one and hoping you don't get the one that kills you. Clearly this is the sort of game you want to be saving every few moves.

This is the kind of annoyance that used to plague text adventures back in the 80's and, along with mazes, is something I'm glad doesn't tend to bog down the modern IF scene. If there was a way to figure out which lever was safe and which dangerous, then fine. But killing the player off for making the wrong decision when there's no possible way of knowing what the *right* decision is, is just bad game writing.

Another example of bad game writing, and one that any mimesis-breaking fanatic will be up in arms about, is the game's annoying way of telling you when you've done something you needed to do. In one location, you need to press a button: press it and a message flashes up on screen telling you that you've done something you needed to do and can now go through the north door in the main hallway. How would the player know that pressing a button opens a door in a completely different room? Can he see around walls or something?

The final nail in the coffin has to be the ever hateful guess the verb, here at full strength and every bit as frustrating as you might expect it to be. The green button can't be "pushed" but can be "pressed". Try "push lever" and you get the default response saying you've pushed it but nothing happens. Try "push blue lever" and you get the proper response. Ouch.

All in all, **Castle Quest** is one of those ADRIFT games that has disappeared over the passage of time and is probably better off forgotten.

2 out of 10



A Day At The Seaside

By Matthew Hunter

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Real Life

Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/dayatseaside.taf>

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Inspired ideas for the Spring Comp 2005 must be seriously lacking this year. One game involved wandering around your house tidying it up, this one has you wandering around a seaside town doing... not much really.

I wasn't really sure what to make of **A Day At The Seaside**. Is it a guidebook for some little seaside town? Or is it a work of interactive fiction? It fails as either.



The guidebook idea doesn't work very well because the town is small, no more than a dozen locations, and the geography is strange to say the least. The whole town map can't be displayed properly because of the bizarre layout and so sometimes when you tap F2 for the map, you get an error message and other times you get a map which seems slightly different depending on which location you're currently standing in.

As a work of interactive fiction, it doesn't work very well either. Commands only seem to be included if they're needed to make progress in the game and left out if they're not necessary. So no swimming in the sea, unfortunately, which is perhaps the main reason people go to the seaside in the first place. You also can't examine the sea either which is another of the game's bad points. In one part of the beach, you can dig if you're carrying the bucket and spade but trying to dig in another part hits you with an error message. Digging in the final part produces a sandcastle which is also apparently invisible as you're not able to look at it once you've made it. You can also make multiple sandcastles if you're so minded but as all of these are likewise invisible, there's probably not much point.

There isn't a proper introduction to the game and so figuring out what you need to do is big problem. A bit of text hints you should head to the beach but as nothing happens when you get there, there's clearly a lot more to it than that.





Wandering around the town produces a few oddities. I'm able to buy a camera despite the fact that I don't have any money – at least, nothing is listed in my inventory which starts off completely empty (I came to the seaside carrying nothing at all? Looks like it.) – yet elsewhere I'm confronted with the problems of a photo booth that requires money to operate and which I'm not able to use. Maybe the money is considered to be part of the player that doesn't need to be listed in the inventory, like your clothes (assuming you're wearing any and haven't just come to the seaside stark naked), but I still wasn't able to figure out the correct phrase to get the phone booth to work.

Items seem to be scattered around pretty much without reason. A bucket and spade can be found near the beach (okay, I'll let that one go, it's the seaside after all), a form that requires filling in, a pen... I'm not able to fill the form in once I've got the pen. Guess the verb issues? Or something else that needs to be done first? I couldn't say.

A gimmick that **A Day At The Seaside** uses is a picture of each location. I wasn't too keen on this to be honest, even though it was a nice touch, as they are actual photos as opposed to the drawings that appeared in the text adventures of my youth (...nostalgia again...). But they were an interesting touch all the same. Some of the locations seemed to lack much in the way of text (one only lists the exits and nothing else) so having something to look at helped.

It was hard to keep any real enthusiasm going for this game. It's not a terribly interesting subject full stop and the amount of things not covered makes matters worse. On top of that, there's no walkthrough and no hints so when I became stuck, which happened before too long, it wasn't hard to resist the urge to quit.

3 out of 10



A Day At The Seaside

By Matthew Hunter

Review: Robert Rafgon

Genre: Real Life

Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/dayatseaside.taf>

.....

This game is based on wandering around a tourist destination. Unfortunately the game looks very rushed and incomplete. This game uses photos, which are generally well done, and the writing is reasonable. However, more objects could and should be implemented in each location. Most of the locations are reasonably described, but the tasks are not. Carrying out point-scoring tasks needs to give players a reward, by an entertaining paragraph, rather than a simple sentence.

This game has promise, as an Art Show like entry, where you wander around trying out and looking at stuff. However, there isn't much to try, as not much is implemented. The aim of the game should have been better articulated. I would personally have started the game next to the council sign, so as to give some ideas of what to do. If this game hadn't been a competition entry, I would probably have given up after a few minutes of aimless wandering.

It took me a long while to figure out anything, and I only solved the game with full points after a hint from the author. The biggest problem is the lack of error messages for close, but not quite right actions. An example (with a spoiler warning) is in the photo booth where "buy photo" only gives a message if you are holding the correct object. Otherwise you just get a standard error message. This made me think that it was a guess-the-verb problem rather than an actual puzzle.



With the photos and room descriptions being generally well done, I almost wonder if this was someone's attempt at showing off their home town, or where they went on holiday. The author shows promise, but needs to put a lot more effort into the game mechanics with more objects and tasks implemented. This game could really be improved with a bit more work.

SCORE - 3/10



Fire In The Blood

By Richard Otter

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Murder Mystery

Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/fireintheblood.zip>

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The introduction to **Fire In The Blood** is quite a bit better than those in Richard Otter's previous games and does a good job of setting the scene. Your wife has been murdered and you have decided to find the killer, and then exact a little 'payback' for their crime.

Unfortunately there are a number of things which bring the game down. As with all of the author's previous works (with the exception of the mini-comp gamp **We Are Coming To Get You!**), there an abundance of items scattered all over the place, the purpose of which is sometimes difficult to figure out. As you wander around the game, you'll pick up more and more items and while there are a few that serve an obvious purpose (the spade and some of the weapons), the majority just seem to be either red herrings or ones whose purpose isn't easy to discern. Then, too, there are the NPCs. There are a fair number of them moving around the game. On the plus side, they can be questioned about a wide range of subjects and can offer some useful information. On the down side, they aren't very interesting characters. The descriptions for them are often brief and to the point and what they say isn't anything particularly rewarding. On top of that, their dialogue tends to be italicized and features very poor grammar, thus the reading of it is often stilted.

By far the game's worse aspect is the way the player will frequently react in unlikely ways:

You are suddenly overwhelmed by a complete feeling of depression and you shout to yourself, "If only that meeting hadn't gone on so long!"

You are suddenly overwhelmed by a complete feeling of worthlessness and you hear yourself mutter, "Jane."

