

## HOLLOW VOICE

Now that I've cleared out the New Year's Eve party detritus — the confetti is swept, the empty champagne bottles tucked in with the recyclable trash — I'd like to venture forth with a 1998 proposition, not so much a resolution, for the IF community: let's turn the now-yearly IF competition into a biennial event, celebrated every two years perhaps much like the Olympics are now.

The benefits are readily apparent: IF programmers could have twice as long to fine-tune their entries, investing more time in thoughtful writing, elegant puzzle design, fleshed-out storylines, and better bug-testing; more aspiring programmers would toss their hats in the ring; while the rest of the IF fans would have more time to enjoy and methodically explore each new competition game — savoring more fully developed, memorable games instead of hurrying through too many games that, while generally well-conceived, were too rushed through development (to meet competition deadlines) to prove really enjoyable.

While many IF fans have more free time than I do — and anyone who's stayed tuned this long for *XYZZYnews's* uneven publishing schedule knows that I haven't much to spare — just as many face even heavier demands from their work, family, school, and other obligations. So let's give ourselves a collective break...! Many of us took *years* to finish *Zork*, *Adventure*, *Trinity*, and the other classic text adventures. Why would we want to rush through 35 games (in this year's competition alone) in a couple of hours or, at most, days each?

One of my real New Year's resolutions was to stop short-changing my personal Web site, and I'm glad to say I'm acting on that one with some recent improvements to the *XYZZYnews* home page: There's a new and improved guest-book (<http://www.xyzzynews.com/guestbook.html>), search engine (<http://www.xyzzynews.com/search/>), and subscription form (<http://www.xyzzynews.com/subscribe/>). Let me know what you think of the new features!

Until next issue, happy gaming!

**Eileen Mullin**  
*eileen@interport.net*

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## Issue # 14 Top 10 Picks for IF on the World Wide Web

### Interactive Fiction Web Ring

<http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/Lair/7152/>

### Hole in the Wall — Interactive Fiction

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Meadows/3355/if.htm>

### HUGO interactive fiction authoring system home page

<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Academy/5976/hugo.html>

### Zork Grand Inquisitor

<http://www.activision.com/games/adventure/zgi/index.shtml>

### Megagame: Interactive Fiction

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

### ifMUD: A MUD Forever Voyaging

<http://fovea.retina.net:4001>

### The Space Under the Window (Andrew Plotkin)

<http://www.edoc.com/zarf/zplet/sutwin.html>

### The Adventure Market

<http://spinndb.asfh-berlin.de/market/>

### Updated Infocom Bugs list

<http://members.aol.com/graemecree/infobugs/index.htm>

### The World of IF

<http://www.natcom.org/if/home.htm>

**Welcome to the Adventure Market**  
Powered by the Infocom, Inc. Community and Talon System.

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**>Hello, Sailor!**

When you visit Adventure Market you have seen one of your old friends from before, but you might be a little more surprised. You are now in the new place or look for more related resources - a page for making adventures is also included. Finally to plan your adventures!

When you visit Adventure Market you have seen one of your old friends from before, but you might be a little more surprised. You are now in the new place or look for more related resources - a page for making adventures is also included. Finally to plan your adventures!

1. If you have found something you're interested in, add the person who gave it to you. Add it if you have visited it, you have to search the Adventure Market. Otherwise people will not be able to see it.

2. One way to make for best adventures. Don't put adventures for other years. It's better for all other kinds of games. Will be implemented in the new version, in the next.

You can also look for items and information concerning all aspects of Adventure Market on our information page. Our adventures will be added your games if possible.

When you visit Adventure Market you have seen one of your old friends from before, but you might be a little more surprised. You are now in the new place or look for more related resources - a page for making adventures is also included. Finally to plan your adventures!

- The Adventure Market

Sell your games or look for treasures at the Adventure Market.

**Programmers wanted**

Readers: I've received a query from a Santa Monica-based television entertainment company that is looking for IF game programmers to possibly develop an online adventure for their Web site. The company is Rysher Entertainment (<http://www.rysher.com/>). It produces and distributes such titles as Highlander: The Series, F/X: The Series and Soldier of Fortune Inc.

Excellent writing skills will count for a lot here. The adventures should also be totally immersed in the world of F/X, Highlander or Soldier of Fortune Inc. — they are looking for something that would stand alongside the best episodes of the actual series. If you would like to toss your hat in the ring, please contact:

Eddie Camarillo  
Director, Marketing/  
Guy in Charge of Web Stuff  
Rysher Entertainment  
2401 Colorado Avenue, Ste. 200  
Santa Monica, CA 90404

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Dear Eileen,

Hello! I wanted to say that I am a great fan of interactive fiction and I think that this is a great magazine to publish! I am 12 years old and in 6th grade. I was introduced to Zork and The Colossal Cave in fourth grade. I beat Adventure with a little help from my mom, and beat Zork 1 and 2 alone.

At school we were getting old, small, cheap computers that couldn't really handle any games that my friends usually play. I loaded all of the Zorks, and a few others. I think they are still on the computers, and the kids really like them. Thank you for printing all of

the latest news and events in the IF world!

—Brian Wilt  
bwilt@ptdprolog.net

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Hello, Eileen,

I started out playing Infocom games in the mid-'80s, and have recently begun to re-acquire the games via the Activision collections. Here is something that I discovered while playing Planetfall.

While inside the safety webbing (in the escape pod) at the beginning of the game, it is possible to retrieve both the towel and the kit by typing "read the towel" and "read the kit." The game will then say:

>Read the towel  
(picking it up first)

It then tells you what is written on the towel (or the kit).

Trying to GET the towel or kit elicits a response to the effect that you cannot reach the item from your current perch.

—Gary MacDougall  
garce@idirect.com

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Hi Eileen,

How about re-running your 'What XYZZY Does' column; from issue (don't remember which, but the article dealt with the competition entries of 1995)? I also remember you urging authors to implement the magic word in their games, and it seems your promotion was very successful.

Nearly every new game has a cute response to XYZZY, and it's become one of the very first commands I try with each game. My current favorite comes from 'Apartment F209':

>XYZZY

Gee, grandpa. What was it like back then?

I believe it wouldn't take much time to compile a list of those replies from the more recent games and turn it into another 'Tales from the Code Front' article.

—Martin  
mbraun@compuserve.com

*That's one of the most frequent requests I receive — and I'm obliging this issue with the answers to "What XYZZY Does..." for the 1997 IF competition entries. Enjoy!*

—Eileen

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Dear XYZZYnews:

Hi, I saw your posting on XYZZYnews, requesting maps for the mazes (alike and different.) My father and I have mapped out these mazes in detail. I'm afraid I don't have the maps in an electronic format right now, but I can give you some hints to mapping them yourself.

For the maze alike, drop an item on the floor in each room. There are at least 12 rooms in this maze, so you may have to carry several armloads worth into the maze. To get out of the maze from the first room, go up. All of the connections in this maze are two-way. That is, if you can get to room B from room A, you can get to room A from room B. However, the passages are twisty, so the connections are often "bent."

The maze different is more convoluted, but you don't need to truck in loads of items to solve it. Each room in this maze is, indeed, different. No two rooms have the same exact description. The descriptions

are made up of three key words, in various orders, for example:

You are in a little twisty maze of passages, all different.

You are in a maze of twisting little passages, all different.

Note how "maze", "passages", and "twisty/twisting" change their order. The rest of the words just serve to connect them, and make things more confusing :-). Anyway, with three items, the number of possible orderings is six. Since one of the items has two forms ("twisty or twisting"), this doubles the number, bringing it to 12. Note that all of the 12 rooms have exits in every direction (ten of them, including up and down.) I'm not sure if all of the room connections are two-way, but I think most of them are. To exit the maze different is exactly opposite of the maze alike.

Go down from the first room, to get to the West end of the Long Hall.

I will try to make image files of my maps. Let me know if you are interested in receiving them.

—amacleod@kersur.net

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Dear XYZZYnews:

Hi there... I just wanted to let you that like most people who email you, I am hooked to XYZZYnews, it's masterfully created and the content is equalled only by its appearance. It is a fantastic idea to put up .PDF versions.

Also, I would really like to read some articles about playing IF, such as advice about making maps, perhaps a run through of some fictional puzzles

to help beginners, also advice on solving mazes etc.

Anyway, thanks a lot for making the magazine available in the way it is, and please keep up the good work!

—Paul sakar@gmrssystemsdemon.co.uk

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Dear XYZZYnews:

Hello, I was surfing when I came across your XYZZYnews Web site, about Infocom adventure games.

I'm a big fan of these games from way back, when I first figured out how to get into the white house. However, I've looked and looked, and I can't find the old games anywhere for sale. Would you know if there is anyone that sells them anymore, or if there would be any sort of way to get them?

—Brian

Dear Eileen,

I've been a silent reader of your wonderful e-zine since the first number.

I am an Informatic Sciences student here in Las Islas Canarias in Spain. I am now 24 and I am a fan of interactive fiction since I joined my life to computers 12 years ago.

I really love writing and reading stories, especially high-tech, mystery, horror, etc. Also I like very much puzzles, so IF is perfect for me.

I write you to congratulate for your wonderful e-zine, keep releasing it!!! I want to ask you for more info about three games from Infocom that don't come with my CD of the treasures of Activision. They are Arthur, Journey and Shogun. Where could I get this games?, Everybody talks about them in SPAG and

XYZZYnews, but here in Spain is completely impossible to see them!! :(

—Rafael Velasco  
A1547@correo.dis.ulpgc.es

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*I have the same Web site suggestion for the both of you: One online trading post for buying/selling/trading interactive fiction games I've learned about is called the Adventure Market (<http://spinnadb.asfh-berlin.de/market/>) —it's one of this issue's Top 10 Picks for IF (see page 2). —EM*

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Hello from a fan,

I am a graduate student at the Harvard Grad School of Education in the Technology in Education program. I am also a fan of Infocom who grew up on Zork.

I am writing a research paper on the development of reading comprehension using interactive fiction and thought I would introduce myself and ask for any suggestions. I am aiming the educational audience at 4th-5th grade, as this is when I began playing and looking up words in the dictionary. In contrast to Moose Crossing at MIT, I am focusing on the "closed" work of interactive fiction as a text unto itself.

If you could please suggest any newsgroups were you feel this would be appropriate I will post there right away. Thanks.

