

HOLLOW VOICE

After a long hibernation, I'm back with *XYZZYnews*.

There were plenty of gentle—and not-so-gentle!—reminders that you were all wondering when the next issue was going to come out. These came from all directions—inquisitive e-mail messages, third-hand reports about far-flung queries on the IF newsgroups, and no-nonsense demands that I put aside my everyday worries (about work, freelance work, lawsuits, my housing crisis) and get back to the important business of 'zine publishing. Even on Liza Daly's wonderful new interactive fiction MUD, ifMUD, (at <http://fovea.retina.net:4001/>) I was taken aback to find not only a *XYZZYnews* room, but also that an angry mob had gathered therein, anxious for the next issue to appear!

There are also plenty of reasons I feel guilty about being so tardy about releasing a new issue. I hope you can forgive me these setbacks—for the future, I've embarked on a couple of strategies that should help streamline my production processes. I'm cutting out one version of the *XYZZYnews* subscription—namely, the kind that includes the games disk. I was finding that the last part of putting together every issue was always finding the games to include on that issue's disk and securing permission from the game authors to include in these collections. I'm also eliminating the date on each issue—at least while I'm so far behind my normal bi-monthly print schedule—so that I'm no longer paralyzed by working on an issue for a time period that's nearly at an end (or already ended). I'm in the process of working through my subscription list and working out appropriate adjustments as necessary for folks who've paid for the game disks—and this should be the last part where I have to ask you to bear with me.

In the meantime, please enjoy this issue's articles: C.E. Forman's final submission, and a real treat from Miron Schmidt on how MUDs are like (and not at all like) text adventure games.

Until next issue, happy gaming!

Eileen Mullin
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Issue #13 — Top 10 Picks for IF on the World Wide Web

Adventure WebRing
<http://www.realkids.com/webring.htm>

Don Woods' Home Page
<http://www.clari.net/~don>

Zplet
<http://adamant.res.wpi.edu/~timbuktu/inform/informtest.html>

The TADS Page
<http://www.tela.bc.ca/tela/tads/>

Fredrik's Interactive Fiction Start Kit Page
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/6116/ifstart.html>

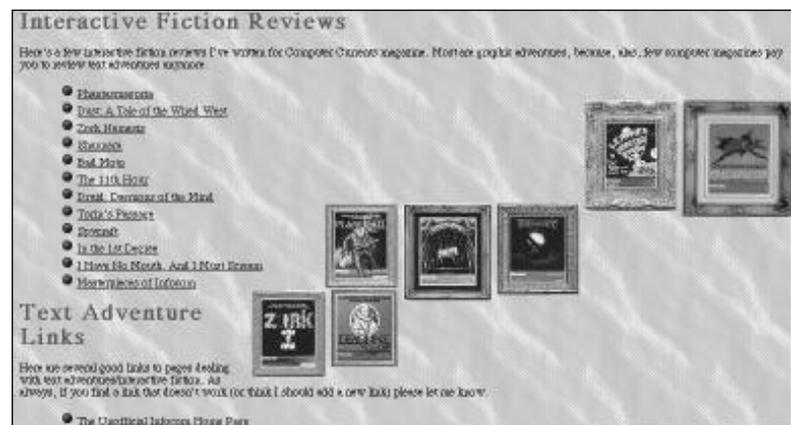
Unearthed
<http://unearthed.mit.edu/unearthed/unearthed.html>

Interactive Fiction — Joe DeRouen's Home Page
<http://www.crl.com/~jderouen/textadv/>

The Dwarf and the Axe: IF Programmers Page
<http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/3567/>

Interactive Fiction Primer
<http://home.earthlink.net/~russbryan/primer.html>

An Introductory Invitation To Interactive Fiction
http://www.omnipresence.com/amiga/News/AR/ar413_Sections/feature1.HTML



interactive Fiction — Joe DeRouen's Home Page

To XYZZYnews:

I am really impressed by your fine publication. I have downloaded all of the back issues and have been slowly devouring them as I find time.

My first exposure to IF was with Zork when I was about 14, back in the early '80s. I owned an AppleII clone, no hard drive. I used to write quite a few of my own programs, but I was really into adventure games. I remember saving up all of my nickels from my paper route to by Zork II! I was never able to finish the game because my computer went on the blink soon afterwards.

