IF Gems

A selection of quotes from reviews of the annual Interactive Fiction competition (1995-2005), compiled by David Fisher.

A zipped version of this document is available from the IF archive: (html) (pdf) (text).

Its home on the web is at Chateâu d'IF.

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Introduction

This document contains a collection of quotes about writing Interactive Fiction. They were gathered from reviews of games entered in the annual IF competition between 1995 and 2005. Attempts have been made to avoid "spoilers" in these quotes, except when describing certain unfair puzzles.

There are both positive and negative comments about these games. Sometimes the most useful lessons are about what not to do; if a game you have written is used in this way, don't despair! It may have been the only negative comment in an otherwise praise-filled review, or it may just be the reviewer's perception of a game that other people found enjoyable.

The reader may notice some contradictions between different reviewers about "what makes a good game." The bottom line is, different people have different tastes, and it is never possible to please everyone. There are no fixed rules, only general principles of good IF design.

The majority of the quotations in this document are from Paul O'Brian, Mike Russo, Dan Shiovitz and Duncan Stevens. The other contributors, in alphabetical order, are: Jason Devlin, Jess Knoch, Michael Martin, Robert Menke, James Mitchelhill, Andrew Plotkin, Mike Roberts, Timofei Shatrov, Emily Short, Lucian Smith, Mike Snyder, David Welbourn, J. Robinson Wheeler, David Whyld and Jake Wildstrom.

Much thanks to all of you for permission to quote from your reviews, and for feedback on early drafts of this document. May future IF authors benefit from your reflections!

Reviews that do not appear on the reviewer's home page may be found at:

- *Brass Lantern*
- *SPAG (Society for the Promotion of Adventure Games)*
- The `rec.games.int-fiction` newsgroup archives.

David Fisher (davidfisher@australiaonline.net.au), July 2007

1. Beginning And Ending

1.1. Introductory Text

The Big Mama (2000) by Brendan Barnwell, reviewer Emily Short:

Opening text is very, very important. But it needs to be short, or I find my eyes glazing over. It's not that I can't read long swaths of prose when I want to; it's just that when I'm playing IF, I generally don't want to. [This game] was a particular offender. That opening paragraph could have been trimmed to a third of its length without any real loss of information or mood.

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

What's going on? That's a long, complicated question, and primary among the [game's] design sins is that it takes a long time to figure it out ... [After the intro is displayed, the player is left] with more questions than answers ... How am I supposed to record all findings? What's my DataStore? And who am I and what am I doing and why?

Identity Thief (2002) by Rob Shaw-Fuller, reviewer Emily Short:

I'm generally of the opinion that the introduction to a work of IF should be no longer than a couple of paragraphs, and that if you can't accomplish what you want to in that space, you might want to think of adding a scene or two to the beginning of your game to set things up.

Tookie's Song (2002) by Jess Knoch, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

I think that authors need to exercise restraint when it comes to opening text. One brief paragraph will usually suffice, if carefully crafted. If you need more than that to get across all of the material you have imagined, perhaps what you need to do is start the game in a different place, and have the exposition unfold interactively.

Baluthar (2003) by Chris Molloy Wischer, reviewer Mike Russo:

I think motivating the player is a very important and oft-overlooked component of a good opening, and [this one] got me to buy into the game almost immediately.

Blink (2004) by Ian Waddell, reviewer Mike Russo:

Less than two turns elapse between the beginning of the first vignette and the time the crisis erupts, and without a chance to settle into the character's routine, the radical change which is introduced feels weightless.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The game would have benefited from just dropping the SF prologue, and either forget it entirely or show it in flashbacks in the middle of the fantasy sequence.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The intro is pretty silly, and goes on way too long with not much happening.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Russo:

The introduction slopes in gradually, and while I generally like to have some idea of what I should be accomplishing from the very beginning, here the more leisurely approach worked well — knowing that plague was loose and the monastery was locked in made things more interesting than the standard wander-corridors-until-something-happens opening.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Robert Menke:

The art of the motive prologue is forever lost ... I believe it's important that — before the first command is typed — the author establishes a goal for the player, however trivial. Waiting to die is hardly a motivating goal.

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer Mike Russo:

The opening is effective, quickly establishing the character's personality (and eliciting sympathy!) in just a few sentences, and then continues strong by introducing a narrative complication.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Robert Menke:

... there's little if any attempt to provide a prologue that gives the player a chance to orient himself.

References (Introductory Text):

- [Exposition in Interactive Fiction](#) by Dennis G. Jerz (Prologue Comp).
- [Discussions about introductory text](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

1.2. Instructions And Warnings

The Ritual Of Purification (1998) by Jarek Solobewski, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

You can cast spells in this game. As far as I can tell, the only way you can learn this is by reading the fifth menu item in the "about" section. This should be mentioned in the text.

Strangers In The Night (1999) by Rich Pizor, reviewer Mike Roberts:

I recommend to the author that he should incorporate the rules from the *readme* file directly into the game's introduction, so that players read the rules before starting the game. The rules are essential to understanding how to approach the game, and players are likely to be baffled if they miss the extra file, as I did for the first half hour or so I was playing.

Coffee Quest II (2002) by Dog Solitude, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I had no idea I could pick locks. Perhaps that could have been mentioned in the intro somewhere.

A Party To Murder (2002) by David Good, reviewer Mike Russo:

Penalizing the player for engaging in typical nosy IF behavior is fair enough, but the author plays foul by not supplying any warning that suspicious activity will be punished.

Sting Of The Wasp (2004) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The game begins with a warning about the strong language and sexual references ... I much appreciate being told about things like that ahead of time.

All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows, reviewer Mike Russo:

The game plays fair, and states up-front in the `about` text exactly what the ground rules are. This is definitely the right approach — rather than belatedly realizing that my saved game is useless and cursing the author, I was able to engage [with the] game on its own terms.

All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Ironically, when a game warns me that it's not going to be fair, I consider that fair warning.

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

The game doesn't warn you, but [it] is not for the easily offendable. The story covers a lot of disturbing topics, including: abortion, suicide, satanism, murder, rape, paedophilia and probably something else.

On Optimism (2005) by Zach Flynn, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

People who self-harm often find that descriptions of self-harm trigger that desire in themselves. It would have been considerate to include a warning at the start of [the] game.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer David Whyld:

After examining just about every item in the subway station [and] not finding much, [I realized I] had to go over the whole place again to find what I needed. A little *readme* file indicating that examining items was different from looking under and behind them would have been a good idea.

1.3. Feelies And Extra Files

I Didn't Know You Could Yodel (1998) by Andrew Indovina and Michael Eisenman, reviewer Lucian Smith:

It was interesting (and maybe unintentional?) to have a saved game included in the download, but it did serve to allow me to see the ending without spoiling the puzzles for me. An interesting technique ... it was actually kind of nice to be able to "skip to the end" and see what was there.

The Best Man (2000) by Robert Menke, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] comes with the best "feelies" I've seen so far in this year's competition. In PDF format is a copy of "All Aboard!: The Magazine For Kids," which not only gives some info that becomes quite useful in the game, but also provides background for the political situation, adds detail to the game world, and also throws in some stuff just for fun.

The Last Just Cause (2001) by Jeremy Carey-Dressler, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

After reading the interminable *readme* and *FAQ* files, I was much less eager to fire this one up than if I'd started cold.

Fort Aegea (2002) by Francesco Bova, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The game] has some of the most gorgeous feelies I've ever seen with an amateur game, hand-drawn maps that positively exude Tolkien.

Domicile (2003) by John Evans, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I am annoyed by messages which say "Please see the accompanying image file..." because I do not like accompanying image files. Text files are fine, but in an Inform game, I expect everything I could possibly want to know or see to be contained within words of text.

Splashdown (2004) by Paul J. Furio, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game even provides a nifty PDF feelie that rivals Infocom in quality.

Luminous Horizon: Earth And Sky Episode 3 (2004) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This super-hero game] has really spectacular feelies — a very nicely-done comic to get people up to speed on the events of the previous two games.

All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows, reviewer Jess Knoch:

[It would have been better] if the hints, walkthrough, and afterword had been part of the game instead of located somewhere else.

Mortality (2005) by David Whyld, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

The first question that needs to be asked is why the author feels the need to tell us all about the plot of the game in the PDF file he includes. I'd far prefer to judge a game on its own merits ... the fact that the PC is an antihero should be discovered through the game, not because of a note the author writes about the game.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Robert Menke:

The *readme* file should be used to provide meta-information about the game: new commands, unusual system requirements, and the like. Background should be discovered as part of the gameplay.

References (Feelies And Extra Files):

- [Feelies, Maps, Cover Art](#) by Emily Short.

1.4. Ending

Zombie! (1997) by Scott Starkey, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The ending ... felt tacked on, as if there were more story to tell but because the game is a competition entry the author didn't have time to explore it.

A Party To Murder (2002) by David Good, reviewer Mike Russo:

[The] failure ending as much as reveals who the murderer is [, which] undercuts the mystery aspect of the game.

Sardoria (2003) by Anssi Raisanen, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The actual ending borders on abrupt, and is certainly anticlimactic. I never found out the wizard's name, and I'm not sure if I got to keep the [object] I found. The game just ends.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Emily Short:

I was startled that [the game] ended when it did. The conclusion seemed a little abrupt. I would've gone for a slightly longer epilogue — even just a turn or two — during which to savor my success.

Scavenger (2003) by Quintin Stone, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I really like that there's a nice hefty chunk of text to read after you win the game.

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I am grateful that there was a generous amount of text in the losing ending, making me feel a bit better.

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer Mike Russo:

The closing vignettes do a very good job of motivating the player to do better and rewarding him for his successes.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The ending is slightly unexpected while still following logically from the rest of the game.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

There is ... one thing that I didn't like — the ending. It comes as abruptly as they go.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Just when you think he's done, he's not done by a long shot, and whatever ending you end up with is going to throw a new light on your earlier actions.

Hello Sword (2005) by Andrea Rezzonico, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Unfortunately, it's also one of those fantasy adventures where you get part one and then the game is over.

Gilded: The Lily And The Cage (2005) by John Evans, reviewer Mike Russo:

While I'm sure there are cleverer ways out than simply fighting, I wasn't able to come up with any, and as a result, the ending was very anticlimactic.

1.5. Resolution

Down (1997) by Kent Tessman, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There are some narrative hooks on which resolution is never delivered. For example ... [a certain man] is injured and bleeding badly ... the man never gets help for his wound, even at the end. I found this ending unsatisfying, though that's not necessarily a bad thing. It makes sense that even after serious heroics, survivors of a plane crash would still find themselves in a very difficult situation, but it's not the kind of resolution I'm used to.

Down (1997) by Kent Tessman, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[The ending avoided] an easy everything's-fine approach, certainly a welcome detail.

Glowgrass (1997) by Nate Cull, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[Some things are never] made clear — you find a printout that hints at a plague, but why did it happen? What sort of plague was it, how was it spread, how did it start, did anyone survive or get off the planet? It might be unfair to expect all this from a competition entry, but a story as complex as this one should get at least some development, and there really isn't much to go on here.

Purple (1998) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Several plot angles go unresolved — it would be nice to see [this game] extended or followed up to make some more sense of the story. As it is, it's a little like a trailer: lots of intriguing things happen, but it would be worth knowing more about them.

On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There's hints at some intriguing backstories that never get resolved, as far as I can tell, and it's a great pity.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There are a lot of endings to [this game], and many of them don't provide much resolution in any obvious way; finding an end to the story that adequately brings the various threads together may take a while for some players.

In a way, that works here; it reflects the general bleakness of the game's world that the end of the story doesn't tie up all the loose ends or furnish an especially satisfying conclusion. The game aspect, however, demands some sort of conclusion, whether optimal or not, and only a few of the endings offer real conclusions as such.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Lucian Smith:

[Some endings] have little to do with the character of the protagonist ... they have no context; present no fitting denouement from what has gone before ... they count as "losses" in my book not because they end with the protagonist worse off than she was in the beginning, but because they do nothing to advance the story; to bring anything to some kind of resolution.

All Roads (2001) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There's this thing for a certain kind of game where the point is to figure out what's going on: ideally, it should be satisfying both in conclusion and then after you sit down and think about it for a while. [This game] is pretty good in the latter, although not all the questions are answered completely, but it falls down in the former area ... when I finish one of these games I want an immediately satisfying a-ha, and it didn't come here.

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The problem is that there's no final coherence, even if you manage to [do the research successfully]. In a way this makes sense: real research isn't a neatly-plotted plot arc but the careful accumulation of details. But, still, this isn't satisfying for the player, and it's almost certainly going to be especially unsatisfying on the first few playthroughs.

Heroes (2001) by Sean Barrett, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[You replay the game with several different roles] while piecing together The Big Picture out of all the separate parts. And it's here that the game doesn't quite work, because that big picture never gels fully. You get lots of cool little details and hints at a greater plot but not quite enough information to make out the whole story, so you're left wondering what exactly happened, even after having played through all the different [alternatives].

The Granite Book (2002) by James Mitchelhill, reviewer Mike Russo:

There's no real closure or explanation at the end, severely limiting its appeal — without some clue as to the nature of the mystery, the game left me somewhat unfulfilled.

Sun And Moon (2002) by David Brain, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I actually liked the fact that you don't know the whole story when you finish the game. Let me point out that the ONLY reason I liked that was because the author has explained the whole thing on a [web page], which you can read when you're done with the game.

MythTale (2002) by Temari Seikaiha, reviewer Mike Russo:

The finale ... has nothing to do with the meat of the game — as far as I could tell, no narrative or thematic elements from [the rest of the story] recurred — and this blunts any sense of momentum or closure considerably.

Episode In The Life Of An Artist (2003) by Peter Eastman, reviewer Mike Russo:

The ending comes out of nowhere, and doesn't provide much in the way of closure. In fact, it doesn't seem as if there's any lasting character development at all, which severely undercuts one of the main pleasures of plot-driven IF.

Snatches (2005) by Gregory Weir, reviewer David Whyld:

I tended to try and get through the many parts as quickly as possible in the hope that I might get an explanation at the end of the game. Unfortunately not. The game ended with me even more confused than when I started playing it.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Mike Russo:

[The author has a] tendency to introduce new characters whenever he gets a free moment. It's hard to keep track of all of them ... there are too many balls in the air to allow for a satisfying resolution for all of them.

Waldo's Pie (2005) by Michael Arnaud, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I'm sure the author knows all the missing pieces, but just because the PC has been hit by a memory scrambler is no reason not to give the player answers to some of the important questions by the end of the game ... so, yeah, fun but kind of frustrating.

1.6. Easter Eggs And Other Extras

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

This game brings new meaning to the way of easter eggs. Try `xyzzy` on the end of the pier, or `say "hello sailor"` (and then ask the old man about the girl, several times).

I Didn't Know You Could Yodel (1998) by Andrew Indovina and Michael Eisenman, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[There was] a fairly enjoyable epilogue describing the eventual fate of every character you met along the way, a la *Animal House*.

Spodgeville Murphy And The Jewelled Eye Of Wossname (1999) by David Fillmore, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Typing `"Zork"` leads to one of the best easter eggs I've ever found in a competition game.

Guess The Verb! (2000) by Leonard Richardson, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game is just stuffed full of Easter eggs, [increasing its replayability] ... [and has] a long list of amusing things to do.

Tookie's Song (2002) by Jess Knoch, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game had] a fun ending that provided more evaluation of my actions throughout the game than I had been expecting.

Screen (2002) by Edward Floren, reviewer Jess Knoch:

[The game] ended without telling me I won. Blechh. And no extras at all, like credits, about the author, anything.

Episode In The Life Of An Artist (2003) by Peter Eastman, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

[The game] had, in place of an `amusing` section, a collection of "outtakes," as if this had been a movie (there are ending-credits-type disclaimers, too) and we were watching the blooper reel.

Curse Of Manorland (2003) by James King, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Neat thing that doesn't work: author's commentary throughout the game. I was looking forward to reading authorial commentary, but there wasn't very much of it at all, and it popped up at odd moments, and it was difficult to distinguish from the normal game text ... but it's a great idea, and I would love to see this sort of thing in more games.

The Recruit (2003) by Mike Sousa, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The real beauty is in all the extras ... for instance, what appears to be the entire text of the 2002 XYZZY Award Ceremony is "hidden" in the game (one of the NPCs is watching it on TV), and you can stick around and see the whole thing if you want.

References (Easter Eggs And Other Extras):

- [Responses to xyzzy](#) compiled by David Welbourne.

2. Puzzles

2.1. Puzzles In General

Maiden Of The Moonlight (1996) by Brian P. Dean, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

The puzzles flow logically from the story, and are well thought-out. Many puzzles re-use objects, which is also a plus.

CC (1998) by Mikko Vuorinen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There was a real guess-the-verb puzzle [at one point] ... if some of your puzzles are poor, their effect is not limited to themselves. Instead, they make the player less willing to expend effort to unravel later puzzles, even if those puzzles are good ones. With every poor puzzle, you reduce the player's faith that later puzzles won't be equally poor.

Heroes (2001) by Sean Barrett, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Not only is it occasionally not apparent why you want to do something, it's not apparent how to do it either — and while puzzles are usually bearable if you have either the why or the how, having neither makes things rough.

Sun And Moon (2002) by David Brain, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The major problem with the puzzles was that I didn't see any reason to solve any of them. After spending [a lot of time on one puzzle] and finally solving it, I didn't get any new information that I needed to solve the overall problem of the game.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer Emily Short:

The manipulation parts of the puzzles are really not very hard at all ... the real challenge is extrapolating the implications of a course of action. This is one game where you can make master plans and carry them out, rather than being forced to step through an obstacle course of puzzles predetermined by the author.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Mike Russo:

The puzzles ... are very well-clued (in that the sense that the player often has a rough idea of how to go about finding a solution, and, crucially, is also almost always given enough guidance to identify the puzzles).

Stack Overflow (2004) by Timofei Shatrov, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The puzzles in [this game] aren't bad, they're just obscure. If you provide a puzzle, it's vital to offer clues. At times in this game, I didn't even realize I was facing a puzzle at all, nor would I have known to poke around enough to solve it.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer David Whyld:

A large portion of the game has the player wandering around the subway station trying to find some money for a bottle of water from a dispensing machine. Why? Because she's thirsty. This struck me as a pretty flimsy excuse for what is ... a very lengthy and time consuming puzzle.

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Most of the puzzles feel like the author didn't do enough thinking from the player's perspective — once you've solved the puzzle it's clear why the solution works, but that doesn't mean this was the obvious thing to try before you knew the answer.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer David Whyld:

[An event doesn't happen] until a couple of other completely unrelated events have taken place ... I suppose it's possible you could hit upon this by sheer luck, but I always prefer puzzles that actually make sense and can be figured out if you take the time to do so.

References (Puzzles In General):

- The Design of Puzzles by Graham Nelson (*The Craft of Adventure*).
- Designing the Puzzle by Bob Bates.
- Designing Adventure Puzzles and Mathematical Puzzles in Fantasy Games by Jonathan R. Partington.
- The Art of the Puzzle roundtable (XYZZY News).
- Discussions about puzzles on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

2.2. Elements Of Good Puzzles

The Plant (1998) by Mike Roberts, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The puzzles ... are challenging but fair ... there are also enough of them for the player to feel like he or she has accomplished something, but few enough that the game is finishable within [the comp time limit] ... several of them involve more than one object, or require manipulating the environment in creative ways ...

The ones that involve opening passages or passing obstacles provide short cuts once the initial puzzle is solved, a great time-saver. The author also fairly consistently rewards the player for solving a puzzle by supplying more story ...

The nature of the puzzles solved [also] make the player feel like he or she is coming closer to the goal, and getting glimpses of the McGuffin when obstacles are cleared reinforces that feeling to great effect.

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer Robert Menke:

[There is] a puzzle that requires an item only available at the beginning of the game ... [This is] bad puzzle design.

Scavenger (2003) by Quintin Stone, reviewer Robert Menke:

Most of this game seems to be "find the cleverly concealed object by searching everything," which is the most pedestrian of puzzles.

Happy Ever After (2000) by Robert M. Camisa, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

I didn't want to experiment with the [machine] since there was just this rack of buttons with no labels. I assumed I'd have to find a clue somewhere ... but apparently I was meant to experiment and figure stuff out. The machine was badly designed from a user's perspective, and in turn, that made it a bad puzzle.

Anyone designing a puzzle like that should go read, *"The Design of Everyday Things"* (formerly entitled *"The Philosophy of Everyday Things"*) and take to heart the principles therein. IF would be a lot more fun.

Color And Number (2002) by Steven Kollmansberger, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I especially like the kind of puzzles this [game] starts out with, which are intuitive and rely on figuring out the rules, rather than mechanical, about manipulating known rules.

Temple Of Kaos (2003) by Peter Gambles, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] contains a puzzle which utterly confounds standard expectations of how the world ought to work, but it's possible to figure out the alternate system of reality at work in the puzzle, and thereby defeat it. The process of doing so is really fun ...

The reason the puzzle works is that even though the PC's actions don't produce the expected results, they do produce some results, and from these results it's possible to deduce what's really going on.