A dozen or more times during my first play through the game, I saw this happening and it got steadily more irritating the longer I played. Just like the creepy sensations that featured in the author's last game, **Darkness**, this sort of thing is fine when used in moderation but too often and it makes the player come across as some kind of babbling idiot.



The hardest thing about **Fire In The Blood** is, as with other games by the author, trying to figure out just what needs to be done. This is clearly an author who doesn't believe in making his games easy to get into. You are presented with a large number of locations to explore, NPCs to interact with and items to collect, but actually guessing how you're supposed to make a start with finding your wife's murderers isn't clear. In a smaller game with less NPCs and less items, it might be possible to hit upon the correct path by trying everything and just hoping something works. In a game the size as this one, you're likely

to struggle. I think I'd been playing for about an hour, had collected over a dozen items, visited every location I could find and had spoken to every NPC there was... and then I just found myself at a loss as to how I was supposed to get any further. Short of asking every single NPC in the game about every single subject I could think of – a mammoth task considering the number of NPCs and possible subjects – it's hard to know what needs to be done. I even ended up strangling some guy in the park with a rope just because he was there, I had the rope and the game would let me do it. Was he the guilty party? I don't know but it felt so good to actually be doing something instead of trying to figure out things to do, that I just killed him anyway.

Fortunately there's a good hints system to fall back upon. I was reluctant to use this to begin with as I tend to think using the hints system is cheating, but unless you're amazingly good at text adventures, or just amazingly persistent, it's likely you're going to find yourself consulting the hints again and again.



Relying on the hints soon reveals several things about the game that are likely to get the better of all but the most persistent of players. Characters need to be asked about other characters yet there never seems to be any clear reason why the player would question them about these characters. Maybe I'm missing something and the clues are there after all, or maybe the author just expects everyone to either



be amazingly persistent and question every character about every *other* character, or to use the hints system as often as possible.

Dealing with the people who killed your wife is a difficult task, not helped much by the fact that obvious commands don't seem to be recognised half of the time. I successfully managed to uncover who one of the killers was (well, okay I followed the hints) but after admitting to me that he had killed her, I then tried to kill him only to be hit with the unhelpful ADRIFT default command of "now that isn't very nice".

The hints also led me to a strange little occurrence which might be a bug or might just be me. One hint advises me that I can use the bottle as a weapon if I break it. So I type "break bottle" only to have someone shout at me not to break it in my current location (the old tennis court). So I leave the old tennis court and try again to break it. This time I'm told I don't have the bottle. Sure enough, I check my inventory and see I don't have it (turns out I gave it away earlier on). Puzzled, I go back to the old tennis court and again try to break the bottle and again get shouted at. Examining the tennis court doesn't reveal a bottle to me so I'm not quite sure what's going on but clearly the game seems to expect me to break a bottle here. Weird.

To begin with, I liked **Fire In The Blood** but the more I played it, the less it appealed to me. It's a large and pretty much directionless game in which nothing is very clear and the only progress you are likely to make is either via the hints or sheer dogged persistence. The writing is average but never becomes anything better than that, and the NPCs are just not really interesting enough to care about. The author needs to work on adding some much needed emotional content to his games.

5 out of 10

Fire In The Blood

By Richard Otter

Review: Robert Rafgon

Genre: Murder Mystery

Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/fireintheblood.zip>

.....

I was a beta tester for this game, but I have replayed the latest version to write this review. The story of this game is about a husband who wants revenge for his murdered wife. This game does feature some violence, which you would expect in a game based on revenge. I have to admit that I didn't identify well with the player character and felt a little uncomfortable, as I personally believe more in forgiveness than revenge. I didn't mind the violence, only the motives slightly bothered me. However, I was willing to put this aside in order to enjoy the game.





The story and writing are fine and do well in expressing the husband's grief, although it does sometimes go a little over the top. I haven't been in anywhere close to this situation though, so it is difficult to judge. The game does not always succeed in providing clues to identify the culprits in the investigation, but this is difficult to do well, as most clues in games like this are generally either too obvious or too subtle. One feature that I really like is that there are multiple solutions to many of the puzzles. There are less red herrings than in the author's previous games, as most of the items can be used for some kind of solution. This provides more variety to the gameplay.

Overall I liked this game. I am always ready for more good action-filled games.

SCORE - 6/10

Flat Feet

By Joel Ray Holveck

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Comedy/Detective

Platform: Inform

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/flatfeet.z8>

The intro to **Flat Feet** was so wildly over the top that I wasn't sure whether to groan, fire the game off to the recycle bin, or just sit there and hope things got better.

Fortunately they *did* get better, although the same streak of wildly over the top, tongue in cheek humour is found throughout the rest of the game, so if you're not a fan of this sort of thing it's perhaps doubtful you'll like **Flat Feet** much.



You're Jacques, a cat detective, and together with your friend Ralph, a ferret, you solve crime. Still with me? Handled better, the intro could have been amusing but the way it was done here left a lot to be desired. Too slapdash for my liking. Too manic. Not to mention the fact that it doesn't give you a clue what the game is supposed to be about.

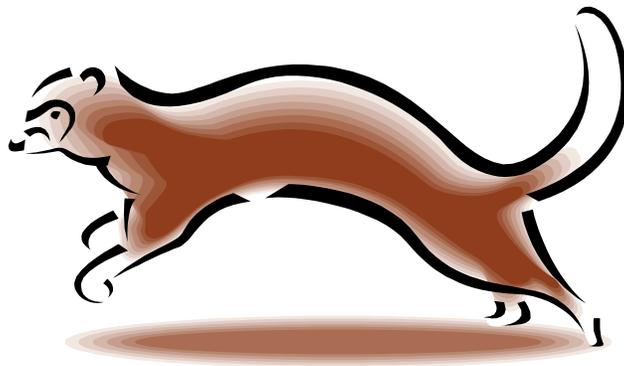
The game starts and... what to do? Good question. I spent some time examining my surroundings, talking to Ralph (comical little fellow with some witty dialogue), wandering around. All without any real clue as to what I was supposed to be doing. I figured that as I was a detective, albeit a feline one, I'd have a case to solve but if that *was* the case, it sure wasn't making itself very obvious. There was a phone in the first location but I couldn't seem to call anyone on it and trying to answer it hit me with the following strange message:

(to Ralph)

"Your voice sounds strange; have you been eating enough bacon?"

So very shortly into the game I was bashing out "H" followed in short succession by "I", "N" and "T". Ah! Turns out I need to recover the tire from the alley and then do a few more things and *then* the phone will ring and I'll be given a case.

Hmmm... I can't help thinking this first part of the game would have been a lot more playable if the phone had rang first and *then* I'd had to figure out how to leave the starting locations. Doing all the other stuff first (and some of it was nail-grindingly drawn out), make the start seem to really drag.