I am now in the planning (paper) stages of writing my own game. I want to eventually enter it into a contest, not this year though.

I guess I have rambled on enough...Keep on 'venturing.
—Chris Seguin
seguin@telusplanet.net

Eileen,

Having been a fan of text adventures and interactive fiction since 1983, I was extremely dismayed by the damage the Graphics Revolution caused to my favorite computer gaming genre. Nowadays, it seems a lot of computer games are not very interactive, and are little more than vehicles to show off the latest in graphics technology. A way of helping designers sell more SVGA monitors.

Since much of today's commercial computer gaming (including Activision's poor Zork games) leaves such a sour taste in my mouth, I was very pleased to discover that inter-

active fiction is being kept alive via shareware. And I was very pleased to find a publication devoted to it.

XYZZYnews is, in my opinion, THE best magazine devoted to IF since The New York Times/Status Line. The articles (such as "Tales from the Code Front," "Gender in Interactive Fiction," etc.) are compelling reading, and the reviews are perfect for anyone who wants to know more about the various shareware IF available.

And of course, I also greatly enjoy the occasional interviews with the Implementors of the classic Infocom games. And the puzzles and humor articles are in the best tradition of NZT/TSL.

In short, I give this publication four stars. Keep up the good work!

—Chris Lang
MKST21C@prodigy.com

Eileen,

Thanks so much for running that interview with me in the latest XYZZYnews [September/ October 1996]! The only appropriate way I could think of to thank you for so much good press was to release an update of CosmoServe with an XYZZY command response plugging your wonderful 'zine. (okay well, I also fixed some bugs and relieved the frustrating time pressures).

Since I was being so industrious between semesters I also updated the Shades of Gray game files (yes, XYZZY plugs you there now too!), and both games have just been uploaded to CompuServe Gamer's forum and gmd.de-if (and soon to an appropriate

AOL folder when the person who offered to do it for me gets back to me).

Thanks again, and good luck with all your professional ventures!

Cheers,

—Judith Pintar

Hi Eileen,

Great Web site and 'zine! I was amazed that anyone still treats interactive fiction as a serious pastime. The interviews with Lebling et al. were really enlightening. I've wondered for years what became of those guys, so it was fascinating to run across the rec.arts and rec.games. IF subgroups (and XYZZYnews, and your web site...) while surfing DejaNews.

I must apologize after the fact for depositing 100K of unsolicited stuff in your email, but this attachment might make an amusing stocking-stuffer for your new XYZZYnews Web site. :-) I honestly don't know what else to do with it... feel free to move it to the appropriate binaries group or FTP site for IF stuff, or let me know where to leave it.

Again, thanks, and keep up the good work!

—John Miles
jmiles@pop.net

Thanks for the kind words, and for the game files. Readers, these files are for an Apple II test gamedemo scenario called Mindtrap: "Escape from Belsaena". They include a .TXT file and two Apple II .NIB images attached as a .ZIP. Since .NIB files are Apple IIe disk images, you'll need to run an Apple II emulator program; see the READ.ME file for

suggestions on where to download one. I've served up these files on my Web site as a zipped file at <http://www.xyzzynews.com/downloads/mindrap.zip>. —EM

IF's literary leanings

In XYZZYnews #12 you mentioned finding an reference to Zork in a novel, well I got another IF reference for you, and I'm sure it's intentional... In the book *Taltos* by Steven Brust (Ace Fantasy) there is a section where the main character, Vlad Taltos, is with a couple of friends, past DeathGate and in the Hall of Judgment—how they got there is most of the novel. :)

There is a section, when they decide to find their own way out of the Hall of Judgment where it turns into, as described by Vlad, and I quote "A maze of twisty little passages, all the same."

I broke out in hysterical laughter when I saw this line. :) That is, to me, a very direct tip of the hat to Adventure. :)

—Fox Cutter
lmb@comtch.ia.com

Piers Anthony has a book out that actually has the player sucked into the game. The whole book is about the player coming to terms. I believe it was the 1996 book in the Xanth series. I can't remember the title.