All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows, reviewer Mike Russo:

The [main puzzle] is well-implemented and well-designed; I had the "aha!" moment when I figured out what was going on, and after that, I was able to sit down and figure out the solution both through trial-and-error and deduction. It's neither too arcane to be solvable, nor so trivial that once one twigs to the concept, it's basically over. This is puzzle design at its best and most satisfying.

Vendetta (2005) by James Hall, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

The only puzzle that I think is bad is the one where you have to go back and forth through about 15 locations to bring one item to the other — this is something from 80's games where hiding key at a large distance from the door was a popular trick to make the game harder.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The puzzles aren't too hard but they're satisfying once you understand the world-logic.

Space Horror I (2005) by Jerry, reviewer Mike Russo:

There is an opportunity for a clever puzzle ... but the author immediately sabotages it by having the answer written in block-caps across the top of the screen. Simply presenting the facts and allowing the player to deduce the pattern would have been much more satisfying.

2.3. Puzzle Difficulty

Fear (1996) by Chuan-Tze Teo, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Puzzles as hard as these risk requiring so much mental energy of the player that he/she loses sight of the plot.

Kissing The Buddha's Feet (1996) by Leon Lin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game's difficulty was just right for me — I never felt so stuck that the pleasure of working on the puzzles ceased to become fun — but it was always a little work to figure those puzzles out. I also enjoyed the feeling of never quite knowing when a puzzle would be solved, and the fact that as soon as you took care of one problem another one, gopherlike, would pop up somewhere else.

Babel (1997) by Ian Finley, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[The puzzles are] not very hard ... most of the game will come easily to the experienced IF player. But that factor works well here: more difficult or time-consuming [puzzles] would slow down the plot and take away the realism of the premise.

Unholy Grail (1997) by Stuart Allen, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Most of the puzzles weren't so hard that they slowed the story down, which was certainly welcome.

Moonbase (2002) by Mike Eckardt, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[The puzzles are like] `"There is a powered exoskeleton here which requires a battery. There is also a battery here. WHAT DO YOU DO NOW?"`

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Emily Short:

[The puzzles are at] just the right level of difficulty: just hard enough to make you feel the PC's pain, just easy enough that you can almost believe in them as improvised on-the-spot solutions.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Mike Russo:

The puzzles actually ramped up in difficulty as the game progressed, starting out easy but becoming quite clever by the end.

History Repeating (2005) by Mark Choba and Renee Choba, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game is] surprisingly pleasant because it's not very hard.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I wish the loot had been more cleverly hidden or harder to get to than just repeated use of `>look under`.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

This game would have benefited from harder puzzles, or at least more complicated ones.

Psyche's Lament (2005) by John Sichi and Lara Sichi, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Ideally this game would have had four or five more puzzles modelled after the first two, with gradually-growing complexity.

2.4. Multiple Solutions

The Obscene Quest Of Dr. Aardvarkbarf (1997) by Gary Roggin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

One great thing about the puzzles in [this game] is that a number of them are solvable with more than one method. Such a capability always takes extra effort on an author's part, and it does not go unappreciated.

King Arthur's Night Out (1999) by Mikko Vuorinen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I felt annoyed when I discovered the answer [to a certain puzzle], because it was no more complicated that the things I had been trying, things which got no response. How was I supposed to know that this particular method had been implemented, I wondered, when 5 others weren't? ...

Puzzles shouldn't consist of hunting around for the one method which the author anticipated. The author should anticipate three or four methods of solving a puzzle, and implement them all, either as alternate solutions or as dead ends which will help point the player toward the correct method.

Stone Cell (1999) by Stephen Kodat, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[For some puzzles] alternate solutions aren't even necessary if enough verbs are implemented with sensible responses that nudge the player in the right direction.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Lucian Smith:

The `"about"` information told of multiple solutions to puzzles, and this made playing the game a more relaxing experience. It also meant that the provided walkthrough could be used as a source of hints and not necessarily of solutions.

The Erudition Chamber (2003) by Daniel Freas, reviewer Emily Short:

I am always pleased with games that offer multiple puzzle solutions, and particularly so with those that make the outcomes of one choice affect another. Some of the early puzzles affected the equipment available for later ones, which I found interesting.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[One puzzle's solution is] the sort of thing that is perfectly reasonable in retrospect, but given the wide variety of things you could do to accomplish your goals, there's no reason to think you should do this one as opposed to any other.

2.5. Puzzle Positioning

The Plant (1998) by Mike Roberts, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The map and plot are carefully shaped to each other ... some puzzles also become solvable only after you've seen certain scenes, keeping the plot synched up, and this is also well-integrated.

Not Much Time (2002) by Tyson Ibele, reviewer Jess Knoch:

What really worked with the puzzles in [this game] was that I saw every single puzzle before finding the solution to it, and so the solution was clear once I found the right object.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Mike Russo:

The author does a very good job of framing most puzzles, so that there are usually only a limited number of possibilities in play at any particular time.

Off The Trolley (2005) by Krisztian Kaldi, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game] just has the one meta-puzzle, but there are a number of steps required ... this is a nice set-up: it's always clear what the point of each individual task is, and the player can work on puzzles in parallel without feeling like he's getting stymied.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Russo:

The player knows about most of the major puzzles ... from the early stages of the game, which serves to alert him to any tools or clues which might help with those tasks. Smaller-scale, more immediate puzzles, ... often confined to one particular area, are introduced cleanly, usually requiring some quick thinking but no items from previous scenes.

2.6. Puzzles And Story

Delusions (1996) by C. E. Forman, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The puzzles serve the purposes of the plot, and the challenges are hurdles that reflect crucial discoveries or roadblocks in the story ... the charm of this is that puzzle-solving and figuring out the plot are usually one and the same task, so there isn't a sense of "gee, I've got to figure out how to do this to move the story along."

Babel (1997) by Ian Finley, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Many of the puzzles draw on the development of the plot — you need knowledge that you discover along the way, for example — in a way that is all too rare even in good IF.

On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There is one multi-step puzzle which is integrated seamlessly into the game's setting, so that it feels organic rather than tacked-on. Each component of this puzzle makes sense, and the feeling of solving it is quite satisfying. This is the main puzzle of the game, and it makes a very good linchpin.

On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There are some incidental facts that flesh out the story but don't help you get to the end. This approach — separating the backstory from the puzzles that lead to the end of the game — worked well for me (much better than making the puzzles turn on some fact you discover somewhere, which often feels rather artificial), but it also raised a problem, namely that gathering the facts was much more interesting than solving the puzzles ...

Of course, if [the game] had consisted only of information-gathering, it probably would have felt distancing, uninvolving; the player needs some sort of objective. But here the objective was so disconnected from the information-gathering that the two parts to the game felt rather unrelated.

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There aren't many puzzles in the game, but those that exist are very good indeed, and quite original. They belong to that rare breed of puzzle that is perfectly integrated with the story and the environment, and is a great pleasure to solve because it requires lateral thinking within a very logical framework.

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The puzzles are well-designed and not too hard; they draw on understanding and being aware of the cave environment, moreover, rather than applying items to problems, which helps them feel part of the story rather than artificial barriers.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Emily Short:

[The puzzles] fit well into their environment. Some are silly, but their silliness is in keeping with the rest of the story.

Mingsheng (2004) by Deane Saunders, reviewer Mike Snyder:

[The puzzles] drive the story instead of merely interfering with your progress ... I believe that this game illustrates the right way to introduce puzzles. Give them a point for existing. Put some logic and purpose behind it. This game does that.

Gamlet (2004) by Tomasz Pudlo, reviewer Mike Russo:

The puzzles become more and more contrived as the game progresses ... the game falls prey to increasingly arbitrary puzzles, with little connection to the story beyond the necessity of padding the length.

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer Mike Russo:

The puzzles are well-clued and unobtrusive.

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

Puzzles should serve a purpose. If they are the focus of the game, they can be an end in themselves. In a story-orientated game like this, a puzzle should not exist for the sake of there being a puzzle. It should pace the game, and ideally lead the player into new knowledge or appreciation. Why make the player [spend time on a puzzle] at a point in the story when all the player wants to do is get on with the story?

2.7. Optional Puzzles And Mini Games

The Obscene Quest Of Dr. Aardvarkbarf (1997) by Gary Roggin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

This game is overloaded with extra puzzles, puzzles not essential to finishing ... there's an appeal in that, in that the game is somewhat replayable, but it's also hard to focus on the main quest at hand because there are so many puzzles available.

A Good Breakfast (1997) by Stuart Adair, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There's even a game-within-a-game for the last lousy point, welcome because it's explicitly extraneous to the plot, not dragged in improbably.

On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There are ... a number of optional puzzles, which do little or nothing to advance the plot, but which deepen the characterization of the PC or enrich the setting. These are optional puzzles done right — they don't feel like padding, but rather like fruitful avenues which branch off the main drag, rewarding exploration with further knowledge.

Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson, reviewer Mike Roberts:

A good fraction of the puzzles are optional ... this created an interesting effect for me: at many points in the game, I knew exactly what I needed to do to advance to the next point in the plot, but I waited for a while so I could explore the current area more fully; I was nearly always rewarded with more discoveries when I stayed ...

By making so many puzzles optional, the game creates a feeling of openness and freedom that few other games achieve — even games that are far less linear in their plot.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

A big part of the gameplay is looking under and behind everything in sight to pocket as many valuable items as possible. That was a fun minigame.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Mike Russo:

[There is] a sort of pickpocketing side-game — the player can solve a number of small puzzles to lift quite a lot of valuable merchandise, and while this doesn't seem to affect the progression of the plot and only adds to the player's score, it also nicely deepens the experience.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Russo:

The prayer system is particularly elegant, almost serving as get-out-jail-free cards — I think in every case, the player can find a solution which doesn't involve prayer, but if you're having trouble coming up with the answer, a saint's intercession will do the job, without forcing recourse to the hints file. This middle ground of providing the player with a limited number of expendable puzzle-solving tokens is very good game design.

2.8. Red Herrings

Unholy Grail (1997) by Stuart Allen, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The game is crammed with red herrings and it isn't initially apparent just where to start ... [the red herrings] sometimes led to frustration ... before I checked the walkthrough, I spent a lot of time on [a particular object], trying to figure out what to do with it.

Downtown Tokyo, Present Day (1998) by John Kean, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

The red herrings ... provide excellent fodder to play with ... my only twinge of disappointment with the game [came from] not being able to use the various red herrings in some elaborate puzzle, which the scene seemed to call for.

Trapped In A One-Room Dilly (1998) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

The few red herrings in this game seemed a bit out of place. Perhaps they were remnants of puzzles that didn't quite make it, but in a finely-crafted game like this, the out-of-place elements jarred a bit.

Nevermore (2000) by Nate Cull, reviewer Lucian Smith:

I liked the fact that there was red-herring information [in some books]. That's to be expected, and there was, I think, the right amount.

Volcano Isle (2001) by Paul DeWitt, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

In a game this small, and with a strict inventory limit, I'm not sure there's a good reason for having red herring items.

Out Of The Study (2002) by Anssi Raisanen, reviewer Jess Knoch:

What I liked about the overall solution to the puzzle was that there were so many red herrings.

The Big Scoop (2004) by Johan Berntsson, reviewer Robert Menke:

[Certain objects] were so obviously out-of-place that they *had* to be useful. More "red herring" objects would have made the game more interesting.

Murder At The Aero Club (2004) by Penny Wyatt, reviewer Mike Russo:

Mysteries are at their best when multiple possible interpretations (and multiple possible murderers) are reasonably plausible, and the intellectual exercise of foreclosing each possibility in turn and deducing the true culprit is one of the major payoffs of the genre ...

[In this game] there's never any real doubt as to the murderer's identity. All the evidence points one way ... there are no ancillary secrets, no red herrings ... it's mystery-by-numbers. The puzzles are just as straightforward as the plot, and thus there's no real sense of accomplishment at discovering the murderer.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Robert Menke:

[The game had] just enough red herrings to make it challenging.

References (Red Herrings):

- [Discussions about red herrings](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

2.9. Unwinnable States

Small World (1996) by Andrew D. Pontious, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Of particular note were the game's warnings before moving to an unsolvable state.

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Following the example set by Lucas Arts' games, [this game] is impossible to put in an unsolvable state. Impressively, it achieves this degree of closure without ever resorting to arbitrary, contrived, or artificial devices. Instead, the gaps are covered so naturally that they often enhance the game's sense of realism.

For example, if you pry a brick from the stony path, then lose that brick beneath the waves, the game says `"With the path breached, you could probably excavate another brick."` It's simple, it's natural, and it prevents the irrevocable loss of an important item.

Babel (1997) by Ian Finley, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

All of the ways to die or make the game unwinnable can easily be foreseen.

A Day For Soft Food (1999) by Tod Levi, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The author was careful to make experimentation safe. All the consumable resources have replacements available, and although there are many ways to lose, I don't think there are any ways to get stuck.

Winter Wonderland (1999) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Mike Roberts:

It does not appear ... that the game can become unwinnable. I very much appreciate this approach to game design, not only for the frustration it avoids but because it puts the game mechanics in the background and allows us to become more immersed in the story.

The HeBGB Horror! (1999) by Eric Mayer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game is carefully structured in such a way as to allow players a second or third chance to obtain items that they may have failed to notice or pick up the first time around ...

This design choice allows [the game] to close off early sections of the map once their purpose is served while avoiding the trap of making the game unsolvable once those sections are unavailable to the player.

Nevermore (2000) by Nate Cull, reviewer Robert Menke:

[This game] has a nice feature, `winnable`, which tells you if you've painted yourself into a corner. This is a great idea.

Heroes (2001) by Sean Barrett, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Several neat choices appear to prevent the game from ever becoming unwinnable, but not by preventing missteps on the part of the player. Instead, as it becomes clear that an action may have closed off the game, [this game] offers the player opportunities to undo the consequences of that action, or to take another shot at the crucial action.

After playing so many games in this comp that really do close off without warning, it was a great joy to realize that in this game, I didn't have to restart after all.

Terrible Lizards (2002) by Alan Mead and Ian Mead, reviewer Mike Russo:

You need to use [a particular object] on a specific thing to be able to win, but you can easily waste it [on something else].

The Case of Samuel Gregor (2002) by Stephen Hilderbrand, reviewer Mike Russo:

The game is on a timer, although you have no way of knowing that until close to the end, and if the player dawdles too much, the game is unwinnable (and doesn't even seem to have the courtesy to end and inform the player as much).

Magocracy (2004) by Joseph Rheaume, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There are a number of situations that put the PC into an inescapable bind, and most of these aren't immediately obvious as dead ends. Consequently, I was several times forced to restore back to an earlier point, even after having achieved some key victories ... I would have greatly appreciated a more IF-like way to get out of the traps through nothing but my own cleverness.

Square Circle (2004) by Eric Eve, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There's one path that puts you into an unwinnable situation which does not announce itself as unwinnable in any way, and in fact teasingly offers a repetition of the solvable opening scenario. I wasted precious time flailing around here before turning to the hints and finding that I needed to restart. I don't care for this sort of design — if you're going to end my game, just end it.

Waldo's Pie (2005) by Michael Arnaud, reviewer Mike Snyder:

[The game ends] any time you've performed an action that will make it unwinnable, although these sudden endings simply announce that what you did makes the game unwinnable ...

I can think of a couple different ways this might have been handled (not allowing the player to make the mistake to begin with, or perhaps ending the game with a more legitimate reason than just "you needed to do something else, but now you've made it impossible") ... ideally, the player should be able to mess up but still have a way to recover.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There's the thing where an action you fail to take in literally the first five or ten moves of the game makes you unable to win (and you can't backtrack). For that matter, there's the thing where it lets you go into the second part of the game even though you've made it uncompletable by something you failed to do in the first part (and, again, you can't backtrack).

References (Unwinnable States):

- [Discussions about unwinnable situations](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

3. Guidance

3.1. Direction And Clues

The Edifice (1997) by Lucian Smith, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

[The tower you ascend] provides hints, another clever touch — murals on each level record what you've done and show what you might do next.

A Day For Soft Food (1999) by Tod Levi, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The writing isn't specific enough to give the player all the nudges necessary to solve [the puzzles in this game].

All Roads (2001) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

At a few points, if you don't supply the needed action, the game gives you progressively less subtle hints ... [but] most of the time the game gets the player sufficiently on the story's wavelength that outright prodding is unnecessary, which is nothing to sneeze at.

Janitor (2002) by Peter Seebach and Kevin Lynn, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The authors are not big on the whole "guide the player" thing (at least, not in-game. There are hints, which are reasonably helpful, but I'd still prefer to get gentle guidance from the game itself).

The Temple (2002) by Johan Berntsson, reviewer Mike Russo:

For the most part there were enough clues to know both what to do next and why it was important.

Scavenger (2003) by Quintin Stone, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

I found most of [the puzzles] intuitive, as long as I paid attention to scene and object descriptions. For example, I walked into a room with [a certain object]... and the description of the room seemed to take particular note of how [the object] was situated ... I immediately focused my attention on [it], and was rewarded, as easily as that.

It's fun when it works that way, and 80% of the game was like that for me ... the exact level of difficulty I get the most pleasure out of.

Risorgimento Represso (2003) by Michael Coyne, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

[The author has] a fine sense of when to help the player and when to stand back a bit.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer Jess Knoch:

You are given a powerful tool to aid in comprehension ... the Triage unit. It is a mechanical information assimilator, and it follows you around on wheels. It can identify objects and give you an idea of how things are used. It's also useful for other problems you encounter during the course of the discoveries, and is just about the ideal thing to have along in a text adventure.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Mike Russo:

[The puzzles are] refreshingly well-clued; you get a chance to see how [an object] works before it breaks, for example, which means you actually have some idea of what you're supposed to be doing to fix it.

Who Created That Monster? (2004) by N. B. Horvath, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[In one place] the game is terribly heavy-handed with its cueing, robbing players of the opportunity to put the pieces together themselves.

Goose, Egg, Badger (2004) by Brian Rapp, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] introduces a handy goal-tracking device, similar to the to-do list from Shade: throughout the game, an "urge" remains in the PC's inventory. Examining the urge will give a clue as to what the player's current goal ought to be.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Mike Russo:

In almost all cases, I was immediately aware of my goal with respect to a particular character or location.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Mike Russo:

If you wait too long in the opening screen, a piece of paper gets torn loose from some nearby debris and flies off, letting the player know there's something hidden in there.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Mike Snyder:

[A certain thing] is important, but nothing about it drew my attention ... I thought the author had flubbed up and completely forgotten to include a vital piece in the description. My fault, but why wasn't it clued better? Say a little more about [the thing]. Draw my attention to [it]. Make me curious about [it] in some way.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Mike Snyder:

I found one important item very early ... and was pleased to see it clued later in the game at a time when it's actually needed.

Waldo's Pie (2005) by Michael Arnaud, reviewer Mike Russo:

[The] puzzles are ... very well clued. I'm not the best puzzle solver in the world, but I found the solutions to even the more complex scenarios ... to be intuitive, because there were enough textual cues pointing towards the salient features of the available objects.

References (Direction And Clues):

- [Playing Fair with the Player](#) by Jim Aikin ("old trunk" example).

3.2. Aimlessness

A Bear's Night Out (1997) by David Dyte, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The only problem is that the first real puzzle to be solved requires some real exploration, so things can bog down a bit while you try to figure that out — though, after that, things move along more quickly. This problem might be alleviated with perhaps a hint or two as to the location of a certain object required to solve the first puzzle — as it is, you discover it, but not because you were looking for it as such.

Unholy Grail (1997) by Stuart Allen, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The real problem with [this game] in its current form is that it lacks a hook — the player can spend a long time wandering around picking up objects before he realizes what to do. Future releases might eliminate some of the useless objects and work in an interesting/mysterious/suspicious development early on that might lead the player in, rather than forcing him to make the first — somewhat obscure — discovery on his own.

A Day For Soft Food (1999) by Tod Levi, reviewer Mike Roberts:

Without any idea of where the plot is meant to go next, the only thing we can do is try to solve things that look like puzzles. I find this type of aimlessness frustrating in an adventure game, although in this case it might be a reasonable approximation of a cat's day.

Castle Amnos (2000) by John Evans, reviewer Emily Short:

I found myself wandering random corridors with no sense of what I was supposed to be doing or what I was looking for ...

If you're going to have a broad set of options available to the player, you ought to give him a hint what he's trying to do. In a very linear game, that's not as necessary, since often there's only one puzzle available at a time. Lacking either game constraints or motivational constraints, my sense of purpose was nil.

The Atomic Heart (2003) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game] is interested in the concept of free will. Unfortunately, at times the game gives the player too much free will: "Here's a big deserted city," it says, "go wander around looking for something to do."

While there is some atmospheric value in wandering around the city trying to figure out what's going on, I would have liked a little more guidance and a little less "hey, this looks like a puzzle, guess I'd better try and solve it."

CaffeiNation (2003) by Michael Loegering, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[I was not guided] in any particular direction. This leads to me wandering around, trying some puzzles and doing things, but not being sure why I wanted to do that, or if this puzzle is solvable at the moment at all or maybe I should be working on something else.

