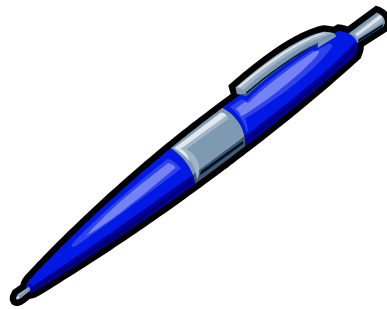# Reviews Exchange

Issue 1
(November 2004)

Contents

Welcome to the first issue (the first of many hopefully) of the Reviews Exchange, a collection of reviews written by drifters for drifters – and anyone else who wants to read them I guess.

The Merry Murders
By Mel S

Review: Woodfish
Genre: Murder mystery
Download: http://ftp.adrift.org.uk/adrift/ftp/games/murders.taf

∎∎

The Merry Murders (a title I still don't understand, even having completed it) is quite a linear, story-led game with a scattering of puzzles, divided up into seven acts. The storyline, in a nutshell, basically centres around an office Christmas party, in which guests are killed off one by one by one of your murderous co-workers. Not much festive cheer found at *this* Christmas party.
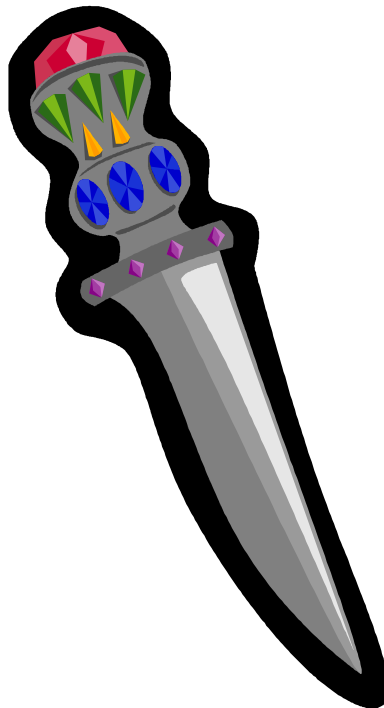
To me, the story is one of the game's strongest points. Once you get over its implausibility (instead of calling the police, the lone security guard decides to lock everyone inside the building *with* the insane killer - and the fact that there were no eyewitnesses to the numerous murders in a party filled with guests is slightly unbelievable), you actually find that the story is quite interesting and morbidly compelling. Deaths are varied and interesting (head in the microwave, dagger sticking out of head, that kind of thing), you nearly always have something to do as a result of the fast-paced narrative, and lots of red herrings mean the player is kept guessing right until the end as to who the murderer actually is. Although it is a murder mystery, there isn't really much to tell you actually *who* the murderer is, and even if you do guess, it doesn't influence the game. So in that respect, it's a bit like reading a book. I personally wasn't taking it too seriously, and that way, I think I was able to enjoy it more.

The descriptions, too, are just about good enough. There has been some obvious effort put into them, and on the whole, they are okay. For every really good piece of writing, however, there is one equally bad. They do often tend to slip into the unimaginative, and there are quite a few instances of bad spelling and grammar. It also gets a bit confusing when the game is told in the present tense, but the author decides to switch to past tense for certain events. Oh, and the way the author switches from first to third person. But other than all that, the writing's okay.
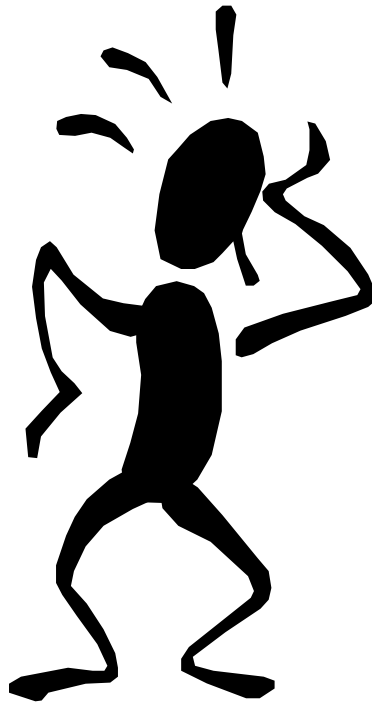
Unfortunately, that's where the good stuff ends. The actual way the author has handled game design and playability leaves a lot to be desired. The environment background interactivity seems to just have been added on at the last minute as a kind of afterthought - with the majority of objects mentioned in room descriptions not backed up with objects at all. You can't interact with many objects, and I found myself discouraged from trying as a result of all the guess-the-verb - for example, I can't "open door", but instead have to "open stall" - and at an equally essential command, I first did "look at microwave", then typed "open it", but the parser processes this as "open a microwave", where the author has only accounted for "open microwave". To me, this is lazy programming. In fact, the game does give a strong sense of laziness from the author. The lack of interactivity, GTV, and especially the player's inability to examine lots of objects (which includes several essential objects - I couldn't look at "the pile", but I had to "move pile" in order to progress), take away much of the enjoyment and are pretty annoying.