—Erik Blankinship  
blankier@

HUGSE1.HARVARD.EDU

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*The Usenet newsgroup rec.art.int-fiction is the main suggestion I have for you. Readers, please feel free to chime in with additional suggestions! —EM*

# The Effects of 'XYZZY' in the 1997 Interactive Fiction Competition Games

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*See which of the enterprising IF programmers entered in the 1997 IF competition coded in a special response to the XYZZY command, a magic word from the classic game Adventure.*

<i>game title</i>	<i>What "XYZZY" does</i>
<b>Inform games</b>	
A Good Breakfast	A hollow voice sighs, exasperated.
A Bear's Night Out	A hollow voice says, "Obviously, you are in the wrong game." (pop-up window: Watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat! That trick never works. — Bullwinkle J. Moose and Rocky Squirrel"
Cask	That's not a verb I recognise.
Congratulations	That's not a verb I recognise.
The Edifice	You mutter a nonsense word and surprisingly, the Edifice trembles in response! Everything else goes silent, and for a moment, it sounds as if the Edifice might collapse! Finally, it stills, and the world returns to normal.  You seem to have created a Word of Power.
Travels in the Land of Erden: In Quest of the Adventure	That's not a verb I recognise.
Friday Afternoon (or, Escape from MicroSun)	That's not a verb I recognise.
A Simple Home Adventure	That's not a verb I recognise.
Aunt Nancy's House	A hollow voice says, "Wrong game, pal."
The Family Legacy	Nothing happens. But you do feel like you have satisfied an irresistible urge.
Madame L'Estrange and the Troubled Spirit	That's not a verb I recognise.

<i>game title</i>	<i>What "XYZZY" does</i>
The Lost Spellmaker	A mystical hand, seemingly made of thousands of tiny sparkling stars, sweeps down from above. Before you can do anything, it prods you in the ribs, and a hollow voice echoes "It's not you!" The hand flies off again, quickly disappearing from sight.
Sins Against Mimesis	A hollow voice says, "Bite me."
A New Day	Stop living in the past, man!
Pintown	That's not a verb I recognise.
Phred Phontious and the Quest for Pizza	That's not a verb I recognise.
Symmetry: A Matter of Self-Trust	That's not a verb I recognise.
She's Got a Thing for a Spring	You feel an indescribable sense of deja vu, and the world seems to turn inside out.
	Darkness It is pitch dark, and you can't see a thing. ( <i>hint: Plugh will get you out</i> )
Sylenius Mysterium	That's not a verb I recognise.
The Town Dragon	That's not a verb I recognise.
The Tempest	That instruction, that verb, doth elude me.
<b>TADS games</b>	
The Obscene Quest of Dr. Aardvarkbark	I don't know the word "xyzyzy".
Poor Zefron's Almanac	>>Foof!<<  You are inside a building, a well house for a large spring.  There are some keys on the ground here. There is a shiny brass lamp nearby. There is food here. There is a bottle of water here.  You are able to take in your surroundings for a few seconds before a second >>Foof!<< deposits you back in Zefron's workshop. Apparently your feeble wizardly powers won't enable you to stay in that distant land for long.

<i>game title</i>	<i>What "XYZZY" does</i>
	Zefron's Workshop You are in Zefron's workshop/bedroom at the top of the tower. ( <i>room description follows</i> )
Babel	I don't know the word "xyzyzy".
The Frenetic Five vs. Sturm und Drang	"Xyzyzy!" you shout, rallying your troops to battle. They look at you like you're nuts. ( <i>if others are in the room</i> )  "Xyzyzy!" you shout, but there's no one around to hear. ( <i>if no one else is there</i> )
Glowgrass	I don't know the word "xyzyzy".
Sunset Over Savannah	The word escapes your mouth like a gentle zephyr and swirls in the air around you. You can feel powerful forces gathering, like a static charge before a storm. You glance around in anticipation. A long moment passes, but nothing happens. You begin to fear that something has gone truly awry with the fabric of the universe.
Temple of the Orc Mage	I don't know the word "xyzyzy".
VirtuaTech	A hollow voice announces that the XYZZY forum on the Virtua WorldNet is closed right now. How typical.
Zero Sum Game	***You have died ***
Zombie! The Interactive Creepshow	Even that magic cannot help you here.
<b>ALAN games</b>	
Leaves	'xyzyzy'? That word is not understood.
<b>AGT games</b>	
E-Mailbox	Eileen Mullin put you up to this, *didn't* she? :-)
<b>Hugo games</b>	
Down	You can't use the word "xyzyzy".
<b>JACL games</b>	
Unholy Grail	Suddenly a magical white glove appears floating in the air before you, slaps you several times across the face, then disappears.

# Spot the IF reference!

Send your IF references found in non-IF materials to [eileen@interport.net](mailto:eileen@interport.net).

Mars Pathfinder -- Welcome to Mars

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE  
JET PROPULSION LABORATORY  
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION  
PASADENA, CALIF. 91109. TELEPHONE (818) 354-5011  
<http://www.jpl.nasa.gov>

Contact: Diane Ainsworth

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 9, 1997

PATHFINDER TEAM PAINTS AN EARTH-LIKE PICTURE OF EARLY MARS

Mars is appearing more and more like a planet that was very Earth-like in its infancy, with weathering processes and flowing water that created a variety of rock types and a warmer atmosphere that generated clouds, winds and seasonal cycles.

[...]

Despite recent communications problems with Earth, the Mars Pathfinder lander and rover are continuing to operate during the Martian days, when they can receive enough energy to power up spacecraft systems via their solar panels. The mission is now into Sol 94, or the 94th Martian day of operations, since landing on July 4.

"Everything that we have seen over the last 10 days (with respect to communications) is like a twisty little maze with passages all alike," said Jennifer Harris, acting mission manager. "I am happy to report that we have made contact with the spacecraft using its main transmitter. We were able to confirm that we could send a command to the spacecraft to turn its transmitter on and then turn it off.

[...]

—submitted by Martin Rundkvist  
[arador@algonet.se](mailto:arador@algonet.se)

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I found the following in "Quantum Leap: Prologue", which explains the set-up before the series starts. Sam's sort-of-girlfriend is being pursued through the tunnels behind Project HQ:

The tunnels carried sound. She fancied she could hear Weyland still cursing and moaning, somewhere behind her. Sometimes it sounded close, sometimes far away. There were other sounds too, scutlings and scrapings and dripping.

"You are in a maze of twisting turning passageways, all exactly alike," she muttered to herself. "Bring on the grues."

It seems that even though Ziggy is the most powerful computer in the world, the Project staff still like to play Zork (probably with a really cool interpreter, though).

—submitted by Neil Hobbs  
[nehobbs@hotmail.com](mailto:nehobbs@hotmail.com)

# All That Erasmatazz

## Crawford's 'AI' game engine earns an erazzberry

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by Neil deMause (neild@echonyc.com)

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For the last couple of years that I've been following the interactive fiction Usenet newsgroups, I've noticed occasional posts referring to the Erasmatron, a supposed next-generation approach to IF. The brainchild of Chris Crawford, author of such Mac games as *Balance of Power* and *Trust & Betrayal*, this Erasmathingy was promised to be a "computer story generation system and method using a network of re-usable substories," featuring "attribute-based social simulation." It all sounded mildly intriguing, even though my own tastes for quantum leaps forward in IF development involve more spellchecking and fewer games with dragons in them.

Still, I never got around to checking out the Erasmagizmo, in large part thanks to my distaste for firing up Netscape except in dire emergencies, like a new Cecil Adams column. Then, one foggy Thanksgiving eve, someone directed me to an article in *Wired* magazine in which Crawford described an interactive world where the plot runs free of its author's mere imagining, a world populated with characters equipped with 21 traits: Timidity, Dutifulness, Magnanimity, Gullibility, Loyalty, Enviousness, Pride, Love, Hunger, Insecurity, Integrity, Lovability, Dominance, Competence, Loquacity, Initiative, Greed, Libido, Sexiness, Nurturance, Temper, and Joviality. (What, no bile, melancholy, or spleen?) Also included were a series of quotes from Crawford that ranged from the grandiose ("A century from now, they'll look back on us and laugh at our misconceptions even as they mythologize our achievements.") to the bizarre ("We're at the nativity of a profound intellectual revolution — what a privilege!").

But hey, who am I to deny a visionary his eccentricities? They laughed at Einstein, after all! They laughed at the Marx Brothers! They even laughed at Hitler, and boy, were they sorry! So, on the off chance that Chris Crawford really was about to launch an IF anschluss of epic proportions, I visited his

erasmatazz.com to download the first-ever Erasmagame: Laura J. Mixon's Shattertown Sky.

Fortunately, I was at work at the time, with its T-1 line, because Erasmogoods are *huge*: more than 5 megs for the stuffed game file of Shattertown Sky. That the accompanying Erasmaganza interpreter clocked in at a mere 400K was little consolation as I waited for Stuffit Expander to gnaw its way through the downloaded archive.

I eagerly double-clicked on the Shattertown Sky game file; then I selected it again from Erasmaganza's File menu. (Crawford, despite being a Mac-only programmer, has apparently yet to learn how to make an Erasmadocument open automatically when double-clicked.) And entered into an interface straight out of...WorldBuilder?

Sure enough, that's what it looked like. The same multiple text and graphics windows, the same cramped type and impenetrable menus (inventory as items in a pull-down menu?) as that late, unlamented '80s-era Mac game development system. The ErasmaGUI, though, has one significant difference: where WorldBuilder made at least a passing attempt at parsing English commands (generally responding with such helpful prods as "Huh?" and "What?"), the Erasmafoozle dispenses entirely with typed input, offering only a single window with multiple-choice options like "I exit" or "I coolly greet Poot." On very special occasions, it spits forth a mouthful of text, then leaves you with a single highlighted phrase on which to click: "(Do nothing.)"