Sardoria (2003) by Anssi Raisanen, reviewer Mike Russo:

The player finds him or herself in a dark wine cellar with no introductory text or direction of any sort ... [The game] would have benefited from an opening paragraph or two setting the scene. In fact, the rather ho-hum plot would have been far more compelling if the game had started earlier ... [this] would have added some much-needed gameplay and created a greater sense of investment and motivation.

Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff, reviewer Mike Russo:

The initial objective seems bizarre, and the player isn't given any real sense of how to go about accomplishing it.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The problem is that while [the author] has envisioned a number of cool scenes, it's pretty rare for the game to give you much of a clue how to start or finish them.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There's not quite enough plot guidance — at the beginning I was wandering around looking for cash for the vending machine, not because I knew why I needed the water, but because there was nothing else to work on.

Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I [had] a problem in the midsection where I didn't know what I was supposed to be working on, and I spent a lot of time wandering around aimlessly. Since the main point here seemed to be just exploration and seeing weird stuff, this was basically ok, but I would have felt better with more direction.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The beginning is pretty unguided, and you can wander around for some time before the story begins in earnest. Later on things improve, but it's still often not clear what to do.

3.3 Unclued Actions

The Clock (2000) by Cleopatra Kozlowski, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

With absolutely no clues about talking animals, why in the world would anyone think to ask an animal about anything?

The Clock (2000) by Cleopatra Kozlowski, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[(spoiler)] ... at one point, you find a "fairy coin," which you'd think you might be able to use to buy something at the fairy shop you find later. Nope ... you plant the coin in soft ground, water it, and a money tree grows! Now, it'd be one thing if there was some clear hint, like a reference to fairy money trees in one of the many reference books you find lying around, or if the old woman said "This is just seed money," or something like that.

The only hint we get is that on one of the TV stations ... an economic adviser says at one point, "Money doesn't grow on trees!" Sorry, but that's just not enough of a hint. The only reason I'd connect this comment with planting the coin is if I was thinking, "Now why would the game include that comment?" When I play IF, though, I'm not thinking like that. I'm trying to put myself in the mind of the character, not stepping outside and thinking about how the game is constructed.

The Djinni Chronicles (2000) by J. D. Berry, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

[At the beginning] you are given absolutely no time to figure out what's going on. Instead, you must immediately pick up that you must accomplish several unintuitive actions in a row or you *die*. Without any idea why!

Coffee Quest II (2002) by Dog Solitude, reviewer Jess Knoch:

There was no reason to think that certain NPCs would give me certain items for helping them out. For instance, when you do a favor for [one character], she gives you something that will get you past another problem spot. Why? Who knows.

Out Of The Study (2002) by Anssi Raisanen, reviewer David Welbourn:

There's one critical object that must be pulled, and there's no hint or suggestion that you ought to pull it, or even that you can pull it. In fact, the object itself is quite easy to miss, and I only found it by doing `"take all"`.

A Day In The Life Of A Super Hero (2004) by David Whyld, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[There is a location containing] a half-dozen pieces of furniture, and moving one of them reveals a crucial item. Nothing in the room or object description suggests that moving it or moving anything else will be useful.

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer David Whyld:

Getting the hotel part of the game out of the way is harder than it at first seemed due to a requirement on the player's behalf to carry out what seemed to me like an unnecessary action ... there's no reason to suggest that [the action was] necessary and no reason after that to suggest anything in the game should change as a result.

Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It doesn't start particularly auspiciously — there's ... a puzzle with a fairly non-intuitive solution (both because it's something you don't usually do in IF, and because it seems like the intro strongly suggested you shouldn't do it).

History Repeating (2005) by Mark Choba and Renee Choba, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

[There is a puzzle where] you must somehow do two unrelated actions in a quick succession without anything hinting at it. You can learn to do it the right way only after you finish with a "wrong" ending.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

I'm given no indication the ground is diggable here, when it wasn't [elsewhere]: I figured the floor was stone.

On Optimism (2005) by Zach Flynn, reviewer Mike Russo:

Puzzles which require ordering NPCs around are often difficult to implement in an intuitive fashion, and here there's not even an indication that [a certain object] is animate.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Mike Russo:

There's one puzzle which felt very much like a read-the-author's-mind challenge — `ask rob about [object]` isn't clued at all, and in fact the resulting dialogue has nothing to do with the command.

3.4. Feedback

Trapped In A One-Room Dilly (1998) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[Sometimes] I was close enough to the solution of a puzzle that I should have received some slight confirmation, but the game didn't provide it ... [in one situation], I felt cheated. If I'm that close, I want at least a little nudge.

King Arthur's Night Out (1999) by Mikko Vuorinen, reviewer Mike Roberts:

One puzzle requires explicitly searching an object that provides no encouraging feedback for other types of inspection; in general, I think that whenever we have to search something, `"examine"` and especially `"look in"` should at least give us some indication that closer inspection is required, and in most of these cases `"look in"` should do the same thing as `"search"`.

The Clock (2000) by Cleopatra Kozlowski, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Several puzzles in the game depend on the construction `ask animal about object` ... [But] if you ask about anything but the topics necessary to solve the puzzle, you get a stock response like `"The cat meows"` or `"The frog croaks"`. When I get a response like this, I take it as a very clear signal from the game that the animal doesn't talk, doesn't understand me, and that trying to have a conversation with it is useless.

The Djinni Chronicles (2000) by J. D. Berry, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

Only after the game actually told me about Purpose levels did I suddenly equate the [number on the] status bar with some life force. This could have been much better clued in the story through the use of feedback. The game *told* you about it enough. But it didn't *show* you. The only way it showed you was when you suddenly run out and you die. Killing someone off is not a useful way of imparting information to them.

The Cruise (2001) by Norman Perlmutter, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

One puzzle in particular violates the primary rule of puzzle design ("If I'm doing the right thing, tell me I'm doing the right thing").

Another Earth, Another Sky (2002) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Jess Knoch:

There are some great responses when you're on the right track, or even if you're on the wrong track, to let you know why what you're trying won't work.

Color And Number (2002) by Steven Kollmansberger, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The feedback level was too low [for a particular puzzle]. The puzzle involved performing a string of actions, but without close investigation, the environment betrayed no particular indication about which actions were successful or useful. It's not that this feedback was entirely absent, but it wasn't prominent enough for me to even notice until long after I had looked at the answers.

Off The Trolley (2005) by Krisztian Kaldi, reviewer Mike Russo:

The author does a good job of providing feedback for partially right solutions which don't quite get all the pieces together.

Psyche's Lament (2005) by John Sichi and Lara Sichi, reviewer Mike Russo:

I initially stopped [an activity prematurely], afraid that since the game hadn't acknowledged that I'd succeeded, I must have been doing something wrong.

Sardoria (2003) by Anssi Raisanen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

More and more, I'm convinced that [good feedback] is a crucial element of successful interactive fiction, at least IF with puzzles in it. When a player gets close to the solution, the game should indicate that rather than giving a flat `nothing happens` sort of response until it gets the exact right set of commands. Moreover, if players think of an alternative solution, the game should be able to either let them utilize that solution or provide a convincing reason why they can't.

How can an author provide this level of feedback? It's all about the testing. Get at least three testers for your game, with a sufficient variety of approaches between them. Then, watch for the things they try. If they get close to the answer, your game should provide some appropriately encouraging feedback.

3.5. Repeated Actions

Friday Afternoon (1997) by Mischa Schweitzer, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The only puzzle that really breaks IF rules is one involving repeated actions without the first few failures being clued — i.e., the player might give up after a try or two, since the responses don't indicate that you're getting any closer ... some tinkering [is needed] — feedback that changes, some reason to believe that pursuing that course will lead you to the goal.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Lucian Smith:

The first time you say you want to [do something], it tells you that you don't want to. Then if you repeat the command [several] times, it finally lets you do it anyway.

I've seen this puzzle a few times before, and once it worked and the other time I hated it. The time it worked was in last year's game, "Hunter, in Darkness." It worked for me there because there wasn't really much else you could do at all, and the game had established a precedent of telling you the results of the first time you tried something, hinting each time that if you tried again, it might work ...

The game kept giving you new responses to your repeated action, even though the responses were getting less frequent, and the natural response, as a player, is to keep going until you run out of new responses. The last new response, of course, solved the puzzle.

Hello Sword (2005) by Andrea Rezzonico, reviewer Mike Russo:

`Read pad` and `x pad` didn't seem to do anything ... only a second `read pad` allows the player to progress.

In my view, puzzles which require doing the same thing twice in a row, without some indication that repetition will be necessary, should be avoided, as the player will generally only discover the solution, if ever, after running out of new things to try and growing frustrated.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[Some] failure messages are misleading (either discouraging you from trying the action multiple times — and yeah, requiring someone to do an action multiple times is usually a poor choice in itself — or discouraging you from the concept when it's just your syntax that's at issue).

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The game requires quite a few unprompted and unclued action ... at times I had to repeat actions I did before, without any indication that I might get a different result this time ... sometimes this can work, but not without some kind of clue or hint that I should try again later.

3.6. Unusual Commands

Four Seconds (1999) by Jason Reigstad, reviewer Mike Roberts:

[One puzzle involves something that wouldn't always work in an IF game]. This is one of those real-world solutions that I think needs to be hinted at strongly within the game world, for the usual reason that the game world is always an extremely tiny subset of the real world, and without hints we cannot possibly guess what the subset consists of. One of the other characters should have accidentally (or otherwise) [performed a similar action] earlier in the game to demonstrate the principle for us.

To Otherwhere And Back (2001) by Gregory Ewing, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

IF can prompt even quite unusual input from the player, as long as the setup has been executed with skill and the cue delivered fairly clearly ... [A certain command was] not something I'd usually type in at an IF prompt, because most games just give a canned answer to it, if they give any answer at all. [The game text], though, was enough to cue me that in this situation, that command might produce something useful ...

It's not that good cueing leads the player by the nose — in fact, the first thing I typed [was incorrect]. But after that didn't work, I looked at the text again, and was able to discern the right move without looking at the walkthrough. This sort of dynamic is the essence of good cueing, and [this game] does it over and over again.

Identity Thief (2002) by Rob Shaw-Fuller, reviewer Emily Short:

I didn't realize that [the PC] would be able to `drive to doctor`. That's a level of abstraction that most IF games don't use unless they first warn you about how to use the commands.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The game requires a number of somewhat exotic commands, but the parsing of them is very smooth and I didn't have any problem making myself understood.

3.7. Teaching The Player

The Djinni Chronicles (2000) by J. D. Berry, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The beginning of the game functions mostly as an introduction to the rules of your world ... picking up on the rules takes a while.

Identity Thief (2002) by Rob Shaw-Fuller, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game includes] some well-implemented gadgets and a good first puzzle to ease the player into using them.

Order (2004) by John Evans, reviewer David Welbourn:

[The author's previous game] failed because, as a whole, it didn't make any sense. There was no thought put into how the player was supposed to figure things out. There was no order.

Because a player of IF can type so many different commands into a game, it's very important that the author gives hints and clues that teach the player which commands are likely to be useful. When the player tries something that doesn't work, explain *why* it didn't work. The player learns by cause and effect.

References (Teaching The Player):

- [Action and Interaction](#) article by Emily Short.

3.8. Hints

Erehwon (1999) by Richard Litherland, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The game has an excellent hint system. Hints are delivered incrementally, so it's possible to get a little bit of help and still feel like you did most of the work. The hint system is context-sensitive, and offers hints only on puzzles that are currently accessible, which avoids giving away upcoming events by showing topics too early.

On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts, reviewer Mike Roberts:

[The] hint system ... provides a few nudges but not outright solutions. I found the hint system especially useful for clarifying what exactly I should be trying to accomplish. The hint system made the game very well tuned for playability — the hints were just about perfect at pointing me in the right direction without giving anything away.

For A Change (1999) by Dan Schmidt, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The hint system seems to be really bad: it never gave me help on the topics I needed and it wasn't clear [to me] which sections to read, so I ended up reading a bunch of spoilerish stuff that nevertheless didn't explain the puzzle.

Till Death Makes A Monk-Fish Out Of Me! (2002) by Mike Sousa and Jon Ingold, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The hints come in three different levels of helpfulness, and are location-dependent, so that when you are in a certain room you get the hint for the puzzle it thinks you're working on. Not always the right one, but it does take into account what you have in your inventory, or at least it sure seems to.

Till Death Makes A Monk-Fish Out Of Me! (2002) by Mike Sousa and Jon Ingold, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There's a very fine adaptive hint system, quite sensitive to situation and even possessing a self-destruct capability that removes the blatant walkthrough answers after the comp period has ended.

Another Earth, Another Sky (2002) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Jess Knoch:

[This game includes] some of the best hints I've seen. They give just enough information, or question just the right bits, to make the player think and consider the options. The best part was, even when I went to the hints for some clue as to how to do something, I still felt like I was solving a lot of the puzzle on my own.

Janitor (2002) by Peter Seebach and Kevin Lynn, reviewer Emily Short:

I sometimes griped at the hints for not providing more information ... they didn't always give away the full correct action.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

I wish that the hints ... had given explicit instructions for seeing all of the endings.

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Unfortunately, the location-based hints explain the individual steps needed to accomplish that location's goal, and nothing else. How helpful is "Find [a certain creature], and get it to chase you here." How do I encounter one without first getting killed? How do I make it chase me? And that was just one of the steps.

Another required `opening` an item found in the room. But you can't open it directly; you need some sort of tool. What tool? Nothing I had seemed likely. Where can that tool be found?

Luminous Horizon: Earth And Sky Episode 3 (2004) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Jess Knoch:

[The hints] seem to be location sensitive, which just makes the puzzles harder when I think I need to be doing something in a different room.

Square Circle (2004) by Eric Eve, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The hints were menu-based and Invisiclues-style, with enough contextual awareness to only offer hints on the problems currently facing the PC. I certainly leaned on the hints quite a bit, and found them quite adept at providing just enough nudge.

Kurusu City (2004) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer Mike Snyder:

To some extent, I'm glad the hints weren't more specific.

Cheiron (2005) by Sarah Clelland and Elisabeth Polli, reviewer Mike Russo:

There are long help files provided, but they're fairly contextless — that is, they just give you a long list of things to try, without any guidance provided for individual patients.

Mortality (2005) by David Whyld, reviewer Mike Russo:

The thoughtful and comprehensive manual arguably undercuts the game by revealing a bit too much ... there's only one main puzzle in the game, and the manual comes right out and flatly tells the reader what it is ... not only is this disclosure rather nakedly game-mechanical, it also sucks some of the enjoyment out of the story.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Robert Menke:

`Hint` was not implemented as a metaverb, so it takes a turn, sometimes fatally.

References (Hints):

- [Discussions about hints](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

3.9. Hint Interfaces

Trapped In A One-Room Dilly (1998) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

The hint system ... was unique and creative ... when the player types `"hints"`, they are transported to a new room whose room description contains the list of hint topics. The only verbs allowed in this room relate to reading the hints, and typing `"exit"` takes you back to the original room.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The hint system ... was well done and a good idea. [It used] numeric codes to minimize the risk of spoilers even in the hint descriptions themselves.

Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer David Whyld:

The only hints were [numerically] coded (a great way to encourage people to quit playing your game incidentally).

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer Mike Snyder:

A request for help whisks you off to a pseudo-room where important components of the current chapter exist. Interacting with these items provide further clues to the actions you should take ... once or twice I still felt stuck afterwards, but it was unique. Ultimately, it worked for me, even if some of it may merit improvement.

3.10. Walkthroughs

Masquerade (2000) by Kathleen M. Fischer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

In a non-comp game, omitting the walkthrough can prompt players to post hint requests, or to email you, and this is a good thing. In a competition game, though, when the players are under time pressure and are committed to playing as many of the games as possible anyway, this strategy only ensures that they will be delayed and annoyed if they get stuck. Not the recipe for a high rating.

Moonbase (2002) by Mike Eckardt, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

[The] `"walkthru"` command ... didn't bring up a walkthrough, it printed out a URL to a website which is hosting the walkthrough. This was pretty irritating, and I suspect that the author did this instead of just including the walkthrough with the game file (as long as he was including all of the sound effects files, what's the difference?) because he was hoping to increase traffic to his home page. Bad idea.

Terrible Lizards (2002) by Alan Mead and Ian Mead, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Unfortunately, the walkthrough file was in the form of a game transcript, which included all of the game's text and pretty much spoiled everything.

Sweet Dreams (2003) by Papillon, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

The *readme* file cheerfully says, "No walkthrough is enclosed (it really shouldn't be necessary)." Wrong. Authors always seem to think their game is so easy it doesn't need a walkthrough, and they're always wrong. The only way I can read your mind is if you write down what you're thinking and let me read it.

CaffeiNation (2003) by Michael Loegering, reviewer Jess Knoch:

When I look at a walkthrough, I want to find out what I need to do, but this one seems to be presenting me with alternatives. I don't want choices. Worse, some of the choices have multiple steps, and those steps are listed on the same level as the other choices, which is rather bewildering. (Example: Problem X has four things listed under it: (1) Solution A. (2) Solution B, step 1. (3) Solution B, step 2. (4) Solution C).

The Atomic Heart (2003) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Some of my reviews so far have said "Thank goodness there was a walkthrough, because otherwise I never would have been able to finish the game." Some other of my reviews have said "I couldn't finish, and there wasn't a walkthrough to help me out."

This game tops them all: here I say, "Thank goodness there is a walkthrough, because this is a wonderful game with a terrific story, which IF is the perfect medium for, and I would have hated to miss out on it ... the walkthrough is a very valuable one because it tells me when I need to save the game, and it gives me the option of seeing several different endings, and reading lots of juicy bits of text, which I liked very much."

Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer David Whyld:

As I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to be doing [and] there was no walkthrough [or easily accessed hints] ... I found myself bashing out `quit` just as soon as possible.

Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer Mike Russo:

Please include complete hints or walkthroughs [in comp games], because we players are a dense lot who often won't get through your game without them.

Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

I'm incredibly glad that the author didn't include a walkthrough. I would have caved in and looked at it way before the end. As it was, I was still playing when the two hour deadline hit.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

The `"walkthru"` command is unwieldy and would've been better offloaded to a separate file.

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer Jason Devlin:

When you include a walkthru with a game, please put it in a form that can be copied and pasted directly (instead of putting `"wait (repeat 7x)"`). It helps when I need to rapidly skip ahead if I forgot to save or switched computers.

References (Walkthroughs):

- [Discussions about hints and walkthroughs](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

4. Story

4.1. Plot

Zombie! (1997) by Scott Starkey, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

After taking so much time to develop the relationship between Valerie and Scott, the game never returns to it ... I usually like it when a game proves itself less predictable than I thought it would be, but this time I felt cheated. I wouldn't have paid so much attention to Valerie or put so much time into learning about the relationship had I realized that she was just a throwaway character.

A Bear's Night Out (1997) by David Dyte, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The idea of playing a teddy bear is great, but the plot of gathering items for the picnic doesn't lend much of a sense of urgency to the game. It's sweet, and it serves, but it doesn't propel the narrative with much strength.

The Evil Sorcerer (2001) by Gren Remoz, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

This is one of those games where the author had a whole bunch of ideas. Some of them were good, some of them were bad, and some of them were just unoriginal. The difference between a skilled IF author and a novice is, the novice author puts all the kinds of ideas in the game. The skilled author has all three kinds of ideas, but throws away the lame ones.

Blue Chairs (2004) by Chris Klimas, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game] is really fairly incredible; I can think of vaguely similar games, but none that take things to such an extreme without losing control of the narrative and crashing, and [the author] walks that narrow line like a pro.

Redeye (2004) by John Pitchers, reviewer Mike Russo:

The chain of circumstance which unspools from [the] promising beginning is so implausible that that sense of immersion, of connection, is snapped.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

[I was] more than a little irritated with the way the plot-progress is motivated solely by bizarre coincidences.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There wasn't enough of a story to make this enjoyable as a "story game."

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I couldn't really find [a plot]. I mean, there were a bunch of threads and peeks at stuff that I could maybe follow up on, but they didn't seem to go anywhere as a group ... in any other game this would have been a serious flaw, but here it's more a cause for mild wistfulness. As it is, [the game] is engaging: think how much better it would be if all that content had felt like it was leading somewhere in particular.

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer Mike Russo:

My enjoyment of the game steadily eroded as time went by ... due to the fact that the slow hints led up to revelations which seemed disappointingly over-the-top. The early stages ... successfully invoke world-weariness, wistfulness for what might have been, and a compelling investigative urgency, but the endgame turns into something different, more garish and obvious and inferior to the understated early sequences.

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer Mike Russo:

I was surprised to find myself enjoying [this game]; fleshing out the scenario by including a plot about actual characters, rather than relying on stale observational humor, gives a tired premise a real shot in the arm.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Mike Russo:

Unfortunately, the contours of the central mystery — not its solution, simply the setup — are very unclear until relatively late in the game, and the author's penchant for twists make the story more confusing than it needs to be. Underneath the continual Big Reveals, there's an interesting story, but I felt like the thriller tropes wound up getting in the way of the interesting relationships.