—Bill B.
bbloh@hpbs1686.boi.hp.com

Infocom bug update

Nifty Zork bug I just discovered: Start the game, go into the Living room, move rug, get all, light lamp go e and up into

Attic, get knife, go d, w, open trap door (now the trapdoor is apparently the last noun you've referred to),d (trapdoor slams shut) and north. Then do:

```
>kill troll
```

```
What do you want to kill the troll with?
```

```
>again
```

```
The trap door opens.
```

I had wanted to go kill the troll and then kill it again, not realizing I had two weapons. The really neat thing is that the door stays open, and you can go back up and then down and it won't slam shut again!

This works on 75/830929, 88/840726, but not 15/UG3AU5. In the latter it does:

```
>kill troll
```

```
What do you want to kill the troll with?
```

```
>again
```

```
You can't go that way.
```

Here's an old bug for version 15/UG3AU5:

Go to the Bat Room while carrying garlic, type "get all" (a common thing to type) or "get bat" And you get:

```
Fweep!
```

```
Fweep!
```

```
Fweep!
```

A deranged giant vampire bat (a reject from WUMPUS) swoops down from his belfry and lifts you away....

This does not work at least with 75/830929 nor 88/840726

—Allen Garvin
earendil@faeryland.tamu-commerce.edu

I have a version of Enchanter, release 10 with serial number 840820, where every occur-

rence of the string "is" has been replaced by "adventurer". Using Z-tools shows that "adventurer" occurs twice in the abbreviation table. I then thought that the game had been corrupted on the way somehow, but everything else looks fine, and Z-tools says that the checksum is correct and the file intact. Odd, it is. And hard it is, to concentrate on solving a game that says "There adventurer a road to the west."

—Fredrik Ramsberg
d91frera@und.ida.liu.se

I believe I found a bug not mentioned in the bug list found on XYZZYnews.

The Lurking Horror
Release 203 / Serial
number 870506

(Distributed via the
Masterpieces Collection.
Running the data file
off of Frotz.)

Whether or not you have actually seen the hidden suicide note on top of the Great Dome, the description of the sign-up sheet in the Department of Alchemy will always tell you who wrote the suicide note after you remember that the guy signed-up took a plunge off a building.

To check it out, do the thing to get the floor waxer out of the way. Go into the Department (knock), and then look at the sheet. Wait to remember the student's name. Look at the sheet again. It says the suicide note was written by the guy. We have not yet seen the suicide note. Since it is hidden in the top of the Great Dome, the suicide note probably hasn't been publicly displayed or anything.

—Cable Hicks
hicks@goldrush.com

Interview with a Playtester Extraordinaire



...XYZZYnews talks with Michael Kinyon

by C.E. Forman (ceforman@postoffice.worldnet.att.net)

XYZZYnews: Please tell us a little about yourself and the aspects of your life that don't touch on IF.

Michael Kinyon: I am 32 years old. I live in South Bend, Indiana, USA. I am married and happily have no children. I am an assistant professor of mathematics at Indiana University South Bend. (Those wishing to find out more about my mathematical research can get information from my home page at <http://sun1.iusb.edu/~mkinyon>. I lead a quiet academic-in-the-ivory-tower sort of life.

XYZZYnews: You've mentioned on r.g.i-f that you decided to become solely a tester of IF games, not an author. What led to this decision? What was the very first game you ever beta-tested?

MK: In retrospect, I realize that the remark to which you refer sounds quite a bit more pretentious than I intended it to be. I did not mean to make it sound like a high-minded defense of playtesting as an art; that certainly contributed to the decision, but there were other far more mundane reasons. For one thing, I have never had any ideas for games that are worth pursuing. For another, I do not really have the time to learn a game development system. Those two reasons alone are quite sufficient as an excuse for not writing games.

I began my testing "career" by sending bug reports on already-released games to their authors. The first games for which I did this were Unnkuulia I, II, and Zero (and yes, I did register those games). I had no particular reason for doing this other than good will and a wish to help out. My vision of share/freeware programs at the time was that they were always works in progress.

At about the same time, I was also sending short bug reports on Curses (one of the early releases) to Graham Nelson. Here I had an ulterior motive:

I hated to bother Graham by asking him for hints, so I approached him in the spirit of exchange, a bug for a hint. Graham was very responsive to my reports, which I found very encouraging.