Characters, which the game really depends on, aren't brilliant either. They're not written particularly well, and whereas I'd of thought this would be a great chance for good characterisation and interaction between guests, the author has almost completely passed this opportunity up. No characters stick in my mind after finishing. "Bad" characters, like Trey, are all bad, with nothing else to them. "Good" characters are liked by everyone, with nothing else to them other than one aspect of their personality. The "ask about" conversation system is lacking with a small number of subjects to ask each character about, and vital ones missing. As a party guest with a murderer on the loose, it must be pretty worrying when you ask the security guard about security and he says "I don't know anything about that". Yet another demonstration that "ask about" is the inferior conversation system. Another damaging aspect to the NPCs believability is that they are completely uncreative (other than when they're killed). I mean, if your co-workers are dropping like flies and there's a murderer set out to kill you, you don't just hang around sipping drinks, do you? Another indication of an author that couldn't be bothered?
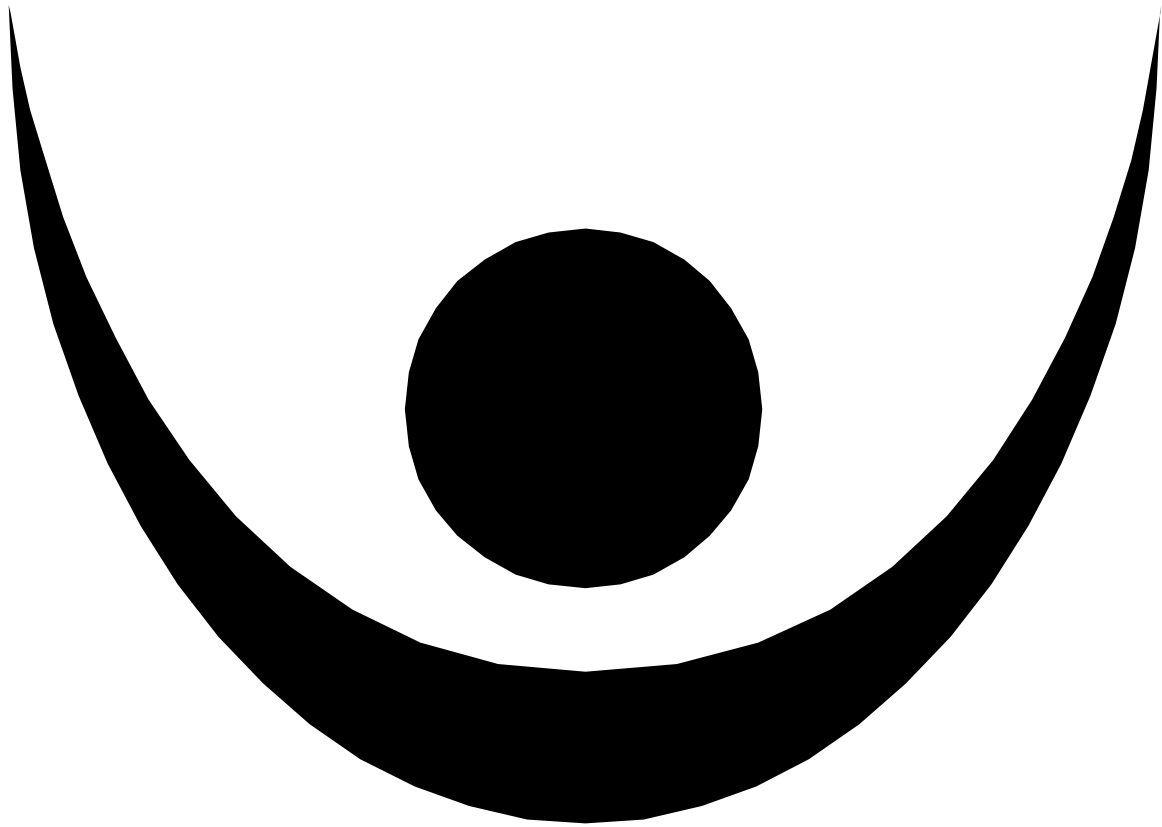
Game design isn't anything to write home about, although its not terribly bad. Due to the GTV, I did find myself floating around wondering what to do next on a couple of occasions, and several times I was confused by object ambiguity. Some events seem to happen conveniently for the game to progress (for example, the computer handily turning on when you need to research a character). Other annoyances are having to do a specific action that the game will only understand in that situation - for example, trying to syringe anyone other than the murderer, or giving anything to anyone other than when you need to progress the game. There were some bugs at the end scene on the roof, involving the character and interactivity. Actually, the whole end scene was a bit of a letdown. After being unfairly killed with no indication that it might happen, and having to restart the game, I was then stuck on how to kill the killer (shards of glass couldn't be picked up, dagger couldn't be taken, no other items could be used to fight with) so I had to resort to looking in the generator to complete the game. This, with the unimaginative ending text (another of my pet hates - a completely boring and summarising end text which offers no reward, twist, or anything to keep you thinking), leaves the player on quite a low.

Overall, despite the interesting storyline and the occasional good piece of writing, the game is quite a let-down, so I can't really recommend it. The linear act structure worked well, I thought, but all its failures in interactivity, logic, game design, GTV, and bugs, make for an uninspiring, unenjoyable, and tiring experience. It's a shame that this came from Mel S, an otherwise good author, but I'm sure he's destined for better things in the future.

5/10
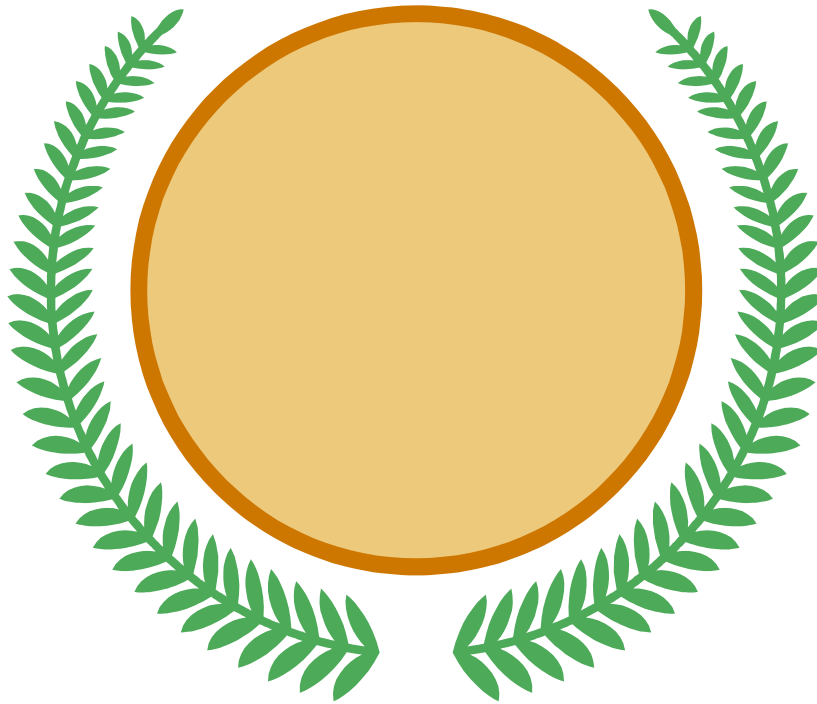
Mount Voluptuous
By Christopher Cole

Review: David Whyld
Genre: Adult
Download: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aifarchive/

■■■

Just to try something different, I decided I'd play an AIF (adult interactive fiction) game. Now I haven't had a whole lot of time for them in the past because while I like the adult side of things as much as the next voyeur, I've found that the games leave a lot to be desired, but a couple I've played recently (*The Backlot* (TADS) and *Ghost Justice* (ADRIFT)) proved quite a bit better than I'd expected so I figured I'd give another one a try. And what better game to start with than the new one by the undisputed king of the AIF world?
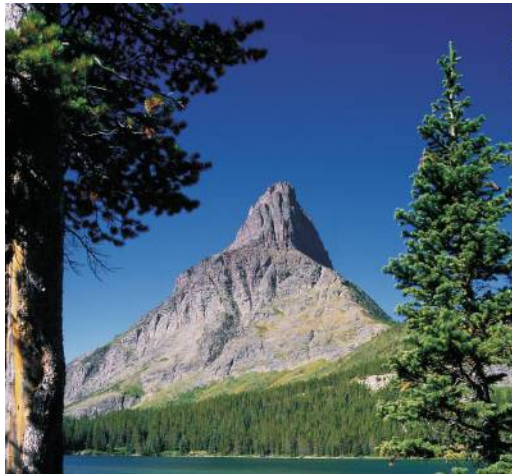
The idea behind *Mount Voluptuous* is straight from the pages of a torrid 70's sex flick: you're the boss of a modelling agency (the Mount Voluptuous of the title) who specialises in models who are, well,

voluptuous. (Although 'voluptuous' here seems to mean chubby or flabby as much as anything else.) The general premise of the game, as far as I could gather, was to get as many models to your house as possible and… you can probably figure out the rest for yourself. This *is* an adult game after all.

So what was it like? I have to admit, the introduction didn't impress me much and neither did I find the locations particularly enthralling. Location descriptions were very workmanlike (i.e. they told you a basic description of what was there but no effort was made to give them depth or make them seem real). There were countless items that you *should* have been able to examine but couldn't. Some were minor and most probably don't affect the storyline in any major way, but sometimes attention to detail is what makes a game seem better than it really is. The very first location, your office, has a poster on the wall of someone called Bettie Ballhaus (you can tell she's a porn star by the silly name) who can't be examined. Examining the window shows a backyard and a pool which also can't be examined.

