

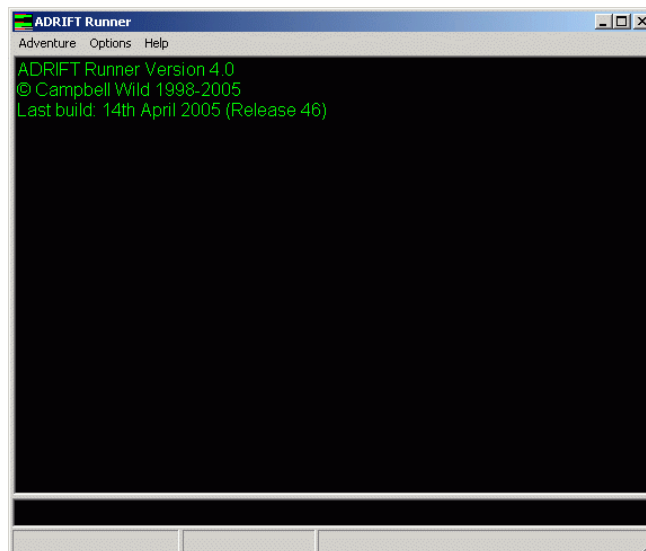
Reviews Exchange

A COLLECTION OF REVIEWS OF ADRIPT GAMES WHICH PEOPLE HAVE WRITTEN BUT THEY MIGHT NOT NECESSARILY BE ALL ADRIPT GAMES THAT PEOPLE ARE WRITING REVIEWS OF

ISSUE 9

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the ninth edition of the Reviews Exchange. Unfortunately, the following issue is a little shorter than some of the previous issues. This is mainly due to the lack of games in recent months. At the heart of this lack of games is the fact that there hasn't been any competition recently. The ADRIFT community only rarely produces games outside of competitions. I'm as guilty of this as anyone, with only one non-comp game released (and this was later entered in a competition anyway).

Are competitions a good thing? I would still say so, as they provide motivation for games to be finished. There have not been more non-comp games, despite the ADRIFT Spring Comp being discontinued this year. Feedback is often better around competitions, even if this feedback is sometimes no better than a final ranking. I have to admit competitions do appeal to my competitive instincts as well.

The price to pay for having competitions does seem to be less non-comp games and slow periods, but I still think that this is worth it. Others may have different opinions though.

Thank you to David Whyld, D.L Sun, Lumin and TDS for contributing below.

Robert Street
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RECENT ADRIFT GAMES

FOR LOVE OF DIGBY

AUTHOR: DAVID WHYLD

PLATFORM: ADRIFT 4.00

REVIEWER: ROBERT STREET

For Love of Digby is reminiscent of another David Whyld game, **Paint!!!**. This is a favourable comparison, given that **Paint!!!** won the ADRIFT Game of the Year award in 2004 and I enjoyed **For Love of Digby** just as much.

For Love of Digby is a one room comedy game, where you have to get your television remote fixed without leaving the couch. As expected, the writing is very well done and it is actually very amusing in places, as you can probably guess just by looking at the game's premise. There isn't much story in this game, with a steady stream of jokes instead.

The main difficulty I had with this game was the lack of focus. Certain actions had to be performed to trigger events in the future, which led to further actions and so on. Why some of these actions lead to the television remote being fixed was difficult to tell. It was just a matter of trying stuff because it was there. It took me a while before I successfully managed to finish the game. I'm still not sure why the end solution worked and the other solutions didn't.

Overall, the game is enjoyable as light entertainment, despite being a little frustrating in its unpredictableness in places.

Score - 7/10

THE POTTER AND THE MOULD

AUTHOR: ROBERT STREET

PLATFORM: ADRIFT 4.00

REVIEWER: D.L SUN (RAINBOWSCAPE)

This review contains spoilers.

Cross the bridge. This was one of the first commands I typed and when I was not understood, I had little hope for the rest of the game.

But I was pleasantly surprised.

Mould is a superhero game, but not in the traditional sense. The introduction starts you off as a perfectly normal individual, but an accident endows you with a small amount of superpowers and you become a superhero in training.

Yes, a sidekick.

From there the story progresses through a series of chapters and time jumps. It is not uncommon to have months pass between scenes.

The story continues on and with the passage of time, and several life changes, our protagonist progresses from reluctant and sometimes resentful sidekick to full-fledged superhero.

I enjoyed the piece and felt like I participated in the story being told. At times there were a few push-me pull-me bits where I felt the character made decisions that the player had no choice but to go along with. For example, that battle with the blue imp is sprung upon you and there doesn't seem to be any other options but to fight it. What if your choice was to let the imp take the amulet and become Mould? I know this might have ended the story sooner and left loose threads hanging but it could have been an option. Especially since the PC toyed with the idea of leading a normal life forever, I felt the author might have allowed for alternate endings. If there are alternate endings where the PC rejects the idea of becoming a superhero and I did not find them, my apologies.

The only time I was tossed out of the game world was at the mall. It seemed strange that the PC had to push Waterfall in order for her explain her back story and also odd that she kept saying, "Push me east or nw etc." Maybe if Waterfall had said, "Push me over here so I can check out that sale I've heard about," I wouldn't have thought this part so forced. On the other hand, making me explore the mall was an excellent idea because I remembered objects I had seen before, and had good idea of how to solve problems with some of them later.

As for the iconic Mould, the oft-mentioned but rarely present original superhero, I thought that character back-story was very well done. I especially enjoyed one of the twists of that storyline, involving the Mould's true identity.

As long as it seemed, when the game ended, the resolution felt sudden and left a few questions behind. Still, it was fun to play and, with a plot that keeps you interested until the very end, I recommend it.