The real breakthrough for me came when on a lark I posted an “advertisement” to r.a.i-f announcing my availability as a beta-tester. In the ad, I “quoted” some of the prominent people in the newsgroup praising me for my wonderful abilities. I forget all of them now, but the one I still think was best was my quoting Mike Roberts as saying that I had talked him out of writing TADS in BASIC. People responded in good humor, and then I started getting testing requests.

There is an implicit part of your question that I have not yet addressed: why do I like to test at all? I am not an expert at self-psychoanalysis, but I can give you a few thoughts on this. Some of it stems from not so much a destructive instinct as much as a deconstructive instinct: what are the limits of the game and where does its behavior go beyond the expectations of the author or the player. Some of it is also based on repetition as a form of anxiety reduction. Recall that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud wrote of patients who were constantly reliving traumatic episodes, a clinical observation that flew in the face of his earlier thought. My approach to IF, whether I am testing or just playing, is similar to this; I will replay a single scene again and again until I am as familiar with it as I can be. This is not something I do because I decided to do it, it’s just the way I play. I think the reason I do play this way is to cope with the stress of “living in the game”. Or maybe a better way of saying it is that it allows me to put some critical distance between myself and the character with whom I am supposed to be identifying in the game. In any case, when one plays like this (notice how cleverly I depersonalized my style of play by using the word “one,” as if to suggest I am about to draw a universal conclusion), one is bound to stumble across bugs and design problems. Thus was an undeserved reputation born. Of course it was also supported by several self-serving posts on the newsgroups.

XYZZYnews: Currently, about how many games in the Archive display your name in the testers credits?

MK: I am not very good at order-of-magnitude estimates (an embarrassing characteristic, considering what I do for a living). Some of my testing credits include, in no particular order: Curses, Jigsaw, Christminster, So Far, Horror of Rylvania, Waystation, Legend Lives, Enhanced, Lost New York, Gumshoe, Magic Toyshop, Night in the Computer Centre, A Change in the Weather, Small World, Kissing the Buddha’s Feet, Tapestry, Stargazer, Wearing the Claw, The House of the Stalker, and Lethe. I’m probably forgetting some at the moment, and I’ve probably mangled a game title or two; my apologies to the authors! I’ve also tested quite a few things that were never released. One I can mention, because the author makes fun of himself for vaporware, is Avalon.

XYZZYnews:

Which, if any, have been your favorites?

MK:

Among so-called full scale games that have been released, my favorites are Curses, Jigsaw and So Far, not necessarily in that order.

Curses, of course, is the game with which I have the longest personal relationship, and is thus the one to which I am the most attached. If Graham was the game's father, I feel a lot like its maternal uncle (in other words, I'm the useless brother-in-law). Jigsaw is also up there on my list just slightly behind Curses. If you like, you can think of the relationship between these two games as analogous to the relationship between Monty Python and the Holy Grail and Monty Python's Life of Brian. Both are wonderful, but the earlier work has a less polished and more chaotic feel to it. I don't think I really need to give detailed reviews here of either game; much that expresses what I would say has already been written about both of them. As an aside, I should mention that both games became a part of my life for quite a long time and led to an intense "working" relationship with Graham. Even though we do not actually correspond very often, I still consider him to be one of the most wonderful people I have ever had the privilege of meeting through the Internet. We eventually met in person. Graham took Kamila (my wife) and me to high table dinner at Magdalen College the last time we were in Oxford.

Getting back to games, let me say something about So Far. Of all the games I have played, this is probably the one that has had the largest intellectual and emotional effect on me. In r.g.i-f, people sometimes write about their emotional reactions to certain games; a favorite "tear-jerker" seems to be one of Floyd's two deaths in Planetfall or Stationfall. In my opinion, for maximal impact in a minimalist text, there is nothing to compare with So Far's scene in the crawl space. I also cannot describe adequately how deeply moved I was when I finally finished the game. My main advice to players of that game is to avoid engaging in a Joycean hermeneutic analysis that attempts to discover what each scene "really" means. In my view, IF players are particularly prone to fall into that sort of trap. Although certainly the various scenes in the game have meanings for its author, So Far is the one game above all others that illustrates that the determination of authorial intent is not as important in literary interpretation as is the recognition that the dissemination of a text as a text is a virtual guarantee that meanings will multiply. (Notice I did not say that So Far is without meaning, which was a view I once held.)