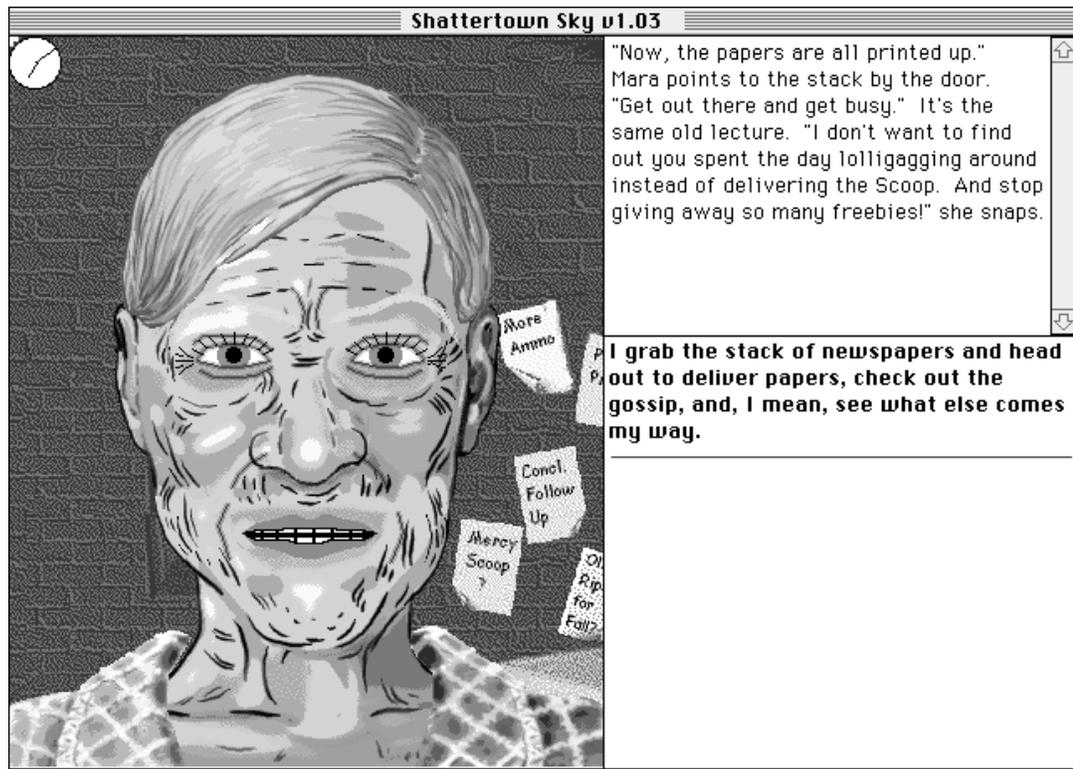
This left the detailed post-apocalyptic dystopia crafted by Mixon largely beyond my reach — though the game clearly displayed "Gramma Mara is asleep on her mattress, snoring lightly, her so-precious handgun cradled in the crook of her arm," I had but a single button to click: "I dig around for a clean pair of pants and shirt, and put them on."

I dutifully clicked. Instantly, there appeared before me the cartoon head of Gramma herself, wrinkles menacingly ablaze.

I screamed.

The interactivity of Erasmaworks, it soon became clear, is concentrated in one narrow arena: character emotions. The options for dealing with Granny were limited to three variations on "hello," with different inflections: "I coolly greet Mara," "'hello there, Mara!'" "'Hi, Mara,' I say glumly." (I picked the last of these; Gramma obligingly bared her teeth. I screamed again.) Once I had dispatched Granny, I went on to meet a series of Shattertown denizens, all presented in that same Mike Judge-meets-Thunderbirds-Are-Go! perspective, all equally uninterested in anything beyond whether I was being (check one) surly, indifferent, or flirtatious. After a few rounds of insults (one character, the eponymous Doc, went so far as to call me a "dog dummy"), I finally man-

aged to pick a fight with a local lowlife named Oliver. Things quickly escalated, until I finally took out poor Oliver with a knife to the gut — whereupon I was presented with the provocative option “I remove the Nothing from Oliver’s body and stuff it in my bag.”



There was more to Shattertown Sky — the random-sounding stories told by the characters when I stopped pummeling them long enough to listen (“Cat asked Aaron for help. ‘What happened?’ he asked. She replied, ‘I’ve been injured.’ ‘Perhaps we can work something out,’ he told her, ‘if you make it worth my while.’”), the madly ticking clock that spun out of control in the corner of the screen, to no apparent end. But to be honest, by this point I was laughing so hard I could barely type straight, so I mercifully put the Orgasmotron (damn, I \*knew\* I’d slip and type that) out of its misery. While a good deal of the blame must be laid at the feet of Mixon’s, er, colorful writing style, the E-tron itself is a major part of the problem: when your only options are a prepackaged set of emotional signifiers, it quickly begins to feel like an animatronic Choose Your Own Adventure book — hey, even Monkey Island at least let you pick stuff up. Chris Crawford’s new gizmo may yet find a niche in the panoply of game development systems, but one thing is clear: the revolution will not be Erasmated. ☒



# IF Roundtable: The Art of the Puzzle

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*One subject that crops up perennially on the interactive-fiction newsgroups is puzzle design. Just how do I come up with these nefarious beasts? is a frequent cry. In the interests of furthering humankind's understanding of the lowly puzzle, we've gathered together three accomplished IF authors -- Adam Cadre, Lucian Smith, and Andrew "Zarf" Plotkin -- along with XYZZYnews contributing editor Neil deMause, in the IF MUD's Specious Lobby to hammer out The Art of The Puzzle.*

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**NEIL:** How about we start by introducing ourselves for posterity?

**ADAM:** Greetings, posterity. I'm Adam Cadre. I wrote I-0, and, even more impressively, Lost Anaheim Hills. I'm currently at work on Pantheon, which I'm targeting for late '98.

**LUCIAN:** I'm Lucian Smith. I found IF again by randomly searching the net for "XYZZY" a couple years ago, and found XYZZYnews. I wrote some invisiclue-like hints for So Far, and just entered this year's competition with The Edifice.

**ZARF:** Hi. I'm Zarf. You may remember me from such transcripts as "Zarf eats the XYZZYnews awards alive" and "Zarf says 'Yo.'" I'm currently working on something but it's not done yet.

**NEIL:** And as for me, I'm Neil deMause, author of Lost New York (LNY). So the reason we're here is because there's been a fair amount of talk on the newsgroup about puzzle design. One, how to make the puzzles seem natural to the game play. And two, how to make puzzles that are both fair and challenging. Let's start with the first one.

**ADAM:** Well, to immediately start talking about myself, most of the puzzles in I-0 didn't have an independent genesis. I'd create a location — either on paper or in code — and then think, okay, what would logically be in such a location? From there, I'd make puzzles out of the materials at hand. I don't think I ever thought, "Hey, I've got a great puzzle idea!" and then struggled to figure out how to fit it in.

**LUCIAN:** For my game, the plot was the puzzle. For example, for the second level of the Edifice, I thought, "OK, in this scenario, the player will have to learn someone else's language." The rest of the details fell in around that. The sick boy was a way of creating a more personal motivation for the player to solve the puzzle.

**ZARF:** Even more so, for me. Since So Far is pretty much pure surrealism, I didn't *have* a plot in mind originally. I had a theme, and was co-inventing puzzles and scenes

and events all at the same time. Plus, of course, part of the theme is that the player doesn't quite understand how it all fits together.

**ADAM:** I suppose that leaves LNY, which featured both intricate puzzles (goats and gum-balls) and a strong sense of place. Which came first?

**NEIL:** Well, LNY is a weird hybrid. I started out with the assumption that IF games were based around puzzles, so I wrote a whole bunch of puzzles around a time travel theme. But what I was really interested in doing was telling a story about the history of New York and forces of change and "progress," I suppose.

I mean, I'm looking to move more towards less puzzle-centric games myself. But then I look at people like Zarf, and they have no problem creating puzzle-centric games that don't seem contrived. What's your secret? You just smarter than everyone else? (And I include Lucian in that, too.)

**ZARF:** I never thought of I-0 as being *less* puzzle-based than So Far. I think maybe I do better at turning the normal plot-incidents of a story into "puzzles" — that is, things that stand out in the player's attention. At one point, I posted "A puzzle is a mechanism for focusing the player's attention." Start with that. But they already were plot elements where the player has to act. Where the *protagonist* acts. I try to invest that into the player.

**ADAM:** Yeah, it does sound like we're talking about different types of animal here. An all-encompassing thought exercise like the language puzzle in The Edifice seems quite different from a lock-and-key eureka-type puzzle, like how to survive the scorpion in I-0.

**ZARF:** Oh, no, they're the same thing.

**ADAM:** Are they? Hmm.

**NEIL:** Yeah. Just levels of complexity, no?

**ZARF:** Levels of complexity, importance in the overall plot, importance in the overall thematic effect.

**NEIL:** Lemme focus for a sec on a slightly different issue: What *purpose* does a puzzle serve? For example: One of the things I like most about playing IF is the thrill of discovering new regions. I've sometimes compared it to the tricks that Frederick Law Olmsted used in park design: make an artificial bend in the path, or a tunnel to pass through, and then once you're past it — bang! a seemingly endless vista! It's not endless, of course, but you can use trickery to make it look endless, at first.

The problem, then, is how to keep the player from rushing through the entire park at once. The solution: puzzles. You'll notice that virtually all the puzzles in LNY involve finding the next plaque to the next time period. Each one you solve gets

you the payoff of a new vista to explore. But I guess I'm wondering if that's the only way to structure a work of IF...

**ADAM:** I'm not so sure you necessarily need lock-and-key-type obstacles for that, though. Here's an alternative model... Think of a map of North America. Say that to see all there is to see, the player needs to visit, say, the 40 largest cities on the map. The obstacle there may be no less than the fact that travelling from Houston to New York means you're traveling away from Los Angeles.

So converting that back to IF terms, we're dealing with plot branches.

**ZARF:** OK, I think you're wrapped up in a subset of possible IF stories — those which are travel stories. If the player's motivation is to see over the next hill, the anticipation and struggle are getting to the top of the hill.

Most generally, the goal is the *next thing* — that's next in the static fiction sense. In a book, pacing is controlled by both simple page count and the nature of the writing (intensity, complexity of action in a scene, etc.). I have much less control over that, but I can make the climactic scene come sooner or later by making the player do more or less to get there.

**NEIL:** But isn't that what we were just saying? Puzzles serve to slow the player down by making them do more, thus controlling the pacing? The only other alternative is daunting amounts of text to read, no?

**ZARF** nods.

**ADAM:** What types of motivations could a player have? There's the thrill of seeing new places and things. That of solving a problem...

**ZARF:** Rescue the princess, find a good book, eat lunch...

**NEIL:** Motivations for the player, or the PC?

**LUCIAN:** I think the two are intertwined. It can be very hard to separate them. For *The Edifice*, the overall motivation is simply human nature. And, in a story about the beginnings of man, this is not inappropriate. I make a very light reference to that in that the only way to get an "extremely content" rating from the game is to walk away from the Edifice at the beginning.