There were also a lot of instances of the writer skipping over basic and very obvious commands. An ever-ringing phone is present in the first location yet despite the fact that it's said to be ever-ringing, you're not able to answer it. A considerable amount of guess the verb is involved with actually using the phone. Examining it informs you that you can make calls simply by dialling the number yet any attempts to "dial [number]" or "call [number]" failed miserably. I later on found out from the Yahoo message boards that despite what the game says, you actually don't need to type "dial" at all, you just type the number you want to call. Ouch! How come the beta-testers didn't pick up on *that?*

This lack of care is evident throughout most of the game (or the parts that I played anyway). Most locations contain items for which descriptions are either missing or so short as to be pretty much irrelevant. While I'm aware that the majority of people play AIF games solely for the sex scenes, it's still disappointing when so little effort has been expended on making the rest of the game enjoyable to play. Window dressing can make a whole lot of difference to a game sometimes. It's even more disappointing that after playing another of the writer's game (a Lara Croft non-AIF effort), I know he's capable of a lot better than this.
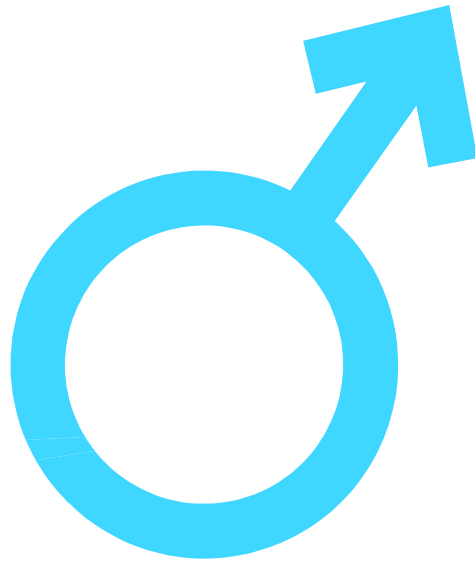
Making progress is difficult due to the game often misleading you into thinking you need to do one thing whereas in fact you need to do something completely different. I tried to watch a few of the DVDs in the TV room because a description of the TV told me I could, yet no matter what I typed I couldn't get a single thing to work properly. *Mount Voluptuous* also uses the dreaded "ask [name] about [subject]" form of conversation which is a nightmare game of guess the subject matter. Here it was especially bad and wasn't helped much by the fact that the people I was able to converse with all seemed slightly less intelligent than the furniture. Now I don't know if porn stars are naturally a bit dim or if that's just a preconception made about them (a big boobs = small brains kind of equation) but if the ones featured in this game are anything to go by, then their reputation for being dim is well founded.

I suppose a review of an adult game just wouldn't be complete if I didn't mention the ladies you can encounter (for want of a better word). Unfortunately with a couple of exceptions they're nothing much to write home about and this probably ruined quite a lot of the excitement that the game might otherwise have held for me. Call me old fashioned but when I see a woman with rolls of flab on her frame, my first thought isn't "cor! What a stunner!" but "yuk! Put some clothes on, love!" My reaction to most of the ones here was of the latter variety, although if Sydney Moon happens to want a back massage one day I certainly won't be saying no…

How far did I get? Not very far alas. The game seemed a real slow mover and despite it being a game about sex, I didn't manage to get any (aside from one unfortunate instance that ended in me being arrested for rape). I met a couple of porn stars but after struggling with various conversation

pieces with them, to no avail, I just found myself losing the will to continue. My attempts to have sex with the porn stars met with about as much success as my conversation attempts. There are no hints and no walkthrough available. For a game like this, which seems steeped in guess the verb, a few hints would have been a godsend. Without them I was unable to get anywhere and in the end I just quit.

I was hoping I'd like this game but I didn't. I might have enjoyed it more if a little extra effort had been made on making the non-sex side of things (the location descriptions, the items, etc) a bit more interesting, and it might have perked matters up if the conversation system hadn't been such a nightmare to use; yet with all the hassles I had, I really couldn't recommend this game to anyone who isn't a massive fan of the adult side of the market and even then you're really going to have to work your damnedest to get any kind of enjoyment out of it.

3.5 out of 10
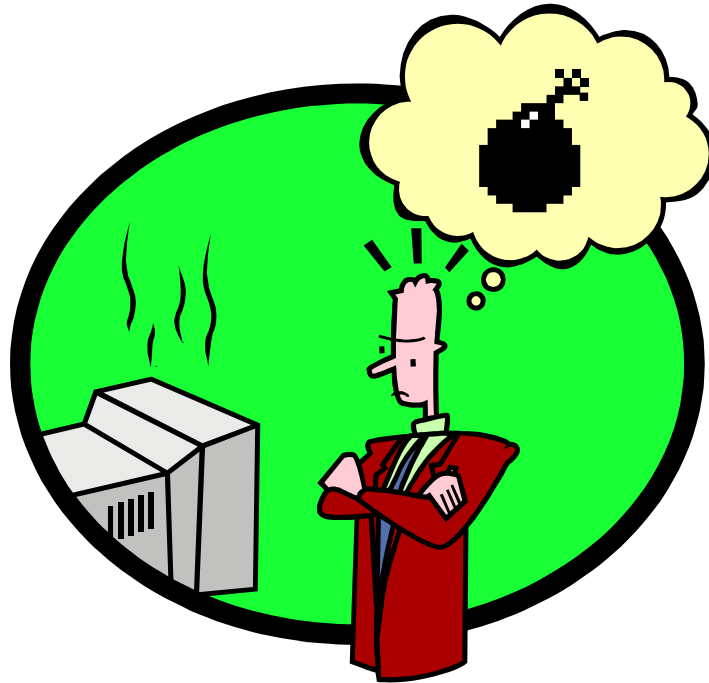
Murder In Great Falls
By Mel S

Review: David Whyld
Genre: Detective
Download: http://ftp.adrift.org.uk/adrift/ftp/games/murdergreatfalls.taf

▪▪

This game came out a while ago (at the end of 2001) and I have few memories of playing it at the time. I *did* play it because there's a short review I wrote of it on the main ADRIFT page at www.adrift.org.uk but I really can't remember a lot about it. So when I decided to review it for the Reviews Exchange, I was approaching it pretty much as a new game.

What's it like?

You play a police detective. Someone has been murdered. Yep, it's a murder mystery. That's the game in a nutshell.