Among small games, my favorite is probably A Change in the Weather. When I say "small," I am not, of course, referring to the length of time required for completion, I am referring to such things as the landscape of the game and the sparsity of the text. A Change in the Weather packs quite a bit of punch in a small package.

Do not make too much of the fact that there are only Inform games on my list; I have no particular preference among the game systems. In fact, there is a TADS game that has not been released that I would rank among my all-time favorites, but I can say nothing more about it at this point.

XYZZYnews: Is there a particular genre or style of IF that appeals to you?

MK: My preference is for games that violate the rules of the genre in which they pretend to be situated. All the games I mentioned in my favorites list above do this in one form or another. I am not speaking of mere anachronism (such as a magic wand in a “realist” game), but a genuine attempt to push the limits of a genre for aesthetic effect.

As far as a genre that I would like to see further explored, I have been a bit surprised that there has not been too much attention focused on erotica. I see this as an untapped well for IF.

XYZZYnews: What tactics do you generally use to seek out bugs in games? Which tricks seem to pay off the best? What types of bugs turn up most frequently?

MK: I usually do not use a “test oracle,” despite the fact that this is good debugging advice in general. As I mentioned above, playing a scene over and over usually helps. If a game has a lot of takeable objects, then I know there will be bugs aplenty, because no author ever foresees what will happen to all of them. My warning flags go up in timed events as well; it is surprising how many authors forget that if a player leaves the room, descriptions about what is going on in another room no longer make any sense. If there are a lot of fuses in one scene, I will usually try to see if I can make things happen out of sequence. I realize this is not a good answer to your question, but my approach to testing is pretty intuitive.

XYZZYnews: How much does the compiler used seem to affect this?

MK: Nowadays it doesn't, really. Of course in every TADS game, there will be at least one “Which golden ocelot do you mean, the golden ocelot or the golden ocelot?” type of bug, but there are not as many of these as there used to be. Of course the really big bugs are those that crash the interpreter, but I cannot say that any game development system is more prone to this than any other.

XYZZYnews: What traps should potential game authors try to avoid falling into?

MK: My main advice is not to start coding before all the possible implications of a scene have been worked out. I never cease to be amazed how many authors confuse designing with coding.

XYZZYnews: In providing feedback, do you prefer to stick to straightforward bug reports, or are you willing to provide an analysis and criticism of a game if an author requests it?

MK: This depends on how busy I am. I have (unfortunately) agreed to analyze a game and then become too swamped with work to have time to follow up on this.

An unfortunate instance of this was the '96 competition. This is a bit off the subject of your question, but in the interest of self-examination, I have to say that I am not particularly proud of how I handled my testing responsibilities. More than one author requested an analysis, and I just did not have the time to get it done before the competition. In fact I got so busy, I was unable to do even adequate routine testing of some games. If you don't mind, let me use this forum to apologize to all those authors who may have felt that I let them down.

Getting back to your question, one of the problems that comes up is that some authors tend to be a bit thin-skinned in their reactions to an analysis. I realize that many beginners are afraid that their games will not live up to some (nonexistent) standard, but my advice to such authors is to not take the criticism as a personal assault. If I say that "I do not think that such-and- such a scene is very well designed for the following reasons...", I am not saying "You are a lousy designer." I am just trying to help authors refine their games so that they express what I think they want them to express.

XYZZYnews: Suppose someone asks you to beta-test a game that you just can't stand playing. Has this situation ever come up? How would you (tactfully) handle it if it did?

MK: Yes, this has happened a couple of times with unfinished games. (This is not beta-testing, of course, but alpha-testing.) I enjoy testing unfinished games, but sometimes it turns out that an author does not have any idea at all about where a game is going, and this can be very frustrating. When these problems have come up, they have resolved themselves because the authors announced they were giving up on their games. If it were ever the case that I was testing, say, a finished game that I really despised, I would probably just say I was unable to continue testing and leave it at that. If an author pressed me and asked why, I would probably cite personal reasons.

XYZZYnews: How long have you been testing IF games?

MK: Since the fall of 1992.

XYZZYnews: About how many hours a week do you spend on testing?

MK: That varies too much for me to estimate. For instance, I have not tested at all in several weeks, so my average has been pulled way down.

XYZZYnews: Any favorite bug stories you'd like to share?

MK: Heh. Well, I'd better not. I'll let the authors tell about them if they wish.