Son Of A ... (2005) by C. S. Woodrow, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game is] a collection of low-key puzzles without much in the way of plot to enliven things.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Mike Russo:

There is something of a mystery hovering around in the background, and there's [a twist], but the plot doesn't really add much to the game.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game] has some storytelling issues. The slow pace acts to leach much of the momentum out of the narrative, but a graver problem is the author's tendency to introduce new characters whenever he gets a free moment. It's hard to keep track of all of them ...

The player character's pursuit of Marie drives most of the opening sequences — but just as soon as things are starting to get interesting, she's dropped from the story ... minor characters are killed off without very much narrative impact at all.

References (Plot):

- [Discussions about plot and narrative](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

4.2. Plot Twists

Alien Abduction? (1996) by Charles Gerlach, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The discover-what's-going-on process is thoroughly creepy — there's no big payoff, but there's a series of smaller surprises that effectively kept me guessing.

Unholy Grail (1997) by Stuart Allen, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There is a twist at the end that feels rather incongruous — it doesn't really seem to fit the rest of the plot, somehow.

Another Earth, Another Sky (2002) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Emily Short:

It seems to me as though the game needs a few more corners, a few more things that are not as you expect them to be. By the time I'd been to the first couple of habitats, I felt I knew what to expect from the others, and by and large I was exactly right.

I am a fan of well-structured IF, where you do not need to make a map, and where the shape of the world and of the plot within the world is sensible. The trick is accomplishing that and yet still being surprising, fitting the pattern in some unexpected way.

The Big Scoop (2004) by Johan Berntsson, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I saw some "how to write a movie script" page that said that the main problem with scripts these days was that modern audiences are jaded and need a twist ending. I'm not sure I'm all that jaded, really, but it's true [this game] had a disappointing non-twist ending.

Redeye (2004) by John Pitchers, reviewer Mike Russo:

The twist is so easy to see coming ... that the climax is greeted with a rolling of eyes rather than a gasp of shock.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[The author manages] to sustain the storyline the whole way, an impressive feat. It keeps moving and had enough twists to make me want to keep playing.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Mike Russo:

There are enough twists to keep things interesting.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Mike Russo:

The author's penchant for twists make the story more confusing than it needs to be ... I do enjoy games which are one big meta-puzzle — Jon Ingold's corpus comes to mind — but here, the twists just sort of pile up on each other, yanking the player one way then the other. Eventually whiplash — and fatigue — set in ...

The wall-to-wall twists make the proceedings feel contrived, and the game doesn't allow sufficient space for the repercussions of each individual revelation to play out, which really reduces their impact.

4.3. Originality

Temple Of The Orc Mage (1997) by Gary Roggin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

You have decided to brave the scary dungeon to find big money and become a hero! This is a tried-and-true IF convention, so much so that it has become a bit of a cliche. Sometimes cliches can work to an author's advantage. Not this time.

Research Dig (1998) by Chris Armitage, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Though the map was logical, it also felt quite a bit cliched, with underground tunnels, spooky crypts, mysterious rune-encarved stones, etc. There wasn't anything that felt very unique once the game got to this point, and it felt like a game with a lot of potential had devolved into another ho-hum underground excursion.

Six Stories (1999) by N. K. Guy, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The stories [this game] tells create a wonderful air of folk tale while at the same time maintaining a refreshing originality.

Bliss (1999) by Cameron Wilkin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

It's all quite cliche, but the game has two things going for it. One, the writing is strong enough that it manages to evoke the specificity of the setting, and even if each element of that setting is lifted from shopworn genre conventions, the gestalt still feels like it has a little freshness left. Second, the game displays distinct signs of being aware of its own conventions.

Castle Amnos (2000) by John Evans, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

Imitation is a useful way to start; originality is where you really score the points, however.

The Gostak (2001) by Carl Muckenhoupt, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game] is about someplace different, someplace we don't and can't fully understand. It's alien and inexplicable, and this is cool, but I found it also ultimately unsatisfing for that same reason.

Shattered Memory (2001) by Andrés Viedma Peláez, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game starts off with an amnesiac PC waking up to an unfamiliar situation, and although this is one of the most hackneyed tricks in IF, the game comes up with a unique reason for it, which counts for a lot.

The Beetmonger's Journal (2001) by Scott Starkey, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

The magic forest that sprawls in all directions ... sylvan streams and mushroom groves, and a unicorn that dances shyly away from you — these are cliches by now, unfortunately. I am sure that something new could be done with them, but it would take some real grit and work and imagination. I'd like to see that kind of hard work on display, instead of the same old same old.

Evacuate (2002) by Jeff Rissman, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

The main problem with [this SF game] is that a lot of the ideas are, by now, well within the domain of cliche. However, this is the point where I become somewhat torn. I like to encourage new authors to take their best bash at completing a game, and not so much worry about whether their ideas are excitingly original or not.

I understand that what motivates a lot of authors is to create something rather a lot like the work that inspired them in the first place, to come up with puzzles that are, to the authors, slightly new twists on ideas they know have been done before.

The Erudition Chamber (2003) by Daniel Freas, reviewer Mike Russo:

On the face of it, the setting is the usual wizard's keep; however, the author chose to situate it in an alternate history of our own world. This grounding is a nice touch; although it ultimately adds little to the game, I found myself more interested than I would have been in another generic fantasy world.

Scavenger (2003) by Quintin Stone, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

If you're going to give us a setting that's been used before, at least give us a more original plot than "retrieve the magic whatsit."

Escape From Auriga (2004) by Florin D. Tomescu, reviewer Mike Snyder:

[A familiar setting is] not necessarily a bad thing. I love sci-fi, and the familiarity helped make the setting seem more alive. However, it became obvious that this wasn't just a lack of originality ... this game is set in a well-known sci-fi franchise ... this puts me in the strange position of rewarding a bonus point for bringing me into an entertaining sci-fi setting, and losing it again for questionable copyright status.

Identity (2004) by Dave Bernazzani, reviewer Mike Russo:

If your concept starts with the PC waking up out of cryosleep to find himself on a malfunctioning spacecraft, you'd better have some extra hook somewhere to keep your game distinctive (this principle is generalisable, of course, e.g. to waking up in your apartment and getting ready to go to work).

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game has] an interesting premise ... [but] ends up feeling pretty generic ... there're a bunch of creatures hanging around with easily-solved problems that they ask you to handle, and some magic whatsits you have to collect to trade for another magic thingy, and there's a dragon and a princess and c'mon.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game] has a really skillful blend of the original and the new that pulls you in with familiar-sounding elements, and by the time you realize that they're not quite as familiar as all that, you're hooked.

Quote from reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[Good games have] something original to show me. With puzzle games, I look for new puzzle tricks. With other games, maybe a new setting, an unusual protagonist, a cool machine to play with, an unusual genre, a new magic system, a new conversation system, a new anything, as long as it's a real part of the game.

4.4. Telling The Right Story

Trading Punches (2004) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The [final scene] was really pretty good. It's a pity, then, that the game ended there right as I was starting to get interested. I think what [the author needed to do] was to focus on what he himself found interesting. It seems pretty clear that this isn't the characters ... what's cool is the backstory, the prophecy, and the future, and that's where the attention should have gone.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I think partly the problem is a variant of the "is this really the most interesting story you could be telling with these characters?" thing — it's not quite that [the game] is telling the wrong story, but that it's telling it the wrong way.

Like, there are a lot of cool things here — secret military experiments, psychic powers, genetic testing, the life of the individual vs the life of a larger group, love and forgiveness. But it seemed like in practice the actual gameplay experience mostly involved wandering around an army base, wandering around a town, and trying to figure out how to use a fishing pole.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game] immediately drew me in by presenting a novel and evocative religious system, a society in which gender is continually and individually constructed, and an interesting central character ... unfortunately, none of this has very much to do with the actual plot, which is kicked off by a peddler who wants you to rid a cave of goblins.

While the story eventually becomes more interesting than the premise suggests, it never managed to sink its hooks into me ... it felt perverse to have all the really interesting elements shoved aside in favor of something pedestrian by comparison.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer David Whyld:

It takes an interesting subject matter ... and then focuses too much on the minor details and misses out on the more interesting one. I spent way too long [performing minor activities] and not enough exploring what could have been a very interesting game.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Jason Devlin:

I kind of wish the ending was the whole game. Or at least what manifests itself in the closing paragraph was the essence of the game itself. As nice as it is to get it described, it'd be nicer to get to live it through the PC.

4.5. Backstory

Babel (1997) by Ian Finley, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Though the game exercises only limited control over the sequence of your discoveries, the control is sufficient to make your reconstruction of the storyline reasonably predictable. Moreover, the manner of those discoveries amplifies the uneasy feel: relevant facts come out first as offhand references and are only explained much later.

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

It's a pity, in a way, that the larger background (that of the period in general) is largely told to you up front, as the main thing I enjoyed about digging into the game was piecing together what had happened to the family, and piecing together what had happened to the world in general might have been even more fascinating.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

An engrossing and well-implemented game with a tremendous amount of thought put into its backstory.

Murder At The Aero Club (2004) by Penny Wyatt, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Rule #1 of solving a murder mystery: thou shalt know who was killed. In [this game], your boss, the head of the Criminal Investigation Squad, sends you to investigate a murder without giving you that vital piece of information. Oh, you know there's been a murder — it's the whole reason you're going out to the club. But you don't have the name.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Mike Russo:

[There is] a conversation which reveals some backstory, but leaves important concepts and facts unexplained.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

The memory system works well as it goes, but I'm not entirely sure I like the idea in general. It seems like an excuse for shifting the burden of discovering backstory to the player, instead of letting the player discover this through the game.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Michael Martin:

[The backstory] was very well handled. It uses the `remember` verb, but this is the best implementation of it I've ever seen. The status bar cues how many topics you have relevant memories for, and the `remember` command gives you a set of topics to infodump on.

This is pretty much ideal, because it lets you get information as you want it, lets you know when it's relevant, and there's no guess-the-syntax for information that — by hypothesis — the PC not only already knows, but actually has at the forefront of his mind.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Robert Menke:

The memory system seemed to be an awkward attempt to flesh out the PC; it ended up leaving more questions aggravatingly unanswered.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The back-story is an epic tapestry of magic and mystery. Much of the fun comes from learning more and more about the unique world in which the game is set, and about the people who inhabit it.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[The author has] clearly worked out some elaborate backstory with the hero of this and the battle of that and the treaty of whatever, and none of it matters at all.

4.6. Focus

Delusions (1996) by C. E. Forman, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

... there is all this plot. There's the fish plot, and the you-learning-about-yourself plot, and the evil computer program plot, [and at least five more] ... any one of these, or perhaps two, would have been an engaging competition entry ... Edit. Make it a trilogy. Or pace it out so that only one or two things are happening at a time; then it would be a full-length game, but a focussed full-length game.

Fear (1996) by Chuan-Tze Teo, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The vividness of the setting lies not in what you see but in how you experience it — i.e., through the eyes of the phobic PC. It may not sound revolutionary, but getting the player to focus not on the PC's external goals but on the internal barriers he has to clear represents a real shift in goal-orientation — and even if the puzzle-solving gets projected into external tasks, it's still worth pondering.

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] has as much or more thematic unity as any interactive fiction game I can think of, and this unity lends a sense of sweep to the plot which makes the game such a powerful experience. [It] establishes its focus from its first few sentences, and from that point on every piece of the game is an elaboration or variation on that conflicted, questioning theme. This seamless melding of plot and design made [it] seem like more a work of art than a computer game.

VirtuaTech (1997) by David Glasser, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Your goal ... is one of the best features of the game — it drives all your actions, it gives the puzzles meaning, and you are never allowed (at least, there isn't much room) to go check out the sights. Many games simply thrust the player into an environment ... with a goal only vaguely defined and not obviously connected to any of the initial things he or she does. There is much to be said for a small, tightly plotted game environment.

4.7. Point Of The Game

Persistence Of Memory (1998) by Jason Dyer, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

It's hard to say what [this game] is about, other than the superficial plot ... [This game] is susceptible to a wide variety of interpretations; it is to the author's credit that he doesn't fill in many of the blanks.

The Moonlit Tower (2002) by Yoon Ha Lee, reviewer David Welbourn:

I left the game thinking, "Gosh, that was nice ... I wonder what it was about."

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The whole fantasy sequence seemed vaguely pointless, since I knew it was all a hallucination.

Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I'm not really sure what the intent of the game was at all ... I can't tell from the ending whether [the couple] get back together and whether this is a good thing or not, so it's hard to say what the author thinks about the whole thing.

Amissville II (2005) by Santoonie Corporation, reviewer Mike Russo:

If the player can't find plot or puzzles or point after an hour, there's something dreadfully wrong with your game. Focus, direction, motivation, pacing — in this day and age, they aren't optional.

Cheiron (2005) by Sarah Clelland and Elisabeth Polli, reviewer David Whyld:

So what's [the game] about then? Well, you're a doctor and there's a hospital and there's patients and several very bland locations to wander around. And that's about it ...

A game set in a hospital could potentially be [quite] interesting — operating on patients, saving lives, etc — but ... instead I just wandered around and became very bored very quickly.

4.8. Non Story Games

Fifteen (1998) by Ricardo Dague, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I like to have at least a little feeling of immersion in my IF rather than unadorned puzzles ... [this game is] all the way over at the extreme end of the puzzle to story spectrum, and that's too far for my taste ... it's too spare and empty, and because of this it fails to create the interest needed to sustain its intense puzzle-orientation.

Exhibition (1999) by Ian Finley, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Nothing seems to happen in this game ... that's fine in the art show when the object is to quietly wander around and play with it, but here I'd like some, you know, plot.

Cheiron (2005) by Sarah Clelland and Elisabeth Polli, reviewer Mike Russo:

The dual nature of IF — works generally are both stories and games — is one of those things which authors need to grapple with. Regardless of where the balance point winds up being, the best IF manages to weave the two strands together so that they're complementary rather than antagonistic. The authors of [this game] aren't particularly interested in that task, however, and the result isn't so much antagonism as it is an all-out rout.

Off The Trolley (2005) by Krisztian Kaldi, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game is] decidedly low-key and quirky, a puzzle-y romp which isn't trying to have much plot but winds up being fun nonetheless.

5. Geography

References:

- [An article on geography](#) by Emily Short.
- [Landscape and Character in IF](#) by Paul O'Brian (section *MAP DESIGN*).

5.1. Map Size

Grayscale (2001) by Daniel Freas, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There's the fairly well-known guideline in IF writing that the game doesn't have to implement every place in the setting, it just has to implement enough to suggest the setting.

Internal Documents (2003) by Tom Lechner, reviewer Mike Russo:

There's [almost] nothing the player can take, discover, or interact with in the opening section of the game that has any bearing on the rest of the game ... there are paths, rivers, bridges, forests, hills, a waterfall, an abandoned paper mill, and more to explore before one reaches the gates where the game proper actually starts ...

If the game had perhaps half as many locations ... it would be much more entertaining; as is, there's simply too much aimless meandering killing off the narrative momentum.

Bio (2003) by David Linder, reviewer Jess Knoch:

A fully-fleshed out setting is important ... [At one point] you come to a crossroads and are told that "various other rooms" are to the south. This is where the PC lives and works — surely he knows what rooms they are, but he's not telling. Actually, this could ave been a really neat touch if you could examine those various other rooms, but you can't.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Roughly half of the rooms in the game are pure filler with no relevance whatsoever.

Vendetta (2005) by James Hall, reviewer David Whyld:

[This] is a big game with a huge amount of rooms, a good number of which could have been cut out of the game and it wouldn't have suffered for their loss ... [it includes] a gigantic complex on many floors that contains vast amounts of rooms. Most of which are either empty or as good as empty ... it seems kind of strange having so many locations in a game these days, particularly when the majority of them don't really seem to serve any purpose.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Robert Menke:

The use of messages during movement increases the size of the mental map to good effect.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It's a small map but it feels very dense and there is a lot to think about and look at.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

Every room [in this game] is necessary.

Quote from reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I like games that are dense. I'd much rather play a game that has ten rooms you visit twice than twenty rooms you visit once, or one key that unlocks multiple doors instead of multiple keys that each unlock a single door.

Although there can be game design considerations either way, generally speaking, fewer pieces that get reused more often make for a tighter and stronger game. I love games where you revisit the same setting over and over again and see how it changes over the course of time, ideally as a result of your actions.

5.2. Split Locations

Stone Cell (1999) by Stephen Kodat, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

After the PC sleeps on the mat and awakens in the cell, the mechanics of the game change radically. Suddenly, rather than just a one-location room with an exit to the north, the cell is now a 3 x 3 grid of locations ... this can be a highly disorienting shift at first, but I thought it was a really cool technique, because it uses the mechanics of location in IF as a way of presenting the PC's state of mind ...

IF with a characterized PC isn't simply presenting a setting. It's presenting a setting as perceived by a particular character. Consequently, a cell that seems small at first might grow in perceived granularity and detail the longer the PC is imprisoned within it ...

Unfortunately, the excitement generated by [this] navigation-altering technique is quickly dampened by some of the game's weaknesses [such as lacking a more detailed description of each part of the cell].

Vendetta (2005) by James Hall, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

Do you really need a whomping 10 locations for a parking lot, or 16-locations lengthed electric fence?

5.3. Familiarization With The Map

Augustine (2002) by Terrence V. Koch, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

By the end of the game, I surprised myself by knowing my way around the streets of St. Augustine without help, just because the game had by then toured me back and forth through it enough that I knew the names of the streets and the major landmarks.

Internal Documents (2003) by Tom Lechner, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

You end up ... inside a large mansion. The NPC who greets you ends up wandering around the place, and when I followed him, I got a cheap tour of the floor plan, one that got me oriented so that I didn't have to get lost or make a map, which was nice.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

If the game had been narrowed down to one dorm ... and half as many locations, it would have been a lot easier to get the hang of.

Amissville II (2005) by Santoonie Corporation, reviewer Mike Russo:

There's no attempt made to channel the player's explorations, or even give an overview of the environment.

Snatches (2005) by Gregory Weir, reviewer Mike Snyder:

[The first segment] does allow for some familiarity with the game map without the urgency of later segments, and that's a plus.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Russo:

Front-loading much of the exploration allowed later sequences to play out tauter, since the player knows exactly where everything is ... the player is introduced to a few new locations at a time, generally already knowing what he wants to do, which helps create a fleshed-out world without unnecessary disorientation.

5.4. Opening Up The Map

The HeBGB Horror! (1999) by Eric Mayer, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The game is nicely structured. We're limited to a few locations while we're solving the initial set of puzzles, after which more territory opens up.

Castle Amnos (2000) by John Evans, reviewer Emily Short:

[This game] opened up way too wide very early on. I found myself wandering random corridors with no sense of what I was supposed to be doing or what I was looking for.

Risorgimento Represso (2003) by Michael Coyne, reviewer Mike Russo:

The environment unfolds gradually, with new areas opening up in a logical, manageable fashion; although there are quite a few locations, I never felt lost or unsure of what I should be working on.

Luminous Horizon: Earth And Sky Episode 3 (2004) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Mike Russo:

Each section of gameplay is self-contained and clearly set off from the others; while this may lead to some disappointment ("you mean part two is over already?!"), it works to focus attention on the particular crisis at hand and keep the aimless wandering down to practically zero.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Russo:

The game … does a good job of unlocking new areas to explore in a controlled fashion.

5.5. Exits And Mapping

Travels In The Land Of Erden (1997) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The on-screen mapping works *very* well indeed, and often helps considerably.

Winter Wonderland (1999) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] uses the status line in innovative ways. It's four lines high and includes score, location, and a compass rose indicating the available exits. We've seen the status line compass rose before, but I found myself using this on-screen mapping feature more than I ever have in any other game which provided it. The landscape is complicated enough that the compass rose feels like a real aid to gameplay rather than just a frivolous but useless feature.

Enlisted (2000) by G. F. Berry, reviewer Lucian Smith:

Having too many rooms so that you don't know what's where [becomes] a puzzle — one which I greatly dislike. Stationfall got around it by providing you with an actual map of the station, and keeping the sub-sections distinct from each other.

Goose, Egg, Badger (2004) by Brian Rapp, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I found myself floundering without exit lists ... even with a PC who knows the lay of the land, a game's room descriptions should still meet the minimum standards for IF: mention of all important nouns and exits.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Robert Menke:

A map! Somebody actually included a map! *swoons*

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Lucian Smith:

The maps (while nice) do not show passageways with closed doors at all, which is very annoying. I missed several areas because of closed and (presumably) locked doors that turned out to be simply openable.

Son Of A ... (2005) by C. S. Woodrow, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

I appreciate putting viable exits in the can't-go message, but I would have appreciated them in the room description more, especially when they're one-way.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer David Whyld:

Most [rooms] lack exits displayed in the text so most of my time seemed to be trying an exit at random, being told I couldn't go that way, and then trying another.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

An awful lot of rooms don't have the exit directions in their descriptions. I was stymied for a while in the first corridor simply because I did not realize at one point that it was possible to go north.

References (Exits And Mapping):

- [Discussions about exits](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

6. Gameplay

6.1. Structure

The Plant (1998) by Mike Roberts, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The player is skillfully guided through the plot. You witness expository scenes as you explore, always in the distance (so you can't interfere) and perfectly believable as things that would be happening around the plant ... the map and plot are carefully shaped to each other to make this work.

Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There's nothing wrong with complicated games; games that require the player to think in order to pull the pieces together after the fact are welcome, and somewhat unusual for IF. But the structure of [this game] — the player marches through the various linear segments, and more than likely has no idea what is going on initially — means that most of the piecing together is done by memory, since the fragments whose true significance might be apparent later on are no longer available when the game makes them understandable (i.e., the player has to replay to fully understand most of the first half of the game).

The HeBGB Horror! (1999) by Eric Mayer, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The game is nicely structured. We're limited to a few locations while we're solving the initial set of puzzles, after which more territory opens up. Throughout the game it's always reasonably clear what we should be trying to accomplish next, but the plot doesn't seem artificially linear. The middle portion progresses naturally toward the end-game — we know from nearly the start what we need to do, and the end-game begins as soon as we've accomplished everything.

The HeBGB Horror! (1999) by Eric Mayer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There are a number of good things about the design, including the fact that the game is carefully structured in such a way as to allow players a second or third chance to obtain items that they may have failed to notice or pick up the first time around. These chances are always well-integrated within the game, and feel natural rather than gratuitous.

Another Earth, Another Sky (2002) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Emily Short:

I am a fan of well-structured IF, where you do not need to make a map, and where the shape of the world and of the plot within the world is sensible. The trick is accomplishing that and yet still being surprising, fitting the pattern in some unexpected way.

Mortality (2005) by David Whyld, reviewer Mike Russo:

The nonlinear way in which [the story is] told makes for an interesting experience — rather than the conventional CYOA structure, where stories branch continually from a common origin, the game's narrative resembles a wave, diverging then returning to common points.

The jump-cuts also help prod the player into working with the story: knowing that the protagonist will knock off his employer, I thought about how to make the choices which would make the scenario more interesting, rather than fighting to try to avoid committing murder.

References (Structure):

- [Structure](#) by Graham Nelson (*The Craft of Adventure*).
- [Discussions about game design](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

6.2. Pacing

Purple (1998) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

After a certain point, [the game's] pacing suffers: there aren't any time limits or even anything encouraging haste for most of the game, which is a shame because a sense of urgency might have made the plot more compelling. There are some points where wander-around-and-explore is a good mood to set, but after a while the exploratory feel needs to stop.

Trapped In A One-Room Dilly (1998) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[In one-room games] much of the relevant material should be hidden at first to avoid discouraging the player; more importantly, objects should be involved in more than one puzzle each. Moreover, goals and motivations should change during the game, to break up the monotony of staying in one room the entire time.

Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The game's use of puzzles is innovative in a very subtle way. Most games use puzzles to impede the player's progress. [This game], in contrast, seems to let us decide how much time we want to spend solving puzzles ...

At many points in the game, I knew exactly what I needed to do to advance to the next point in the plot, but I waited for a while so I could explore the current area more fully; I was nearly always rewarded with more discoveries when I stayed, and once I started to run out of ideas I could move on to the next scene.

It's quite an accomplishment for the author to make a player want to stay around in one scene in an adventure when the path to the next scene is clear; it also makes the pacing nearly perfect, since the player can decide just how much to savor each scene, and just when to find out what happens next.

Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[The puzzles] feel like they're there to slow down the pace of the game a bit — which is unfortunate, because [this game] tells its story reasonably well, and the pace doesn't particularly need a change ... the puzzles don't do anything to draw the player into the story; they simply break up the flow ...

The player [should be given] more time in the various scenes to poke around and explore, rather than getting whisked to somewhere else as soon as the obvious task is done.

Enlisted (2000) by G. F. Berry, reviewer Lucian Smith:

You know something's wrong when getting a medical exam takes eight moves and saving an alien race takes one. This game went into excruciating detail for bits that I didn't care at all about and zipped over all the interesting bits.

My Angel (2000) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There are several sequences of moves where you're traveling, and while you can interact with the scenery as you go by, you can't stop the movement.

This actually works fairly well — it's a good balance between keeping the story moving and letting you poke and prod things — but when you get to the points where the story stops until you solve the puzzle, the story loses some of its pace. Usually, it's not so bad ... but the more difficult puzzles break the mood by bringing everything to a halt.

Best of Three (2001) by Emily Short, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game] needs more narrative pace to genuinely work as a game — it's more a series of conversational vignettes, some more illuminating than others, that eventually lead around to where you want to go, and the whole thing ends pretty abruptly thereafter.

Jane (2002) by Joseph Grzesiak, reviewer Mike Russo:

Pacing ... seemed too rapid; there was never enough time to thoroughly explore the house, for example, and events and conversations seemed to flow by regardless of player input.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Emily Short:

The pacing is superb — the puzzles and the story both progress fairly evenly throughout the duration of the game. I appreciated how later disasters were set up in advance, so that each little episode ... seemed like the inevitable working of fate, rather than an ever-more-elaborate contrivance.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The pacing is superb: the pieces of the story come at just the right moments, the understanding comes gradually and not too slowly.

Mingsheng (2004) by Deane Saunders, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There were a couple of problems. Most notably, pacing. [One scene] should be one of the peaks of the game, but in my play it came very early on, before I had any idea what the need was for it. Furthermore, it wasn't something I was trying for; just a random scene that showed up as I was moving along, and then it was followed by a passage that might as well have been labelled "This is the part with the moral."

Similarly, [another scene] ought to have been either something cool or something that would lead to something cool, but instead the game ends shortly thereafter with another Educational Segment and then a fizzle.

Murder At The Aero Club (2004) by Penny Wyatt, reviewer Mike Russo:

Murder mysteries are hard, in static fiction or interactive. Pacing is key — the slow sense of discovery, as avenues of investigation open up and hit dead ends ... [This] game is a mystery, but it's sadly lacking in the suspense and richness of detail required to do justice to the genre.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Mike Russo:

The story ... moves along at a fairly good clip, which is enough to sustain interest.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game] has numerous strengths, but I think the most important is how well paced it is. The introduction slopes in gradually, and while I generally like to have some idea of what I should be accomplishing from the very beginning, here the more leisurely approach worked well.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Mike Russo:

I'm usually in favor of games taking some time to establish their premise, the central characters, and the protagonist's routine, rather than just jumping into a plot before the player is given a reason to care about the proceedings. Situating a story in a particular place, and allowing the people to exist independent of whatever dramatic twist winds up pulling the rug out from under them is, generally makes the narrative feel more distinctive, more real, and facilitates player investment.

[This game] is a rare exception to the rule — not so much because it's a bad rule as because the game's grasp of pacing is seriously off. The opening sequences drag, such that half of [the] playing time elapses before the main plot really starts to kick in.

6.3. Triggers

For A Change (1999) by Dan Schmidt, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The first puzzle isn't solvable until a certain event happens, and it's possible for the player to fail to trigger the event early on and wander around getting frustrated.

Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

It followed the Christminster model of advancing the time and plot in response to character actions, which would usually work — until you didn't realize you were supposed to do some action, and ground the plot to a halt. This happened to me a couple times, and it was unfortunate. When it worked, it worked smoothly, but when it didn't work, the connection between myself and the story was strained.

The Cruise (2001) by Norman Perlmutter, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game precludes you from reaching your final goal until you have spent two days (game-time) on the ship. Thus, if you solve the main puzzles within the space of a game-time afternoon (as I did), you end up wandering around aimlessly for a long time, unable to obtain crucial items and completely unaware that the game is planning to give you the vital tidbit in another day and a half. This is completely arbitrary, and very, very bad ...

Don't built arbitrary waiting periods into your game unless they're very short and the player has plenty to do in the meantime. If players are wandering aimlessly, or performing dull, repetitive actions in order to progress the plot, the game has failed them.

Eric's Gift (2002) by Joao Mendes, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This] is one of those games that runs on triggers — [where performing some action] triggers a non-interactive cutscene, which changes the PC's location and moves the plot along. When games like this work, they give the feeling of a story advancing smoothly, right in sync with the player's actions. [When they don't work] players flounder about looking for the right action as the plot's momentum evaporates ...

[One time] I needed to examine a sub-object of an object (that is to say, a second-level noun) in order to trigger the next scene.

Concrete Paradise (2002) by Tyson Ibele, reviewer Emily Short:

[This game] has you try to solve puzzles, but what actually happens is the result of some totally coincidental action. You have to crawl into the vent system not so that you can escape through the vents but so that someone can find you when you come back out. You have to try to [perform another action], fail, and then be arbitrarily struck by lightning.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer David Whyld:

Certain things occur that halt the progression of the game until after they've occurred. Here it's a tad more annoying than usual as the `wait` command doesn't move matters on, so a good portion of my time ... was [spent] moving back and forth between a couple of locations hoping to trigger the next event. While timed events are logical, they're also annoying.

6.4. Consistency

Delusions (1996) by C. E. Forman, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game] has an odd split personality: there are sections of the game where the plot is more or less told to you via several screens of text, and there are other sections where the game gives you virtually no guidance ... both parts, to be sure, make some sense within the plot of the game, but the gameplay is a bit disorienting as a result.

Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game] is more story IF than puzzle IF, which makes the incursions of puzzle-oriented moments rather jarring; it takes the player a while to figure out that puzzle mode rather than story mode is on, and it doesn't help that some of the puzzles are a bit obscure and require some major intuitive leaps.

The Isolato Incident (2001) by Alan DeNiro, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It is pretty easy to do a surreal game since, like, you just have to slap a bunch of things together; it's harder to write a surreal game where the pieces actually work together.

The Great Xavio (2004) by Reese Warner, reviewer Mike Russo:

The game doesn't transition from [one genre to the other] very smoothly; I was interested in discovering [the NPC's] secret, and to suddenly find that it was besides the point, and I was actually meant to do something completely different, was disappointing.

I Must Play (2004) by Geoff Fortytwo, reviewer Mike Russo:

A game of minigames is sort of like a sitcom clips show: even if the disparate parts are individually strong, the overall disjointedness is difficult to overcome without a compelling frame and sustained internal linkages.

Blue Chairs (2004) by Chris Klimas, reviewer Mike Russo:

Finding a hidden safe combination and navigating a maze ... just didn't seem activities which inhabited the same universe as the rest of the game.

Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff, reviewer Mike Russo:

The dream-interlude doesn't help matters — dream sequences are most effective when they're tied to the larger narrative, and here, they seem just like a disconnected series of "crazy" vignettes.

Psyche's Lament (2005) by John Sichi and Lara Sichi, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game mixes] Hellenic mythology with puzzle-solving gadgets. I like a mash-up as much as the next guy, but in this case, I really don't think it works; the two elements are pulling in such opposite directions that the mythology aspects wind up looking like window dressing ... [which] wound up making the puzzles feel arbitrary and disconnected from the story, which isn't pleasant no matter what kind of game you're playing.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer David Whyld:

What was looking like a science fiction game with a bizarre twist later on becomes a fantasy game with a bizarre twist ... the difference between the earlier part of the game and the later part is bewildering ...

While both parts of the game are good enough in their own right, they're just too different to make playing the entire thing anything less than jarring. I think I'd have preferred either a game fully set on the alien planet and the missing colony or a game in the fantasy land. The two together are just downright weird.

Gilded: The Lily And The Cage (2005) by John Evans, reviewer Mike Russo:

The player is ... forced to react to a series of threatening situations, which increases the feeling of being off-balance, as the player doesn't have the leisure to experiment and explore.

While there's nothing wrong with such an evolution towards reactive gameplay, it happens far too suddenly, and feels too much like the rug being pulled out from under the player ... a more gradual transition would allow the player more time to master the [PC's] powers, and flesh out the characters more fully.

Son Of A ... (2005) by C. S. Woodrow, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The conversation at the end is a little confusing (since it had been a no-conversation game up til then).

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

One puzzle in the game implements a hit point system, which is used and mentioned nowhere else that I can see.

6.5. Type Of Game

Domicile (2003) by John Evans, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

[There was] no score system to go by as a marker of progress (an undesirable omission in a puzzle game ... and one of the many indications of certain flaws in this author's thinking about what he was crafting).

Quote from reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[A good] game knows what kind of game it is, and it's that kind of game to the max.

If this is a puzzle game, I want a lot of puzzles and I want challenging puzzles and I want original puzzles. If it's a game about interacting with characters I want verbs tuned to the kind of interaction the game is about and where interacting with characters is the main thing to do. If it's a game about exploration or mystery I want lots of cool little secret things and clues to find, stuff to ferret out and piece together.

Whatever it does, I want it to do it well and do a lot of it.

6.6. Text Dumps And Cut Scenes

Tapestry (1996) by Dan Ravipinto, reviewer Lucian Smith:

The few turns that pass between the other character's monologues are probably for the best, since they allow some experimentation, and examination of the surroundings.

My Angel (2000) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Emily Short:

I have no problem reading large blocks of continuous text in other contexts. When I'm reading game text, however, I'm doing a hard search for the relevant stuff. I want to get an impression of things quickly. I can embellish it later. I think this was the largest problem I had with [this game] ... I couldn't get an immediate handle on what was going on ...

The text in a game is supposed to provide your impressions, and the feeling of immersion. It's not very immersive if you have to think too hard in order to eke out the meanings of things. Likewise if you have to spend a lot of time reading text between command prompts.

You can make this a little better, and combat my additional habit of eye-skipping to the end of a long paragraph and spoiling it for myself, by putting in pauses in big text blocks.

My Angel (2000) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The story flips back and forth between the main thread and some flashback sequences in a reasonably seamless way, and you can actually interact with the characters and objects in the flashback sequences ... the game manages to limit your options to assure that it controls what actually happens in the flashback sequences while still providing more interactivity than a simple cut scene ...

The one aspect of the story that suffers, however, is that it's easy to get confused about what exactly happened in the flashbacks — the game throws several names and relationships at you and essentially expects you to keep them straight ...

The flashback approach can, in fact, work well in IF, but there's also an inherent disadvantage ... it's harder to flip back to an earlier moment to check on details that you missed the first time around ... (Babel, by way of contrast, solves this problem by allowing the player to access the flashbacks repeatedly and at will).

Vicious Cycles (2001) by Simon Mark, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

I'd suggest repositioning some of the cutscene material to be more evenly spaced, so that in between attempts at solving the puzzles you get the backstory nicely filled in.

Gilded: The Lily And The Cage (2005) by John Evans, reviewer David Whyld:

The same information that took half an hour to read through could have been conveyed to me in a few sentences, and the game would certainly have benefited from not bombarding the player with information overload at every turn. Or maybe all that mountain of text could have accompanied the game in a simple *readme* file that could have been read, or not, at the player's choice.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Robert Menke:

The journey home seems unnecessarily padded; much as I despise their overuse, a cut scene would be appropriate here.

Vendetta (2005) by James Hall, reviewer David Whyld:

When faced with one screen after another of text, none of which is avoidable, my eyes begin to glaze over and I tend to just skim through it to get the gist of it ... it might have been better as a series of questions that could be asked, instead of just being delivered to you over several screens of text.

Vendetta (2005) by James Hall, reviewer Mike Russo:

The overwhelming impression I retain is of gigantic text-dumps containing lots of dialogue and action, brought on by typing a single command — which is often `G`.

References (Text Dumps And Cut Scenes):

- [Discussions about cut scenes](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

6.7. Repetitive Activities

The Plant (1998) by Mike Roberts, reviewer Lucian Smith:

[There were situations where] something complex had to be done to pass an obstacle the first time, but, once passed, an easy way was provided to pass it the next times.

Enlisted (2000) by G. F. Berry, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] creates a very convincing world ... the problem is that genuineness isn't always a virtue ... [There is] a puzzle that requires you to travel outside the space station ... you must painstakingly maneuver the suit to a variety of locations based on x, y, and z coordinates ...

It was fun and exciting to get myself maneuvered to the first place I needed to go. Then, when I realized that I'd need to go through this laborious process something like five more times, I started to get really annoyed. What started out as fun very rapidly devolved into tedium ...

This puzzle would have been excellent if [the first target] had contained an autopilot module which allowed the rest ... to be done automagically.

Episode In The Life Of An Artist (2003) by Peter Eastman, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

At first, I was annoyed with [this game] for making me go through such extremely quotidian tasks as showering, picking out clothes for the day, and so on.

Once I grokked the PC a little better, though, I loved the game for doing that. By forcing me to step through those tasks, and to experience the PC's unwavering interest in and enjoyment of them (as well as hearing his ceaseless grab-bag of quotes applied to them), the game let me become closely acquainted with the PC's mindset in a way that still felt interactive and advanced the plot. Because it's preceded by such an exceedingly ordinary morning routine, [a certain event] carries much more of an impact than if it had been the beginning scene of the game.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Emily Short:

[I] admired the game's neat division into three acts, and the way any boring and unhumorous puzzles were skipped over in the intermissions. Doing all the setup work of preparing a vegetable soup would have been dull and slowed down the game pace; much better just to cut ahead to the point where it is nearly ready.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Forcing the player to put their textbooks in their backpack, close the backpack, and pick up the backpack every morning serves no role in the game, nor does making them have a wallet full of id cards to show clerks or swipe in card-readers.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Mike Russo:

There are a number of tasks — busywork, really — the player needs to perform [every day] ...
The first occasion that the player encounters these situations, it's fun to go through the motions, but
by the fifth or sixth, I was wishing that there was a shortcut, or that the game would just
automatically assume that I knew to gather my things before running to class.

6.8. Waiting

The Frenetic Five vs. Sturm Und Drang (1997) by Neil deMause, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

For a short game, large amounts of playtime are given over to waiting ... the enjoyability of the
game could be increased considerably if those were eliminated or shortened. (It's not just that you
have to wait — it's that not much goes on, often enough, while you're waiting).

She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

If you stay by Bob's side, you can watch him [perform all sorts of activities] — and though all this
takes hundreds of moves, the passage of time is slowed while you're with Bob (a comment on the
stimulating nature of his company?) so that you don't forfeit the main story by hanging out [with him].

Persistence Of Memory (1998) by Jason Dyer, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The `wait` command is altered for the occasion: time passes until something of note happens, rather
than 1 or 3 or 10 turns. This proves very handy, though the player might find the game unspeakably
boring if he or she does not realize that the action comes to the character, rather than the character
producing the action.

Vendetta (2005) by James Hall, reviewer David Whyld:

There seemed to be a lot of waiting around ... too much for my liking. This isn't a terrible thing in
itself, if done in moderation, but quite a few times I seemed to be required to wait around in certain
locations for something to happen without any real indication that anything was going to happen.

6.9. Fun

Ralph (1996) by Miron Schmidt, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The concept of [this game] is great fun — the idea of nosing around as a dog gives the author the
ability to take advantage of some of the most fun aspects of the text-based interface.

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

This year's competition had a fair crop of "ordinary person doing ordinary things" games ... but few
of them confronted the central problem associated with such games: how to make the game
interesting, more than a collection of dull tasks ... [This game] is up to the task; the game gives the
player an apparently ordinary situation and invests it with unexpected life.

Moonbase (2002) by Mike Eckardt, reviewer David Welbourn:

The moonbase had no telescopes, space maps, moon maps, rock assays, rovers, or any fun equipment at all.

Fort Aegea (2002) by Francesco Bova, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Most of the game is really fun — it has several good puzzles and action sequences, a nice propulsive plot, and some surprising and well-drawn details. In addition, the game employs spellcasting, which is a kick.

The Moonlit Tower (2002) by Yoon Ha Lee, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Part of the pleasure of IF, at least for me, is fancy objects to play with that I can't have in real life; like So Far's box, a number of the objects here are elegant and make me wish for feelies.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Mike Russo:

The PC is given a few gadgets which are fun to use but which don't overpower the gameplay.

All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Wisely ... the author ignores the angst and the what-is-the-moral-philosophy-of-science stuff and cuts straight to the good bit: zipping through time to solve puzzles and fight paradoxes.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Mike Russo:

Somehow there's enough enthusiasm animating the thing — and enough fidelity to the roots of the fantasy tradition — to make the game feel fresh and fun. It shouldn't work, but it does.

Vendetta (2005) by James Hall, reviewer David Whyld:

[The main character] is presented as a super soldier yet never gets the opportunity to use his super soldier abilities.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Mike Russo:

The idea of playing a thief attempting to gain access to his ill-gotten goods while on a cruise ship sounded like a lot of fun.

References (Fun):

- [A Theory of Fun for Game Design](#) book review/summary by Emily Short.

6.10. Realism vs Fun

A Bear's Night Out (1997) by David Dyte, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Though not everything in the game really fits the mode — how does this teddy bear manage to carry so many items? — the sacrifices are generally in the name of facilitating gameplay and as such are wise choices ...

For example, a teddy bear's paws aren't probably up for much in the way of manipulation — but [the author] fortunately didn't confine the player's actions to things like pushing or pulling. That would go beyond realism into annoyance.

Congratulations! (1997) by Frederick J. Hirsch, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

A game documenting care of a newborn would probably have to distort reality considerably to be exciting, and [this game] is regrettably faithful to the subject.