REVIEWER: DAVID WHYLD

Superhero games have always been a favourite of mine since I was a kid so I warmed to this one immediately. Although, saying that, none of the heroes or the villains presented here, particularly the title characters, were really that super. The Potter was a remarkably poor supervillain and the Mould's sole power is to change his body into different shapes. The main character is even worse off. Bearing the unflattering superhero moniker of Handmade, he can only transform his hand into different shapes. As far as competing with comic book superheroes and villains like Spiderman or Doctor Octopus, the Potter, the Mould and Handmade come off as a poor substitute.

You play the part of a helpless bystander, rescued by the Mould from drowning and gifted with a portion of his powers in the process. You assume the name Handmade (not quite the new Magneto or Wolverine unfortunately) and join forces with the Mould to fight crime. (Although what use a guy who can only change his hand into different shapes is going to be in a fight with genuine supervillains is debatable.) You're joined along the way by a superheroine called Waterfall who can transform her body into water at will and use it to combat crime.

Some of the game is told in flash back, detailing the events which led to Handmade becoming a superhero (the aforementioned drowning) and the death of his parents at the hands of the Potter (the supervillain of the piece), culminating in present day events and heading to the Potter's lair to do battle with the evil tyrant.

While Handmade himself isn't much of a superhero, his nifty trick of changing his hand into different items is a nice one and allows for quite a bit of variety in gameplay. Type MOULD and you're offered a choice of things you might like to mould your hand into. While I'd have preferred a choice to mould my hand into anything I felt like (a machine gun would have been useful in some of the situations), there's a fair bit of choice on offer. Sometimes you'll even find yourself with several possibilities for mould shapes, all of which seem equally viable at the time.

Difficulty-wise, **The Potter & The Mould** is a fairly straightforward game with a few puzzles scattered along the way, but little that should stop people in their tracks for any length of time. There's only one bit I had trouble with - a fight with a shape-shifting imp - that took a while to get past due to the random nature of the imp's attacks. Just as you can change a part of your body into different weapons during the fight, so can the imp (or its whole body actually), thus getting the better of it is often a case of bashing in one command after another and hoping something works. There seemed to be a kind of logic to the way the imp attacked, and which mould shape I should use in turn, but I found it easier to simply type in one command after another until I beat it. On the plus side, the imp's attacks seem to cause me precious little damage so the fight itself wasn't life-threatening, just lengthy.

My main criticism of the game, aside from the weakness of the superhero and villain characters, was that Handmade never really gets to perform much in the way of superhero actions. His one power isn't up to much and most of the time he seems to make his way through the game doing little more than the average guy in the street could do. Even when fighting a couple of supervillains attacking a mall, he defeats them by more mundane means and seldom has to use his powers. For that matter, use of the items you can mould you hand into is sometimes buggy. During the fight with the supervillains at the mall, I was given the option of moulding my hand into a number of weapons, a bat and a whip being two of them, yet trying to hit my enemies with these items never got me anywhere.

The only other negative aspect of the game was that it was a little too linear for my liking. I would have preferred to explore a bit and maybe make my way to the confrontation with the supervillain on my own. Still, there's a fair amount of freedom in the areas you can explore so you can't really claim you're being forced down a set path.

Overall I liked this game and rated it as my favourite in the Spring Thing 2006. I'd look forward to another one in the same theme but preferably with a superhero who is really super.

7 out of 10

REVIEWER: TDS

In this game you play a fledgling superhero that makes his way to the top while destroying bad guys left and right along the way. The premise isn't one I like but I decided to give this one a try. I wasn't disappointed.

The game starts off with the origin of your character's superpowers and goes through your training stages until you are a fully fledged hero and get to take out the main baddies. This isn't just some game you're thrown into with a guy that already has fully matured powers and you must now figure out how to use them. In this game, your player learns how to use his powers at the same pace as you. And unlike some superhero games, the protagonist actually has a buffet of ways to use his powers.

The game's writing is above average and it keeps you interested in the story as it moves along. Only a couple flaws I noticed while playing through. I found the room descriptions to be...large. Almost every one was about seven or eight lines long, and that's without the many scenes that occur in the game. Most descriptions are meaty because the author does a little too much telling instead of leaving the scene to speak for itself. However, when the time does come for the author to take over a little more and give the character a voice I am disappointed. In one very emotional scene the player shows less emotion than he would if a fly landed on his arm. Despite the loads of backstory and extraordinary abilities the player is really a dull guy. At the same time he's not quite the faceless, nameless adventurer of old text adventures. The story is predictable for the most part, and mountains of text make bearing it a less enjoyable task.

As I said before, this hero has powers he can actually use. He's not some average Joe with a superhero costume. The Mould can turn parts of his body into pretty much anything within reason. Due to the obvious constraints of IF you are given a limited choice at any appropriate time. This opens up the game to more original puzzles and situations you otherwise wouldn't be able to go through. This part of the game was done well as you get to use logic you otherwise wouldn't have considered to solve puzzles. Also there are battle scenes in some parts of the game. They don't use the standard ADRIFT battle system(thank God) and it does an even better job of conveying the action. You choose what you want to do and must judge wisely in accordance with your villain's actions. It isn't overused to the point of annoyance nor underused to the point of obscurity.

The game lasted me about two hours and it doesn't have a particularly hard puzzle. Near the end of the game I started to get tired of reading the tons of text coming up every turn. The game is your standard adventure with a few unique aspects and if you play slowly it may last a little longer than a day. Overall it's a fun game but beware there is plenty of story to digest so don't just expect a puzzlefest.

6/10

IT'S EASTER PEEPS!

AUTHOR: SARA BROOKSIDE
PLATFORM: ADRIFT 4.00

REVIEWER: DAVID WHYLD

The sole ADRIFT entry in a recent one room comp (it came sixth out of nine entries, although as it was an Italian website hosting the comp and seven of the entries were in Italian, that's not as bad as it sounds), **It's Easter, Peeps!** is quite a charming little game. Little in the sense that it takes place in just a single room.