XYZZYnews: Have you noticed any regular peaks during which many authors tend to release games (not counting the competitions)?

MK: I think the question you really wanted to ask me is if I noticed any times of the year when testing requests reach a peak. Releases come after testing, of course.

The competition has skewed this because more authors are focusing their energies on it. Otherwise, I would say I get more requests in late February and early March than at any other time. I get the fewest requests from October through January.

XYZZYnews: What's the maximum number of games you've been testing at the same time?

MK: Again, the competition affects this. Last year, counting competition and full-size games, I had eight going at once. That was a bit ridiculous, I know, so I will be more careful this year.

XYZZYnews: Have you noticed any specific trends in modern IF? What are your thoughts on where the medium is currently going?

MK: I am currently not up to the task of sorting out my thoughts on this. I think this is a very complicated issue that touches upon involves several factors: the text as a work of art; the anachronism of text-based games in an atmosphere of increasing technological sophistication (a fancy way of expressing the strangeness of playing a text adventure on a modern computer); the predominance of computer scientists, particularly students in the medium; amateurs versus professionals; the growing popularity of the marketing model; etc., etc. I'm afraid it's a bit beyond my powers of ratiocination at the present time.

XYZZYnews: What games are you currently testing? Would you be willing to provide any specific details, or do you prefer to keep the author-tester relationships confidential?

MK: I am not actively testing anything at the moment because no one has asked me. I suspect the reason is that I am not a regular poster on r.*.i-f, and I no longer respond to "call for beta-testers" posts, so many folks do not know that I am available. There are two unfinished games, one of which is Avalon, where I am in a holding pattern. Even if I were actively testing, I do not think I could really say anything about the games (unless the authors requested that I "talk them up"). I respect confidentiality.

XYZZYnews: Anything else you'd like to add?

MK: As I said, I am available right now if anyone would like me to take a crack at a game. Other than that, I'll just say: keep reading *XYZZYnews*! (How was that for an endorsement?) ☹

Dungeons, Dragons, Shovels, and Telepathy

A brief look at MUD design

by Miron Schmidt (s590501@tfh-berlin.de)

I. Introduction

MUD is short for “Multi-User Dungeon,” as most of you will know. There are a number of similar environments which have evolved from the original MUD idea, such as MUSEs, MUSHes, MOOs, and so on. In this article, I will only talk about MUDs—partly because I feel more at home in them, partly because the differences in terms of design aren’t terribly big.

A MUD, at the time of writing, is a text-only, multi-user, real-time environment, very much like a text adventure game, and very much unlike it.

Let’s focus on the similarities first. Commands are given to the MUD in short natural sentences, like “open the door,” or “wear the chainmail.” The complexity of these sentences depends mostly on the care the designer has put into parsing, as every object is allowed to define its own verbs and their respective syntaxes.

It is quite common that one area may accept only very simple, two-word commands, while the area next door allows for unbelievably complex structures. TUB-MUD, the only MUD where I actually code, features a quest in which, at one point, the player is required to take a shrink-head by typing the command “take the shrinkhead of the orc shaman from the pillow on the pillar next to the western wall.” If the syntax isn’t followed exactly, the—hilariously funny—error message “Take the what of the what from the what on the what next to the which what?” appears.

Those “MUD quests” are small adventures that require a sequence of puzzles to be solved, much like little games on their own. The puzzles range from simple riddles (a character might expect an answer to a verse), over logical exercises, such as building a sand castle, to monsters that have to be killed in a role-playing game fashion. In fact, fighting is an integral part of MUDs: most employ complex combat systems that make the choice of armor and weapons an important part of playing.

II. Real time

While in most text adventure games, time progresses only between subsequent input lines from the player, encouraging her to think carefully about every action, MUD time runs steadily. This results, among other things, in time-critical sequences being rather hectic: players have to type their actions as fast and accurate as possible, and the consequences cannot be undone.

In design terms, much care has to be taken that the player's input bears instant results. Redirecting input, for instance to confirm a dangerous attempt, is a definite no-no, if it isn't done with extensive care:

```
A grizzly bear paces nervously up and down.  
> pinch the grizzly bear in the side  
Do you really want to do that? (y/n)  
Suddenly, the bear wheels around, facing you with obvious wrath!  
> run away as fast as possible  
Please answer yes or no: Do you really want to do that? (y/n)  
The bear hits you with a bone-crunching sound.  
...
```

On the other hand, the real-time environment allows for attractive little details: a clock that strikes the hour; a magic potion that stays in effect for five minutes (thus prompting the player to plan *before* quaffing it); a beautiful orchid that blossoms only once a month...