Making progress through the rest of the case is quite a chore. There are a large number of locations and what to do in most of them is never very straightforward, although there's more than adequate hints system for if, like me, you get stuck. Sometimes strange things need to be done to move matters on – climbing the dinosaur skeleton in the museum allows you to meet the person who wants to hire you. At other times, the game introduces very weak excuses for not allowing a certain action – Ralph will nip to the toilet whenever you press the elevator button in the Transamerica Pyramid and you are unable to enter the elevator without him. Annoyingly when he returns and you hit the elevator button again, Ralph nips off to the toilet *again*. In fact, he carries on doing this *every single time* you press the button. The little guy was so annoying I even got tempted to kill him at one point. As a comedy sidekick, he's frequently amusing but more often than not just plain frustrating.





A few times, the lack of testing shows through. Sausalito features a number of identical art galleries with a number of seemingly identical proprietors, none of whom can be examined or even spoken to. Some of the proprietors have names, others are just referred to as 'proprietor'. There's also the annoying fact that if you head to Sausalito too early in the game, you can render it unfinishable as you can only cross the Golden Gate Bridge once. Admittedly, the game does warn you of this (in a roundabout fashion) but surely it would have been better to allow the player to cross and re-cross the Bridge as often as was needed?

But bad points aside, I rather enjoyed **Flat Feet**. For all its faults, and there were quite a few, it was well written and comical. Logic doesn't play a very part in it, unfortunately, and quite a few times there were things happening that seemed too forced, and were then attributed to the kind of wacky logic that some comedy games have. Walking *up* at the Mystery Spot and then being able to walk *over* the city was a good example, as is the bit where your car appears out of nowhere if you leave off your walk over the city at the wrong time.

But I liked it. It was amusing. It could have been better but, all things considered, it was my favourite game in the Spring Thing.

6 out of 10

Frustrated Interviewee

By Robert Rafgon

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Fantasy

Platform: Adrift 3.9

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/frustrated.taf>

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Although unlikely to win any “Best Title” awards, I felt **Frustrated Interviewee** was the strongest game in this year’s Spring Comp and while not as good as the author’s previous game, **Veteran Knowledge**, it was still the most accomplished game in the Comp.

The premise of the game is... different to say the least. You're attending a job interview and part of the job requires teamwork. So to show what a great team player you can be, you decide to relate a few examples from real life: problems you have solved, ways in which you and your friends have put your heads together to figure things out, etc. Different but... good? Well... I liked the *idea* of the game itself being a series of events that the player relates to the interviewer but wasn't too sure how well it worked in practice.

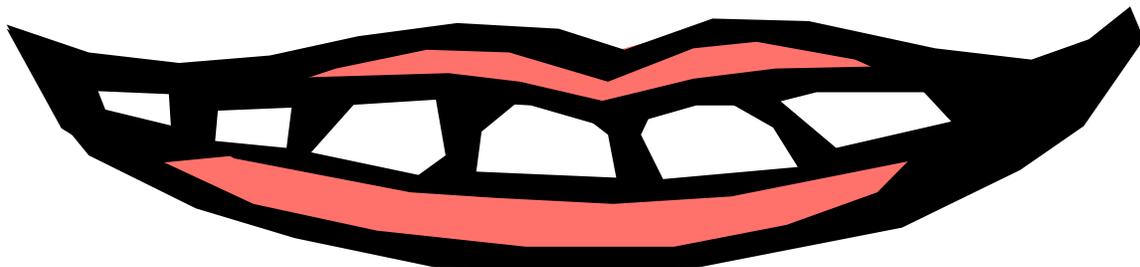
But the game itself...



It's split into three main parts. The first part involves wandering around your living area at university and getting together the other members of your gaming group. Some of this is fairly obvious, some less so. Daniel is an easy enough person to be persuaded to help you but I ran into quite a few problems with Michael, who is asleep and seems determined to stay that way no matter what I did to him. Strangely enough, when I resorted to the hints I discovered that several of the things that *should* have woken him up, didn't. The hints advised me to slap or shake him, which I did. Neither worked. The third hint told me that I should shout at him, which *did* work. Simply typing "wake Michael" didn't do any good either.

All the rooms at the university contain the usual allotment of items to be examined but most of these are just scenery pieces and serve no real purpose in the game. Trying to examine most of the items in the rooms of your fellow university buddies hits you with a default message that you don't want to be searching through [name]'s belongings, which becomes a bit trying after you've seen it for the tenth time.

The only bad thing about the first part of the game was the often poor dialogue. As with **Veteran Knowledge**, the characters' dialogue is handled badly and they seem to have all the depth of cardboard cut outs. Admittedly, none of the characters are so wildly over the top as the Monster and his clichéd super villain rants (from **Veteran Knowledge**) but they all seem to act like they're reading from prompt cards most of the time. After all, would a university student really say *'That is not enough chocolates to tempt me to stop reading?* Kind of doubtful.





From time to time, the game is interspersed with comments from the interviewer which add an interesting flavour to the proceedings. Unfortunately, while the comments of the interviewer are in bold print, your own replies are in the same print as the normal text in the game and it's occasionally awkward trying to tell the two apart. Maybe your own comments could be italicised to make them stand out better?

Part two of the game is quite a bit more interesting than the first. Here you are plunged into a generic fantasy game that you and your university buddies are playing: *Frustrated Looters*. As with all generic fantasy games, the objective is to find a mysterious treasure, battle enemies and so on and so forth. You become a warrior and your buddies all become the kind of characters that tend to populate fantasy worlds: a fighter, a thief and a sorcerer. There's some amusing tongue-in-cheek dialogue with each of them that gently mocks the fantasy setting of this part of the game. Anyone who has played a generic fantasy game before (and there must be quite a lot of us) will probably smile a few times at reading this.

There are problems with the second part, though. Not least of which is that the difficulty factor has been ramped up several notches. While the first part of the game was relatively straightforward (problems with waking Michael up notwithstanding), the second part introduces a lot more variables into the equation and figuring out how you're to proceed is confusing to say the least. Your companions, as in any fantasy game, can assist you but it took me several attempts (and more than a few peeks at the hints) before I hit upon the correct solution to the many puzzles facing me. This isn't helped much by the fact that commands required for one specific puzzle often don't work in any other location. Take the problem with the tree: it needs chopping down. You can't do it yourself as you lack the necessary tools so someone else has to do it for you. But in the previous location there was also a tree and commanding this character to chop it down didn't work there so when I came across the tree that *did* need chopping down, it never occurred to me to even try.

As I made my way through the second part, I found myself resorting more and more to the hints and while a few of the puzzles I'm sure I probably could have figured out for myself if I'd tried hard enough, there were a good number that I doubt I would ever have got the better of. Was I really expected to realise that I needed to pick up one end of the trunk and one of my companions the other end?