The premise is a simple one: it's Easter and you've got to collect items for an Easter basket for your son, Max. To make matters easier, Max has helpfully provided you with a list of the items that he needs. All you have to do is find them and place them in the basket given to you by the shopkeeper the moment you enter his candy store.

Unusually for a game by a newcomer, **It's Easter, Peeps!** shows a good level of testing and has responses for most of the things I tried. The faults I came across - examining the candy coin shows me a description of the candy in the display case being the worst - are relatively minor and forgivable given ADRIFT's often poor handling of items with similar names. It was also kind of annoying when I tried to open the display case, had the shopkeeper tell me that he had the key to it (albeit a figurative key rather than a literal one) but attempts to ask him about the key resulted in the game asking me Which key. House key or car key? and then responding with Shopkeeper does not respond to your question no matter what I typed. The shopkeeper is quite a helpful chap for the most part and questioning him about various things is a good idea, but here he was less than forthcoming.

Most of the items are easy enough to find but the means of getting hold of some of them are a little odd. I found a number of the items by vandalising part of the store, yet the shopkeeper, rather than getting all irate over me smashing up his livelihood, instead seemed quite pleased that I'd thought of this course of action. Then again, the shopkeeper is an unusual character full stop. He doesn't even ask me for payment for the items that I took from his store!

I finished the game after quite a bit of head scratching (and the occasional peek in the Generator! (yes, I'm weak)) but a few things were never explained to me. What was the significance of the coded note? I never did discover if it actually does anything or was simply a red herring. As I finished the game without discovering what it meant, it clearly wasn't a big deal. The phone, too, I never discovered a use for, even though a message I found indicated the phone might well serve a purpose.

All in all, **It's Easter, Peeps!** is a nice enough game which ought to keep you occupied for a while. It's certainly way better than average as far as games by newcomers are concerned.

6 out of 10

REVIEWER: TDS

It's the week before Easter, and you've popped out of your office one day on your lunch break. Your mission? To assemble an Easter basket that will both delight and mystify your 4-year-old son Max.

A parent shopping for an easter basket for his child is an interesting concept for an IF game and I was eager to see how this played out. Unfortunately the game was just as exciting as its intro.

For the entire game you look around a candy store for items on your son's list to put in his easter basket. At first I thought that was just a cover and really when trying to buy a creme egg aliens would blast through the wall or something. Nothing of that sort happens in this game. It's pretty boring the entire time.

From start to finish the game remains very upbeat. I've never played a game where things were so happy-go-lucky before. Either the game was written for children or the author was just in a cheerful mood when making this game. I noticed the shopkeeper in the game ends almost every other sentence with an exclamation mark. Here's a dialogue snippet:

>ask shopkeeper about store

"I've been running this place for 35 years now. Can't imagine doing anything else. I love the sight of a smiling child! Or even an adult every now and then, mind you!"

Cheesy? Oh yes.

On a technical level everything is fine, except for a little problem with ambiguity I ran across. The gameplay is a bore unless you're a fiend for short puzzlefests.

Although I don't favor games that are on the overwhelmingly light side, I don't dislike the game because of that. The game is light-hearted...so where's the humor? I played through the game a couple times to be sure I didn't miss some nugget of comedy or at least an attempt. I found nothing.

For a one room game I guess it succeeds. Although for a short distraction I can point you towards games more interesting that are also sprinkled with comedy. I can't recommend this to anyone.

4/10

SERE (SURVIVE, EVADE, RESIST, ESCAPE)

AUTHOR: SKYPIG
PLATFORM: ADRIFT 4.00

REVIEWER: DAVID WHYLD

This review is based on the first version of the game.

A new ADRIFT game and a new author to boot. Quite a rarity these days. So is **SERE - Survive, Evade, Resist, Escape** any good? Unfortunately not...

You play the part of a soldier in some unspecified war zone whose helicopter crashes, everyone else dies and you are the only survivor. You have to get back to friendly territory and evade capture for as long as you can.

The intro is poorly written, riddled with more than a few spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. YOUR LEANING ON YOUR MACHINE GUN SCANNING, OUT THE WINDOW FOR ANYTHING OUT OF THE ORDINARY. Maybe it's just me, but every time I find a typo of any kind in the introduction to a game, I wince. By the time I'd finished the intro to this game, I was pretty much permanently wincing. Frequent misspellings of "you're" as "your" are rife throughout the game. It also suffers from some pretty frustrating guess the verb problems, some of which are made harder by typos in the text that lead you to try one thing when another is expected. Examine the equipment in the crashed helicopter and you're told you can see your tool box (note the space between the words!) Yet every attempt to OPEN TOOL BOX or EXAMINE TOOL BOX met with YOU SEE NO SUCH THING. It seems you have to refer to it as "toolbox" (all one word) for the game to understand what you mean. It doesn't understand box unfortunately.

The player starts with a loaded pistol which, for some reason which probably seemed like a good idea at the time, I decided to remove the magazine from. Later on, I came across an enemy soldier who I tried to shoot so I put the magazine back in the pistol, only to be told by the game that the pistol wasn't loaded. Oh yes, it was. The debugger even confirmed this to me but no matter what I typed, I couldn't seem to get the game to accept this. In the end, I had to restart the game to make any further progress. As it happens, the command LOAD PISTOL was bugged anyway as every time I tried it, ADRIFT assumed I meant to 'load' a new game and didn't process the command. Funnily enough, LOAD FLARE worked fine for the pen flare, even though you can fire it at the end of the game whether you've loaded it or not.