**ADAM:** On the other hand, I do think that PC motivation and player motivation can be separated. The player always chooses to subject herself to the frustrations a game inevitably provides, but the PC may well be happier just going home, or just playing volleyball.

**NEIL:** But, Adam, I could say the opposite: the PC only has the game goal to live for, whereas I may very well decide to go watch TV instead. Motivating the PC is worthless if you don't motivate the player, too.

**LUCIAN:** And I think one of the main purposes of a puzzle is to involve the player in the story more. I remember Gareth Rees talking about his Christminster. He said that the purpose of his 'darkness' puzzle was essentially to give the player something to do while Wilderspin told his story. This is along the right lines, I think, although for better integration, solving the puzzle should advance the plot on its own.

**NEIL:** Well, maybe I'm unusual, but I don't solve puzzles because I like solving puzzles. I solve puzzles to get the payoff, whatever that might be.

**ADAM:** I think we've wandered into the question of where the pleasures of a text lie. In IF, overcoming an obstacle should be rewarding, but also, the obstacles should themselves be somewhat pleasurable, or the player *will* go watch TV. Or just use the walkthrough without even trying the puzzle. Which I often do.

**NEIL:** I don't even bother to finish games that don't have a clear payoff. This can be either the threat of nuclear holocaust, or characters I care about — either one will do. But otherwise, the first hard puzzle and I'm out of there. I don't even bother with a walkthrough. I only use walkthroughs for games I like that I get irrevocably stuck in.

**ADAM:** This may also be a factor in why so much IF has a comedic tone. If a game is funny even while I'm banging my head against the wall, I'll keep playing. If not, I'm probably gone.

**ZARF:** Well, I like discovering clever puzzles, so there's *some* motivation to finish a game with no clear payoff. On the other hand, I've never seen a game without a clear payoff — except mine, and I had my own reasons. Any idiot can threaten nuclear holocaust.

**LUCIAN:** So, I think what we're saying is that there should be two parts to any given puzzle. To use my language puzzle as an example again, since I'm familiar with it, saying that the sick boy was "just a detail" was misleading, before. There's the puzzle itself, and its relation to the story.

**ADAM:** And yet the Edifice language puzzle is an oh-so-rare example of a case where I found myself addicted to the puzzle just because it was interesting.

**NEIL:** We seem to be meandering into the second part of the conversation: What's a good/fair puzzle? Maybe we could start with the opposite: What makes a *bad* puzzle?

**ZARF:** A bad puzzle requires you to be in telepathic communion with the author. We all know that rule. A bad puzzle is one where, when you figure out the answer — or look it up — you're annoyed instead of pleased. And a combination lock made of soup cans is a bad puzzle.

**ADAM:** And I can think of an example of the last of these — have we all played 'A Good Breakfast'? This is an example of a game that's interesting, that has interesting

puzzles — but the puzzles themselves are really unmotivated. For instance, a combination lock made of rotating gnomes, just to get back in your house.

**ZARF:** The cute robot toy?

**ADAM:** You need a spoon. How do you get a spoon? You play Lights-Out with a robot. Who, if you win, unexpectedly gives you a spoon. The puzzles and the stories are tangentially related at best. That's a problem.

**NEIL:** Deus ex puzzle.

**ADAM:** Exactly.

**ZARF:** It's tricky, because I *liked* all those elements. And the author can get away with one of them (any one), because of whimsy.

**NEIL:** Well, here's the problem with trying to define "good" and "bad" puzzles. As Lucian will attest, when I found out the proper solution to the darkness puzzle in So Far, I just about had a conniption. Yet many other people say it's their favorite puzzle. And I get the same complaints/compliments on my games, too. What some people love, others hate.

**LUCIAN:** There's a difference between puzzle elements and puzzle solutions.

**NEIL:** So as an author, how do you judge what's good? Just your own personal reactions?

**ZARF:** Yes, no, and let me back up. :) The "tangentially related" problem is, I think, a conflict between the focus point of the story and the focus of the player. You-the-player stuck and frustrated and yelling at a bunch of gnome statues that are preventing you from getting in the front door. If that were a short story, going in the front door would rate one sentence. Or, if it were weirdly locked like that, it would be a major part of the story in a way which didn't make it into AGB.

I cheat heavily by setting up stories where a major part is the protagonist wandering around, trying to understand confusing things. Many many IF works do the same thing, of course.

You can make IF where you're in control and confident, but you have to structure the puzzles to take that into account.

**LUCIAN:** There's definitely a difference between 'satisfying' and 'pertinent'. A satisfying puzzle is one that you are pleased with yourself for solving. A pertinent puzzle relates it to the plot as a whole. You might be pleased with yourself for winning "Lights Out," but that doesn't make it pertinent.

**ZARF:** Unless it's satisfying because you solved it by understanding its relationship to the plot as a whole. Then they're the same thing again.

- NEIL:** It sounds to me like bad puzzles fall in three categories: the unfair, the unsatisfying, and the, er, impertinent. Am I leaving anything out?
- LUCIAN:** The too hard, the too easy, and the too weird? Shall we talk about “hard” vs. “easy” puzzles, then?
- ZARF:** Hard vs. easy is too subjective. We can sometimes agree on fair vs. unfair, but almost never on hard vs. easy.
- NEIL:** Unfair = requires telepathy, right?
- ZARF:** Yes.
- ADAM:** Here’s another issue that just occurred to me regarding the fairness issue: what kinds of cognition, for lack of a better word, do IF puzzles incorporate? For instance, how often do we encounter puzzles that require knowledge of the world or culture? (Didn’t Graham have a puzzle that requires familiarity with Proust?).
- ZARF:** About Proust, no, I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure he put in clues for the culture-ignorant. You may be thinking of his “deliberate guess-the-verb” puzzle.
- NEIL:** This is mostly an implementation issue, I think. Or at least partly so. Locked door puzzles are easy because there are libraries for them.
- ADAM:** Is it really unfair for a puzzle to test your knowledge of baseball, but fair to test your command of logic? Or are these just different kinds of games, and player beware?
- LUCIAN:** I was able to create an interaction-with-people puzzle (the selfsame language puzzle) only because I was able to limit the playing field—the Stranger had a complete vocabulary of about 21 words. Even with that limitation, that code still took up about a third of the game.
- ZARF:** Well, yes, they’re different types of games. But the level of logic in existing IF is really within the grasp of just about all the literate audience. Whereas I don’t know Proust *or* baseball.
- NEIL:** Define “literate.”
- ZARF:** Capable of reading science fiction. OK, I’m judging by myself. Of course the prevalence of SF and fantasy in IF is not a coincidence — similar target audiences. Ditto, why there’s a lot of puzzle plotting in SF and fantasy.
- NEIL:** Whereas I know plenty of people who know baseball, but couldn’t solve a logic puzzle to save their life.
- ZARF:** Can’t solve which logic puzzles? The formal knight-and-knave puzzles? Those are a minority. Are you talking about people who can’t solve Lights Out or the brown-eyed rock puzzle in Spellbreaker?

- NEIL:** I know a very smart person, for example, who was unable to get past the first puzzle of System's Twilight. The tree thing. It requires a certain kind of thinking — which is I think what Adam was trying to point out.
- ZARF:** OK, that's a large class of puzzles that I wouldn't hesitate to put in IF, but which would give people trouble.
- NEIL:** Basically, anything that's fair game in Games magazine tends to be seen as fair game in IF.
- ZARF:** Hypothesis: we don't spend enough time inventing *easy* puzzles. Discuss.
- NEIL:** Easy puzzles are too hard to design! Seriously. It has to be easy enough for anyone to solve, yet hard enough to be satisfying. That's a damn hard line to walk.
- LUCIAN:** I think we might be able to define a new classification here — “kind” and “unkind.” A kind puzzle will take your attempts at solving it, and push you in the right direction. An unkind puzzle will wait for you to solve the whole thing before it lets on that you're on the right track.
- ZARF:** Implementation detail.
- LUCIAN:** Exactly. And that's important!
- ADAM:** Okay, so what makes a puzzle involving aside from difficulty?
- NEIL:** It should be fun to do. No setting a hundred levers to different positions.
- ZARF:** The canonical uninvolved puzzle is “find a key in the living room which unlocks a door in the hall.” That's easy, but there's more to it than that.
- NEIL:** It should have an obvious payoff. Either intrinsic or extrinsic to the puzzle itself. The problem with the “find the key” puzzle is that it's no fun looking for the key, and a door in itself isn't that exciting.
- LUCIAN:** But if you *made* it fun to look for the key, it would suddenly become OK.
- NEIL:** Right. Put the key just out of reach, guarded by, er, a tree sloth. And have intriguing noises coming from behind the door. And suddenly it's not so bad a puzzle.
- ZARF:** No. The noises and the tree sloth make it an interesting *situation*, but the puzzle itself adds nothing. What you've done is added a potentially interesting get-the-key-from-the-sloth puzzle.
- LUCIAN:** Layers of complexity.
- NEIL:** Babel fish.

**ZARF:** If, however, the solution to *that* is to find some sloth chow, then again the players will say “gosh, the sloth chow puzzle.” A puzzle can be easy and satisfying, on its own, if it reveals something interesting or makes you think of something in a new way. The harder puzzles don’t let you win until you’ve thought of it; an easier version might show it to you as a side effect of winning.”

**NEIL:** Whereas if it’s to learn something about sloths (say, that they’re distracted by copies of the National Review), then to tune the TV to a picture of William F. Buckley, it’s a more interesting puzzle?

**ADAM:** That reminds me of the Reagan puzzle in Bureaucracy.

**ZARF:** How about the slide projector from Curses? The puzzle proper is to put a two-inch picture into a two-inch slot. But the context makes it interesting, even though it’s not particularly tricky by itself.

**LUCIAN:** One trick in conventional fiction is to show the end before you get there. This can be in a flash-forward, or by, say, showing you the murderer in scene 1 and telling you he’s the murderer. The interesting bit then becomes ‘How will the detective catch the murderer?’ You can do the same thing with your puzzles to make them more interesting. If you dangle a gold key just out of reach, and have a gold door somewhere, you become very interested in getting the gold key. If instead, you saw a sloth, got him to move, and suddenly found a key in his lair, it isn’t as tantalizing as it could have been.

**ZARF:** Good. Anticipation is part of it, yes.

**NEIL:** Having Vogon announcements blaring in your ear, to make you desperate for the fish. If it were just an “every time you solve one puzzle, we’ll give you another” thing, it’d be far less engaging. It’d be damn annoying, in fact. The announcements are key; they provide urgency.