Four In One (1998) by J. Robinson Wheeler, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The NPCs [in this game] are not entirely malleable; to that end, [this game] gets lots of realism points ... but all the realism points seem to come out of the fun column.

Transfer (2000) by Tod Levi, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There are virtually no meaningful time limits, and no resources that you can waste. At times this strains realism, of course — even when you're somewhere that you shouldn't be, you don't need to rush to get your business done because no one's going to interrupt you — and it takes the edge off any tension that might have been produced. But for fairness and ease of play, it certainly works.

Prized Possession (2001) by Kathleen M. Fischer, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Granted, this game is set in the middle ages (the real-true middles ages, not a generic fantasy riff), and you're female, so presumably it is somewhat realistic to have life pretty much suck with badness around every corner, but it's not clear this is actually fun to play.

Getting Back To Sleep (2004) by Patrick Evans, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game] runs in real time ... sadly, I'm not sure what the feature adds, exactly; a real time limit is in some ways less annoying than a turn limit, since one doesn't need to worry too much about typos killing you, but it does add a kind of low-level, omnipresent urgency, reminiscent of a faint headache, to the entire proceeding ...

I've never been a particular fan of realism for realism's sake, when it comes to game design — features should buy you something, gameplay-wise. If a particular gesture towards realism increases immersion, all well and good, but honestly, I found the ticking clock did more to jolt me out of the game than anything else.

7. Classic Game Elements

7.1. Inventory Limits

The Frenetic Five vs. Sturm Und Drang (1997) by Neil deMause, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

You need absolutely every item that you can carry, and you are limited to carrying one fewer item than you need ... [the game can be closed off] without warning, since several objects have unforeseeable uses. Inventory management should *not* be a puzzle, and penalizing the player for failing to take everything that isn't nailed down is no longer cool.

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There were the numerous times where the game put me in a time-critical situation, but wouldn't let me perform a task because of its arbitrary inventory limits, forcing me to once again restore back to an earlier save, shuffle items around, and replay the sequence. All this, apparently, in the name of realism.

Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff, reviewer Mike Snyder:

Inventory management became a frustration. I don't think the concept is inherently bad ... but as the game progressed, I found myself leaving items behind that I later needed. Before I stopped, I had reached a point where I wasn't even quite able to carry all the loot I knew I would need.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

This is 2005 and there is no excuse for inventory limits. Or weight limits ... (on the other hand, the resource limit of needing cash for the vending machine is great, since it gives you something to work on).

References (Inventory Limits):

- [Discussions about inventory limits](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

7.2. Hunger

Evacuate (2002) by Jeff Rissman, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game kills you after 400 moves if the PC hasn't eaten yet. I hate this. It's pointless, unrealistic, and really adds no challenge. But if food is readily available, or if the time limit is generous enough, a starvation puzzle alone isn't enough to kill the fun of a good game.

Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer Mike Russo:

The player's given a number of reasonable goals, and while I'm generally down on hunger puzzles, here the hunger acts to get the player moving and provide a goal besides sit-in-the-room-and-work-on-a-paper, so it's forgivable.

The Clock (2000) by Cleopatra Kozlowski, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Authors, please. I beg you. I implore you. STOP IT with the starvation puzzles!! Stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it! Thank you.

References (Hunger):

- [Discussions about hunger](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

7.3. Mazes

The Town Dragon (1997) by David Cornelson, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

A couple of gratuitous mazes created frustration (especially since there were too few inventory items handy for the "drop and map" method).

Winter Wonderland (1999) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game has two sections that aren't exactly mazes, but feel enough like mazes to provoke some annoyance. By the time you figure out how to solve them, you'll have done a fair piece of mapping, and while there are no "trick exits" and everything connects to everything else in a fairly logical way, just the mapping alone is enough to make the whole area seem pretty tedious.

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Particularly good is a maze with randomly generated descriptions that can be infinitely large. Some will object to the inclusion of the maze at all, of course, but this is one of the more creative mazes in IFdom and as such gets a pass from me — no mapping is required, for one thing, and the random generation brings to mind real caves, which aren't limited to a defined number of rooms.

Planet Of The Infinite Minds (2000) by Alfredo Garcia, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Maze. Arrrgh.

Sun And Moon (2002) by David Brain, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I actually like mazes under a few conditions: the maze can be mapped, it has rules and sticks to them, and is generally consistent as you walk around it. Plus the interface should be cool. A maze in a traditional text-only adventure is rather tedious, I agree. But this maze was on the web, and between the interesting scenery, the colored doors, and my handy map, this maze was an amazing amount of fun. It is easily solved if you spend enough time on it.

Color And Number (2002) by Steven Kollmansberger, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

If you're going to put a maze into a Comp game, it had better be so damn clever that you win a *Best Puzzle Xyzzy Award* the following Spring. In other words, you have to be more clever than Andrew Plotkin, because he already did it once and the bar is that much higher.

Amissville II (2005) by Santoonie Corporation, reviewer Mike Russo:

There's lots of asymmetric connectivity; go east then west, and end up someplace completely different. In fact, one time through I managed to get myself so lost, I got stuck and couldn't find my way back to the beginning. I lost count of the number of pseudo-mazes.

References (Mazes):

- [Where Mazes Came From](#) by Stephen Granade (Brass Lantern).

7.4. Darkness

Of Forms Unknown (1996) by Chris Markwyn, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Lighting a dark room (whose description reads "You can't see a thing") by saying `"turn on light"` not only goes against the logic of the description (isn't the light switch one of the things you can't see?), but also against one of the most standard conventions of interactive fiction, which suggests that even a light switch in a dark room is inaccessible without a faint light by which to discern it. "Delusions" had the answer to this — [this game] does not.

Babel (1997) by Ian Finley, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

This game demonstrates the use of darkness without resorting to a flat `"It is pitch black"`. There are many dim areas, which conceal secrets until you can find light, but which are still navigable.

Scavenger (2003) by Quintin Stone, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Some of the action takes place outdoors, at night, and unlike some games where as long as you've got a lantern, it may as well be daylight, in [this game] you get a sense of darkness, of being restricted to only seeing one thing at a time, without it affecting gameplay at all. The feel is there, and that makes all the difference.

References (Darkness):

- [Discussions about handling darkness](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

7.5. Time Limits

Babel (1997) by Ian Finley, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

There is no way to lose or get stuck or run out of time ...

[This game] demonstrates that you can have the emotional effect without using classic IF limits. The power is slowly failing throughout the game, with periodic warnings; but it does not actually fail during play. I felt hurried by the warnings, and afraid I would run out of time, but it did not prevent me from winning.

Down (1997) by Kent Tessman, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

I felt pressure to do something, right away ... a little danger and a time limit go a long way.

Zombie! (1997) by Scott Starkey, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game] neglects the element that makes horror scary, namely a sense of imminent danger associated with a time limit; rarely is there pressure to do anything until the very end of the game ...

The one situation where there is a meaningful time limit ... is genuinely scary, and is suitably enhanced by messages each turn suggesting that you're running out of time.

Film At Eleven (2001) by Bowen Greenwood, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There's a time limit, but it's not terribly tight — I had no trouble getting to the solution well before time ran out.

Color And Number (2002) by Steven Kollmansberger, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The beauty of [one particular puzzle] was, there didn't seem to be any rush. I could [play with an object] to my heart's content, until I had it all figured out exactly ... and nothing bad would happen. I like that. It doesn't make sense in the world, but it's very good for a puzzle-fest.

Screen (2002) by Edward Floren, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The time limit [is] annoying and pointless (you could have just as much tension with repeated messages, and no actual time limit).

The Atomic Heart (2003) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Mike Russo:

The initial section is frustrating and punishingly timed. When confronted with a myriad of new commands and a nonhuman player character, my first impulse is to tinker and experiment; unfortunately, this led to a quick depletion of my charge. It took me several restarts before I figured out everything I needed to do.

Splashdown (2004) by Paul J. Furio, reviewer Mike Russo:

I generally loathe time limits, but this one was relatively forgiving, and taking too long was much more likely to lead to a lower score than catastrophic failure, which is a reasonable approach.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

The puzzles seem to be mostly timed and the timing on them's awfully tight. I appreciate the sense of urgency, but it could stand to be loosened up a bit.

7.6. Disabling Undo

The City (1998) by Sam Barlow, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

During those discussions about `"undo"` that we always seem to get into on raif, I've stated that as a general rule, undo is a good thing and should be kept in, unless there are serious artistic reasons for leaving it out. Then I'd privately add "but I doubt I'll ever see a game that really requires doing so."

Ok, I was wrong. This is the game. Not only does it leave out undo, save and restore are also removed. And guess what? It's ok. It works.

Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There is no excuse for disabling `undo` ... this is especially irritating because I can't see any particular reason for it — there are some combats but they don't seem to be very random, and I don't see any other random events that the author might feel the need to restrict undo over.

References (Disabling Undo):

- [Discussions about disabling Undo](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

7.7. Randomness

Four In One (1998) by J. Robinson Wheeler, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game is] frustrating ... it's not because there are a lot of NPCs to understand and manipulate. It's that so much of the NPCs' behavior is random, as far as I can tell, that a given game can be impossible to win if certain random events go against you often enough.

Nevermore (2000) by Nate Cull, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The instructions for a certain puzzle] are spread over six different books, books which only reveal their contents randomly. That's right, each book contains between four and ten critical pieces of information, but each time you type `"read book"` you get a random selection of one of those pieces.

Consequently, not only can you never be sure if you've obtained all the information you need, you have to perform the same command over and over again, wading through dull repetitions of already-printed information in the hopes that you'll turn up something new.

Nevermore (2000) by Nate Cull, reviewer Lucian Smith:

To make me type [the same thing] over and over and over and over and over again hoping against hope to get a new randomly-discovered piece of text is *quite* annoying ... any number of other methods could have been used that would have perfectly adequately conveyed the "not very well organised" feel to the research ...

The information could have been presented in a "shuffled" order. It could have required you to use the `>look up x in y` syntax. It could have at *least* allowed the `>look up x in y` syntax to find information you had already read once! Maybe an automatic note-taking system could have been utilized.

The Beetmonger's Journal (2001) by Scott Starkey, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The clue for [a certain] puzzle seems to be embedded in an environmental "atmosphere" message that only prints randomly. This setup has the dual disadvantage of fading into insignificance after several instances and possibly not printing when the player most needs to see it. A crucial clue whose absence will stop the player from progressing probably shouldn't be random.

Chronicle Play Torn (2004) by Penczer Attila, reviewer Mike Russo:

Your items get stolen at random, and it's possible to have the game put itself in an unwinnable state if the wrong item gets taken.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

The book ... [is] implemented to show snippets of text at random. The player has no way to know if they've seen all the text. When a piece of text repeats itself, it's natural to assume that you've seen all the text.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Mike Snyder:

I looked at the [objects] on the shelf several times. I saw two or three different [objects] — and sometimes none at all — after repeating that ten or so times.

Later, via the walkthrough, I found that [one of the objects] can be taken ... you can take [the object] only when you stumble upon it, which requires pure and repeated randomness.

7.8. Scoring

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game's "scoring" system does keep track of puzzles solved, but does it in emotional rather than numerical terms, starting with "conflicted" and moving through "astonished," "respectful," etc. I thought this innovation worked brilliantly ... I was greatly pleased to see a game whose scoring system fulfilled the basic purpose of a score (keep players posted on their progress) and went beyond it in such a flexible and artistic way.

Mother Loose (1998) by Irene Callaci, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There's a freshness of spirit to [this game] that is unusual — getting points for things like returning objects to their owners, not because it serves ulterior ends in the game but merely because the author feels it's a good thing to do, reminds the player that children are part of the intended audience.

Jacks Or Better To Murder, Aces To Win (1999) by J. D. Berry, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The game awards a couple of points here and there merely for looking at things. I think the author probably did this to provide a sense of steady progress, but I found it very distracting.

On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts, reviewer Mike Roberts:

There is no score in this game. My guess is that the author didn't include a score because he wanted to emphasize the story component, but there were still enough puzzles, simple though they were, that I found myself wanting some sort of indication of my progress.

The Case of Samuel Gregor (2002) by Stephen Hilderbrand, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Your score goes down for doing something you have to do to win.

Domicile (2003) by John Evans, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

[There was] no score system to go by as a marker of progress (an undesirable omission in a puzzle game, if you don't mind my saying, and one of the many indications of certain flaws in this author's thinking about what he was crafting).

Identity (2004) by Dave Bernazzani, reviewer Mike Snyder:

I particularly liked the "Complete %" as opposed to a straight numeric score. Sure, it's still "X out of 100", but it was a nicer way of gauging progress.

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer Mike Russo:

The scoring system ... doesn't really add much to the game.

Son Of A ... (2005) by C. S. Woodrow, reviewer Michael Martin:

The scoring system ... made point awards kind of function like clues. That was a neat trick too. "Oh, I got points for picking this up/going here; this must be important."

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Robert Menke:

You can [perform a scored action] multiple times, getting points for each action. I had 103 out of 95 points going into the endgame.

References (Scoring):

- [Discussions about scoring](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

7.9. Death

The Plant (1998) by Mike Roberts, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

It [is] impossible to [die], a design choice that works well in some contexts but not in this one. The story ... involves some danger; breaking into heavily guarded top-secret complexes usually entails negative consequences if caught. But there are several points where harm should be imminent, logically, and knowing that the danger will just keep getting closer but never arrive, Zeno's-paradox style, destroys the illusion of the story and takes away the tension ...

Admittedly, with an IF engine that supports `undo` as well as `save/restore`, any "death" is but a passing setback — but avoiding death does affect a player's emotional experience, and knowing that there was no death to avoid reduces whatever emotional effect there is.

SNOSAE (1999) by R. Dale McDaniel, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Many of the puzzles ... are of the "save-and-restore" variety. "Oh, that killed me without warning. Well, let's get a hint from this death message and restart." These sorts of tactics really raise my hackles as a player, because they use the IF conventions I've learned against me, and give me no warning they're doing so. When I solve one, I don't think, "Aha! I feel so clever now!" I think, "What an irritating puzzle."

Only After Dark (1999) by Gunther Schmidl, reviewer Mike Roberts:

[One puzzle] can't be solved without first getting killed, since we need information from the death scene to know what to do; I don't like this kind of puzzle because it forces the game mechanics to intrude, destroying the illusion of a story.

Stone Cell (1999) by Stephen Kodat, reviewer Mike Roberts:

[A hint given after a fatal action] is poor in that using it requires "alternative universe" knowledge: we can only apply the hint by restoring an earlier game ... thus the player can obtain the hint, but the player character cannot.

A Light's Tale (2004) by Zach Flynn, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The sudden death issue was [very] prominent ... I would suggest that instead of death, the player is sent back to a central location; it provides a penalty, but should save a little on frustration.

Splashdown (2004) by Paul J. Furio, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

This is a terrific Infocom pastiche ... you definitely need to be prepared for the old-style "run out of time, die horribly, run out of light, die horribly some more, make mistakes, die horribly, optimize, win" cycle. But that's fine.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It's too easy to get killed at the beginning.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game] is very deadly ... but it plays fair and though the player will do a lot of dying, generally each death imparts a bit more information about how to not die next time.

Space Horror I (2005) by Jerry, reviewer Mike Russo:

Several times, the text indicated that the protagonist wanted to pick a certain path, which when followed led to certain death.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

One slight problem is the risk of instadeath in places ... I'm not convinced this is an entirely successful technique, but it works to an extent I suppose.

References (Death):

- [Discussions about death in IF](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup (search down).

8. Writing

8.1. Writing In General

Photopia (1998) by Adam Cadre, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game] skillfully uses multiple narrators to tell its tale, and carries themes and images throughout that help give the story life.

Till Death Makes A Monk-Fish Out Of Me! (2002) by Mike Sousa and Jon Ingold, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There are numerous instances of excellent foreshadowing, whether of themes or puzzles — in the former case, they add great pleasure on re-reading, and in the latter case they operate as a delightfully subtle but effective hint system.

Scary House Amulet! (2002) by Ricardo Dague, reviewer Jess Knoch:

When I walk into a room with a skeleton and I get a message like `"The skeleton gnashes gruesome teeth at you! Chak chak chak!"` I can't help but giggle! The tone is amazingly consistent throughout the entire game.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The text ... must make clear to the player the situation, and describe the scene, objects, and actions so that the player can tell what's going on ... sometimes authors let that job slip a little in the name of art, or perhaps literature ... the words [in this game] are beautiful, haunting, and evocative, while still performing their task of communication.

Baluthar (2003) by Chris Molloy Wischer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[A] chronic problem in the prose is "adjectivitis": `"The white-lined faces of the densely-packed leaves give the unsettling impression of a ghostly crowd of fish bones which stretches endlessly around and above you."` Ack! "The (adjective noun) of the (adjective noun) give the (adjective noun) of a (adjective noun) of (adjective noun)..."

This repetitive structure gives the prose a lumbering, choppy feel, no matter how vivid the words may be.

Trading Punches (2004) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Mike Russo:

The author goes to some trouble to address all of the senses — most notably the tactile — [and] the various locations are distinctly immediate and immersive as a result. The descriptions linger over the feeling of skipping a stone, the quality of the ambient light, the subtle heat emitted by a wristwatch.

The plot jerks the player from one event to the next, often separated by a wide stretch of time and space, and it isn't the rather tacked-on frame which unifies things; it's the familiar warmth of the prose.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

The intro rubbed me a bit the wrong way. I don't know why, but it feels tonally off. Not emotionally charged enough to be an inside-of-head monologue, too slanted to be just a flat intro. It read a bit like that guy who corners you at parties to complain about some particular of his life and makes you wonder if you could escape by chewing your arm off or something. I think it's its focus on a bygone event rather than the current situation that does it.

Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty, reviewer David Whyld:

Very well written in parts. Nicely wordy without it ever seeming like you're being forced to wade through so much text your eyes begin to glaze over.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The writing ... [lacks] complicated metaphors and dense descriptions. This keeps it unpretentious and more game-like than story-like.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The writing [in this game] is excellent. This is one of the few games where the text just flowed right. It wasn't forced, it wasn't overdone, and it wasn't choppy. Good writing makes a game seem more real, and when the unique world seems to be the focus, that's important.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Whether you like this game or not, you have to admire Devlin's willingness to go all the way in writing it. He doesn't rely on hints or suggestions or innuendo — this is a game about corruption and rot and spiritual and physical decay, and if that requires sticking a filth-encrusted chamberpot in the heart of the church, then he's going to put it there.

References (Writing In General):

- [Fine Writing](#) by Gareth Rees.
- [Discussions about writing](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

8.2. Setting The Mood

A Change In The Weather (1995) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game] is a veritable textbook for authors who want to know how to create and then change a mood, or infuse a scene with tension ...

Like all good writers, [the author] is sparing with the adjectives and more often uses verbs to produce the desired effect ... elements of the scenery get active verbs rather than simply being described, and the adjectives are placed to convey something essential rather than simply piling on the description.

Delusions (1996) by C. E. Forman, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Infocom-level prose — not at classic literature level but more than sufficient to get one's heart racing and chills mounting. The descriptions of [certain] entrances and exits skirted the edge of histrionics but always came down on the right side.

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The prose employed at the magical moments was breathless with a sense of wonder, imparting just the right amount of awe and astonishment without going over the top into cheesiness or melodrama.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Almost immediately, the game has an eerie tinge to it ... the text studiously avoids saying "you" ... the descriptions of things and even descriptions of actions are ghostly, passive: the desk you want to look in is not "your desk," the response to `"open drawer"` begins with `"The large central drawer opens"` ... trying to take an object you already hold gives `"One cannot take what one already has."`

Internal Documents (2003) by Tom Lechner, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

I found the whole area quite evocative of age and decay and history ... the occasional mentions of creaks and groans and cracks were suitably atmospheric, creating the palpable sense that I was weakening an already structurally-unsound area by the act of exploring it.

The Recruit (2003) by Mike Sousa, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The text of the game was actually written by more than one person ... the style differences [helped] to make the world feel more textured, with different flavors of writing that seemed to match the different-colored rooms.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Mike Russo:

While the game is overall fairly solid, its refusal to maintain a tension-filled atmosphere severely undercuts its effectiveness.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The writing is vivid and the game feels urgent when it needs to be.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Mike Russo:

The biggest complaint I had about the game is that [it] suffers from a tone mismatch. The overall vibe and language are very jokey, but there are occasional moments where the author seems to be wanting to tell a more serious story ... [there is a problem with] consistency of mood.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

The writing is excellent and conveys the sense of isolation and incipient madness flawlessly.

8.3. Overdone Writing

The Obscene Quest Of Dr. Aardvarkbarf (1997) by Gary Roggin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Almost every single room ... has some kind of remark about how you spend your days weeping and crying ... the prose sometimes goes much too far in repeating the same thematic point in object after object.

My Angel (2000) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The writing, for its part, is solid, good enough not to get in the way, though it does occasionally lurch into total abstraction at times when the player simply wants to know what's going on ... something Has Happened, and the player (this player, at least) doesn't want to hear about how the darkness is like a fruit dangling from an elm-tree.