It doesn't start well. That much becomes quickly apparent from the opening sections, which were weighted down with so many spelling mistakes that if they'd been a boat it would have sunk. Descriptions of these locations are poor: the word "large" pops up three times in the very first location, giving me the impression at one point that my character was some kind of dwarf. This sort of things bogs down the rest of the opening locations: you also have a small living room complete with a small TV on a small stand. There's also a couch here as well but that's apparently of normal proportions. The TV can be examined but trying to watch it produces a message that the game doesn't understand what you're trying to do (what else does it think you'd be trying to do with a TV?) and trying to turn it on produces an even more baffling message stating that you can't do that *here!* As the TV isn't portable, I'm assuming

this is either an unfortunate bug or the TV that I *can* turn on is somewhere else. Not a good start to the game at all.
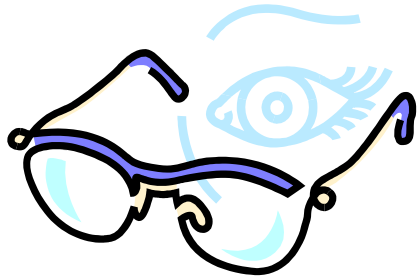
As I wandered about and tried to solve the murder, my character seemed to fulfil a whole array of duties which I'm pretty sure real life police detectives aren't required to. I photographed a crime scene (surely that's the job of the scene of crime guys?), collected my own evidence and took it off to the evidence store (why not the forensics lab?) and seemed to be left to pretty much handle the case on my own with any assistance from my fellow officers. An officer who was stationed at the crime scene didn't seem especially interested in helping me out and the first response I managed to obtain from him basically told me that it was *my* job to solve the murder. Gee, thanks. Worse still was my boss who spent the game in his office and didn't lift a finger to help me.

Logic doesn't play a very large part in the game unfortunately. I showed up at the garage owned by the father of the murdered man and was refused entry to the father's office by a security guard. Even showing him my police ID didn't gain me entry. Surely as a police detective I should have access to whatever potential witnesses there are and any security guard standing in my way would quickly find himself spending a night in the cells at the police station.

The police station? I expected this to be a hive of activity as a murder had just been committed but the only two people there – my boss and the guy in the evidence store – didn't seem unduly concerned. The rest of the force… er, were nowhere to be found. No wonder the poor chap got murdered if this is the entire police presence in the town.

Conversation is handled in the unhelpful "ask [name] about [subject]" format which always has me tearing my hair out in frustration because it's such a damn awkward way of handling conversation and generally results in a not very interesting game of guess-the-subject which is even more tedious than it sounds. Fortunately, I was able to obtain responses more often than not. Most of the characters in the game can be asked about the other characters, although I was never really sure whether this made a difference. Certainly none of them gave me any clues that seemed to lead anywhere.

I didn't get very far with the actual solving of the crime, I'm afraid to say. I wandered around the town and noted a strange discrepancy when trying to go east from inside a garage actually leads you back to the town centre which is actually several locations distance. Going back west takes you to a different location altogether. There's also a strange loop in the police station when you can keep going north unto infinity and yet arrive at the entrance time and again. What else did I do? I found a few pieces of evidence and managed to hand them over to an unhelpful chap at the police station. This resulted in a nice little boost to my score so clearly I was on the right track. And then… well, I got stuck. I'd wandered around every location, collected as much evidence as I could find, asked every character in the game questions about every subject I could think to ask about… and was still stuck on day 1. The game is split into three parts and certain tasks have to be completed before moving from one day to the next. But how to move to day 2?

Fortunately I'm not above cheating and so I fell back on the walkthrough which the author kindly e-mailed to me a while back. There I got a little baffled as to progress any further I was required to ask one of the characters about a subject I had never come across before. Even doing a search through my transcript of the game didn't reveal any clues as to why I should think to ask the character about this particular subject and as I'd spoken to every character and searched every location as best I could, it's unlikely I missed it. But I'll give the game the benefit of the doubt and assume that, tucked away somewhere that I didn't think to check, there's a hint about this.

The game moved to day 2 and I experienced a level of dismay at being told that a suspect had been found. Where and by whom? Certainly not by me and as no one else seemed to be doing anything on the case, I'm not sure where this suspect turned up from. Are there people helping me out but so desperate to avoid the limelight that they're doing all this stuff behind my back? Maybe *they* should be put in charge of the case as in a single day while I wandered around and collected a few bits of not-very-useful evidence, they managed to find a suspect. Clearly the wrong guy is in charge of the case…

Negative things aside, this isn't a terrible game. In parts, particularly photographing the crime scene, it's actually quite good. But there are too many rough edges – spelling, guess the verb, lack of logic – for me to heartily recommend it.

4 out of 10

Murder In Great Falls
By Mel S

Review: Laurence Moore (Cannibal)
Genre: Detective
Download: http://ftp.adrift.org.uk/adrift/ftp/games/murdergreatfalls.taf

Personally, I think there is a serious lack of quality detective adventures in the IF world. For me, none have really set the grey cells working as did Infocom's classic _Deadline_. So, how does _Murder In Great Falls_ by Mel S stand up to cross-examination?

I found this adventure had plenty of ideas but the implementation was flat and lifeless. The introduction was clumsy and hardly inspiring. I didn't feel like a cop from the word go and I never felt there was any

urgency to solve the murder of Donald Wisker. The opening scenes of a game (or book or movie or anything, really, including conversation) are so vital. You need a decent hook. I can always understand the comment "well, it started very good but then lost its way afterwards". This is so true when an author has poured every last sweat and tear into snagging the player or reader with a top quality opening but simply cannot maintain the pace throughout. *Murder In Great Falls* doesn't even have a good opening so how does the rest fare?

You begin with a call from the Chief who needs you to crack a murder case. Location descriptions of your house are fairly unexciting and the sequence is dull. You move around and collect items that you should already have (police ID, evidence bags) and off you go to explore the coastal resort of Great Falls. You move around by foot (no need for a car) and, in true adventure fashion, pick up anything that is lying around. I found the lipstick the second time round and handed it in at the evidence desk. This was a nice touch (although the expert Jake, who told me it would take a few days for analysis, needs to get off his ass and do some work). The police station itself has no atmosphere and seemed to be lacking any cops as well.

Still, I was able to get a camera from my locker and head for the crime scene. This was a very enjoyable section of the game and it would have been best to start the game here. Why have the game open at your own house staring out to sea? That's more like the end of a game not the beginning. This would have packed more punch. Anyway, back to the crime scene. The area was sealed off and I was able to photograph the body and sweep the scene for evidence. Although strictly the job of a crime scene unit to collate hair and stuff I had fun examining the car and finding clues. This was a good part to the adventure but could have been far more detailed and involving. I headed back to the police station and gave my evidence to Jake (the lazy guy who couldn't get off his ass to process the crime scene himself) and went off to find something to do.

Conversation is handled in the dreaded "ask <npc> about <topic>" which usually has me typing "quit" not so long afterwards. I simply can't get to grips with this style of conversation. I go blank. Then I think of a hundred topics and none of them get an answer. So I then give up in frustration.

I made it to day 2 of the job but woke with a headache (why?) to learn that we had a suspect (where was I during this?) that I needed to investigate (send the other guy, he's obviously doing better than me).

I continued with the case - finding more evidence for Jake the lab whiz to look at and exploring more locations with the familiar bland style of writing. In the end, I resorted to the walkthrough when I got stumped. The guilty party took me by surprise but the ending - where you coax a confession - was too forced to give closure.

It's often forgotten that Mel S is a very prolific Adrift author (well over a dozen games) but this is certainly not one of his best. If I was to offer advice it would be to make location descriptions more fleshed out, work on the introduction and consider how credible plot and dialogue and puzzles are when using a modern-day genre. Fine if the game is a comedic crime caper but if this is supposed to be the dirty busy of investigating murder then it was more *Murder She Wrote* than *CSI.*

Not the best.