III. Multiple players

Multiple players necessitate multiple solutions. This is not an option; it's a requirement! A stone block that you can't lift because it's too heavy, requiring you to drink a potion of cyclops strength just won't do: three players will be able to move it without.

When designing messages, it is always vital to ponder all possible constellations of players: there are five possible kinds of players to be considered.

- The player who acts.
- The player he acts on.
- Onlooking players.
- Players in nearby locations.
- Players in distant locations.

Thus, if Belphegor zaps a wand of earthquake at Lliana, the following messages need to be printed.

- Belphegor: “You zap the wand of earthquake at Lliana. The earth shakes violently under her feet.”
- Lliana: “Belphegor zaps a wand of earthquake at you. The earth shakes violently under your feet.”
- Others in the same location: “Belphegor zaps a wand of earthquake at Lliana. The earth shakes violently under her feet.”
- Others in nearby locations: “Suddenly, the earth shakes violently.”
- Others in distant locations: “Suddenly, a faint rumble can be heard.”

Note the different use of “the wand” vs. “a wand.” Alternatively, “your wand” and “his wand” could be used.

IV. Making it feel like a whole

Players have inherent capabilities that are to be regarded when designing objects and characters. Next to skills, stats (like strength or constitution), and visual characteristics (such as scars and tattoos), there is one power to be especially minded: the power of telepathy. In most MUDs (all I know, to be sure), players can “tell” and “shout.” Telling is the ability to telepathically communicate with other players, no matter how far away they are; and shouting is the ability to scream something so loud that every other player will hear it.

If the player is transformed into something different, or his perception is manipulated, his means to communicate will change. LPMUDs (MUDs using an interface that was initially designed by Lars Penssjö) feature a curse that will transform the player into a frog. All shouts by this player will be transformed to

A big frog shouts: Hrribit! Hrriibbitt!

A friend of mine once designed a drug that, when taken, would sporadically cause the player to see things and, unknown to him, display reactions to that. For instance, he would get the message

You say: I feel perfectly normal again.

while the other players in the room would see (if the player were called Geronimo)

Geronimo says: Argl! Argh argl!

To offer some further examples for objects that will change the player’s abilities: a broken arm will drastically lower the player’s fighting skill; a chewing gum will muffle everything she says; being too drunk, a delicate combination lock will prove unopenable.

V. Object orientation

While in a text adventure game, the author is responsible for every single object, this is not at all true in a MUD. In fact, good programming will even consider those objects that didn't yet exist when it was written.

The worst imaginable situation for a player is that when he tries to dig in, say, a moldy haystack, he gets a parser complaint ("Dig where?") while a shovel bought in the shop around the corner will dig perfectly well. As a programmer, one has to make sure that such puzzles are handled flexible enough: one has to create the process of digging in a way that rewards the *idea*, not the *action*, even if this means anticipating bad creations by other programmers.

As an example, if I wanted to place a tree in a certain place, which the player would have to tie a rope to, I could create a rope that allows to be tied to the tree. However, if the player then tried to tie a *different* rope to my tree, that rope wouldn't probably know that it could be tied at all. Thus, a better solution would be to let the *tree* know that a rope can be tied to it: any object that fit the description "rope" would then satisfy my condition.

Proper object oriented design is the hardest part of MUD design. I might decide that a ladder would be equally suitable to climb my tree; so I would tell the tree that an object fitting the description "ladder" could be leaned against it in order to climb up. A rope ladder, however, fits the description and still cannot be leaned against anything. So I'd have to anticipate *that* possibility, too. In any case, whatever amount of work I would put into my tree, I could never foresee every possible solution: Superwizard's Fabulous Device of Climbing Like A Squirrel wouldn't work on it.

IV. Conventions

To make object orientation easier for the novice programmer, it is a good idea to follow certain conventions or create one's own: it can be queried whether a certain object is alive, a weapon, or edible (or all of the above, such as a lobster). If I created a quill, for example, I would allow it to write on everything that calls itself "paper," "parchment" or "papyrus"—and additionally allow other objects to identify as "writable on," so that my quill could be used to expand their description.