You can die very easily in this game if you're not careful, and sometimes even if you are. A few times the game assumes you're trying to carry out a command that you might not be, executes that command, and as a result kills you off. I found a truck and tried to examine it. The game apparently decided that by EXAMINE TRUCK I actually meant to APPROACH TRUCK so it helpfully carried out that action for me and then promptly had me shot dead. You can also die at other times when you're given a kind of CYOA choice of do this, do that or the other. Pick the wrong one - and there's no way of knowing beforehand which is right and which is wrong - and you die.

My final annoyance with the game (although there are many others that I haven't mentioned in this review) involved an item showing up only after a certain point in

the game. Examine something when you first come across it and you see no indication of an item being there, examine it later and, lo and behold, the item has shown up, although there's no explanation for why it's there now but wasn't before. (Oh, and for my definite final annoyance with the game, USE PLIERS ON IGNITION is a nasty bit of guess the verb.)

SERE - Survive, Evade, Resist, Escape is a short-ish game, ten or so minutes from start to finish if you can figure your way past the guess the verb problems and general getting killed every few moves. It's not the worst game by a newbie I've ever played (Death Agency still holds that record by quite a margin), but it's in definite need of being run through a spell and grammar check, as well as some serious testing. Even if you're a fan of war games, and I can't say I am, this one probably won't hold a lot of appeal for you.

2 out of 10

REVIEWER: TDS

You never saw what hit you. Your first thought was that your pilots were flying too low, too fast and struck a tree or a mountain top. Then you heard the pilots screaming "SAM, SAM, we're hit!" Shock, fear, panic. Not one of your drunken boastings ever included peeing in your pants but thats between you and God if you don't make it out of this.

In this game you play a soldier whose plane has crashed and must survive the enemy that happens to patrol the forest you end up in. It's a concept that you don't see everyday in IF and I wish there were more espionage/military games out there. Unfortunately this one doesn't exactly bring glory to the genre.

It's a short game so it doesn't depend on its story to carry it. The story is placed at the beginning and end of the game, as I expected. I didn't expect an epic storyline from a game that's short like this but a quick snippet of what the player was doing before the attack would be nice. The writing isn't the greatest as you might tell from the introduction but it passes for standard text adventure fare. The problems don't really start with the "fiction" but rather the "interactive" part of the game.

This game goes out of its way to present itself with a flashy intro with colors, music, and a menu that adds nothing to the game itself. Although that I don't mind. What I do mind is the screen refreshing itself every time I enter a new room or type "look". Having the screen clear all the time makes me wonder what was the point of the author doing this. Almost every room or description in the game is indented yet there are some that aren't. Trying to spice the game up in that way fails because it isn't consistent. There are odd breaks in the text and the incongruous use of colors scattered throughout the game makes things look even worse.

I think less time should've been spent on presentation, and more time spent on the actual game. Guess-the-verb gets so bad it's ridiculous. It seems like the author has only one command for most things to be done. I tried "shoot sniper" and later found out I had to "fire at sniper" despite the intro telling me that was the correct syntax to use. The game is lazy when it comes to descriptions. Sometimes three or four distinct objects are covered with one description. Other times you won't even get a description. Other times you'll get a description...for another object!

As I said before, there is guess-the-verb and it makes solving puzzles a pain. There are numerous ways to say and do things but the author restricts you to just one. I definitely wouldn't have guessed the wording used in some situations without the aid of a walkthrough. Guess-the-verb even ruins cool concepts such as looking through a sniper rifle using rooms to navigate your line of sight. Sometimes I get killed and am flashed to a poorly-done "game over" room. More bad presentation.

I think the game could be better if more attention was paid to the gift rather than the gift wrapping. Because of this the game doesn't rank highly to me.

3/10

THE WARLORD, THE PRINCESS AND THE BULLDOG

AUTHOR: DAVID WHYLD

PLATFORM: ADRIFT 4.00

REVIEWER: LUMIN

I've never been a big fan of puzzle-heavy games, both because I find myself more drawn in when the 'F' part of IF is the most prominent, and because I'm just not good at solving the things unless I've got a walkthrough handy. But David Whyld's **The Warlord, the Princess, and the Bulldog** is, simply put, the best Adrift game I've ever played. It's also one of the best IF I've ever played, taking a place in my mental 'Top Five' list that until now has never been graced by a single pure puzzler. Poor David may well have shot himself in the foot with this one, because any of his future games are inevitably going to be compared to it.

While technically the sequel to **A Spot of Bother**, a game I had played previously and had been rather underwhelmed by, WPB can (and probably should) be enjoyed with no knowledge of the original, and when you start it up it's evident almost from the very first room that it's lightyears ahead of its predecessor.

In fact, David's done so many things right with this one that I hardly know where to start. The game was an entry in the Spring Thing and thus is quite a bit larger than average, but despite the size the writing is solid throughout, and except in a few minor cases mercifully bug and typo free. I can't even imagine the work that went into testing this one, let alone writing it in the first place.

To begin with, let's talk about aesthetics. The game just looks GOOD. In fact I never realized how blah the default look of Adrift was until I played this one and saw how much of an effect taking a little care with the fonts and presentation could have. There are also little touches like clearing the screen for every new room, an oldschool convention I've never really cared for, that somehow work here and add to the overall impression of professionalism.

But okay, I know, real IF aficionados couldn't care less about APPEARANCE; it's all about the gameplay, right? Well, I'm happy to say that WPB delivers in that area, too.

You play the part of Stavros 'the Bulldog' McGrogan, in the author's words "the hardest man the SAS ever produced" though it soon becomes clear that that's a hell

of an understatement. The main character rarely has much of a personality in the more puzzle focused games, usually serving as a mere cipher, but that's definitely not the case here. The Bulldog alone contributes a hefty chunk of entertainment value to an already entertaining game, and despite the brilliance of most of the puzzles it just wouldn't be the same without him.