4.5/10

Neighbours From Hell
By David Whyld

Review: Laurence Moore (Cannibal)
Genre: Detective comedy
Download: http://www.shadowvault.net/nfh.taf

▪▪▪

If you play Adrift games then there is a fair chance the lion's share of those adventures will be penned by David W. If you think his brand of humour and mimesis-breaking style is not to your taste then you will often miss out on a cracking selection of games.

Neighbours From Hell opens with the simple plot of you living next door to the Crumms. They are the worse neighbours in the world. In fact, they are even worse than that. Having suspected that they are responsible for murdering another set of neighbours you decide to employ a few amateur detective skills and try to find enough evidence to take to the police.

Within a few moves I was able to locate a number of objects (including a nose and an ear!) which led me to conclude that I might not be looking to collect evidence against the Crumms as just to collect body parts instead.

As with other David W adventure's the discovery of said body parts is delivered in typical humorous fashion. I also found early on that I had plenty to examine and search in order to discover hidden items and further body parts. Try it! You need to look under things as well. There is quite a wealth of items to search for. Everything I tried seemed to have at least 1 level of description. I tend not to go beyond that. Perhaps the author forgot to describe minute particles of grime but so what - it won't effect the game.

There was a puzzle - this is quite early in the game so can hardly be considered a major spoiler - where an object is concealed in a hole brimming with murky water. I was able to retrieve the object by using a pole which I found hard to believe (until I examined the pole and realised how I was able to snag the object on it). My most hated verb "use" reared its head at this point - "use pole" - and I couldn't find an alternative - "search hole with pole" for example. The main reason I despise the verb "use" is that it tends to be the one I turn to when I can't think of any other verb to try. I wonder if other players feel that way about it.

There is a nice trick later in the game - something I employ on a regular basis in all my unreleased works - where examining something once (a static object, in this instance) leads to the discovery of an item. So, the player is happy and off he goes to use the item somewhere else not stopping to think there might be a second item hidden. This is another form of a puzzle the IF author can use. It's akin to when a player enters a location and spots an object he generally believes that is the purpose of the location (to hold the object) and then moves on to the next part of the game (forgetting to go deeper into the location to see what else it might hold). Equally, if you search an area once, you tend to thing you have found everything. I missed the second search and was puzzled for

quite a time until I realised there was a clue in the initial search to try a second time.

So, back to the plot, how many body parts do I have now???

I nailed the Crumms in the end (they don't actually feature in the game) which is a shame because I never actually felt they would turn up (bob the dog is an amusing sequence) and this would have increased a bit of tension (perhaps a series of random events or someone even knocking at the door or one of the Crumms returning having forgotten something). It could have added an extra twist that I wouldn't have seen coming.

Overall, I found Neighbours From Hell an enjoyable and pleasing outing with decent descriptions and enough puzzles set at the right complexity level. The game doesn't take itself too serious - surprise, surprise - but it is not as madcap as other DavidW affairs - the humour is delivered at a steady pace. It could have benefited from an additional twist or two near the end (one of the Crumms returning, perhaps) and I don't like the exits displayed as they were (i.e. Exits are north, south and west). That aside no real grumbles.

Strangely, when playing this, I kept getting a very strong retro feel about it which is probably the way I would sum up the David W catalogue (a kind of retro text adventure meet new IF).

As a footnote, this game is also available for Quest.

Recommended.

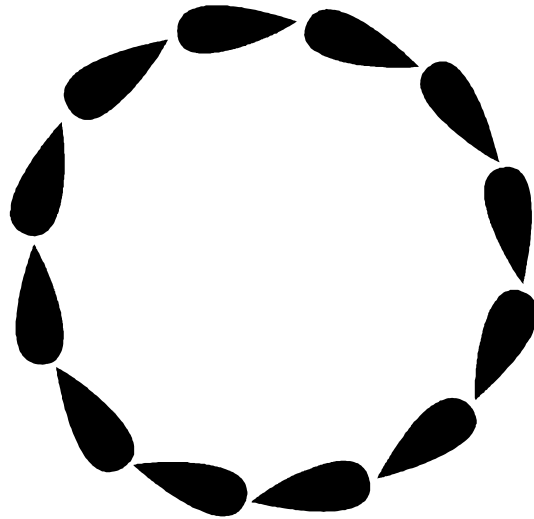**7.5/10**

Shards Of Memory
By David Whyld

Review: Greybear
Genre: Fantasy
Download: http://www.shadowvault.net/shardsofmemory.taf

■■■

Initial Impressions

This brief review is based on about two hours of play. I doubt I'm even close to finishing, though I have arrived at a point where I'm stuck and thought it time to share my thoughts with the author.

Did you ever attend a concert or drama by someone whose work you admire or read a book by a favorite author and then realize after the first thirty minutes that the person you came to see or read is coasting? You sit there, hoping for the quality you expected, to be amazed, to be emotionally engaged so that you lose track of time and the world outside.

Then it becomes more and more apparent. The performer is coasting; you are getting less than 100 percent. This is my reaction in the early stages of playing *Shards of Memory*. I believe that David Whyld, an excellent writer and programmer, can do better. So I'm impatient, restless, frustrated, and the magic spell of the imagination evaporates.

Of course, this could be due to my lack of experience and my own biases. I am not a big fan of third-person narratives that masquerade as first-person. The "I" in the story is not really the "me" who reads the story, but a character I become. The "I" makes it very personal. The author should take the time early in the story to make the character engaging. Do I really want to crawl inside this person's skin and see the world through his eyes? Not really in my case, since there is insufficient narrative to ease me behind the mask. I think the story would have been stronger in third person.

I'm not sure about the hybrid menu system for travel either. I felt like I was wandering around in a Hollywood set with nothing behind the fronts. Personally, I prefer either one or the other: either an IF or Choose Your Own Adventure format. When they mixed I could feel the gears of the story grinding.

I suppose I found the story abrasive from its first few scenes.

Pit

X north wall → nothing out of the ordinary. (I am in a pit for goodness sake. There's nothing "ordinary" there. Provide a visual description.)
Tap east wall → the sound echoes (From tapping on an **earthen** wall?)
Hit east wall... → Now that isn't very nice. (I'm trapped in a pit and hitting the wall isn't "nice"?)
X ground → I see no such thing. (What? In an earthen pit?)

So I'm stuck in the pit... until I check the Generator to discover I'm supposed to examine the <u>floor</u>. The author could have fixed this problem by simply making "ground" a synonym for floor. Better yet, make "ground" the keyword, not floor. I don't consider the earth at the bottom of a pit a "floor."

Now I know immediately that David is coasting at this point because I am absolutely certain that he already knows these things.

So I continue to read and tap the keyboard, never becoming lost in the story.

I hate to be so critical because I consider davidw as a member of the great trinity of ADRIFT authors who have taught me a lot. I have learned a great deal from him and appreciate his insights on the forum. I also deeply appreciate his willingness to *not* password protect his stories so they can be examined in the Generator (thanks David!). I hope he finds my comments useful in some way. I eagerly await his next creation. I just hope he takes the time to strut his stuff and demonstrates his potential.

Here are additional comments he might find useful. I think the problems and my suggestions will be obvious.