Puzzles abound in the game's second part and most of these are difficult ones. The sun room puzzle – which involves putting four sticks in eight different slots in order to open a door – almost made me tear my hair out in frustration. This puzzle in particular is very poorly clued. I struggled with it for a while and then, weak chap that I am, went to the hints. After that, there seemed to be a puzzle in every location and it quickly reached the stage where I was beginning to suffer quite badly from puzzle overload. Now I've never been much of a fan of puzzles full stop. Most of the time I can't figure them out and even the few times when I'm lucky enough to realise what needs doing, I find they tend to slow the game down so much as to make it almost unplayable. Aside from anything else, I just don't like them period, so when a game comes along that features one in almost every location... well, it's not a game I'm going to think of very favourably. For certain, the ones in **Frustrated Interviewee** were tedious enough that I would have quit if the hints hadn't told me exactly what I needed to do to get past them. The later ones I didn't even attempt to solve. Just banged out "hint", saw what I needed to do and did it. Yes, it's cheating but my patience was wearing so thin that I imagine if it had been a choice of either struggling to solve them and quitting, I'd have quit.





Into part three of the game. This was considerably shorter than the second part but, unfortunately, still had more than its fair share of frustrating puzzles. But either I'm getting better at this sort of thing or the puzzles were easier than in the second part because a couple I actually managed to solve on my own without the hints. The final set of puzzles, though, involving dealing with your treacherous former ally, Tife the Thief, really made me grind my teeth.

So what was **Frustrated Interviewee** like overall? On the plus side it was an original idea and it was well written. I particularly liked the comical dialogue with the other characters in the second part. The frequent comments of the interviewer were a nice touch, particularly as they seem to think you achieve things by either bribing people or threatening them with violence. On the down side... the puzzles. Ah, the puzzles. Too many, too hard, too tedious. Like I said before, I've never liked puzzle games overly much and the ones here are so difficult, and so poorly clued for the most part, that I imagine even people who *do* like puzzles will probably decide enough is enough and resort to the hints. Not to mention the fact that one puzzle after another is definitely overkill.

All in all, I'd say this was a lesser game than its predecessor but still likeable enough in its own right. More please (only not so many puzzles next time, okay?)

6 out of 10

House Husband

By C. Henshaw

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Real Life

Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/househusband.taf>

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There were a number of problems with **House Husband**, the main one being that nowhere in the game does it actually state what you're supposed to be doing. Fortunately, the author had posted a message about the game on the ADRIFT forum a while back about the game so I'm aware that the general idea is to pick up items and drop them in the bin in the kitchen then drop *that* bin in a wheelie bin outside. Unfortunately anyone who didn't read that thread is most likely not going to have a clue what the game is about or how to make any progress.

Another problem, although not really a problem in the usual sense of the word, is that at heart this isn't a very interesting idea for a game. You wander around your house and tidy it up. Hmm... I hate housework in real life and don't have any more enthusiasm for it in a game. Quite why this would be considered a good subject for a text adventure I'm not sure.

There are a few peculiarities with the way the game handles certain things, which I'm guessing is down more to the fact that this is the author's first game and she's probably missing quite a few things that people with a couple more games under their belt would spot. In the first location are several bottles but none of them can be referred to as "bottle". In fact, the bottle of tiger beer has to be referred to as "tiger beer" as neither "tiger" or "beer" on their own work. In the same room is a television that can't be watched or turned on. There are also some curtains which can't be opened because the player, apparently, isn't in

the mood! The same applies to the window. While that's certainly a better default response than "you can't do that", it still leaves a lot to be desired.



Wandering around the house and tidying things up seems to be just about all this game has going for it and it wasn't long before my patience was beginning to wear thin. It isn't helped much by the fact that most of the items you need to find are concealed either under or behind other items, meaning a good part of the time spent playing **House Husband** was spent typing "look behind [item]" or "look under [item]" which isn't a thrilling experience by any means.

The score is displayed on the status bar at the bottom of the screen but, irrespective of what it currently is, typing "score" displays a message saying that your score is "[number] out of a maximum of 0". Even when I'd remembered enough about the game from forum posts to realise what I needed to do and managed to boost my score above 10, I still kept getting this message.

For a game, **House Husband** has too many flaws for me to recommend. It looks to have gone through nothing more than minimal testing and the basic idea, tidying up your house, just isn't interesting enough to make forgive want to play it.

3 out of 10





House Husband

By C. Henshaw

Review: Robert Rafgon

Genre: Real Life

Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/househusband.taf>

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This game is mainly about a husband who has to clean up the house before his wife returns home. A fact, which is probably unsurprising, is that I find doing lots of household work boring, both in real life and on the computer. Unfortunately a lot of this game is just repetitive tasks, where you know what you have to do, and it just takes a lot of turns and effort to achieve it.

I hope I do not put off too many people with these comments, as this is a well written game, which does make the mundane more fun. There is also an interesting plot that you gradually discover and I do not want to spoil here. This review is far more negative than the game deserves, but at times as you play through, you just find yourself wanting to get on with the story, rather than repetitive tasks



The biggest problem with this game is the fact that you have to clean up absolutely everything before reaching the game's successful end. I solved about 90% of the tasks, before giving up and going to the walkthrough, as I was completely stuck. I gradually checked off and completed the tasks that I hadn't done, but it took me a long while to figure out the last missing task was where I had forgotten to look at an object in the first room. I think it would be very difficult to figure out everything without the walkthrough. This made the game very frustrating, especially as I had already figured out the plot from unsuccessful endings. It would possibly have been better to only need to complete most of the tasks rather than all of them, or allow a shortcut to the finish.

One error I noticed was that looking in the shed interior gives the same message as when you enter the shed, which is no longer appropriate.



Overall I did enjoy this game, but I think it could have been improved by not being quite so fastidious. That is how I like my housework.

SCORE - 6/10



How It All Started

By Kevin Treadway

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Dungeon Crawl

Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/howitstarted.taf>

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Games by newcomers always hold a special kind of feeling for me: it's halfway been delight (at seeing a game by a newcomer) and dread (at seeing a game by a newcomer). Sometimes newcomers write great games – **The PK Girl** and **Unraveling God** to name but two – but all too frequently it goes horribly wrong (**Death Agency** anyone?) It's even rarer to get a newcomer willing to submit his first game to an ADRIFT comp, considering that games entered in comps tend to receive so much more feedback, mainly negative, than any other games. But the writer of **How It All Started** obviously decided he was going to take a risk.

So... how is the game?

Surprisingly it's quite good.

So How *Did* It All Start?

With a goblin, apparently, and a room. So the game amusingly informs you at the very start. You start off in a generic fantasy dungeon, locked in there by a goblin called Nurgle. You have no weapons and you're without any possessions aside from a stick. No way out? Actually there's quite a good puzzle here which starts the game off

well. (On the downside, the most obvious command of them all – “kill Nurgle” – isn't covered.)



Unfortunately, it's now been a year and a half since **How It All Started** came out and as no subsequent games have been released, I think it's a safe bet to assume that one was all Kevin Treadway had in him. A pity. While there are rough edges in **How It All Started**, it's an accomplished game for a newcomer and boded well for any future releases.