Oh, and there are lots and lots of those puzzles, but thankfully they really ARE brilliant, that rare mix of challenging but fun. Two of the things I dislike about puzzles in general is how just for the sake of having puzzles, they're often crammed in where they don't belong and stick out like a sore thumb, and how they can ruin your enjoyment of an otherwise great game by forcing you to bang your head against a brick wall for hours and hours, making not one iota of progress.

WPB circumvents both of those problems. First of all, the plot is a simple one, mostly involving infiltrating a fortress, and all of the puzzles feel like a natural part of infiltrating that fortress. Some are fairly straightforward, some are more complicated, and ALL of them are fun. I never once felt like Action A was just a tedious and unrelated chore to get to Room B.

Secondly, David made some unique design decisions that keeps players from running into the other problem I mentioned. It really does seem like it would be difficult to get stuck, even for 'solution-challenged' people like myself, as just about every major puzzle has an alternate solution, sometimes several, and you don't even need to solve every one of them, as there is plenty of bonus material and multiple paths to the end. (Though only the more difficult one may lead to the the optimal ending, I still managed to accomplish two out of three of the main goals my first time through, and only needed to consult the hints twice.)

Then, of course, there's the fact that many of the 'alternate solutions' might be as simple as bashing your way on through the opposition. The Bulldog starts off with a certain number of 'life points', which I know isn't a term generally associated with IF, but it works so well here I wonder why more games don't use it. Every time you take the easy way out and solve a puzzle with brawn instead of brains, there are painful (and usually amusing) consequences for the Bulldog, which eat up a number of life points. All life points gone = game over, but by making good use of the Undo command (which can be accidentally disabled in the most hilariously cruel way ever, though it's through a command I always try in the first room, so no big loss there...) I never even came close to dying until the final confrontation at the end.

Compared to the rest of the game the epilogue seemed slightly weak, or at least disjointed, but it's not really an issue, and the only reason I mention it is so that I can have SOMETHING in this review that qualifies as criticism. Needless to say, I am eagerly awaiting the sequel.

NON-ADRIFT GAMES

THE RELIQUES OF TOLTI-APH

AUTHOR: GRAHAM NELSON

PLATFORM: INFORM 7

REVIEWER: DAVID WHYLD

The Reliques Of Tolti-Aph is a strange game, particularly considering who wrote it (the famed Graham Nelson, creator of the Inform language) and that it was one of the games meant to herald the forthcoming Inform 7. I remember starting to play it expecting to be blown away by its sheer magnificence, and then, barely two minutes later when I found myself in a generic RPG with randomised combat and two of the most basic functions of IF games bizarrely disabled, I began to wonder just what was going on. Was this some kind of joke game? Had Nelson been 'hacked' by Paul Panks? Or, the hardest to believe, did he actually think this kind of thing was what people wanted to play? It even made me think of an hilarious sketch on Alas Smith & Jones from years ago when an ageing and highly respected singer comes out of retirement to make his comeback... and does so with a song that's so mind-numbingly cheesy and awful that everyone, even former fans of his and people who respect him, have to struggle to contain their dismay over just how bad it is. **The Reliques of Tolti-Alp** would be Nelson's version of "Gandhi". :)

The introduction did a good job of making me want to quit the game. It seemed to be slightly mocking the whole RPG genre with references to 'retiring at level 3' with 'most of your experience points intact' - hardly a positive start. As far as introductions go, this one was bad.

The combat system that is at the heart of the game is pretty cringe worthy. I'm a big fan of RPG on the whole - Baldur's Game II and Diablo II and Morrowind - but the combat system here is lame. There's not even a proper combat system as such because all that seems to happen is that someone attacks you and you just bang the RETURN key a few times until the combat is over. Exciting it isn't. During the first combat in the game, between myself and a harpy, I tried doing things like ATTACK HARPY or KILL HARPY only to be told that I couldn't because I was already in combat. Ho hum. My opinion of the game, already low, sunk a bit further.

The combat ended, incidentally, with the harpy killing me. As it did the second time I played the game. And the third time. The fourth time, however, I beat the SOB. Not, I should add, through me improving my tactics or anything, but purely because of the randomised nature of the combat. I let out a disgruntled "about damn time!" at this stage, progressed a bit further, got into another fight, died... and as UNDO was disabled, and I hadn't yet reached a part where I could save the game, that was it. I'd have to go through the entire combat with the harpy again if I wanted to see what else the game had to offer. As it happened, I didn't want to see what else the game had to offer as I was more eager to quit this than any game I've played for... oh, a long, long time. A quick click on the delete key **and The Reliques Of Tolti-Aph** was consigned to that special part of my recycle bin that I affectionately term the "What The Hell Were You Thinking?" section.

No doubt it would have kept Ninja and Ninja II company there for the rest of my hard drive's days, but then Inform 7 emerged in beta, the source code to the game

was available, and I decided I'd have a bash at fixing the game's annoyances and see if there was actually a decent game hidden behind the horror that is a disabled SAVE and UNDO system in a randomised combat scenario.

Was there...?

Hmmm... let's mention something about the game I actually liked. The writing. It was nicely written, well polished and far, far better than anything else in the game. It's got the kind of wry humour built into it that I'm especially fond of, hinting at someone who knows exactly what he's doing and knows how to do it best. Unfortunately, the writing is the only thing this game has got going for it.

Gameplay wise there are a veritable horde of annoyances. From the plain terrible (like the aforementioned decision to disable SAVE and UNDO) to the mimesis-breaking (combat information and describing items as "The dagger is a weapon with a 1d3 attack") to the seriously unpopular (mazes). Even when I'd figured out how to enable SAVE and UNDO, I still found it hard to get any kind of enjoyment out of **The Reliques Of Tolti-Aph**. It's just not a good game. The combat system bored me before I was at the end of the first combat. I cheated with this game more than I've done with any other IF game I've ever played (giving myself 14,000 Strength to make me invincible and increasing the dagger to a 10d10 weapon so I could instantly kill just about every enemy I came across with a single blow) and still found myself unable to like it. And when I stumbled across the maze, I just hung my head in despair.