Road

Exit → I fail to find an exit in that direction. However, I can go north....
S → Move south on road second time and die. (Seems abrupt for so early in the story; player should be warned)
X self → I see no such thing. (Hmm... maybe I'm a ghost)

Building

Hit figure → now that isn't very nice. (there should be some consequence)

Ackor Junction

X hawkers → I see no such thing
X stalls → same

Temple of vandamma
X door → I can't see the outline from here!

Forest of the Lost
Path to the se and sw lead deeper...
Se... I can only move north
Sw...I can only move north

Road
Something about the trees...
X trees → I see no such thing.

Desolate plain
Look down → I see no such thing
Look up → I see no such thing
X ground → I see no such thing

Before the Black gate
X man → I can't see the men from here

Menu traveling is a significant break in mimesis, loss of special context

Fire Swept Path

X hut → I see no such thing (??) (skeleton of a hut mentioned)
X skeleton of hut → I can't see the skeletons from here.
X ash → I see no such thing

Metricles Harbour

"The harbour-master's fort is in while out leads to the map." (confusing)

Duke Faraaz's Palace

"Above you rises …" Shouldn't that be "Above me rises …"

Hall of Greeting

X statues → I see no such thing

Throne room

Hit fallen → "Now that isn't very nice."
Take jewels → Take what?
X jewels → "I see no such thing"
Use lightstone and hit with dagger → both destroyed (no warning, seems odd to me)
Hint → no help
STUCK with Fallen (restart from save)

Law chamber

…the stand looks barren. (Not sure "barren" is a good word for empty.)

Judges chambers

X shelves → I see no such thing.
X tomes → … appearance of this books….
X tomes → It seems strange how decayed… (be more descriptive)
Talk to Cedrik → three options; choosing #1 results in menu of "1" (suggest no menu, put in a pause to continue conversation)
Goodbye → The "go" command has been disabled for this game.
Hit Cedrik → Sprints off (interesting effect rule)

Gungador Prison

Force open gates → I can't open the gates! ("…death for anyone who tries to force them open" is in description of gates.
X runes → I see no such thing.

Gate control

Turn wheel → (nice description)

[28]

Turn wheel (again) → … I would be foolish to risk it again. (kill player who has been warned)

Close (or open) door → I can't close (or open) the door! (Why? Do you mean doorway, not door?)

Mage Halls

X injuries → I see no such thing (description of injuries or revise ALR)

Royal Park

Ne → I fail to find an exit in that direction (mentioned in description of RP)

Hint → No help seems to be forthcoming. (suggest revising to remove "seems." If there's no help, there is no "seems")

STUCK in a loop (will have to keep trying or examine story in Generator)

AUTHOR COMMENT: Unfortunately this game seems to have rather a few bugs/errors in it that I could really do with fixing. Many thanks to Greybear for taking the time to comment on the game like this. At least when I get round to re-writing *Shards Of Memory* (something I've been meaning to do since it was first released), I'll have a good idea of where to start first. *David Whyld*

Where Are My Keys?
By Richard Otter

Review: David Whyld
Genre: Comedy
Download: ftp://ftp.adrift.org.uk/adrift/ftp/games/keys.zip

First the good news: as of October 2004 this was the first full-size, non-competition, non-adult ADRIFT game to be released since February 2004 (something of a record). The bad news: it's rushed in places and would seriously have benefited from a few rounds with a good beta-tester, not to mention being fed through the tender care of a spell-check.
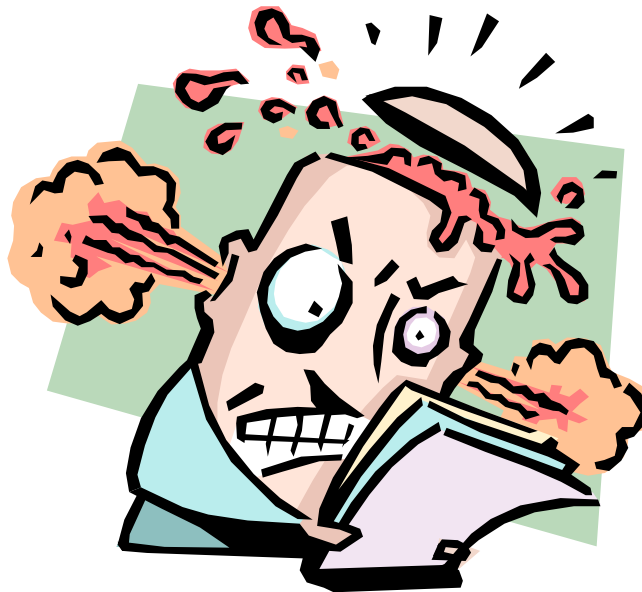
It has to be said that the introduction isn't one of the best I've ever read. It's told in centred text with a blank line inserted in between every line of text, which might have seemed like a good idea in theory but in practice

it looks a bit of a mess, especially if, like me, you have the font sizes overridden and half the text has disappeared off the screen before you can even read it. Scrolling back up to read text that's flashed by too fast to be read is never a positive thing. It's also not a good idea to have an introduction littered with spelling and grammatical errors: full stops seem to be dropped in purely at random (except in the places where they're actually required) and while a few commas have had the decency to show up, a good few others got lost somewhere along the way. You might get away with this sort of thing partway through a game, particularly if your audience are enjoying said game and willing to overlook minor errors, but right at the start it gives off a very bad impression indeed.

But on with the game…

The objective: you've crashed at a friend's house after a particularly heavy drinking session and need to find your car keys so you can get home. The back bedroom, it seems, needs decorating as your wife's mother-in-law is coming to stay and you, being the man of the house (though clearly not the one who wears the trousers) are needed home asap, if not sooner, to get the decorating done. Ignoring the fact that such things as taxis, buses and – heaven forbid – walking on your own two feet exist, you decide to hunt around the house for your car keys.

From the above, you're probably getting the impression that I wasn't overly enthusiastic about the start of the game. You're right, I wasn't. Potentially the most important part of the game left me feeling that this was a game that had been rushed to get finished and little effort had been taken to bring it up to scratch. But it managed to keep my interest long enough for me to actually make some progress with and, after a while, it began slowly but surely to win me over.

This is a game greatly concerned with a vast array of items and in that respect it harks back to some of the text adventures I used to play in the 80's when I'd be faced with a whole horde of items which didn't seem to have a use and part of the fun (or frustration, depending on your viewpoint) was finding out what that use was. Unfortunately I didn't do very well here. At one point I must have amassed somewhere in the region of 30 items which I had scattered about the kitchen floor as there was a limit on how many I could carry and having them in one place seemed the easiest way to keep track of them all. A few – the knife, some bread and the coffee – I managed to discern a use for but the majority just got the better of me. There were others that I was sure I could find a use for but which it turned out I couldn't – the bone, for instance, I thought I would need to give to the dog but after trying unsuccessfully with this and being told that the dog wasn't interested, I guess I was wrong. Either that, or guess the verb reared its ugly head and got the better of me. Even so, I was a bit miffed that a *dog* wouldn't even take a *bone* that was being offered to it.

There are several other characters in the game and while you can ask them questions about a wide variety of subjects (Mark, in fact, seems to have a programmed response for almost every item in the game), they're not very interesting characters. All seem to be at various stages of a hangover and despite you having access to items such as headache tablets and mugs of coffee (another couple of items that I managed to find a use for), these don't seem to do a lot for the hangover and the characters remain pretty much the same afterwards. Whether getting them sober is a requirement to finishing the game or just a puzzle that doesn't go anywhere I couldn't say.