Gamlet (2004) by Tomasz Pudlo, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The writing [in this game is] so highly stylized that it's probably not going to be to everyone's tastes. Sentences are ornamented and elaborated to the point of gaudiness, and then a few other decorations are tacked on (`"A tall cabinet cleft between darkness and dusk stands at the northern end of the landing.","Thickets of weed sizzle and seethe along the almost vertical walls of sediment and vegetation."`) ... the writing so florid that I couldn't get into the game enough to appreciate the theme.

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Definite points for ... the writing (not frilly, but with a few well-turned phrases spaced appropriately).

Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The writing in general is overdone, and hits an emotional level that we don't see enough character development to justify.

On Optimism (2005) by Zach Flynn, reviewer Mike Russo:

The prose is overwrought, dripping with emotion which is completely unearned by the narrative — at one point, the protagonist says that weeping is not his custom, when it seems like every single room he enters prompts a different crying fit.

8.4. Conciseness

Purple (1998) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Certain moments go underdescribed — but the spareness of the prose serves the author well in spots. Descriptions are concise enough that they convey what happens and let the player mentally fill in the details ... disturbing details are scattered here and there, rather than filling every room description, suggesting a measure of restraint.

Captain Chaos (1999) by Shay Caron, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game is filled with] two-paragraph room descriptions. I'm all for being descriptive, but giving detail in a small amount of space is a valuable skill too.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Lucian Smith:

Very few words are used (perhaps "wasted") on anything ... for all that the sentences were brief, they didn't ever feel like they needed to be longer. The essentials were communicated efficiently, and the terse writing conveyed the mood of the piece almost more than the actual words themselves.

The Big Mama (2000) by Brendan Barnwell, reviewer Emily Short:

I think brief descriptions that can be further elaborated are preferable to long ones. I'd rather examine half a dozen things mentioned in a room description than have those descriptions all stuck into the bulk of the narrative. For one thing, this feels deeper and more interactive; it gives me an option about ordering, and rewards me for paying attention.

Baluthar (2003) by Chris Molloy Wischer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[One description said] `"A nine-foot statue of a deity scowls down at you from the top of a large boulder near the hut."` ... [This sentence piles] on one modifier after another.

Consider if instead it had read, `"Atop a large boulder, a nine-foot statue scowls down at you."` We don't need to know it's near the hut, because we know we're standing outside the hut — the simple presence of the object in this location tells us it's near the hut. Save the fact that it's a deity for the statue's description, and separate the remaining prepositional phrases by moving one to the beginning of the sentence, shortening `"from the top of"` to `"atop"`, and now we have a much more concise and compelling description.

The Big Scoop (2004) by Johan Berntsson, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The writing [contains] no real flaws, but it doesn't take any chances, either. Room descriptions are short and to the point with hardly any color ... I'd rather have seen some errors and a more colorful game than the way [it] is now, playing smoothly but unexceptional in any way.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The writing was very good ... the author was able to paint a vivid picture without excess text, and that's something I find enviable.

8.5. Show, Don't Tell

Cattus Atrox (1998) by David Cornelson, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game] reemphasises the point made by Anchorhead that you almost certainly can't write anything as scary as what I can think up. So the more explicitly you write about something, the less room you've left for imagination and the less scary it is.

Stone Cell (1999) by Stephen Kodat, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[The game] is a little too quick to ascribe emotions to the PC, and to maunder on about those emotions; the more restrained scenes that leave the player to make inferences about the PC's feelings work much better.

Shade (2000) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Emily Short:

The PC's character and phobias pervade the descriptions ... but in an understated way, so that there's a cumulative effect rather than one particular moment when the fear begins ... the author wisely avoids telling me what to feel, leaving me to notice [things] for myself.

Prized Possession (2001) by Kathleen M. Fischer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

"Show, don't tell" is a piece of advice often given to beginning writers. The basic gist of this advice is that authors should endeavor to let us observe the action and draw our own conclusions, rather than just flatly announcing the state of things — it's far more effective to show a character fidgeting, biting her nails, and stammering than to just say, "Marcy was nervous."

The danger of this advice is that it is so easy to misinterpret ... some writers hear "show, don't tell" and take it to an extreme, thereby leaving out important swaths of the story on the assumption that readers will be able to connect the dots. Well, maybe some readers can, but the more transitions, background detail, and other such connecting stuff gets omitted, the higher the number of readers who will stumble through the story in a state of perpetual confusion. It's a difficult balance to achieve, and I fear that [this game] finds itself on the confusing end of the spectrum.

For instance, at the end of the first scene, the PC has just effected a daring rescue but paid a heavy price. That first scene omits a lot of detail about who the PC is, why she finds herself in such dramatic circumstances, and what caused the tragic end event, but these omissions aren't too bothersome, as we trust that the story will get filled in.

Instead, none of this information ever comes to light; the game careens into its next scene, which takes place ten years later, and provides no explanation whatsoever of what has happened during the intervening period. The PC is in entirely different circumstances, but these are, again, unexplained. This sort of phenomenon happens over and over throughout the story, and my notes are filled with bewildered complaints like "wait — when did I get untied?" and "I am so lost."

Augustine (2002) by Terrence V. Koch, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

What better gets across the idea of time passing than watching a city evolve? Sadly, most of the potential is squandered. There aren't really any times in [this game] when you get to see a location in the city and then come back later to see how it's changed, so most of the information about the changes just gets told to you rather than shown.

Identity (2004) by Dave Bernazzani, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

You regain your memories over the course of the game, which is fine, but the repeated exposition that `"You have regained some of the memories you lost in the crash"` is rather painful. Describe the experience, don't tell me that it happened.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

I'm told far too often what I'm thinking and feeling.

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer Mike Russo:

... the game ultimately feels superficial. All through high school, my English teachers would repeat that most annoying of mantras: show, don't tell. [The game] presents a 1984-style dystopia, but doesn't provide any details or specificity on what, exactly, the society does that's so terrible ... instances of government oppression are few and far between ...

As a result, the proceedings feel bloodless; the central dilemma which is meant to give force to the plot lacks tension, and the ideological struggle is an abstraction without weight.

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer Mike Snyder:

It was never quite clear what freedoms and choices were abandoned by the formation of the Union. Everything seemed pretty normal to me. People came and went unhindered. Lives seemed otherwise normal. The theme could have been more heavily saturated into the game, for a better effect. With a theme like this, I think that's important. Show, don't tell.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It's a historical piece ... and it's kind of heavy on the details ... the author clearly realizes he's going a bit overboard, but really should have restrained himself further. The trick with these kinds of things is for the author to know a lot about what they're writing, but only to put a small fraction of what they know into the game, and let the rest just be suggested.

8.6. Spelling And Grammar

Screen (2002) by Edward Floren, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Any sense of involvement was pretty well shaken when the girl that Jordon brought to the treehouse was described as being `"so sweat"`. Yuck.

Hello Sword (2005) by Andrea Rezzonico, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The English [in this game] is bad enough that it's not really playable. It takes a lot of work to understand some descriptions, and sometimes this spills into player input as well (for instance, there's a part where you have to do `>write x with y`, and `>write on x with y` gives a confusing error message).

Dreary Lands (2005) by Paul Lee, reviewer Mike Russo:

There are wall-to-wall misspellings, and "your" and "you're" are continually interchanged.

On Optimism (2005) by Zach Flynn, reviewer Mike Russo:

[The game] is riddled with misspellings, usually due to homophones (bear/bare, its/it's).

Phantom: Caverns Of The Killer (2005) by Brandon Coker, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

The first sentence has an extraneous comma, a misspelling, and a miscapitalization. The second is a fragment. Get an its/it's error in there too and you'd have a complete set of writing errors.

8.7. Humor

Arrival (1998) by Stephen Granade, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The fun of the game is largely in the writing and the amusing asides ... the charm [lies more] in seeing the aliens' funny responses to different actions than in solving problems, and it is hence more rewarding to move the story along, in order to discover more parts of the game that produce funny responses, than to stand still until you solve a puzzle by your own wits.

Four In One (1998) by J. Robinson Wheeler, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game almost works, but] there's not really the feeling of continuous zany activity necessary to make you feel immersed in the slapstick.

Four In One (1998) by J. Robinson Wheeler, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The game is consistently funny — Groucho has lots of good one-liners, and Harpo has plenty of amusing antics.

Enlightenment (1998) by Taro Ogawa, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The gimmick is reminiscent of "Zero Sum Game": you've just finished a long dungeon crawl. Now there's just one damn troll between you and the exit. The pre-history of the game is the funniest part, as it shows up in various offhand comments ... try `"places"`, `"objects"`, or `"full score"`. Or the false hints. Brilliant. Brilliant, I say.

Spodgeville Murphy And The Jewelled Eye Of Wossname (1999) by David Fillmore, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The most amusing thing to me was the scoring system, which is a bit of adventure-game humor: we start the game nearly at the end, so our starting score reflects a huge pile of past achievements that don't appear in the game. The `full score` listing is hilarious.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

Overall, this is the sort of work that impresses you with its quality, and yet you find yourself wishing for a leavening of humor, as the atmosphere of the game is unusually grave.

Shade (2000) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

The only thing stopping me from giving a 10 out of 10 to this game is its crushing bleakness. I wish [the author] would cheer up his writing every now and then. He does have a sense of humor and a sense of whimsy; in his IF writing, he often ends up pulling down an opaque windowshade to cover them. Let's get some light in here, and crack the window to maybe let in a refreshing breeze now and then.

Not Much Time (2002) by Tyson Ibele, reviewer Mike Russo:

There's a gentle sense of humor to the whole thing, and there's enough whimsy to keep the plot ... from appearing too ridiculous.

Amnesia (2003) by Dustin Rhodes, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game] is a parody. Not a good parody, but a parody. I'm interested in humor from a theoretical perspective so I am curious why the satire felt so blunted. I think what it comes down to is [the author] recognized a couple obvious cliches in IF (amnesia, islands, cramped ecosystems, mazes) but didn't have a good enough understanding of the cliche to know what to do with it to make it funny ...

[There is] a maze that consists of a room saying `"This is a maze, ha ha."` Save Princeton had a maze that looked like a regular maze, but when you dropped objects to tried and map it, it said `"Ok, ok, I see you know how to handle these, let's just skip to the end"` ...

Just pointing out something is a cliche isn't particularly funny — taking that idea and doing something with it is funny, carrying it to extremes or turning it around and carrying the reverse to an extreme.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

This is a very good comedy IF game that sometimes rises to the fever pitch of successful slapstick comedy, and otherwise sustains a tone of gentle amusement. Quite a tricky thing to do right, but this game manages to.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There are basically two kinds of comedy you can put in an IF game: you can write funny lines, which lots of games do, or you can write funny scenes, which hardly any games do (Fine Tuned being one of the notable exceptions, as was the also-restaurant-themed Dinner With Andre). Or, rather, hardly any games do it well: `"You are a fat goofball wearing nothing but underwear"` is an attempt to write a funny scene, even if it doesn't, like, work.

[This] is a funny-scene game, and manages to pull it off, getting the PC to perform one bit of slapstick after another.

Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The humor would have been funnier if it eased up a bit.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

I found myself trying to act in character ... but even so, the packrat persona won, and it was amusing to see that referenced at the end of the game: sort of a sly dig at the player rather than the character. Me like.

Waldo's Pie (2005) by Michael Arnaud, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

[There's] something I've always hated in text adventures: The idea that humor is a good replacement for good writing. This isn't to say that humor and good writing don't mix, some of the best games have been comedies ... assuming a guise of humor in order to distract attention away from poor writing and puzzles is not a winning strategy ... humor is difficult to do well and this game doesn't do it well.

8.8. Examples Of Humor

Phred Phontious And The Quest For Pizza (1997) by Michael Zey, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

My favorite [quote] has to be when you come upon a butcher who is described thusly: `"Gunnar is burly, scary-looking brute. But he has the heart of a lamb. He has the heart of cow, too. He has many hearts in a pile on top of the counter."`

Erehwon (1999) by Richard Litherland, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Most of the inside jokes were past me, but there were quite a few funny moments that required no special knowledge to enjoy. For instance, this exchange with the parser:

```
On both sides of the so-called boulevard (more of a dirt track) is
an impenetrable ferret.

>x ferret
Did I say ferret? I meant forest. It's stoatally impenetrable.
```

Till Death Makes A Monk-Fish Out Of Me! (2002) by Mike Sousa and Jon Ingold, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The writing in this game is just flat-out funny, sometimes howlingly so. Just one example of many — looking at a palm scanner after you've switched bodies with an NPC:

```
>x panel
Flat black glass, a panel that uses all manner of fancy beams to
read over your palm-print and check you are who you think you are.
Unfortunately, it's not clever enough to realize you now think you
are someone that you actually aren't. Or you think you are someone
who you're not, but really are. Or something like that. Anyway,
it's a pig-ignorant machine.
```

A Paper Moon (2003) by Andrew Krywaniuk, reviewer Jess Knoch:

You can tell right off that the game is not to be taken seriously when the response to `"use toilet"` is `"You know how on TV shows like Star Trek, the characters never seem to need to use the bathroom? It's like that in adventure games too"` ...

```
>close door
You're not the kind of person who closes doors behind him. Stop
playing against type.

>take bell
If you carried a bell with you everywhere you went, you wouldn't
be able to sneak up on people any more.
```

Sting Of The Wasp (2004) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The NPCs ... provide the game lots of opportunities to replace standard library responses with something more fun. One of my favorites was this replacement for `"You can't go that way"`:

```
"Oh dear", Cissy says as you bump into a low wall. "Julia, you
really should try some Ginkgo biloba. I've been taking it for
months now and I hardly ever crash into walls anymore."
```

9. Descriptions

9.1. Descriptions In General

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Most events and descriptions are portrayed with a wealth of detail, consistently absorbing and almost never tedious ... though the writing in [this game] is not always as economical as it might be, the moments that get described with particular detail warrant the attention; the game's interest in detail mirrors the player-character's observations of the surroundings, and the circumstances justify more attention to the scene than your average passerby might give.

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

One of the best-described settings imaginable ... most of the five senses are at work throughout the game, and the descriptions often reflect a multisensory experience.

A Moment Of Hope (1999) by Simmon Keith, reviewer Mike Roberts:

One technique that the work uses to great effect is a gradual revelation of details in the setting. The initial setting ... is quite rich, but the game doesn't immediately dump every detail on the player; instead, the game reveals details gradually as the player accomplishes things. This allows the game to guide the player's attention to things in a particular order; the effect is subtle, because it mimics the way we actually absorb our surroundings: we notice what we want to notice and lump everything else into the background.

Shade (2000) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The one-room setting is implemented brilliantly, shaping its descriptions based around what the PC is most likely to perceive first.

The End Means Escape (2000) by Stephen Kodat, reviewer Emily Short:

The rules of our world are discarded in favor of some other set of rules, and you are encouraged to explore until you understand what's going on. In service of that, the description must walk a delicate line: it must convey the Strange Other, but in terms that are still semi-familiar.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

I can guess what a locutory is, and contextual clues suggest at the function of a calefactory, but some better description might help.

References (Descriptions In General):

- The Room Description by Graham Nelson (*The Craft of Adventure*).
- Mapping the Tale: Scene Description in IF by J. Robinson Wheeler.
- Descriptions Constructed by Stephen Granade (Brass Lantern).
- Description Medicine by Michael Berlyn (XYZZY News).
- Landscape and Character in IF by Paul O'Brian (section *ROOM DESCRIPTIONS*).
- Discussions about descriptions on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

9.2. Inadequate Descriptions

Down (1997) by Kent Tessman, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[One] problem is that the scene is a bit underdescribed — you're told that there are people helping injured passengers, but that's about it. Are there lots of injured people? Are they badly injured? Are there enough intact people to take care of the injured? There are almost no bodies [either].

For A Change (1999) by Dan Schmidt, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game] manages to leave most of the visual details entirely to the player's imagination by refusing to pin down exactly what the PC is seeing or experiencing, except in the most general terms. The result is either maddening or evocative, depending on the player.

Delvyn (2002) by William A. Tilli, reviewer Emily Short:

I can see that the author and I have different approaches to implementation, and that from his point of view mine might be obsessively detailed to the point of clutter. He might even be right. But austerity is also a tricky thing to handle properly, because if you have a sparse room description and no further descriptions available to help the player visualize critical objects, the player may have no idea what to do next.

Temple Of Kaos (2003) by Peter Gambles, reviewer Emily Short:

[I couldn't] envision the details of the world well enough to imagine how I could interact with them ... in a surreal environment you have to work that much harder to make your game world accessible.

The Recruit (2003) by Mike Sousa, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

I had a problem with ... the Yellow room. I found the scene and object descriptions inadequate at providing a mental picture of the room and everything in it ... in this room somewhere is a cage, I'm not quite sure how big, and in it are a dog, a blanket, and a card, in some undefined way out of reach, and there's a door somewhere of unknown size (but too small to enter), but it's not necessarily blocked by the cage, even though the cage is described as big enough to reach the ceiling and contain objects out of reach.

9.3. Undescribed Objects

Phred Phontious And The Quest For Pizza (1997) by Michael Zey, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

One significant object is hidden in a scenery object that barely gets mentioned, [and] another important object is never mentioned at all.

Colors (2001) by J. Robinson Wheeler, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There are some game states where crucial items appear to have vanished, when in fact they are present but totally undescribed. This sort of environment manipulation is a big no-no in IF — I'm relying on the text to present an accurate picture of the world, especially in pure puzzle games.

A Paper Moon (2003) by Andrew Krywaniuk, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game uses] unmentioned but implied scenery items as important puzzle components ... [this is similar to] Adam Cadre's I-0, where a car is a major game object, and even though things like the tires, trunk, seatbelts, and glovebox aren't explicitly mentioned in the car's description, they're implemented and often important ...

I think the reason that this method didn't work very well in [this game] is that it was done only inconsistently ... [it] doesn't provide the solid coding and consistency of depth that would lead us to expect those implied items always to be there.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There's a bit ... where you have to sabotage [an object], which requires doing something to an undescribed part of the [object] and then doing something not clued at all to disguise the sabotage.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Mike Snyder:

Some of the puzzles [were not solvable] ... the problem is, certain aspects of objects weren't described well enough to even provide all the information a person would need to solve the puzzle.

Son Of A ... (2005) by C. S. Woodrow, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

I had no reason to believe [a particular object] was openable.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

When the PC [does an action], a book appears. This is not mentioned until the player types `"look"`.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Michael Martin:

The contents of my wallet (which are important for dealing with daily life) don't directly show up in my inventory.

9.4. Changing Descriptions

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Several rooms have initial descriptions which describe the experience of arriving in the room, and the features that are most salient at first. Once this description has been displayed, further looks at the room will stabilize into a more settled description, one which takes details into account and bears reading multiple times.

Masquerade (2000) by Kathleen M. Fischer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The descriptions of various characters (and yourself) change as their relationships to one another shift, a technique which breathes a great deal of life into them.

Internal Documents (2003) by Tom Lechner, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

The best writing in the game is in the scene descriptions [in a certain area]. One nice thing about them is that they are adaptive; as you open doors, the description changes to tell you what exits are open and which are closed.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Mike Russo:

Thoughtful, amusing touches abound. `"x me"` reports the player character's increasing dishevelment as the evening progresses.

Goose, Egg, Badger (2004) by Brian Rapp, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

One stylistic choice that didn't work too well for me is that [this game] changes all room descriptions after the first visit. This approach can work well to help characterize a PC who is very familiar with her surroundings ... but I found myself floundering without exit lists, and frequently checked the scrollback because of the nagging feeling I'd missed something ...

If you embed clues in your prose, that prose should be repeatable without too much trouble. This is one of those rules to which there are a bunch of exceptions, but I what I found in [this game] is that occasionally an important bit of information is smuggled inside a description that prints once and once only.

Mortality (2005) by David Whyld, reviewer Mike Snyder:

At one point very late in the game, the `x me` response didn't take into consideration a pretty important change in circumstances.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Russo:

As time passes ... descriptions change quite strikingly, which is a very nice touch — not only does it effectively convey the character's deteriorating mental state and effectively underline the thematically central mood of decay, it also makes re-visiting already-explored areas a pleasure rather than an invitation to tedium.

9.5. Level Of Detail

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The levels of description can run so deep that the detail of the game becomes almost dizzying ... I have a terminology I've made up to talk about this sort of thing ... First-level nouns are those nouns that are mentioned in room descriptions. Second-level nouns are those nouns mentioned in the descriptions of the first-level nouns. Third-level nouns are in the second-level noun descriptions, and so on.

The deeper these levels go, the more detailed and immersive the textual world. Most text adventures don't even fully cover the first-level nouns, but [this game] does, and often many of the deeper levels as well. The result is a cave environment that feels hauntingly, sometimes terrifyingly, real.

Jacks Or Better To Murder, Aces To Win (1999) by J. D. Berry, reviewer Mike Roberts:

Several things that should be obvious in a room's description or an object's description are found only by inspecting something. This is fine when an additional level of detail is revealed by closer inspection, but in this game that balance was frequently not achieved: in many instances, inspecting one object reveals another object that really should have been at the same level of detail as the first one.