Back to the "What The Hell Were You Thinking?" section of my recycle bin, I'm afraid.

Addendum: in a way, this game, despite its many faults, is a game that everyone should play as it does an excellent job of including just about every unpopular aspect of game design:

- * SAVE is disabled (or at least restricted).
- * UNDO is disabled.
- * It's got randomised combat.
- * It breaks mimesis to such a degree that even I, who break mimesis regularly in my own games and generally don't give two hoots about it, found it annoying.
- * It's got a maze.
- * It's got a wyvern (which is a kind of dragon).

Write a game which includes none of the above and you're well on your way to a masterpiece.

So a score of 1 out of 10 for the game. Normally I'd add a point for the nice writing, but as I'd already deducted 50 points for one annoyance or another, it's final score of 1 remains.

1 out of 10

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE

AUTHOR: EMILY SHORT
PLATFORM: INFORM 7

REVIEWER: DAVID WHYLD

This was an interesting little game that I wasn't really sure what to make of. Playable for nothing more than a few minutes, and with an event kicking in after a dozen moves and abruptly killing you off, it's unfortunately not the sort of game that is likely to hold much lasting appeal.

You play the part of Agrippa Postumus, the magic-using grandson of Caesar Augustus. Augustus is dead and your life is in danger. Act quickly or it's all over for you.

I was actually looking forward to this game. The previous game I played by the author, *City Of Secrets*, was one of the best games I've played over the past few years. Five minutes into playing **Damnatio Memoriae** and I had been killed three times. My enthusiasm began to wane quite swiftly after this. I think one of the issues I had with the game was that I never realised just how short it was until I'd completed it. I had the idea that the two locations available at the start of the game were just a small part of what was on offer, and that if I could figure out how I needed to solve the puzzle that ultimately left me dead, I'd be free to explore the rest of the game. Unfortunately, when I figured out what needed doing, after dying roughly a dozen times, the game ended anyway.

The game has a few neat custom commands, but it's over with so quickly that there's not much chance to make use of them. Like reading the intro to a superhero novel where the hero's powers are listed in great detail to whet the appetite... and then THE END is promptly displayed. The THINK command came in handy for hiding the evidence of my 'crimes' as it revealed what still needed to be done, and I found a use for LINK as well (quite an inspired command actually, even if there wasn't enough time to make proper use of it), but REVERSE LINK I never got to use and ENSLAVE only ended in my slave getting killed instead of me and then me being imprisoned (and thus the game ending anyway).

It took several runs through the game before I figured out everything that needed doing to avoid being killed and then, just as I expected the game to really open up and start properly, it ended. Yes, it's a short game. Two rooms in total, although as one of them doesn't need to be entered (as far as I could tell) and is a dead end, what you're left with is essentially a one room game that can be completed in a dozen moves and no more than a minute's playing time. Nicely done all the same, but I couldn't help thinking this wasn't an actual game so much as the introduction to one.

There were a few annoyances at play, although I'm not sure if this was down to the game itself or Inform 7 in general. The help menu, for instance, was a pain to navigate, requiring N to move down to the next help item and B to move back to the previous one. The arrow keys didn't work for some reason, although they did in Inform 6 help menus. Other than that, I found myself amused by Inform's default response whenever I tried to move certain items: THAT'S FIXED IN PLACE. One of the items was a vase which, while large, was hardly fixed in place. Another was some hay. The last was a stool. A stool! Fixed in place! I think the kind of responses

I used to get back on the two word parsers that plagued text adventures in the 80's would have been preferable: YOU CAN'T DO THAT.

6 out of 10

PANTOMIME

AUTHOR: ROBB SHERWIN
PLATFORM: HUGO

REVIEWER: DAVID WHYLD

This was the third of Robb Sherwin's Hugo games that I've played but the first that I actually managed to finish (albeit with a little help). The previous two I didn't give up with because of their difficulty but because the subject matter didn't really interest me. **Pantomime** I decided I'd stick with through thick and thin because it was one of only two new games in the Spring Thing 2006 (one of the others was mine and another I had helped test) so I figured getting through two games prior to the Comp deadline wouldn't be too much of a struggle.

Pantomime is a strange game, made stranger by the gameplay device of not showing the whole story from start to finish but often dropping lengthy cut scenes in which serve to explain little but confuse even more. The main character is called Raif, a resident of the Martian moon, Phobos, who has a companion called Chmod with him for part of the game. Chmod is a robot who resembles a shop vac. The setting is the future, yet it's the kind of Blade Runner style future where most of the world seems to have changed little from the modern day (aside from it being set on one of Mars' moons, of course). Old time humans are cloned and referred to as 'mimes', some suffering apparent brain damage from the cloning process and needing help in adjusting to modern society. One popular pastime is throwing rocks at the mimes of politicians who were probably dead before you even were born. Oh yes, a strange game indeed.

Pantomime frequently did a great job of annoying me. Hiding exits from rooms is never a good idea, nor is events not running until something else, seemingly unrelated, has occurred first. A few times I seemed to be revisiting earlier parts of the game for no other reason than to try and find the trigger needed to progress the game to the next stage.