Mention of the headache tablets brings to mind one of the game's more annoying aspects. The headache tablets are actually inside a packet. Open the packet and try to give a tablet to someone and you're told, quite bizarrely, that you're not carrying the tablets! This being despite the fact that they're inside the packet which you're carrying in your hand! Having to open the packet and then remove the tablets *before* I'm able to give them to someone struck me as a strange flaw and one that could certainly have been fixed with a little effort.

But then this is a game with a lot of rough edges and which appears to have been tested very minimally, if at all. Spelling mistakes litter the text and while everyone makes them (I'm as guilty of this as anyone), they're distracting all the same and in this age of spell-checks it's disappointing

to see so many. Even more disappointing is that from playing a previous game of the writer's, I know he's capable of much better than this.
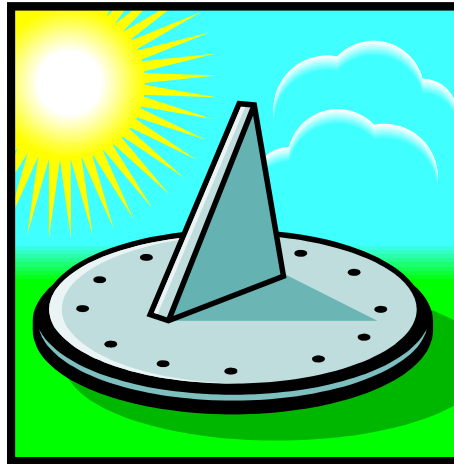
I didn't finish the game. I don't even think I came close. Assuming that all the items I managed to find, and which are now making a sizeable dent in the kitchen floor from their sheer number and bulk, have a use then it's probably quite likely that I did very poorly. I *did*, however, manage to discover where my car keys where. The dog buried them. Unfortunately I wasn't able to use any of the items I had discovered to dig with and nor, in fact, was I able to dig with my bare hands. The hints system seems to imply that the dog can be used to dig up the keys but as he wouldn't respond to the bone and just dropped the toy mouse back in his basket every time I tried giving it up him, quite how I was supposed to make use of him I couldn't say. Either I'm getting at worse at these sorts of games (a definite possibility I suppose) or the puzzles are just getting harder and harder to fathom out.

Clearly this was a rushed game and the rough edges leave a lot to be desired. But there's still a fairly reasonable effort here if you can make the effort to get past the all-too-obvious mistakes and flaws; at times, flashes of the great game it *could* have been, but isn't, shine through and I find myself wondering if the best thing for it might to be taken down, fixed, put aside for a few months until everyone has forgotten about it, and then a second version released.

4.5 out of 10

The Woodfish Compendium
By Woodfish

Review: David Whyld
Genre: Various
Download: http://ftp.adrift.org.uk/adrift/ftp/games/compendium.zip

■■■

The Woodfish Compendium, as you might well have gathered from the name, is a compendium of games by Woodfish. Very short games, unfortunately, as he seems to run into problems with anything large. But if you've got ten minutes to spare, or you just don't fancy playing a one hundred room epic, this bunch might be right up your street.

So what are they like? Well, let's take a look…

Forum

I wasn't entirely sure what to make of this game to begin with. The intro was certainly interesting: a virus has been unleashed which has spread across the world and infected all ADRIFT members, leaving them as mindless slaves for the evil one behind the virus. You, Bob the Newbie, are ADRIFT's only hope.

Still with me so far? Good. After that cringe-worthy intro, the game gets quite a bit better. You head off to defeat the evil one, armed with nothing but common sense and all round knowledge of certain ADRIFT forum members. The latter proves to be quite in solving one of the puzzles (would non-ADRIFT members know to smack DS490 with a pair of clogs?) and it also helps with some of the in jokes which are scattered around the game. Anyone unfamiliar with the ADRIFT forum would probably not have a clue what was going on.

Nicely written, *Forum* is a remarkably bizarre game which never makes much sense or even attempts to. It's also a short game which in hindsight is probably just as well because the idea, while comical for the time I played it, would more than likely wear thin very quickly.

6 out of 10

Forum 2

While not as enjoyable as the first game, this one is certainly stranger. It takes place two months after the events of *Forum* when the evil Woodfish (name-dropping so and so…) has been defeated and the ADRIFT Forum has returned pretty much to normal – or as close to normal as it gets. But then you, once more playing Bob the newbie, receive an urgent call from the ADRIFT boss asking for help. A moment later he's gone and you're on your way to the Forum to find out what has happened.

The opening of this game was better than its predecessor but I overall preferred the first game. While very humorous, in a decidedly corny way, to begin with, the humour seems to dry up once the game gets underway and it becomes more of a standard text adventure with standard text adventure puzzles to solve, most of which are nothing special and certainly not as amusing as in *Forum*. They're also very easy and that, combined with the shortness of the game as a whole, means that you shouldn't be spending very long playing it at all. The writing is good, the difficulty factor easy, the game reasonable. The less said about the ending, which was even stranger than the rest of the game, the better.

4 out of 10

The Game To End All Games

I took one look at the intro to this game and almost quit:

"hello this is my fist game ever and its relly good. u r an adventerer and u decide 2 go on a quest and get da cristal of power from the dragun of doom! i hope u like it! oh yeah u hav a strang way of seein so u can not look at da objects in dis game!"

It read a bit like the intro to that ADRIFT classic of yesteryear, *Death Agency*, but while *Death Agency* intro was bad purely because it was bad, *The Game To End All Games* intro was deliberately bad. The game improves quite a bit later on but I've always wondered just how many people saw that awful intro and quit in disgust.

So why the bad intro? Well, it's a game within a game which ends with the player wondering why the game he's just played is so dire. As soon as the first one ends, the player is thrown immediately into another.

If the writer set out to write a bizarre and confusing game, he certainly succeeded. If he set out to write a good one, I'd say he failed. *The Game To End All Games* isn't a terrible game but nor is it one I could really say I enjoyed playing. It's weird. *Too* weird for my liking. The end, as with *Forum 2*, is confusing and leaves the player without any real kind of

satisfaction at actually reaching the end. The feeling I had was one of relief that it was over.

3 out of 10

ImagiDroids
Parts of *ImagiDroids* bear remarkably similarities to *The Game To End All Games* in that there are games within games. The idea is a nice enough one in its own right, but used twice in different games by the same writer shows a lack of new ideas.

ImagiDroids starts with several lines of garbled programming language and then clears to show the player sitting at a desk in front of a computer. There is little to be done here aside from turning on the computer and being transported to the Desktop, an actual location, and from there into the game within a game. This is a generic fantasy effort with the player trapped in a cell. The ol' grey matter isn't given much of a workout in figuring out how to escape from the cell but then this is a writer more concerned with the telling of the story and less with the puzzles involved therein.

The game ends unsatisfying with a lengthy period of inactivity on the part of the player. You are unable to do anything for a dozen or so moves while an event runs in the background, explaining the reasoning behind the game. While this made a refreshing change (to play a game by Woodfish and understand what it was about), it was also disappointing in that an *interactive* fiction adventure, the interactive side of things seems

to have been left out. Still, the explanation behind the game is an interesting one and the game itself is well written so I've no real complaints here.