This works in the other direction, too. An antidote would offer to "heal poison," so that a dangerous fruit would know its effects could be reversed by that potion.

Still, creators will have to foresee as many different uses of their items as they possibly can, since there will certainly be those other creators who choose not to follow conventions, however bad a decision that may be.

VII. Finally, a quest is prepared

Writing a quest requires further considerations.

- How many players should take part?
- Will they need prior experience (combat, casting spells, etc.)?
- Will they need to bring special equipment (such as an empty bottle, or a rope)?
- How long will it take to solve it?

Players in a MUD cannot save their game state. It is therefore advised not to top three to four hours solving time for a *long* quest. At least, players should be warned if the quest is exceedingly long. Such a quest should additionally provide a special service to play in multiple sessions. The quest might be split into three parts, with every part only accessible if the earlier ones have been solved. The player could go back to the campaign office and register the key events he has solved so far. Or he might have a non-player companion who will keep track of his achievements and wait for him to begin a new session.

If the quest is designed for one player, what will happen if he brings a friend? If he brings two? An unscalable wall will be much less of a problem if one character can step on another's shoulders. Sir Archibald the Knight isn't all that dangerous if attacked by four characters at once. A trap door won't be suddenly closed if one character guards it from above.

These possibilities will have to be thought of when writing a quest. A simple solution would be to shut out other players as soon as one has entered the quest (teleport device, force field, riding into battle on horseback).

VIII. Conclusion

Design decisions have far-reaching consequences in a MUD. A mistake often made by novice programmers is to design a MUD quest in the same way as a text adventure game: a MUD is something entirely different, even though it looks temptingly similar at the first glance.

MUDs, as well as all their numerous siblings, are interactive fiction on a different level. Not necessarily a higher level, but certainly different enough to be enjoyed as a new experience.

If you haven't already—make up your own mind. I'll be happy to lead you through the wonders of TUBMUD. Just drop me a note.

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

I'm grasping at a straw here, but I'm looking for information regarding the old Microsoft Adventure, and thought you could help me given your XZZZYnews site.

Having found the "Classic Adventure" on CompuServe, I've never been able to figure out the mazes (alike and different) and am looking for a map of them. The documentation I've got from the original game is so old that, when I call Microsoft, they don't even know what I'm talking about.

Can you point me in the right direction?

Bobbie Lackey
102577.3403@compuserve.com

You've got a great site going — I can't place too many games above the Infocom series for my all time favorites. There was one game that I remember playing long ago, but just can't seem to find and I was hoping you might have some information on it.

It was called Mansion (99.9% certain) and it was a contemporary of Colossal Cave. I don't remember a whole lot about it, but if I remember correctly, the game starts with you being dropped off outside an old mansion. You can look around the grounds a little bit, but most of the action occurs inside. I

remember finding a gauntlet under a trapped table (King's / Queen's table?) that allowed you to carry more stuff, and there was also a transmitter / receiver pair of objects that you could use to teleport yourself around. I believe the goal was to find treasure stashed in the mansion...

Sound familiar?? I'm looking for a copy that can run on an Intel PC machine.

—John Nethery
blackhol@xnet.com

I'm looking for a text-based game I used to have for the C64. It was called Sweet Sixteen. I think I had gotten it from a friend, since I don't think it was ever sold in the stores. If you can help me, please write.

—Tony
tony@pitnet.net

Winners' Circle — The inaugural XZZZY Awards for Best IF of 1996

The First Annual Xzyzy Awards Ceremonies were held live via telnet on Saturday, February 8, 1997. The winning games, and their authors, were named in the following categories:

Best Game

So Far, by Andrew Plotkin

Best Writing

So Far, by Andrew Plotkin

Best Story

Tapestry, by Daniel Ravipinto

Best Setting

Small World, by Andrew Pontious

Best Puzzles

So Far, by Andrew Plotkin

Best NPCs

Kissing the Buddha's Feet, by Leon Lin

Best Individual Puzzle

Opening the gate, from So Far

Best Individual NPC (three-way tie)

The Burin, from Frobozz Magic Support

The Devil, from Small World

Evan, from Kissing the Buddha's Feet