Annoyances

Though accomplished for a game by a newcomer, **How It All Started** has several annoying problems. The Grotto location features a waterwheel and a shack yet the shack can't be entered. Also in the Grotto is a gate featuring a metal panel with a slot in it. Only one item can be inserted in the slot but attempting to insert the wrong items proves an unhelpful error message stating that nothing can be put in the slot. While no big deal, it was still annoying as by the time I found the one item I needed I had tried every other item in the game and been hit with the error message every time. Some kind of better response would have been nice: “You can't put the sword in the slot. It's too wide.” would have worked well. There's also a pole here as well

but that's apparently nothing very special as it doesn't even warrant a description.

Another location features a pool of water yet trying to enter the pool or swim in it doesn't produce any proper response. Is the pool just an illusion then?

Many of the problems with the game are most likely down to the fact that the writer was a newcomer and didn't know to cover some of the responses. A rewritten and revised version could easily fix the majority of these problems.

Short But Sweet

How It All Began isn't a very long game and aside from a few annoying guess the verb problems and non-obvious commands, it shouldn't take you very long to get to the end of it. The end hints that it might well be a kind of prequel to a larger work but as no subsequent games have been forthcoming, maybe that's not the case after all. A pity. While it's got its fair share of rough edges, it's a decent enough game and it's a shame the author never went ahead and wrote anything else.

5 out of 10





The Monster In The Mirror: Part 1

By Mystery

Review: Robert Rafgon

Genre: Horror

Platform: Adrift 3.9

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/monsterinmirror1.taf>

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The Monster in the Mirror 1 throws you immediately into a strange place, with almost no background as to why you are there, apart from that you have awoken suddenly from your sleep. This is a very surreal game, which never does give many answers about why these events are occurring, but this does not really matter.

There are two strange environments to experience before you return home for the last section of the game. These places successfully evoke a dreamlike atmosphere with strange descriptions. The technique of the game taking place within a dream actually works in hiding some of the inconsistencies of IF, especially in the need for puzzles. In a dream, the unusualness of everything being a puzzle can become usual, unlike in real life. Having unusual actions being required actually can add to the atmosphere. However, it can also add to the frustration, when the game sometimes becomes a little obscure. It is a difficult balance to maintain and the game does not always succeed.

One problem that I had when playing the game is that it hides necessary objects in unobvious places. Whilst playing the game you have to make sure to look at every single place or object mentioned in the description, as occasionally something you think would have a mundane description is hiding something important. The worst offender is in the second section where the object you need to look at is only implied by your location, and not actually listed. At least not that I could find. In the endgame sequence I was also stuck for a while, as I couldn't find a furniture item from the description. I

eventually realised that it was only referred to within the game by a shortened version of its name. When I was standing around doing nothing, as I could not figure out what else to do, the puzzle lost its urgency because nothing else was occurring.



The Monster in the Mirror 1 does not take long to play through, apart from when you are stuck trying to figure out which object you have missed looking at and searching through. It is generally fairly obvious what you need to find though, even if it is difficult to locate. Apart from these few very frustrating points, the game is enjoyable to play.

Score - 4/10

The Monster In The Mirror: Part 2

By Mystery

Review: Robert Rafgon

Genre: Horror

Platform: Adrift 3.9

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/monsterinmirror2.taf>

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The story of The Monster in the Mirror 2 ties together the trilogy. The first and third parts can work better as stand-alone games, but this game works better when combined with them to provide the link. The story could be better, but it is adequate, and it is only an excuse for the main purpose of the game, which continues to be wandering around the surreal environment. Most of the comments I made about the dream-like atmosphere in my review of the first part can also be applied here.

This game is an improvement in both the descriptions and puzzles, as it is more logical. By more logical, I mean the logic within the context of the game is more consistent, not that the game has become more realistic. The puzzles make more sense, and I did not have the same difficulties in playing hunt the required object. The improved ease of playing is partly because this game builds on some of the ideas and locations of the first game. It is also because the game is easier and shorter than the first game.



I found the Monster in the Mirror 2 more fun than the original. I would recommend that the original be played before this game, as it will make more sense.

Score - 5/10



The Mystery Of The Darkhaven Caves

By David Whyld

Review: Laurence Moore

Genre: Dungeon Crawl

Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/darkhaven.taf>

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(includes a few minor spoilers)

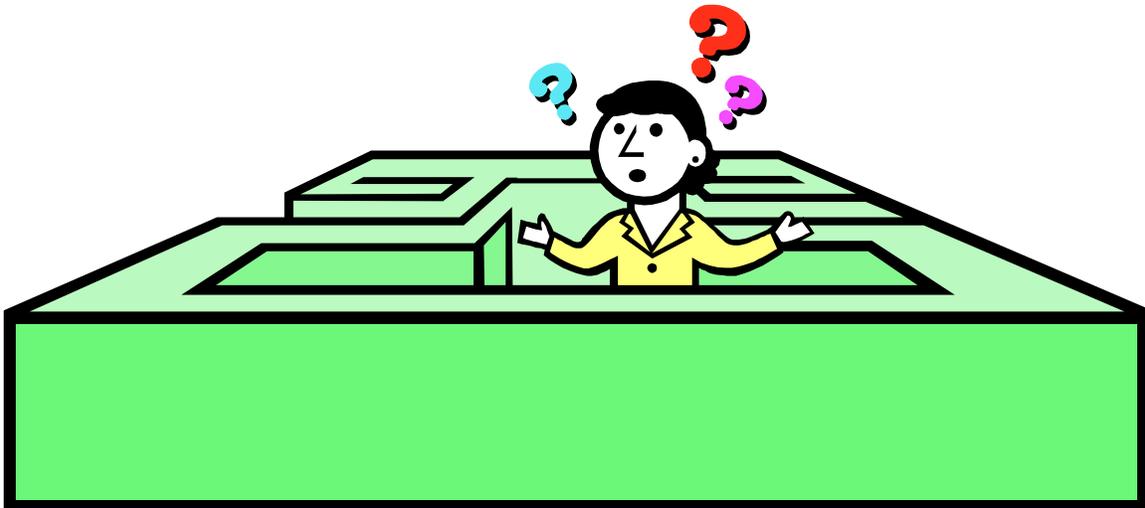
When you produce as many games as Davidw then it's very easy to have a few of them get lost in the portfolio and hardly become topics of discussion or garner a healthy series of reviews. Even if they were a competition entry.

The Mystery of Darkhaven Caves is one such game that I played bits and bobs of on its initial release but never finished it. Now, having tackled and completed the adventure, I'm certainly glad I took the time to dig it out of the archives. It's not a classic game. It's certainly not Davidw's best game, either, but it does have its own charm and very much a retro appeal.