**LUCIAN:** Showing you the fish was essential to that puzzle. If it had been “something flies past you, and you don’t see what it is.”, it wouldn’t have been quite as engaging.

**ADAM:** Would this be the time to bring up narrowness and width? As in, how does it affect our assessment of a puzzle if it’s A Thing To Do as opposed to The Only Thing You Can Do? How do we ameliorate the frustration factor of the latter, and make the former compelling?

**NEIL:** Provide entertainment.

**ZARF:** My problem with the Only Thing You Can Do is that it limits the *solutions* to the stuff available, and therefore it can’t be interesting to figure out which stuff is relevant.

**NEIL:** You mean, the player just gets to make a list of objects they have, and try one at a time?

- ADAM:** Or knows that everything needed is at hand (or lost) and that no further exploration will help.
- ZARF:** In the worst cases, yes. And if you *solve* something that way, it's not satisfying. Brute force never is.
- NEIL:** How do you avoid that, though? At some point, every game can devolve into Only One Thing To Do.
- ZARF:** If there's lots to do, there is the potential to make that connection between apparently unrelated things.
- LUCIAN:** The Edifice would be a very different game if you had to finish the first level before you could get to the second. Which I considered. And which I rejected as I thought about how much fun it would be to play if I did ;-)
- ADAM:** The red-herrings issue goes back a bit to the first thing I said: if you create objects to fit the setting rather than just making what the player will need, the herrings take care of themselves. One of the things that bug me in games is encountering, say, a salad shooter, and knowing that the reason it's there is because I will need to come up with some innovative way to use a salad shooter in the future.
- LUCIAN:** For my game, I tried to make the "herrings" tangentially related to the puzzles. For the most part, they weren't there to solve the puzzles, but they could be used to give the player/PC clues about the correct solution. For example, all you really *needed* to solve the language puzzle was about five words. But all the rest were there to provide a context, and to encourage the player along a path.
- ADAM:** I'll throw in a random observation here on puzzle genesis. Since my current project is still quite plot-centered, a lot of the opportunities for puzzley-type things has come from my own implementation of them.

*[At this point, the MUD promptly crashed. Adam, Lucian, and Neil regrouped the next day, with Zarf joining in a bit later.]*

- ADAM:** Okay, here's an example. In my current project, there's a vehicle I have to make. The process of figuring out how to implement it ended up seamlessly transmuting into a puzzle: how will the player make it work? This is another variation on the "found puzzle" phenomenon I mentioned at the top.
- NEIL:** "Found puzzle" as in puzzles that derive from the story, right?
- ADAM:** Right.
- LUCIAN:** I think that good responses to wrong solutions are extremely important. In the stimulus-response that is IF, you, the game author, are providing stimuli to the player, who responds by typing in another command. Every default response or "I don't understand that." response when the player was trying something serious is

a mark against you. Every unique response when the player is trying something goofy is a mark in your favor, and encourages further typing.

The animal puzzle in So Far is a good example. Even though there's only one correct way to do things, there are many interesting ways of failing, all of which help your conceptualization of the situation until you finally solve the puzzle. I tried to guide people along this same course in my "invisiclues" — I told the player to do many wrong actions, hoping that the responses they got would help them enough so that they wouldn't have to come back to the clues again.

Maybe this tells us something else, too — a good puzzle in IF is a puzzle for which there is more than one potential solution.

**NEIL:** I have a game in the early stages of design where the whole plot hinges on gaining knowledge about something. Think of it as a whodunnit, even though it isn't. My problem: Short of an ACCUSE verb, or buttons to push indicating what the player knows, how can I tell when the player has figured it out? More generally, my question is: How does one design a knowledge puzzle?

**ADAM:** So I take it it's not a matter of revelation — you have to figure out when the player has pieced it together in her head?

**LUCIAN:** I think that if the plot hinges on this knowledge, there should be some physical way for the player to manifest this knowledge. I think you'll need to figure out what your plot's equivalent of an "accuse" verb is.

**NEIL:** It's the Clue problem, though. How do I stop the player from ACCUSING salesman, ACCUSING cat... ACCUSE MR. MUSTARD WITH THE CANDLESTICK. No, that's not it. ACCUSE HIM WITH THE LEAD PIPE...

**LUCIAN:** How to prevent brute force?

**NEIL:** That's part of it.

**LUCIAN:** Have too many options?

**NEIL:** I think the greater problem I'm pointing to is: It's possible to design a puzzle to determine whether the player knows the answer to a question. But not if they understand WHY it's the answer. The final puzzle of LNY, for example, is solvable without understanding it.

**LUCIAN:** A small number of options with a variety of ways to combine them works. For example (again!) my language puzzle could certainly eventually be solved by brute force. Well, half of it, anyway.

**NEIL:** You can see how this artificially hamstring what puzzles are available, though, right? Ultimately this reduces knowledge puzzles to a game of Mastermind.

Let's go back to Clue. Sure, you can make the puzzle more difficult by forcing the player to determine the murderer, murder weapon, location, and time of death, if you so choose.

**LUCIAN:** That's an example of combinations. Some rooms, some people, some locations, buttons of possible groups of three.

**NEIL:** But that isn't the same thing as requiring the player to figure out the motive and the M.O.

**LUCIAN:** But for motive, wouldn't you be saved by the fact that you had tons of options?

**NEIL:** But how do you let the player explain a motive? It's a parsing problem. Here's another example: Exercise: Translate TO SERVE MAN into IF.

I had enough troubles with GUIDE, TAKE ME TO AUSTRALIA in MacWesleyan. If you think I can code a game to understand WARN LEADERS THAT BOOK IS A COOKBOOK, you're nuts.

**ADAM:** You want to make sure the player stops the aliens for the right reason And not just because "I know the aliens are bad. Aliens are always bad! Screw the book puzzle!"

**LUCIAN:** I'd find a way to abstract the knowledge into a concrete form. A written translation of the man pie recipe, for example. Then you can SHOW RECIPE TO PRESIDENT or whatever.

**NEIL:** There are major guess-the-verb pitfalls here. But I guess that's unavoidable.

**ADAM:** At some point you'd need the player to be able to enter the word "cookbook" somewhere. You'd just need to find a way to make that as simple as possible.

>TELL GUARD ABOUT COOKBOOK

If you put TELL PREZ ABOUT BOOK, it'd reply, "Yeah, aren't those aliens sweet?"

**LUCIAN:** Tapestry will have Morningstar react differently if you refer to him by a certain name. If you referred to the book as a "cookbook," that could also work.

**ADAM:** >TELL PREZ ABOUT COOKBOOK would elicit, "Oh my God! We gotta stop 'em!"

**LUCIAN:** Well, you'd have to allow for TELL PREZ ABOUT BOOK OF RECIPES, and what-not. Abstraction is a key, though. Find a way to represent the knowledge in a simple form, and make that form obvious to the player.

**ADAM:** That brings up something else...the fact that experienced IF players know that there are only about 20 commands that are ever likely to do anything.

**NEIL:** SHOW PICTURE OF CHEATING WIFE TO HUSBAND. See, Gumshoe tried to do a knowledge puzzle. And it was clunky as all get-out.

**LUCIAN:** As opposed to ACCUSE WIFE OF SLEEPING AROUND.

**NEIL:** The more complex or abstract the puzzle, the more different player inputs you're going to have to account for. There's an inherent conflict in player expectations. They expect things to work like they've always worked, and yet they also expect new puzzles that they've never thought of before. There's a fine line between "Ick! Guess-the-verb puzzle!" and "Cool! A game that recognizes a new verb!"

**ADAM:** Right. Here's what I'm envisioning: Game starts. Before long, the player's up against a puzzle. An experienced player will try three or four "standard solutions," then if those don't work, sit back and think. "Hmm...what am I missing?" A novice player is more likely to try ten things the parser doesn't understand, and get frustrated. How to "pitch" a puzzle to both audiences?

**NEIL:** All the more reason to have as many working non-solutions as possible.

**LUCIAN:** Right. For example, I implemented "use" in my game, just because my novice beta testers were trying it.

**NEIL:** It almost seems like a puzzle's fairness or enjoyability has less to do with how to solve the puzzle, than with how the game lets you *not* solve it.

**LUCIAN:** Essentially, I told them, "Don't use 'use'. Try other verbs." But at least it was a response. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that working non-solutions are essential to a fair, kind, and enjoyable puzzle.

**ADAM:** It's important that players be given an idea of what current IF tech just can't handle. The problem is, most players won't sit through an instruction book. So insinuating it into the game would be a real plus.

**LUCIAN:** I remember someone's idea on r.a.i.f a while back where if a player got a certain number of "I don't understand" responses in a row, the game would say, "Okay, you seem to be new at IF..." Not the best as it stands, but it's a good start.

**ADAM:** I've had friends who've never touched a computer game of any kind play I-0, and I found myself having to serve as a second parser, translating what they wanted to do into IF-ese. Otherwise, they'd type things like GO BACK SOUTH. Or GO NORTH AGAIN. Maybe even just making the player conscious that IF-ese exists would be good.

**LUCIAN:** But now we're talking about kind parsers, and not kind puzzles.

**NEIL:** I think even leaving out beginners, though, it's a problem to introduce new puzzle-solving methods. Has everyone here played Plundered Hearts at least, oh, three-quarters of the way through? I'm trying to remember now: What's the puzzle with the spices?

**LUCIAN:** BLOW.

**NEIL:** Right. Is that a nifty extension of the verb set, or an unfair puzzle?

**ADAM:** Depends. To an experienced IF-er, that's outside the standard set of tools. To a novice, it's no more out there than anything else.

**ZARF:** My immediate thought is "give the player a fan, too." If the player has made a breeze in the past, it becomes a known tool. And "blow" is a valid alternate solution.

**LUCIAN:** I think it depends on how the game reacts to the standard verb-set. For example, what happens with the verb THROW?

**ADAM:** In I-0 there's an avoidable micro-puzzle to which the solution is APOLOGIZE. That's one of Graham's supplied verbs. Still, it's out there.

**ZARF:** I always turn off most of the sorry, curse, etc., verbs — precisely to avoid confusing the player.

**ADAM:** THROW AT comes up with the bizarre response: You miss. In Inform, at least.

**NEIL:** TADS, too.

**LUCIAN:** No, I meant in this specific example. What happens if you try THROW SPICES instead of BLOW SPICES?

**NEIL:** Don't remember. Obviously, it's a good place to put a hint in the right direction. If this is a problem with physical puzzles, the problem is tenfold with knowledge puzzles. What if, instead of BLOW SPICES, the player has to TELL LUKE THAT LEIA IS HIS SISTER? The player starts with TELL LUKE ABOUT LEIA. "What about her?"