6 out of 10

Saffire

Considering that Woodfish writes the strangest games since Heal Butcher, it's quite something when a game is strange even by *his* standards, yet *Saffire*, an entry in one of the mini-comps we have entirely too often in the ADRIFT world, is his strangest game yet.

It starts with the player getting shot dead and ends… well, there are four separate endings, all wildly different. Normally I'm all in favour of different endings to games as they offer replay value but the endings here are all decided on the press of a button at the very end of the game. How you played the game up to that point is pretty much irrelevant; all you need to do is press one of four buttons and read what follows.

In between the beginning and the end is the game itself. After getting shot dead, the player wakes up in another place (limbo?) and from there he has to navigate his way towards the Room of Cloud where the button pressing is carried out. The landscape over which you travel is illogical in the extreme, although as this is a game played from the viewpoint of a dead person I suppose a logical landscape wouldn't have fit in.

All in all, nicely written but much too bizarre for my liking.
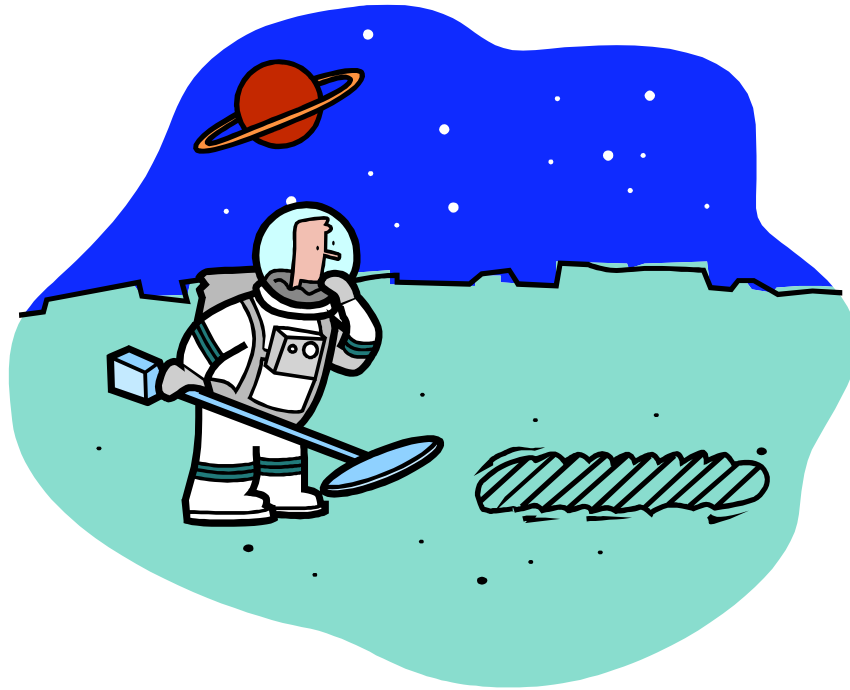
Topaz

More a story than a game, *Topaz* is also the writer's most accessible and accomplished work. It's short (naturally) but remarkably well written, if just a tad *too* linear for my liking.

Little is said of the player but he (or perhaps she) begins walking along a muddy road in the rain. Something shiny alerts his attention and he stoops to see a sword lying partially buried in the mud. Beating aside a few guess the verb problems, he takes the sword and then is swept away by a sudden torrent of rain. Is there a connection here? Ha, serve him right for picking up strange swords like that.

There are no real puzzles to solve and making progress is generally a case of typing in the most obvious command but then this isn't a game concerned with puzzles. It reads more like a novel (or short story at any rate) than a standard text adventure with occasional breaks in the text to allow the player to type in obvious and straightforward commands. From start to finish, you're probably talking under ten minutes unless you're either a really slow reader or the sort who favours reading the overly descriptive text. This is a pity because there's a very good game here but just as you're beginning to appreciate that, it reaches an ending.

An ending which hints at a much needed sequel.

7 out of 10
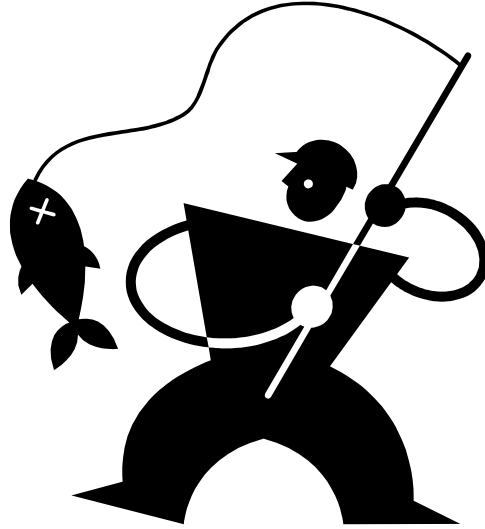
<u>*Overview*</u>
Good games and bad games, but they all bear a couple of things in common. They're very short. And they're very linear. Several times during playing these games, I felt I was being forced along a very set path which the writer wanted me along without any real explanation for *why* I was being forced along in this way. In *ImagiDroids* there is nothing to do for the final dozen or so moves of the games except sit there and listen to the NPCs' talking to each other; in *Saffire* my character is backed up against a wall by a man intending to kill him but isn't given the option of running away or fighting back; in *Topaz* the player sees something gleaming in the mud and is given no choice but to dig it out. The choice of being able to do something else would have been a blessing.

Good as some of the games were, I've little desire to play them through again. Partly because they're so short but also because they're linear. It might be easier to tell a storyline with a linear game, but it also kills replay value as there's nothing to see subsequent times that you didn't see the first.

As short games, some of the ideas used here are good ones but I'm not sure how well they'd work as full size games. The ideas behind each seem

ideally suited to short works which last little more than a few minutes; in a large game, the bizarreness might well put off too many people.

But if you're into linear games that don't take up too much of your day, you could do a lot worse than to check out some of the ones contained in The Compendium.

<u>Credits</u>

Many thanks to:

*Cannibal (Laurence Moore) for his reviews of **Murder In Great Falls** and **Neighbours From Hell** (especially the latter. I wasn't aware anyone was even playing that!)*

*Greybear for **Shards Of Memory***

*Woodfish for **The Merry Murders***

Want to submit a review? Make a comment on the issue? Offer suggestions for future issues? Send an e-mail to
reviews@dwhyld.plus.com

Reviews Index

Games

The Merry Murders (issue 1 by Woodfish)
Mount Voluptuous (issue 1 by David Whyld)
Murder In Great Falls (issue 1 by David Whyld and Laurence Moore)
Neighbours From Hell (issue 1 by Laurence Moore)
Shards Of Memory (issue 1 by Greybear)
Where Are My Keys? (issue 1 by David Whyld)
The Woodfish Compendium (issue 1 by David Whyld)

Reviewers

David Whyld – *Mount Voluptuous [issue 1]; Murder In Great Falls [issue 1]; Where Are My Keys? [issue 1]; The Woodfish Compendium [issue 1]*
Greybear – *Shards Of Memory [issue 1]*
Laurence Moore [Cannibal] – *Murder In Great Falls [issue 1]; Neighbours From Hell [issue 1]*
Woodfish – *The Merry Murders [issue 1]*