The plot is wafer thin - again, commonplace with retro text adventures. There you are, the hero, and off you head to a network of caves where buried treasure is rumoured to be stashed - no one has ever found the treasure, no one has ever returned from the caves, no one has ever emerged from the trials within. Yep, you're a pretty dumb sort of hero, too, but not so dumb to arrive empty handed (as you do in most games). No, this time you are at least carrying a sword.

The location descriptions throughout are also pretty thin, just a few lines, but are fairly atmospheric in places. In fact, I kind of found this refreshing. It was a nice change of pace to escape from the reams of flowing text present in most current games. The caves themselves are a maze but rather than a very boring and pointless maze (Acornsoft were notorious for this - I hated those iron tunnels) at least you have plenty to do here.



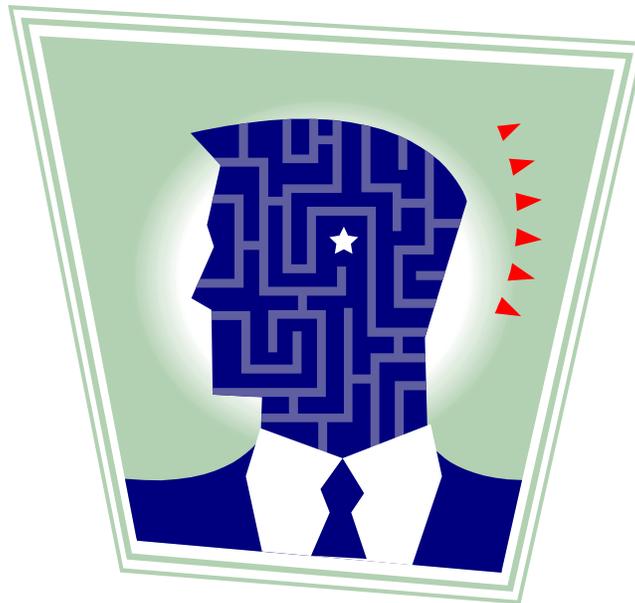
In the early stages of playing I fell foul to a teleporter but clicking on the map would (or so I thought) quickly resolve this. Ha, no it didn't, because the map had been cleverly disabled so I was hopelessly lost for a period of time. I stumbled upon a Troll and rather than lunge for the sword I tried a bit of conversation. "talk to snugg" wasn't recognised but "talk to troll" was. I took this as an oversight but it should have been included. Snugg is a typical Davidw monster creation - he has a bit of personality and humour...and also a toothache. Ah, time for a Troll toothpick, methinks. There are a few other characters

to bump into, as well, such as Cyana the Elf (try stealing a kiss), Mad Tom (a wizard...try and kill him) and Pargus the magnificent and most of them have errands for you to run. Once again, this is very retro in style, leaning towards inventory based puzzles - meet NPC, learn what item is required, find said item, return it to NPC. For example, with Snugg, it's obvious you need to find a toothpick and, once obtained, you can exchange it for a cello (play the cello, twice, for a humorous response). Now, go and find that musical fellow the harp player. Guess what you have to give him. In fact, you can offer him several items.

Gold plays a part, as well. The gold isn't listed in your inventory but you can "x" or "count" it to see how much you are carrying and it is essential because you will need to buy items if you want to complete the adventure. Somewhere in the cave is a merchant Gnome willing to sell you a bargain or two. There is also a scoring system present with a maximum of 125 points to be achieved.

The puzzles, and there are some, are mostly inventory based, as mentioned above, and here I certainly got another rush of retro text adventures.

In fact, the entire experience is retro so if that isn't your thing then you might want to give this one a miss. I also kept thinking of the maze in the fighting fantasy gamebook *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* although Davidw's maze has much more humour and less danger.



I enjoyed the game - it's not in the same league as **Paint!!!**, **Dead Reckoning** or **Sophie's Adventure** but then it isn't supposed to be, either. It's a light hearted cave crawl with an interesting assortment of puzzles and things to do, easy to pick up and play. It did leave me wondering a few things though. Here, we have an author with an obvious love for the text adventure (and many other similar formats) but what makes him tick? What drives someone to devote such time to such a hobby? What games are the author's personal favourites? Does writing a new game still bring the fresh buzz of excitement as the one before? (*note to KF, arrange an interview*). Did **The Mystery of Darkhaven Caves** provide the author with as much satisfaction as previous (or later) games? Actually, I'm sure Davidw had a lot of fun writing this one, pretty much the same level of fun I had playing and completing it. The humour and feel good factor does shine through quite often. I generally found I could do what I wanted and encountered no serious bugs or anything that left me hurling the file to the recycle bin in a rage. What I did find was a good game. A game that, no doubt, the author enjoyed putting together. And one which I certainly didn't end up pulling my hair out in frustration (I should stay away from *AIF*).

In summary -

- Quick and untaxing gameplay
- Text fairly non-verbose
- Nice retro feel
- Decent NPCs
- Inventory based puzzles
- Good humour

If you're looking for a break from the heavy and deep IF niche then this is a good departure for you. Would you like a window seat or the aisle?

6.5/10

Private Eye

By David Whyld

Review: Robert Rafgon

Genre: Detective/Comedy/Gamebook

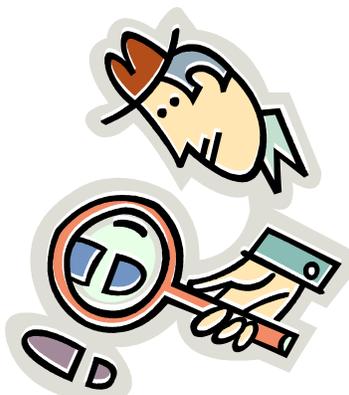
Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/privateeye.zip>

.....

In this game you are a private eye, as the game title indicates, and you have been hired to investigate a kidnapping. Unlike the other games in the competition, this is not a traditional IF game, it is a gamebook style game, where instead of typing in commands, you get to pick which option you want. As mentioned in the "about" section this means there are no guess-the-verb problems, which was a relief after A Day At The Seaside.

One of the best features of Private Eye is the numerous different choices and paths through the adventure, so there is lots of replay value to this game. The setting captures the noir detective genre, and it allows the author to showcase his normal sense of humour, which is always entertaining to read.





It was a bit annoying on the first time that I was presented with six choices, but the only one that worked was staying at the office. However, as this was mainly due to my sub par detective skills, I was soon fired from the case anyway. I would have preferred not to have all of the potential choices mocking my poor skills though. Even when I had one of the other choices as well, it would be better if the invalid choices were not included, although of course this is much more difficult to program.

Unfortunately I did find some occasional places where the game behaved strangely, such as:

- * One time the game refused to accept any numbers when the Feds came in during the kidnapping.

- * Near the end the game would not let me go back to find Kavallon after knocking the person out in the cell.

I will admit that gamebook style games with this many paths are hard to make work though, so the author has done a good job to rid the game of most of the bugs.

Overall this is a fun game, which I enjoyed and voted as the best of the competition.

SCORE - 7/10



The Prostitute

By The Anonymous Martian

Review: Laurence Moore

Genre: Adult

Platform: Adrift 3.9

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/prostitute.taf>

.....