**LUCIAN:** I think that in the Luke/Leia case, you should have a good response to TELL LUKE ABOUT LEIA. Like, "What do you want to tell him about her? A), B), C),...."

**NEIL:** But multiple choice ruins it, if the player needs to figure it out themselves. TELL LUKE THAT LEIA WAS DISSING HER SISTER. "She is? No way!"

**ZARF:** If you're going to bring in a keyword system, you're going to have to tell the player and then put in a lot of work to make it playable.

**LUCIAN:** ...and that's where you need natural language parsing.

**NEIL:** But still, how's the player to know that they need to use LEIA and SISTER in the same sentence? Especially given that games are usually limited to TELL X ABOUT Y.

**ZARF:** The only way I can think of is to use the system so heavily that by the time the player gets there, it's obvious.

**LUCIAN:** Seriously, in order for this to work with present technology, you'd need to have some method of abstracting that knowledge into something concrete. A pendant with their family name. A DNA code analysis. Whatever.

**NEIL:** That's really clunky. It's back to SHOW PHOTO TO HUSBAND.

**LUCIAN:** Well, that's what level we're at, as far as I can tell.

**ZARF:** Nobody cares about clunky. As long as there's a clear solution, people will accept it as "The parser didn't suck."

**ADAM:** Well, you know my answer. Ask/tell must be burnt down. Or maybe not that extreme, but still.

See, here's a problem. Take TELL LUKE ABOUT SISTER as an example. You sort of have to trust that no player will try that until she knows what it is that a mention of SISTER translates to in the game. And that means that somehow you've got to keep players from trying stuff like TELL LUKE ABOUT BUTTERSCOTCH.

**ZARF:** "You don't know anything about Luke's sister" — well-known hack in knowledge puzzles.

**LUCIAN:** Also, I don't think it's as clunky if, in response to SHOW PHOTO TO HUSBAND, the game responds, "'Sorry, Mike,' you tell him, 'I'm afraid your wife is sleeping around.' Incredulous, he denies it, until you show him the picture, and he can't help but acknowledge it."

**ADAM:** Y'know, Balance of Power had a notice on the title page: "People who play this game without reading the manual are wasting their time." Include a message of that sort, and in the manual, say TELL doesn't just mean "ramble on about X."

**NEIL:** Zarf, the problem with your solution is that it requires that the player perform a certain task, flaggable, to find out that Leia is Luke's sister. You can't code the player's brain to trip a flag.

**ZARF:** Well, that's how I'd set up that kind of plot.

**NEIL:** How does that differ from FIND KEY TO OPEN DOOR, then?

**LUCIAN:** It doesn't. But that doesn't make it a bad puzzle.

**NEIL:** FIND LEIA'S BABY PICTURE TO SHOW TO LUKE.

**ZARF:** That's not a command, that's a description of some plot events.

**NEIL:** Sorry. Lower-case it.

- ZARF:** It becomes a known puzzle, yes, but the content is interesting.
- LUCIAN:** All games are Space Invaders. But some games are more Space Invaders than others. All puzzles are lock-and-key. But some puzzles are more lock-and-key than others.
- ZARF:** And more likely the interesting point was the scene where you found out, or got the evidence, or whatever. The evidence itself is just something you grab as a reward.
- NEIL:** This seems to be directly at odds with Adam's solution. Zarf and LP suggest bringing the puzzle within conventional commands. Adam wants to tear up TELL entirely.
- ADAM:** Yeah, well, now that I've perfected my conversation interface, Ask and Tell are ashes in my mouth. Or something.
- ZARF:** Not to drop any spoilers, but the "about" text of my half-done game says "To simplify the problem of dialogue in interactive fiction, the 'tell' and 'ask' commands are not used in this game. Your conversational options are limited to 'yes,' 'no,' and saying nothing at all." Except that *really* that turns out to be... not entirely the case...
- ADAM:** I think what we're getting at here is: set your own ground rules. It's not that hard. Your game doesn't have to incorporate everything every other game has.
- NEIL:** But give the player lots of warning what the ground rules are. And lots of tolerance for disobeying them.
- ZARF:** I certainly don't stick a TELL X ABOUT Y puzzle at the end; that would suck.
- NEIL:** Well, but also: If you're going to require the use of the verb SIGNIFY in the endgame, you might want to mention it two or three times earlier in the game.
- ZARF:** Have the player use it casually, early in the game, with lots of cueing.
- LUCIAN:** I put in a new, necessary verb in Edifice. And no one's complained yet, so I suppose that's good.
- ADAM:** Er, I did. That was when I had to hit the walkthrough.
- LUCIAN:** Well, whether it worked or not, I tried both to include as many synonyms as I could, and also imply the verb indirectly as part of the "functional non-solutions."
- ADAM:** I'm wondering about the prompt now. One of the big arguments in favor of the prompt is that it provides the illusion that you can type anything you want — not just pick from a menu of 12 verbs. Yet that illusion is so far from the truth...
- NEIL:** That illusion is what puts bread on our table. So to speak.

**ZARF:** The truth is *also* far from a menu of verbs. There is a consistent IFese. But I know we've done this on the newsgroup.

**NEIL:** So what have we determined about puzzles?

**ADAM:** Puzzles. Burn them down!

**ZARF:** It's better to find a can without a can opener than a can opener without a can.

**ADAM:** >OPEN PARROT

**LUCIAN:** Well, in a whispered conversation with Adam, I remembered that I actually added *two* necessary verbs, one of which he got, and the other of which he didn't. The first one, on the first level, I provided much more context. More synonyms, more implications. The second, on the third level, didn't have nearly as much context, and I agree that the verb was probably harder to come up with.

**ZARF:** I would have gone off on my rant about "any good puzzle can be done with standard verbs. Except NPC puzzles." Except I liked the Edifice puzzle you're talking about.

**ADAM:** I'm troubled by the whole notion of 'standard' anything. At least regarding IF.

**ZARF:** Be troubled; we've got standard IFese.

**ADAM:** Any game could be someone's first game. You can say that "we've got standard IFese," but "we" who have it are mostly in this room.

**ZARF:** Many games have the standard intro to IF built in. Even the rest could just say "See the standard intro to IF first."

**LUCIAN:** A sample transcript should be able to overcome most of the problems with that. I've come up with three things we've said.

- Use the environment.
- Provide working non-solutions.
- Provide ample context and warning.

Any others?

**ZARF:** Err on the side of easy. (He said, waiting to be struck dead for hypocrisy.)

**LUCIAN:** Be kind to your players.

**ADAM:** "Use" the environment? I thought we weren't supposed to use "use." Oops! I used it!

I think the only thing I'd add is this: IF is different things to different people. To write a game I like, emphasis on LP's point one is paramount. But other people won't much care. So the upshot is: to an extent, how you approach your puzzles isn't a matter of "good" or "bad," so much as: what type of game are you writing? ☹

# Announcing the 1997 XYZZY Awards

Now that the voting for the 1997 IF Competition is at last at an end, it's time to get down to ... more voting! That's right: the 1997 XYZZY Awards are upon us. And unlike the Competition, all games released in 1997 are eligible for these "IF Oscars," and *everyone* is eligible to vote.

**ELIGIBILITY:** All IF games released for the first time during the year 1997 are eligible for the 1997 XYZZYs. Whether it showed up on a web page or in some obscure subdirectory of GMD, it's on the list. (See below.)

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

**CATEGORIES:** There are ten XYZZY categories this year: Best Game, Best Writing, Best Story, Best Setting, Best Puzzles, Best NPCs, Best Individual Puzzle, Best Individual NPC, and the two newest categories: Best Individual PC and Best Use of Medium. In the "individual" categories, vote for a particular NPC, PC, or puzzle; in the rest, vote for the game as a whole. Vote once in each category, then stop.

**DEADLINE:** All ballots must be returned to eileen@interport.net by February 1, 1998. Ballots arriving after that date will be used as cat litter.

And now, on with the voting:

BEST GAME: \_\_\_\_\_ BEST NPCs: \_\_\_\_\_  
BEST WRITING: \_\_\_\_\_ BEST INDIVIDUAL PUZZLE: \_\_\_\_\_  
BEST STORY: \_\_\_\_\_ BEST INDIVIDUAL NPC\*: \_\_\_\_\_  
BEST SETTING: \_\_\_\_\_ BEST INDIVIDUAL PC: \_\_\_\_\_  
BEST PUZZLES: \_\_\_\_\_ BEST USE OF MEDIUM\*\*\*: \_\_\_\_\_

\*NPC stands for "non-player character"

\*\*This award is meant to honor proficiency in use of the parser, default messages, and so on.

## Eligible games:

A Bear's Night Out	Lost Anaheim Hills	The Acorn Court
A Good Breakfast	Madame L'Estrange and the Troubled Spirit	The Chronicles of Aarbron
A New Day	Magic Realms: The Sword of Kasza	The Edifice
Apartment F209	Mercy	The Family Legacy
Aunt Nancy's House	Mystery Science Theater 3000,	The Frenetic Five vs. Sturm und Drang
Babel	Adventure 102, Reel 1: A Fable	The Garden
Baltimore:24	Myth	The Hollywood Murders
Bedlam	Oskar und der Tod v1.1	The Incredible Erotic Adventures of
Breath Pirates	Papa wird vermisst	Stiffy Makane!
Candy	Phred Phontious and the Quest for	The Lost Spellmaker
Cask	Pizza	The Mad Bomber
Caso Cerrado	Pick up the Phone Booth and Die	The Obscene Quest of Dr.
Coming Home	Pick up the Phone Booth and Die,	Aardvarkbarf
Congratulations!	Part 2	The Space Under the Window
Down	Pintown	The Tempest
E-Mailbox	Poor Zefron's Almanac	The Town Dragon
Everybody Loves a Parade	Sea of Night	The Unholy Grail
Friday Afternoon or: Escape from	She's Got a Thing for a Spring	The Zuni Doll
MicroSun	Shivani, Ciudad del Mal	Travels in the Land of Erden
Glowgrass	Sins Against Mimesis	Tryst of Fate
Heist: The Crime of the Century	Sunset Over Savannah	VirtuaTech
House II	Sylenius Mysterium	Zero Sum Game
Interstate Zero	Symmetry	Zombie!
Kook U	Temple of the Orc Mage (level one)	Zork: The Undiscovered
Leaves		Underground

# So you want to write a text adventuring authoring system...

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*Many a programmer who has played Adventure, or any of the Infocom games has considered writing their own adventure game; some even consider writing an authoring system. In this article, author **Alan Conroy** ([alan@accessone.com](mailto:alan@accessone.com)) discusses how he developed an adventure authoring system named Adventure Builder and the issues involved with writing your own.*

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## The genesis of Adventure Builder

When I was in high school, I played nearly every game on the HP 2000 system that users at my school and others in the area could dial into. I wrote a couple simple games of my own — battleship, card games, and the like. In the summer of 1978, just after I had graduated, a former teacher of mine began managing the district's new minicomputer. The three high schools in our district now had their very own DEC PDP-11/70 running RSTS/E. I spent some time at the computer center as a guest, playing with the computer while they worked the bugs out of the new system.