There were no real bugs that I encountered in the early part of the game (a few missing item descriptions but nothing terrible and an exit moving itself) but a couple of oddities later on. One involved meeting Cinnamon at a restaurant, experiencing a cut scene outside, being dumped outside the bar... and then having the cut scene run again. Another time, my robotic companion Chmod disappeared from a room with only one exit, then when I left the room myself and returned, I found him there waiting for me. At first I assumed he was still there and just missing from the room description, but as attempts to speak with him didn't work I guess he was gone after all. There was also an amusing moment towards the end of the game when the room description first of all told me that Chmod was giggling to himself and then that he was knocked out. Clever things these robotic sidekicks.

An interesting twist at the end indicates the player has a mime himself which explained a few of the more confusing pieces that had occurred before, but still left a number of holes in the main plot of the game. The motivations for the villain seemed strange - acquiring body parts for no other reason than to have them? The fact that such a person could hardly pass in public looking like that was never raised. Or was he simply so deranged that he had never stopped to wonder about that?

I was left with mixed feelings at the end of the game over whether I actually liked it or not. What I did like was the writing (very accomplished and showing a lot of polish. Even when the game was at its most confusing, the writing was enough to gloss over the rough edges). What I didn't like was... quite a few different things actually. The fact that I couldn't really get my head around the storyline didn't help. Then, too, there's the fact that a good name for the main villain of the piece is not Mr Kangaroo. It's kind of hard to take a character seriously when he carries a name like that.

5 out of 10

APPENDIX

LIST OF GAMES REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE AND PREVIOUS ISSUES

- The Adventures of Space Boy! Volume I** by David Parish ([1] issue 5 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 6 review by Robert Street)
- The Adventures Of Thumper: Wonder Wombat** by Sarazar (issue 3 review by Robert Street)
- Akari's Story** by Taleweaver (issue 8 review by Sara Brookside)
- Authority** by Eva Vikstrom (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- Back To Life... Unfortunately** by David Whyld ([1] issue 2 review by Laurence Moore / [2] issue 2 review by Lumin)
- Bedlam** by Mark Whitmore (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- Bolivia By Night** by Aidan Doyle (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- The Cabin** by Blue Roses (issue 2 review by Lumin)
- Can I Do It?** by Chillindawg (issue 7 review by David Whyld)
- Can It All Be So Simple?** by The Dominant Species ([1] issue 6 review by Robert Street / [2] issue 6 review by David Whyld)
- Castle Quest** by Andrew Cornish (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- The Cave Of Morpheus** by Mark Silcox (issue 2 review by THoiA)
- Chasing the Russian** by Greg Broulette (issue 7 review by David Whyld)
- City Of Secrets** by Emily Short (issue 2 review by David Whyld)
- Crazy Old Bag Lady** by Sprite (issue 6 review by Robert Street)
- Damnatio Memoriae** by Emily Short (issue 9 review by David Whyld)
- Darkness** by Richard Otter ([1] issue 2 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 3 review by Red-Sith)
- A Day At The Seaside** by Matthew Hunter ([1] issue 4 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 4 by Robert Street)
- The Demon Hunter** by David Parish (issue 7 review by Robert Street)
- Doctor Who & The Vortex Of Lust** by Christopher Cole (issue 2 review by THoiA)
- Escape to Freedom** by Richard Otter (issue 5 review by David Whyld)
- Escape to New York** by Richard Otter (issue 7 review by The Dominant Species)
- The Final Question** by David Whyld ([1] issue 5 review by C. Henshaw / [2] issue 5 review by Stefan Donati)
- Fire In The Blood** by Richard Otter ([1] issue 4 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 4 by Robert Street)
- The Fire Tower** by Jacqueline A. Lott (issue 5 review by David Whyld)
- First Day** by Mystery (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- First to Arise: Alone with a Pug** by Darkling (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Flat Feet** by Joel Ray Holveck (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- For Love of Digby** by David Whyld (issue 9 review by Robert Street)
- The Fox** by Flame Achron (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Frustrated Interviewee** by Robert Rafgon [AKA Robert Street] (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- Future Boy!** by Kent Tessman (issue 5 review by David Whyld)
- The Ghost Train** by Paul Johnson (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Glum Fiddle** by C. Henshaw ([1] issue 8 review by Robert Street / [2] issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Halloween Hijinks** by David Whyld (issue 5 review by Robert Street)
- The HeBGB Horror** by Eric Mayer (issue 2 review by David Whyld)
- Hoedown In Ho-Town** by S. Welling (issue 3 review by David Whyld)
- House Husband** by C. Henshaw ([1] issue 4 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 4 review by Robert Street / [3] issue 6 review by Lumin)
- House of the Midnight Sun** by Paul Johnson (issue 7 review by David Whyld)
- How It All Began** by Kevin Treadway (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- The Hunter** by Red Assassin (issue 7 review by Robert Street)
- In The Claws Of Clueless Bob** by David Whyld ([1] issue 5 review by Robert Street / [2] issue 5 review by Stefan Donati)
- It's Easter Peeps** by Sara Brookside ([1] issue 9 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 9 review by TDS)
- Jack of Shadows** by Arnold "Ace" Rimmer (issue 7 review by David Whyld)