Okay, AIF, let's get this out of the way first, then. It's a genre. And like any other genre it has its good and bad points, good and bad writers, good and bad games.

Yes, but it's just about sex. I mean, what's the point? Your mission is to have sex. And every game is the same.

True...but then isn't every fantasy game about saving the world or finding a hidden (insert talisman or crown or amulet or etc etc here!). Sure, it has its well worn carpets and well trodden paths but then every genre has built in clichés. If I play a horror game then I expect (hope) to be scared. If I play a comedy game then I expect (hope) to have a laugh. If I play a sex game then I expect (hope) to get laid.

So what's the difference? What's the big deal?

None, as far as I can see, but AIF does seem to be plagued with more poor writers and more poor adventures than most genres. Guess the verb and bugs rear ugly heads far too often. Spelling mistakes and bad grammar litter too many passages of text.

I rate Chris Cole as one (if not the) best writer of AIF. He successfully blends sex with puzzles and interesting scenario's and NPCs. **The Prostitute** penned by ??? does not come with the most exacting of plots but then what game does truly break the mould.

Okay, let's get down to it...



You are a nameless, faceless man who begins the adventure in a sleazy motel room looking to meet a prostitute for a birthday treat. Foolishly, you have booked the room and arrived already without arranging for any company as yet. The opening text is clumsy and repetitive and made me groan inwardly. Inventory wise you begin with a leather wallet but you cannot examine anything inside it (license, paper, credit cards) without the dreaded reply *you see no such thing*. This is a fundamental mistake and could have been handled very easily with just three items added and a text of *there is nothing interesting about the license, credit cards, paper*. A silly mistake. And there are more silly mistakes, too. A wooden dresser that can be examined but not opened. A television set (you must identify it as a TV and not telly or television - these are not recognised) which you can examine but not watch although you can turn the TV on (or attempt to). Surely, coding the game to accept turn on TV and not watch TV is just bad design and not a mere oversight. No, this is an author with a singular command in mind. Do not stray from the path then.

Now, this is all in the first location so the omens are not promising for a game where plenty has been implemented. I don't expect a game to allow me to swing from the ceiling or lean on one leg humming a tune whilst I open a door but I do expect to be able to examine objects mentioned and use commands as basic as watch TV when the room contains a TV. The night table is just as bad with objects invisible to the PC unless you examine the table itself. The objects in question are not concealed or tucked into a drawer but visible to the PC yet I could only see them once examining said table. How the hell can that be? Am I a midget? If I am then logically I might not be able to see the surface of the table but, come on, that's just bad game design once again.

At this point I was becoming a little frustrated...thank goodness I found the remote, ah, some porn...nice!

Well, that's AIF for you. You were warned. It's all buggy. Stupid games about shagging your sister and very little else.

No, that's not the problem. The problem here is bad and lazy game design regardless of the genre the game nestles in. If this was a fantasy game and the setting was a sleepy tavern in a middle-earth type village then I would still expect to be able to examine and interact with objects. Obviously, the room would be bereft of a TV (unless it's a David Whyld adventure, of course, but that's another tale).



Okay, let's continue...

First, I really am getting bugged at this and I hope the author takes note. The word "it's" means it is, right? So a sentence reading *the*

toilet serves it's purpose is incorrect. What you are saying is *the toilet serves it is purpose* which is nonsensical.

Please, address this in your next game.

The motel bathroom is a hopeless location. You can examine the tub (not bath) but not the tiles. You can examine the toilet (which serves *it's purpose*) but not the mirror. And, lo and behold, we uncover a copy of playboy on the toilet seat. Now, how do I not see this magazine when entering the room? Why do I have to examine the toilet to discover it? Furthermore, why does the item not feature in the location description *after* I have discovered it and before I take it? Again, this is bad game design and the author really needs to think logically about how he handles this type of thing. Sure, utilising the Adrift facility of having objects on other objects might seem cool but they make little sense if these objects should be visible upon entering the location. If the magazine was behind the toilet or concealed on a high shelf then that would make sense not to see it immediately. However, here the magazine is on the toilet seat, a few feet or so off the ground. Nothing is obscuring my vision (unless too many right hand shuffles have left me short sighted...)

Of course, it's an AIF game, that's it, I must be short sighted...

Now, the magazine, you can examine it but reading it is a waste of time (although a response is in place). As an aside, I think Britney is spelt Britney and not Brittany (that might be a place in France but don't quote me on it). The issue is from 2002 and features 80s pop princess Tiffany (I remember that shoot).

Now where the hell is my prostitute...?

After calling her up (open the night table and read the Bible, sinner) I wait nervously for my *date* to arrive. I tried having a wank with the playboy magazine but the game didn't understand what I was trying to do. I tried manipulating my manhood but, once again, I *saw no such thing...hey, have you been talking to my ex-wife?*

Eventually a hot redhead arrived. I paid her and tried conversation but it's that damn *ask NPC about SUBJECT* which I can never get to grips with. I was at a loss of how to proceed so I went with *f*** Lacey*

where I was told not to be so eager. Fair enough, I tried then to *kiss Lacey* and was told to get on with it - what???

So, the nitty gritty, the sex scenes, are they any good? Who knows? Who cares? I took Lacey's bag and found a dildo but getting her to use it was a real struggle. I couldn't seem to get her to undress, partake in dirty conversation or initiate any sexual couplings.

At this point I decided to clear off with my issue of Playboy and gaze at a former teen pin-up Tiffany...her glossy pages seemed to have more life than any part of this game.

Now you see, right? It's AIF. It's all crap. Littered with mistakes, bugs, stupid situations...

No, it's not AIF, it's just a bad game that failed to serve *it's* purpose. Make sure you return the keys when you check out.

2/10





Selma's Will

By Mystery

Review: Robert Rafgon

Genre: Horror

Platform: Adrift 3.9

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/selmaswill.taf>

.....

The Monster in the Mirror trilogy's concluding game Selma's Will also works well as a stand-alone game. When I first played this game I was not aware of the first two games. From this I can say that it is not necessary to know anything about these games to gain a rewarding playing experience. Selma's Will is different in style, as it takes place completely in the real world, unlike the dream environments of the first two games.

Once again there is only a short background story, which was mainly revealed in the ending of the Monster in the Mirror 2. This story sets the scene for the exploration of the house and basically just provides a reason for the treasure hunt to find the will in the game's title. None of the games in the series have much story, instead relying on the player's curiosity for looking around strange places. As a curious person myself, I enjoyed searching around the environment.



Selma's Will is well written, with much longer and better descriptions that add greater depth to the environment. The comparison of the PC's memories with the current state of the house is an interesting contrast. The game is also larger in size and better constructed than the first two games, which had linear designs. Selma's Will allows far more deviation in the order that puzzles are solved. Although the game is larger, it is still not too long or difficult. In fact I would recommend Selma's Will as a good game for beginning players to try.