That summer I was introduced to Adventure, an early port of the original that had me instantly hooked. Imagine! A computer game which understood typed English commands! True, it only understood one or two-word commands and had an extremely limited vocabulary, but compared to anything else up to that point it was a revolution.

I played Adventure whenever I could that summer, and in the fall I started taking evening classes at a community college while working as an EKG technician. They had a dial-up terminal in a back corner that sat unused in the evenings, so I dialed-in to the PDP-11 with a guest account and continued to play Adventure. By the next year, I hadn't yet solved it — two puzzles still had me stumped. Most of my high school buddies who had played Adventure were at colleges out of state and there were no such things as Invisiclues, so I was on my own. The thought of writing my own game had also firmly taken root and I had begun preliminary coding in BASIC.

Then I moved to Washington to attend Seattle Pacific University. Some of my high school buddies were already there, and I found several other new friends who had played Adventure through to the end. That first quarter at SPU, I finally got

all 350 points in Adventure. Now I could consider some serious coding for my own game. SPU also had a PDP-11 computer, so my game — such as it was — required no rewriting. In 1980 I took a Pascal course and for the course project decided to write a complete specification of my game from a programming standpoint. This included deciding what data structures I was going to use, the basics of the parser, and converting what little I had written into Pascal. This was the beginning of the Quest game.

I continued to work on Quest on my own once the course was over. By this time, TRS-80 computers were in vogue and were soon showing up all over campus. After I gained access to the university's one TRS-80 Model II with a FORTRAN compiler, I decided to convert Adventure to run on that platform. I had to type all of the source code and text in by hand before I could even deal with compatibility issues between PDP-11 FORTRAN and TRS-80 FORTRAN. Of course, before I could finish that — I still had grades to consider — one of the university's administrative departments repossessed the Model II, and I never saw it again.

About that time I learned about adventure games for Apple computers created by companies like Broderbund, Adventure International, and Sierra On-Line. The Apple games had the same limited parsing ability, but included low-resolution graphics that accompanied the text. Shortly thereafter, TRS-80 Model III computers could be found all over campus and I decided to earnestly start coding Quest for that platform. I converted my Pascal code to BASIC — the only programming choice I had for that computer — and tried to squeeze it into 64K along with the BASIC interpreter and the TRSDOS operating system. I made enough progress that I let other people play Quest on a trial basis and used their input to refine my design and ideas about adventure games.

Then someone installed DUNGEON (Dungeon) on the academic minicomputer and I was hooked all over again. Here was a parser that understood much more complicated input than any other adventure game! In short order I ran into the shortcomings of Dungeon, but found it such an improvement over everything else that I was willing to forgive all. There were many times that I played the game with several other students at the computer lab, trading hints until the early morning hours until we had solved the mysteries. Suddenly, Quest seemed pale and insignificant by comparison. It was no use trying to improve it, the 64Kb memory limit and the limitations of BASIC and TRSDOS made it pointless to continue.

So, once again I converted Quest, this time to BASIC-Plus-2 (a BASIC compiler) on the PDP-11. With the 128Kb memory limit and the ability to do overlays, I was free to make a decent game along the lines of Dungeon. At this point (about 1981), I began to wonder if I couldn't create a library of routines that could be used by any number of games, enabling any programmer to create adventure games on the PDP-11. This new goal, plus my desire to finish Quest, fueled my work for the next two years. Even with overlays and data caching, the memory limits were a real thorn in my side. I spent half of my time trying to figure out how to change the overlay structure to allow me to compile every significant enhancement.

In 1983, I purchased a DEC Rainbow computer (8088) with a huge 5 MB hard disk and 256 KB of memory! And it only cost \$3,600. My dream of text adventures for the masses was much closer. Still, it seemed unlikely that many people were going to buy systems of that caliber for that price, so I continued to work on PDP-11 Quest. It was around this time that the Zork series was released by a new company called Infocom. These games only required a 2-sided floppy and 256K of memory. I could run them on my machine at home! I was a college graduate by then and busy working as a system administrator; what little time I had outside of work was spent on other projects, not Quest.

Finally, in 1987 two important things happened. First, I got married. I had introduced my fiancée to adventure games, and she loved them. I had made some converts to adventure games over the years, but she was the most enthusiastic. Second, I was laid-off during a series of downsizings. So we both decided that I would work full-time on Quest as long as we could afford to financially — she worked part-time and I did some consulting to stretch it out to six months — and Conroy & Conroy Company was born. I decided to consider the previous nine years as research and development, with Quest as the prototype and write from scratch in Turbo Pascal V3 on MSDOS (version 2.11 at that time). This gave me the chance to completely separate the Quest game from the engine. Since I didn't want anyone to have to buy Turbo Pascal or any other compiler to use Quest or to write games, I wrote a simple compiler based on the Sirius language (which I had been refining even longer than Quest) and integrated it into what now was the Quest Adventure Authoring System Version 1.0. Since I had an integrated interpretive run-time system, it was easy to integrate the engine and the programming language more tightly than a more conventional approach would have made possible.

This was during Infocom's heyday, and I knew that Quest would have to let people write better games than the Infocom ones in order for it to sell. Fortunately the years of messing with parsers let me write a parser far better than what Infocom had back then — in retrospect, this wasn't all that great of an accomplishment, but I felt good about it at the time. A few big games had been written by then; for example, Time Zone for the Apple was huge — ten diskettes instead of the normal two. Not to be outdone, Quest allowed 8,191 rooms (called nodes), and up to 4,095 unique items. Users needed 640Kb of memory to run such a large game, but by that time, most DOS machines had over 1MB. However, I could fit a standard Infocom-size game in 256KB of memory. Quest came with the game I had been working on all these years as a demonstration of the authoring tool's abilities. I even included the entire original Adventure game as part of the larger Quest game. I sold a couple of copies and got a review or two in various newsletters, but the money certainly wasn't rolling in.

So in early 1988 I had to go back to work. Conroy & Conroy was still alive and well, but I wasn't putting the same hours. I made various improvements and bug fixes, until reaching Quest V1.2 in about 1993. Most of the improvements were in making the authoring system's interface less "techie."

Over time, my target market had changed from game companies to *anyone* who wanted to write a text adventure game. Quest had come a long way since the TRS-80 days, but even with V1.2 it was still too techie for a general audience.

By this point, though, text adventures were considered passé by the general public, and Infocom was no more. I had not made enough money to even cover a portion of the time I put into Adventure Builder. I made the Quest demo game available as freeware, but that failed to drum up any business either. The prospects for Quest seemed rather bleak.

So why did I continue? Partly because of the encouragement of my wife, Annette. She was working on her Masters degree in education — specifically language acquisition. According to her, text adventure games were exceedingly useful in building language skills (both comprehension and composition) in limited-English students. By now she has completed her Ph.D. and still maintains that this is so. The second reason I didn't give up is that I personally still believed that text adventure games were unsurpassed in the game software world in their ability to engage your imagination. If only they could be made more popular with the current video-oriented generation...

In 1994 I began work on a major upgrade to Quest. First, I decided to change the name to Adventure Builder. It was too confusing to have the authoring system and the demo game named the same. Next, I created a Windows GUI version of the authoring system, another step towards making the authoring system easier to use, although the DOS command-line interface remained available for people who didn't use Windows —and at the time, that was most people. The new version was Adventure Builder v2.0, which is still the current version. The next version, 2.1 is underway, but it will likely be a few years before it sees the light of day.

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## Why did it fail?

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So, with such an awesome product at such an early date, why wasn't it more successful? I think the major reason is that I am not a marketer; I'm a programmer. The first of several mistakes I made was in the pricing (I was charging \$99). I came from the DEC computer world, where all software you purchased came with 12 months of free maintenance, including free updates of any software that came out during the 12-month period, with renewal for a relatively low price. I carried this philosophy forward into the PC market thinking that people would love the novelty of decent support. I also learned the hard way that many industry magazines were interested in printing a decent review only if you were willing to fork out hundreds of dollars to advertise in them.

A second problem was that the target market was relatively small. More people wanted to play adventure games than write them. But I wrote Adventure Builder because that is what I wanted to write. There were other minor reasons too, I think, but the combination of writing what I wanted rather than what the market demanded, plus the inability to market it in the first place, is explanation enough.

So why didn't I write games instead of an authoring system? I was really more interested in the authoring system, and I'm not that great of a game author. If you play Quest, you will see that it doesn't have much over Zork I as far as plot or NPCs.

What about the Internet? Until this year, I didn't have Internet access. I was pleasantly shocked to find a thriving, if small, gaming community online. And though Adventure Builder might have been the first commercial text adventure authoring system outside of the game companies, it certainly is not the only one now. If I had Internet access ten years ago, things *might* have been different — or they might not have. The current popular authoring systems all have (at least) one major advantage over Adventure Builder: support for multiple platforms. It is unlikely that Adventure Builder will support platforms other than DOS and Windows.

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## Why write your own authoring system?

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This question might be rephrased as “Why would anyone write their own authoring system anymore?” After all, there are numerous authoring systems, the market is small, and no one in this field is likely to get wealthy because of it. Nevertheless, I think there are still good reasons for writing your own authoring system.

Nothing will teach you more about adventure game theory than writing your own authoring system. As a game writer who uses an authoring tool, you don't need to concern yourself with file formats, the internal workings of parsers, object interaction engines, compilers, interpreters, linkers, or debuggers. But as you write an authoring tool, many or all of these things must come together or no game can be written. Knowing this kind of detail about the underlying system can make you more adept at writing games. It will hone your programming skills. It will call upon a wide range of knowledge domains. In other words, you will learn a lot.