- Jason Evans 1** by Sockets (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Jonathan Grim: Space Tourist** by Ren ([1] issue 8 review by Robert Street / [2] issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Laboratory R.A.T.S.** by C. Henshaw ([1] issue 6 review by Robert Street / [2] issue 6 review by David Whyld)
- Lauren's Awakening** by TotalDirt (issue 5 review by David Whyld)
- Lights, Camera, Action** by David Whyld (issue 6 review by Robert Street)
- The Magic Show** by Jason MacInnes ([1] issue 2 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 2 review by Laurence Moore)
- The Makeshift Magician** by C. Henshaw (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Man Overboard!!!** by TonyB ([1] issue 8 review by Robert Street / [2] issue 8 review by David Whyld / [3] issue 8 review by TDS)
- The Merry Murders** by Mel S (issue 1 review by Woodfish)
- The Monster In The Mirror: Part 1** by Mystery (issue 4 review by Robert Street)
- The Monster In The Mirror: Part 2** by Mystery (issue 4 review by Robert Street)
- Mortality** by David Whyld (issue 7 review by The Dominant Species)
- Mount Voluptuous** by Christopher Cole (issue 1 review by David Whyld)
- Murder In Great Falls** by Mel S ([1] issue 1 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 1 review by Laurence Moore)
- Murder Mansion** by Reelyor ([1] issue 5 review by C. Henshaw / [2] issue 5 review by David Whyld / [3] issue 5 by Stefan Donati)
- The Murder Of Jack Morely** by Mystery (issue 2 review by David Whyld)
- Must Escape!** by Robert Rafgon [AKA Robert Street] ([1] issue 6 review by Stefan Donati / [2] issue 6 review by David Whyld)
- Must Escape! (introduction)** by Robert Rafgon [AKA Robert Street] ([1] issue 5 review by C. Henshaw / [2] issue 5 review by David Whyld / [3] issue 5 review by Stefan Donati)
- The Mystery Of The Darkhaven Caves** by David Whyld (issue 4 review by Laurence Moore)
- Neighbours From Hell** by David Whyld (issue 1 review by Laurence Moore)
- Normville** by BBBen (issue 5 review by David Whyld)
- Outline** by Robert Rafgon [AKA Robert Street] ([1] issue 5 by C. Henshaw / [2] issue 5 review by David Whyld / [3] issue 5 review by Stefan Donati)
- Pathway to Destruction** by Richard Otter (issue 7 review by David Whyld)
- Pantomime** by Robb Sherwin (issue 9 review by David Whyld)
- The Plague (Redux)** by Laurence Moore (issue 7 review by The Dominant Species)
- Point 2 Point** by C. Henshaw ([1] issue 5 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 5 by Stefan Donati)
- The Potter and the Mould** by Robert Street ([1] issue 9 review by D.L. Sun / [2] issue 9 review by David Whyld / [3] issue 9 review by TDS)
- Private Eye** by David Whyld (issue 4 review by Robert Street)
- The Prostitute** by The Anonymous Martian (issue 4 review by Laurence Moore)
- Provenance** by Corey W Arnett ([1] issue 7 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 8 review by TDS)
- The Quest for More Hair** by Matt (Dark Baron) (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Regrets** by David Whyld (issue 6 review by Robert Street)
- The Reliques of Tolti-Aph** by Graham Nelson (issue 9 review by David Whyld)
- Rift** by Red-Sith ([1] issue 5 review by C. Henshaw / [2] issue 5 review by David Whyld / [3] issue 5 review by Stefan Donati)
- Selma's Will** by Mystery (issue 4 review by Robert Street)
- SERE - Survive, Evade, Resist, Escape** by Skypig ([1] issue 9 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 9 review by TDS)
- Sex Artist** by A. Ninny (issue 5 review by David Whyld)
- Shadow of the Past** by Catherine Post (issue 7 review by David Whyld)
- Shards Of Memory** by David Whyld (issue 1 review by Greybear)
- Showtime at the Gallows** by The Dominant Species (issue 7 review by Robert Street)
- Silk Road Secrets: Samarkand To Lop Nor** by C. Henshaw ([1] issue 5 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 5 by Stefan Donati)
- Snakes And Ladders** by KFAdrift (issue 2 review by David Whyld)
- A Spot of Bother** by David Whyld (issue 7 review by Robert Street)
- Sun Empire: Quest For The Founders** by Tech (issue 3 review by Robert Street)
- Take One** by Robert Street (issue 7 review by David Whyld)

- Target** by Richard Otter ([1] issue 6 review by Robert Street / [2] issue 6 review by David Whyld)
- Threnody** by John Schiff (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- The Timmy Reid Adventure** by Jonathan R. Reid (issue 3 review by Robert Street)
- To Cage a Magpie** by Lucilla Frost (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Too Much Exercise** by Robert Street (issue 8 review by David Whyld)
- Varicella** by Adam Cadre (issue 3 review by David Whyld)
- Vendetta** by James Hall ([1] issue 7 review by The Dominant Species / [2] issue 7 review by Robert Street)
- Veteran Experience** by Robert Rafgon [AKA Robert Street] (issue 2 review by David Whyld)
- Veteran Knowledge** by Robert Rafgon [AKA Robert Street] ([1] issue 3 review by Cobra1 / [2] issue 3 review by David Whyld)
- A Walk At Dusk** by Eric Mayer ([1] issue 3 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 3 review by Laurence Moore)
- The Warlord, The Princess and The Bulldog** by David Whyld (issue 9 review by Lumin)
- We Are Coming To Get You!** by Richard Otter ([1] issue 2 review by David Whyld / [2] issue 2 review by Laurence Moore)
- Where Are My Keys?** by Richard Otter (issue 1 review by David Whyld)
- The White Singularity** by Irene Villanueva ([1] issue 6 review by Stefan Donati / [2] issue 6 review by David Whyld)
- Whom The Telling Changed** by Aaron A. Reed (issue 4 review by David Whyld)
- The Will** by Ambrosine (issue 5 review by Robert Street)
- Wizard's Playground** by Evil_Flagpole (issue 7 review by Greg Boettcher)
- The Woodfish Compendium** by Woodfish (issue 1 review by David Whyld)
- The Woods Are Dark** by Cannibal [AKA Laurence Moore] (issue 2 review by THoiA)
- Zack Smackfoot** by KFA drift ([1] issue 5 by C. Henshaw / [2] issue 5 review by David Whyld / [3] issue 5 by Stefan Donati)
- Zombies Are Cool, But Not So Cool When They're Eating Your Head** by Mel S (issue 2 review by David Whyld)