This game includes a lot more NPCs than the first two games. They are not hugely conversational, although this does fit their characters to be rude to the PC. There are also a lot more objects to figure out uses for. In this game everything and everyone has one use, and you just have to find it. The lack of red herrings makes the game easier to solve, but unfortunately the game's simple design means that sometimes there is too much just find object/give object to person, or find key/unlock door type puzzles. A bit more complexity or variation in the puzzles I feel could have improved the game.

Selma's Will is easily the best game of the series and a good game overall. The writing and design were better for each subsequent game in this series, showing the author's improvement over the period. Selma's Will is an enjoyable fun game, which I would recommend.

Score - 7/10



Threnody

By John Schiff

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Fantasy

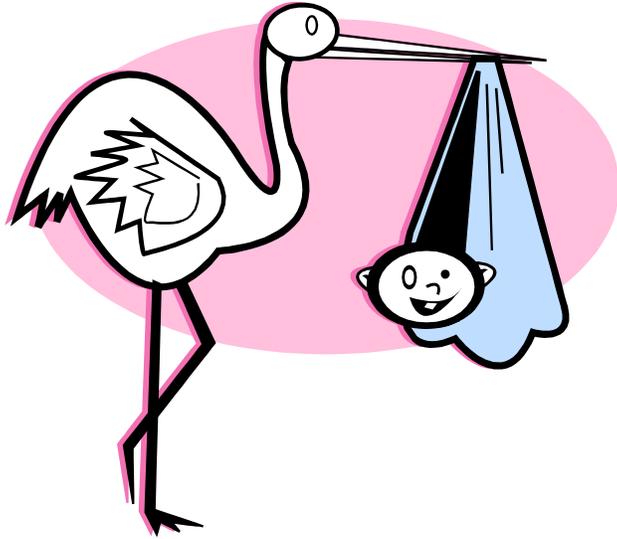
Platform: Tads

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/threnody.gam>

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By far the most interesting aspects of **Threnody** takes place right at the very start of the game. Afterwards the player is born and it all goes downhill. Kind of like real life in order words... ☺

The game begins just before you are born. You're sliding down a canal and there's a cord wrapped around your throat. The canal can't be examined (bad move – although considering what it actually is, that might be just as well) and there's not much to do here but wait for a while until you get your first real decision. Here you have to make a choice which will affect how the rest of the game plays out: choose the lion to be a warrior, the dragon to be a mage and the ferret to become a thief. I actually liked this idea and if I'd liked the game itself more than I did, I'd have probably played it through a few times to see what difference choosing different career paths made for you.



After that, alas, you're born. And the game gets less interesting.

I chose the path of the mage and the game jumped forward a number of years and plonked me outside a generic fantasy fortress in the middle of nowhere. Hardly the most riveting location for my adventure to properly begin. There's also no real clear idea of what I'm supposed to be doing here. Not the sort of thing that generally encourages me to keep playing a game.

But I persevered for a while. As I wandered around, the game filled in some of the gaps for me and I managed to figure out roughly what I was supposed to be doing.

I tried casting a few spells and ran into some annoying guess the verb problems. "cast spell" hits me with the truly annoying default error message "there's no verb in that sentence!" which always reminds me of English lessons back at school. Never a good sign. "cast spells" (note the 's' on the end) works wonders. Suddenly I've got a whole horde of spells at my disposal; none in good ol' fashioned English alas but I guess you can't win 'em all.

After wandering the bleak and not very interesting landscape around the fortress, I decided a bit of spell casting was in order. Unfortunately the game seemed to have other ideas, or maybe just liked giving me confusing messages. "cast volare" – a spell of weightlessness – just gave me "what do you want to cast the Volare spell?" Bit confusing there. "cast exubero" didn't work at all and instead hit me with an

error message which informed me the game didn't understand the word "cast". Considering I'm playing a spellcaster, that's a pretty poor oversight. In the end, I figured out that the spells can only be cast *at* things. So "cast volare" will always hit you with an error message unless you're typing "cast volare at [something]". Annoying.



Once I'd figured out the basics of what I was supposed to be doing, getting further in **Threnody** was fairly simply. Most of the puzzles, at least in the earlier parts of the game that I played, tended to involve simply figuring out which spell was required and casting it. As there doesn't appear to be any actual limit on the amount of spells you can cast, you can just keep going through the list until you hit upon the right one. I only played **Threnody** from the mage's point of view so I'm guessing that more warrior-like and thief-life ways of puzzle solving are also available.

So does the fact that there are three different paths through the game via the three classes you can choose (mage, warrior, thief) give the

game added replay value? Not really. I didn't dislike **Threnody**, I just didn't find it that interesting. The generic fantasy world wasn't anything very special and at no time did I feel like I was actually embarking on a wondrous journey. A lot of this is down to the way the game is written. Strange and magical events are given no more room than ordinary run of the mill ones and so while they *are* strange and they *are* magical, you never get the impression that they're anything very notable. Not to mention the fact that the generic fantasy setting has been done to death before, and much better.

Actually the most fun I had with **Threnody** was in typing in some of the games built-in silly commands (a list of which is accessible via the hint command). Peeing on the midwife amused me no end, childish that it was.

There are also a few annoying things missed out that I felt should have been covered, the main one being the lack of a "talk" command, with not even a default message to tell you to try something else.

But not a terrible game all told. I didn't finish it. The game just didn't interest me enough but the for hour or so that I played it, it was reasonably entertaining.

5 out of 10





Whom The Telling Changed

By Aaron A. Reed

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Story

Platform: Inform

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/teller.z8>

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Another entry in the Spring Thing 2005 – and a game I'm not really sure what to make of.

It starts without any kind of background to set the scene (something I've never been a big fan of) and then... well, you leave your tent, speak to someone, get told to give a circlet to the storyteller... and the rest of the game just seems to be a story told by the storyteller. From time to time, you can make your own contributions by typing out the words in bold in the storyteller's dialogue, but for the most part it's just a simple case of sitting there and banging out "wait" commands one after the other. While an original idea (at least as far as I was concerned), it isn't a particularly thrilling one. It also wasn't helped much by the fact that to, begin with, I wasn't even aware I needed to be talking to the storyteller or asking questions, so I simply sat there, hit "wait" and read the story as it passed me by on the screen.



Whom The Telling Changed isn't a bad game but it's one I just couldn't seem to find any enthusiasm for. A better introduction, actually stating the premise of the game and what was expected of the player, might have helped.

3 out of 10



Credits

Many thanks to:

*Laurence Moore for his reviews of **The Mystery Of The Darkhaven Caves** and **The Prostitute***

*Robert Rafgon for his reviews of **A Day At The Seaside**, **Fire In The Blood**, **House Husband**, **The Monster In The Mirror (Parts 1 & 2)**, **Private Eye** and **Selma's Will***



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dwhyld@gmail.com



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<http://www.shadowvault.net/rex.htm>