Perhaps your strengths don't lie in the area of game writing — I, for one, am more of a “tools” person than an “application” person. Writing an authoring system allows me to write an application that *is* a tool. It will give you great appreciation for the accomplishments of authoring tools such as Inform, Hugo, and maybe even Adventure Builder.

Despite the lack of both fame and fortune, I don't consider the last 19 years of effort on adventure games to be a failure. I had fun. I learned more from that effort than I learned in my years at the University — that's no reflection on SPU. Finally, it's given me the confidence to know that I can pull off the next generation of adventure game software I write. Fame and fortune would have been nice, but they were never the motivating factors for what I did.

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## How do you start?

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You can learn a lot about how a successful authoring tool works by studying the inner workings of someone else's parser. The same holds true if you plan to develop a compiler or interpreter. There is a lot of source code readily available on the Internet for your perusal. You should also seek out opportunities to talk to those who have already created their own. Check out various game magazines, such as *XYZZYnews*. One good introduction to adventure game authoring issues is an article by Infocom's Dave Lebling in *Byte* magazine, Volume 5, Number 12 (December 1980) — your local library should be able to help you locate a copy.

Expect to spend roughly equal parts on the game itself, the parser, and the rest of the program. In *Quest V1.0*, the parser was 30% of the executable in size, but took about 50% of the development time due to the complexity of interpreting commands in English.

Don't be daunted by the size of the task. If I had known that *Adventure Builder* would be ten years in the making, I probably would not have even started it. However, at each stage of the process, I had a better system than before. You can implement your improvements in phases: Do a very simple parser on the first round and concentrate instead on how objects interact in your world. Once that's done, get a simple demo game working and then add a better parser, then an interpreter, then allow save and restore, and so on. Immediate feedback from your efforts will encourage you. After all, you're doing this for fun, aren't you?

Consider working with someone else, especially if their interests complement yours. Perhaps they will work on the interpreter while you work on the parser, and so on.

Good programming skills are a given, as is keeping a goal in mind. You should have a good sense of what you want the finished program to do before you start. Next, spend some time designing it before you begin programming. Don't overlook your target audience. If the authoring system is solely for your use, a fancy user interface may not be necessary. On the other hand, if (like me) you wish to allow non-technical people to write games, you will need to invest time in designing the authoring system's user interface. Finally, seek out constructive criticism on both the authoring system and your game. This could be done in many ways, from asking friends to review your software to having official beta testers.

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## Conclusion

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I hope I've encouraged a few of you to experiment with your own authoring tools. If you have questions about adventure game theory and existing authoring tools, you can post them in *rec.arts.int-fiction* and most likely find someone with an opinion on the issue. If you would like to get a copy of *Adventure Builder*, go to <http://www.accessone.com/~conroy/ab.html>. The documentation may be of particular interest since the authoring tool source is currently unavailable. ☒

# I-0

release 4

Parser: Inform  
 Author: Adam Cadre (adamc@acpub.duke.edu)  
 Requires: Inform run-time interpreter  
 Response to the XYZZY command: "A hollow voice says 'Fool. But you're cute, so that makes up for it.'"

## SEX.

Okay, now we've got that out of the way. There are many reasons for the incredible popularity of Adam Cadre's Interstate Zero (or I-0, as it's better known) when it hit ftp.gmd.de earlier this year. It has an engaging lead character (Tracy Valencia, a free-spirited college student on her way home for her 18th birthday), a tantalizing setting (out of gas in the middle of the most desolate stretch of the desert state of Dorado), and a level of detail that sets new standards for interactive fiction (if Tracy's car doesn't have an alternator implemented, it's only because she doesn't know what one is). But mostly, it's got sex. In I-0, as in real life, you can try to boink whoever you like (yourself included, which is often the handiest option), though like in real life, you may not always like what it gets you into.

When Cadre made the decision to make I-0 understand the word "undress," he should have realized that everyone who played the game would spend most of their time doing just that: undressing in the middle of a highway, in a convenience store, in a fast food restaurant. Nudity, apparently, is even more of a temptation to IF players than a cigarette lighter — give them the opportunity, and they'll try it *everywhere*.

And more power to 'em. But once the thrill of flashing motorcycle cops has worn off, there's a lot more to I-0 than just dirty fun. Cadre, an English grad student at Duke University with one unpublished novel to his credit, has created an enjoyably immersive world that cleverly sends up some typical characters in the Great American Desert. Though a relatively small game in terms of locations — Cadre claims to have written the entire thing in six weeks, which must be some kind of record — there are plenty of things to play with along the way (no, not yourself — we're done with the sex part of this review, thank you very much) and a

couple of alternate paths to take that give I-0 great replayability value.

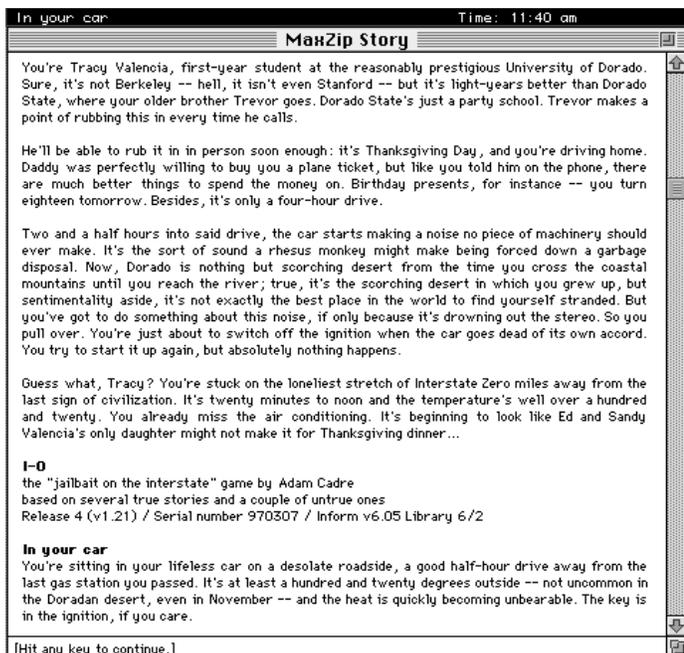
Add some of the most accomplished writing you'll find anywhere in IF, and you've got a whole lot of fun in store for you.

That depth of detail, however, can cause problems for unwary players. If you're used to games with room descriptions that run down every usable item in a nice, happy list, forget about it — I-0 is likely to just show you a car, and leave it to you to figure out that it has a steering wheel, a trunk, a glove compartment. The only "puzzles" in I-0, in fact, rely on exactly those sorts of challenges: not so much figuring out what Item A to fit into Slot B, as deciding what course of action to take when confronted with a difficult situation. If you find yourself stuck in I-0 (as I did several times), rather than searching your inventory, you'll be better off wracking your brain for the answer to the question, "What would I do in this situation?"

With one glaring exception (involving a timed escape path that opens without the player being notified — don't be afraid to revisit old locations to see if anything has changed), all of the challenges are fair and relatively easy to puzzle out. Some even have multiple solutions, with different options depending on whether you'd rather have Tracy use her wits to escape her predicament, or her wiles.

I know which option *you'll* choose, though. You're so predictable. ☒

—Neil deMause



Opening screen from I-0, the "jailbait on the interstate" game

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

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I've bumbled into *XYZZYnews* for the first time, and my world is a better place! An IF fan of old (I even wrote a high-school research paper on the subject), I haven't played a text adventure in (wow) two years — but that's soon to change!

One question has been bugging me for a long time: has any slobbering Infocom fan compiled a history of Zork? I know that a Zorkian encyclopedia was included with *Return to Zork* (the real reason why I bought the game), but has anyone done a full historical, zoological, geographical, and metaphysical gazette of the GUE Universe (or would anyone be insane enough to try)?

Thanks!

—Adam  
abank@earthlink.net

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I am wondering if you can help me find information about an old text adventure called *Asylum*.

It came out during the period when these games were popular. I remember several ads running for the game and I believe this is the correct title, however it *has* been a few years since its release. Note: it didn't stay around long either...

If it's any help, the premise was you are a nut in an asylum and had to get out. I don't remember any details other than the player was insane and believed that if they looked up

a piano would fall on their head. Naturally, if LOOK UP was entered, a piano would actually fall and kill the player. Strange, eh?

I almost feel like I could solve one of life's great mysteries if I could only verify that it existed! (LifeBonusPoints: if I can play it on my PalmPilot). Please let me know if you can help. Thanks in advance!

—Radleymarx@aol.com

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Just recently dug out the old Infocom collections and thought about some of the old C-64 text games. I had (and still have) one called *Amnesia* by Thomas M. Disch on Electronic Arts. Seemed pretty nice although I never got far. Have you ever seen a translation for Macs (or even IBM)? E-mail with any info. Thanx.

—Damocles@aol.com

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I am writing to you in the hope that you can steer me to a source which might help me locate a copy of a program marketed in the mid 1980's by Activision called *Alter Ego*. Specifically, I am trying to locate a PC version of either the female or male edition of this program.

I tried Activision's Web site and also tried e-mailing directly to them, but they were of no help, merely telling me, which I already knew, that they discontinued the product years ago.

I also tried a few sources which I found searching the web, but I'm pretty unsophisticated in such searches and in any event was unsuccessful. If you can help in any way to point me in the right direction,

I would be very grateful.  
Thanks.

—Robert Friedman  
refriedman@rosenman.com

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I have recently downloaded the new text adventure, *Zork: The Undiscovered Underground*. It's quite fun, but I'm stuck. I've figured out how to keep the lantern lit, get the lenses, talk to the statues and find the bug spray, but what I can't figure out is what to do with the red lens, or at least I think it will be the red lens, but really any of the lenses in general. Does anyone know what to do with the red lens? If not, how about the costumes, how do you know which one to wear? The read.me says there are hints on the home page, but all I can find is a document with the goals of the game, no real hints. Thanks for any help.

—David  
bainesdean@worldnet.att.net

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I'm just curious. Do you know where to direct me to find somewhere to check online getting a missing piece for Infocom's *Quarterstaff*?

I bought the game when it came out (even still have the poster and stuff) but it had a stupid little wooden coin that you needed to cast certain spells and interpret things. It was small and therefore easy to lose which I did a few years ago.

I thought you might be able to direct me to an Infocom site or something where I could ask about this. Maybe I could find someone to e-mail me a scan of one.

Love your newsletter! And thanks.

—Peter Nelson  
bbqkna19@idt.net