Strangers In The Night (1999) by Rich Pizor, reviewer Mike Roberts:

At first I was a little disappointed by the level of detail in the game ... examination of the setting is mostly unrewarded with more detailed parts of things to examine. Once I figured out that this was a game, though, I could see that the setting was not of great importance; I then saw the consistency of the detail level as a benefit, since I knew I wouldn't have to take a lot of time to inspect everything in each location.

Masquerade (2000) by Kathleen M. Fischer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

This game implements nouns to an impressive degree of depth, creating the illusion of a fully fleshed-out world in which the characters move.

Out Of The Study (2002) by Anssi Raisanen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game goes] very deep indeed with its levels of description ... given that [it] is a one-room game, this depth of implementation goes a very long way towards making the environment feel real and interactive.

Intriguingly, the point of this depth isn't just to increase immersion; it's actually an element of the game's puzzles, and clues are often buried several levels deep.

Square Circle (2004) by Eric Eve, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I particularly liked `x walls`, which provided an actual description for each wall of a room, creating a wonderfully complete feeling for the game's world ...

Some of the game's description levels go intoxicatingly deep:

```
>x guardian
The guardian is a lithe, athletic-looking man in his mid-thirties,
with short fair hair and a hard, unsympathetic face. He's dressed
in a pale gray uniform ...

>x gray
It's a drab, though reasonably smart, uniform consisting of pale
gray trousers and a tunic of the same color. The tunic has a pair
of breast pockets, with a badge above the left one ...

>x badge
The badge bears the inscription NEW ENLIGHTENMENT PUNISHMENT
SERVICE and depicts a set of prison gates and a sword ...

>x sword
The highly stylized sword is depicted hilt up and to the left,
with its blade interlacing the prison gates.
```

9.6. Creativity In Descriptions

Till Death Makes A Monk-Fish Out Of Me! (2002) by Mike Sousa and Jon Ingold, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The room descriptions are masterfully done, drawing from an endless well of cleverness to make the typical exit listing sound fresh and interesting.

Moonbase (2002) by Mike Eckardt, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

The scene descriptions were at times, shall we say, scantly realized: `"If you've seen one hallway, you've seen them all. You can go east and west in the hall, and there are doors to the north and south."`

Actually, I've seen some pretty unique hallway descriptions in IF ... you're the author. It's your moonbase. Take ten minutes, figure out what it actually looks like, and tell us.

Tookie's Song (2002) by Jess Knoch, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

[The description of the leaves is] `"see the row of icicles text."`

If you're going to bother to make a scenery object and give it a description, just put an actual description there ... the reference is [also] mimesis-breaking (mentioning game "text").

Adoo's Stinky Story (2003) by B. Perry, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

Often, you get text that says something like, `"Not very interesting, really."` Or, in different terms:

```
>AUTHOR, DESCRIBE THIS SCENE
The author has better things to do.
```

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Mike Russo:

Descriptions note the texture of surfaces and the richness of furnishings; leaving a porthole open will realistically chill a room. I've probably played dozens of games set on board spaceships, and am sick to death of running through their corridors and cabins and galleys and decks, but the similar environments in [this game] feel fresh.

Focusing on details makes the ship seem like a real environment, rather than a schematic backdrop for the action.

9.7. Being Specific

Masque Of The Last Faeries (2000) by Ian Ball, reviewer Emily Short:

Good descriptive prose needs particularity ... `"You see a redhead, a blonde woman, and a brunette here."` Blah. They might as well be a stack of colored blocks. I realize, of course, that with so many NPCs running around there's a heck of a lot of writing involved, but still. Either give me an undifferentiated crowd, or show me individuals rendered individually.

Rent-A-Spy (2002) by John Eriksson, reviewer Jess Knoch:

[At one point] `"x paper"` gets you `"It's a purchase order for more office supplies. It's signed by someone called Amy Bird."` Which says to me, as a game player, "It doesn't matter what it says exactly. It's related to office stuff, but what you really need to know is the name Amy Bird." Me, I'd rather see exactly what the paper says, I think.

Adoo's Stinky Story (2003) by B. Perry, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The description [of a CD] reads: `"It's a CD from your father's collection. This one is one of his favorites, although you've never quite been sure why."`

Is it Barry Manilow? Alanis Morissette? The Indigo Girls? It could be anything, just be specific! You're not only missing a chance for humor, you're missing the chance to add a bit of character and depth to this otherwise flat world. I feel like it's not a real CD, just a piece of game code shaped like a CD.

References (Being Specific):

- Lacunae (deliberately leaving out details from descriptions) by Stephen Bond.

9.8. Atmospheric Messages

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Particularly effective ... is a series of random messages involving your scenery that recur now and again ... though not precisely relevant to anything in the game, [these messages] do plenty to set the scene.

The Beetmonger's Journal (2001) by Scott Starkey, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The clue for [a certain] puzzle seems to be embedded in an environmental "atmosphere" message that only prints randomly. This setup has the dual disadvantage of fading into insignificance after several instances and possibly not printing when the player most needs to see it.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game has] a lot going on — probably more than the author realizes, since he knows which daemon messages are important and which are just color, but the player doesn't.

9.9. Location Names

The Chasing (2001) by Anssi Raisanen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The various estates throughout the game often have charming names such as "Bluebells" or "Valleyside" rather than just being called "Large House" or "(npc)'s House." The nice thing about this choice is that it works subtly toward enhancing the character of the PC, a wealthy landowner whose relationships with his equally privileged neighbors are friendly and congenial. The idea that the PC knew immediately the affectionate designations that the neighbors had for their houses granted authenticity to his friendships with them, and made the landscape feel more inhabited as well.

Koan (2002) by Esa Peuha, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Walking through places titled "Middle Location: This is the middle location in this game" and "North Location: This is the north location in this game" isn't an awful lot of fun.

Hercules' First Labor (2003) by Bob Brown, reviewer Jess Knoch:

[One area of this game] was too hard for me to map ... because so many of the location names were either similar-sounding or just identical.

10. Interactivity

10.1. Interactivity In General

Photopia (1998) by Adam Cadre, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The genius of good IF is that the player shapes the development of the story, even if the author has a certain end in mind.

Exhibition (1999) by Ian Finley, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This piece] could have worked perfectly well as straight fiction ... the playing experience in the interactive medium is rather distancing — and yet the story itself is genuinely intriguing, so much so that the player can almost forget that he has no part in it.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

As has often been noted, there are many difficulties inherent in telling a story through the IF medium, and one of the most-remarked-upon is the difficulty of keeping the player/reader involved (by giving him/her something to do) while still telling the story that the author wants to tell.

The solutions usually boil down to relinquishing control of the pace of the story (typically through giving the player puzzles to solve), or avoiding/minimizing the puzzle aspect of IF and sending the player through the story with little opportunity to affect it.

Shade (2000) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This] is the kind of game that puts a ton of care into its coding, most of which the player will never notice, because the very purpose of that care is to make the experience seamless for the player no matter what order she does things in.

Chronicle Play Torn (2004) by Penczer Attila, reviewer Mike Russo:

There's a fair bit of freedom here, and apparently one can win the game in a number of different ways, but since the player never really understands what's going on, instead of providing a sense of agency, all of this choice is just frustrating.

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

For a murder mystery to work, the player needs a sense of agency. The reward the player receives is from understanding things and working out the truth. In other words, it's the perfect genre for a wide open playing area with the player able to follow several leads at any time. The missing sense of agency here pulls the game down.

References (Interactivity In General):

- [Discussions about interactivity](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

10.2. The Illusion Of Freedom

Photopia (1998) by Adam Cadre, reviewer Lucian Smith:

I have never seen a more astounding example of adroit use of the "magician's choice." The geography is often completely plastic in the game, molding to fit the player's whims. "Pick a direction, any direction," [the author] tells us, while forcing us to choose the [right one] ... a clearer example of "the player walking through a field, not realizing they're following a path" I could not imagine.

Now that isn't precisely the "magician's choice" but [there are also some times when you enter commands just when the author planned for you to].

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I was ... wowed by the way that the game subtly arranges itself so that it appears to allow a very wide scope of action, but in fact moves the PC through a specific plot. I can think of several junctures where multiple choices are possible, all of which lead, very logically, to the same point. This is a game that clearly took great care with its design, extending the illusion of freedom a long way while maintaining a fairly specific structure.

Remembrance (1999) by Casey Tait, reviewer Mike Roberts:

I imagine that the author used the free-form entry system out of a desire to create more of an illusion of interactivity and freedom of action than a list of links would have suggested — the author might have thought that a fixed set of links would have made the limited set of choices too obvious.

But ... the player figures out very quickly that no actual freedom exists. To create a sense of freedom for the player, the game must actually understand and respond appropriately to the full range of commands that it purports to allow; when in fact a severely limited set of responses is allowed, it is far better for the player if the game simply enumerates the choices.

A Moment Of Hope (1999) by Simmon Keith, reviewer Mike Roberts:

Interestingly, this work isn't truly very interactive in the sense of allowing the player to control the way events unfold, but the design creates an effective illusion of interactivity. It is impressive that the game seems so interactive, and that the interactivity is so transparent, when in fact the author is guiding you down a fairly rigid path.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Mike Snyder:

Each chapter ... gets shorter and less interactive than the one before. Even when key story points can offer no real choice, it's better to keep the illusion of choice.

10.3. Genuine Choices

All Roads (2001) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Rather than letting you, the player, screw things up and get some `"*** You have died ***"` equivalent, the game simply prevents you from screwing things up ...

The railroaded nature of the game took away some of the satisfaction of figuring out the puzzle, since there was no possibility that I'd make a clever guess and be rewarded.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer Emily Short:

[This game] makes a fantastic breakthrough in interactive fiction design. I played it and thought, oh, so that's how it's done ... this [game] really offers free will for the player in a context where the choice actually matters to the story ...

This is one game where you can make master plans and carry them out, rather than being forced to step through an obstacle course of puzzles predetermined by the author.

(See the full review for elements of this game which may be imitated).

Luminous Horizon: Earth And Sky Episode 3 (2004) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The climactic battle ... gives you no leeway at all. You have to choose the right move each turn. It therefore becomes an undo-fest, which leaves me with little sense of making real decisions.

Mortality (2005) by David Whyld, reviewer Mike Russo:

At one point in the story, the narrative flashes back to [a certain time in his life]. The player has the option of having the character behave aggressively ... or meekly ...

The choice does seem to reveal something about the character, and one would think that later conversation options might alter to reflect a more confrontational or more retiring attitude, but no such changes seem to be on offer.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It looks like it's setting up for having to make a real choice and decide which alien to trust. But then, oops, the plot heedlessly carries you along and makes all choices for you, ending up with the wishy-washiest alternative. Bah. It would have been way better if the player could really talk to the aliens about stuff for a while and decide who to trust based on that, and then make a decision and see how it plays out.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer Mike Russo:

[This game] suffers from being on rather stringent rails. In just about every important scene, my input was limited to banging the spacebar at paragraph intervals while the excitement unfurled automatically around me. Really, I think the most important choice I made in the course of my playthrough was which flavor of beef I wanted for each meal.

Given that the central conceit of the game is that the player must choose between backing two alien factions, it's rather egregious to not even let the player voice an opinion on the matter ... [the game] practically plays itself, and the poor player is left to take care of meals and naps.

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

It sets us up for a nice choice between support of a secure status quo and a risky but tempting unknown, presenting both sides as of some merit at least in the eyes of the character. I play the role I'm expected and made a choice, and was pretty much told that that choice was wrong and that the other choice was right.

This is not what I want to see. If you're exploring a dichotomy, you can either present a really damned compelling case for one viewpoint or you can leave it openended. Trying to graft your own viewpoint onto a morally ambiguous story is cheating the player.

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The basic problem is that for any of these issue games, there's an easy answer: domestic abuse is bad, families should love each other, freedom is good. If this is all that's required, then the player will make the right decision instinctively and go on having learned nothing whatsoever.

If you want to write a good game about an issue, therefore, you have to make the choice a real choice ... there are multiple endings, yeah, but it's frustrating that any discussion of the ramifications of the choice only comes in the ending text — by that point, it's too late to think about it!

Quote from reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[In a well designed game], the player can participate meaningfully ... and isn't there just to read the author's carefully-written backstory. Games like "Whom The Telling Changed" are awesome because they let you make a real difference in what's going on.

Even games with a linear story can qualify here if the protagonist has an important role in the story and gets to do stuff, not just flash back to stuff someone else did.

10.4. Multiple Paths

Poor Zefron's Almanac (1997) by Carl Klutzke, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The author has manipulated the scoring system in such a way as to give the feeling of multiple endings. Granted, many of those endings amount to one version or another of `"*** You have died ***"`, but not all of them. There are more and less successful solutions to the story, and they are integrated so naturally into the endgame text that they almost escape notice. One of the nicest implementations of multiple endings in the competition.

Little Blue Men (1998) by Michael S. Gentry, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Another good point about this game is the multiplicity of endings, a nice touch, especially in a game this size.

The Plant (1998) by Mike Roberts, reviewer Lucian Smith:

Of the three endings possible in this game (that I found), there was no mystery as to which was considered "correct" — that's the one that got you the last several points. Since the other endings weren't so terrible, I wished that I had gotten *some* compensation for choosing them, at least, even if not as many as I got for the "right" one.

Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

[This game] has several different endings, all of them quite plausible ... the alternate endings fit the feel of the story well: the game portrays your situation as torn between diverging paths; the decisions you make, it is clear, have a more than incidental effect on the course of your life.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Lucian Smith:

[With one particular] ending, the rest of the endings "made sense" to me. If you know the possible "losing" endings, then this last "winning" ending is that much more meaningful ... but without pretty explicit hints, who's going to hear or understand that story? ...

My thought is, if you are designing a game with multiple endings that only make sense in context of one another, you should really give the player more to work with by way of finding those endings. And especially not tell the player in the walkthrough to throw away the one method they have of getting the best ending!

Jane (2002) by Joseph Grzesiak, reviewer Jess Knoch:

[I] agree with what the author says in the afterword about alternate endings: if he had implemented an ending where [the main character] gets away from her abusive husband, then he would risk making any ending where she doesn't seem like a "losing" ending, and that can't help but trivialize the subject. It's a difficult thing to handle in a work of interactive fiction, but I think this is an excellent attempt.

Jane (2002) by Joseph Grzesiak, reviewer David Welbourn:

All choices have no useful effect except to advance the story on rails, which unfortunately makes things seem more hopeless than they ought to be ... I think this might have worked better if [the main character] was given real choices to make, and if the game had multiple endings so we could learn which choices were good, and which bad.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer Emily Short:

There are multiple endings; [all of them are] sensible (within the logic of the game-world, anyway). The game handles the divergence gracefully. The first ending I got more or less by accident. But when I saw what had happened, I was able to think up a good way to avoid that particular ending, so I went back and tried something else. Because of the game's structural conceits, the failed playthroughs become part of the story of how the player reaches a final, desired outcome.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Tapestry [(another game by this author)] made a huge splash in 1996 by using the IF medium to explore ethical choices, allowing multiple paths through the game without attempting to privilege any one path as the "proper" one ... like Tapestry, [this game] offers an array of choices while attempting not to prefer any of them over the others ...

Even though multiple paths were available, there was still one that felt much more right to me than the others.

Space Horror I (2005) by Jerry, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

One minor feature that's an interesting design choice is [that] the different paths are all intended to take place in the same reality — if you don't make choice X at some point, then it won't be done as you're heading down the other branch, which might have an effect later on. I'm not sure this kind of faux-simulationism is really that visible to the player, but it's an interesting idea.

Snatches (2005) by Gregory Weir, reviewer Mike Snyder:

I played through to three different endings once ... but felt there had to be more. Later, I played through again, trying everything I could to make [the different story lines] interact. I managed to create some minor inconsistencies that way, but I never managed to find a deeper plot line. I hoped that the first character could do something that would help the second character do something to benefit the third character, and so on.

References (Multiple Paths):

- [Multilinear Interactive Fiction](#) by Emily Short.
- [Discussions about multiple endings](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

10.5. Linearity

Tapestry (1996) by Dan Ravipinto, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The game locks you into your path once [your initial] choice is made ... [This] does limit the realism element somewhat; in theory, you might have learned from one experience and want to take a different sort of path at the next decision point.

At the very least, having to play through the thing when your decisions are foreordained — when the game is simply waiting for you to input the correct things, not giving you choices as such — is a bit frustrating; I'm not really sure whether it would have been better to let it all scroll by than to provide the illusion of interactivity ...

My main problem [was that] there was no path that actually reflected what I, speaking for myself, wanted to do.

Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

A work of IF can still be enjoyable even when the interactivity aspect is minimal. Such a story needs to have a plot that is interesting enough that the player wants to see more of it, and is willing to put up with the lack of interactivity because guiding the story to its conclusion is enough.

Plots that call for emotional identification with the PC or another character are not good candidates, in other words, because empathy isn't fostered when the player can't interact much with the story; stories that turn on ingenious authorial inventions or breaking down the wall between author and creation — like [this game] — have a better chance of involving the player even without benefit of interactivity.

Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson, reviewer Mike Roberts:

This game is thoroughly plot-driven, and as a result it's highly linear, by which I mean that our course through the story is pretty much fixed: we don't have a lot of flexibility in choosing where to go or what to do next. Linearity is often bad, because we're forced to work on puzzles in a particular order, but in this case it works; there's so much to do, and the game relies so little on using puzzles to block progress, that the linearity never seems restrictive.

Rameses (2000) by Stephen Bond, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

If you'd asked me before this year's competition began to envision a game whose lack of interactivity was among its primary virtues, I'd have had trouble coming up with an example ... [This] is just such a game, one that uses the player's inability to interact (in part) to tell its story ...

There's virtually no deviation possible in the course of the game ... that usually indicates to me that the story would work better as static fiction — but the tension between player and PC sets up its own kind of interaction that makes this a surprisingly successful game.

Eric's Gift (2002) by Joao Mendes, reviewer Mike Russo:

Linearity in this sort of game isn't a terrible thing, but [it] suffers from never convincing the player that anything s/he does really matters to the story, either in the overall plot or even in smaller, thematic ways, which makes it hard to invest very much in the game.

A Light's Tale (2004) by Zach Flynn, reviewer Mike Russo:

[Almost all IF] has to deal with the railroading problem. One can work to allow as many player actions as one can imagine, but this approach is labor-intensive and can lead to nonsensical and pacing-free narrative. The alternative is to put the game on rails, to one degree or another. The best authors are able to arrange things such that the "correct" course of action appears intuitively obvious, and set out a few critical decision points where the player can feel like they're collaborating in the narrative.

[This game] has a third take: it's on naked, unmistakable rails, and it berates you any time you even think about getting off. Needless to say, this isn't a very appealing prospect.

Mortality (2005) by David Whyld, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

This [game] is actually less interactive than Photopia. Like, although the story's pretty good, most of the actual gameplay for me was

```
There are exits west and east.

>west
There's nothing interesting that way.

>east
A bunch of plot occurs, putting you into another room with exits
north and south.
```

Which, argh. I was ok with that in Photopia (and anyway, as people have pointed out, Photopia had a non-railroady appearance to a much larger extent than most of the games that have followed in its footsteps) but these days I think I'd rather see more interactivity even at the price of less story, unless the story is really incredibly awesome.

References (Linearity):

- [Discussions about linear IF](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

10.6. Disallowed Actions

A Party To Murder (2002) by David Good, reviewer Jess Knoch:

If you have no reason to be snooping ... then the game will prompt you with a `"Don't you feel funny, pawing through someone else's belongings?"` yet will allow the action if you insist. This is the perfect way to handle "IF behavior" in a more modern setting.

Square Circle (2004) by Eric Eve, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I quite liked the way [this game] allows you to do utterly dumb things, and the consequence is generally instant death.

Blink (2004) by Ian Waddell, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The plot's rails are constructed well — that is, whenever the game prevents the PC from taking a divergent path, it generally provides a pretty good reason.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer David Whyld:

Frequently I would try to venture off in one direction only to be told that I had no reason to go that way yet. Yes, it's one of those games where perfectly logical commands — i.e. exploring the general layout of the land — is restricted until certain requirements have been met.

While this limits the player from wandering off completely at random and ensures the games progresses in a nice, orderly manner, it's also somewhat annoying to be told you can't do something without a better rationale than "you've no reason to do that" being given. If I want to wander away from the crash site, shouldn't I be given the option to do so?

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

The response `"You can't go that way (at present)"` is deeply annoying. If you disallow something have a good reason and tell the player why.

References (Disallowed Actions):

- [Fatalism](#) (permitting dangerous actions) by Jason Dyer.

10.7. Auto Pilot

Jacks Or Better To Murder, Aces To Win (1999) by J. D. Berry, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

At a number of junctures in the game, it only takes a very minor action ... to impel the PC to perform a long sequence of actions, all of which are out of the player's control. In a way, this is fine, since most of the actions performed would be very difficult to communicate to an IF parser, not to mention difficult to guess.

However, this design choice once again tips the balance away from interactivity. Every time the PC makes a bunch of independent choices, I feel more and more like I'm not really involved in the story, like I'm just there to hold up the cue cards so that the plot can continue ...

[One factor] which helps to counterbalance [this game's] lack of interactivity is the fact that it doesn't make its puzzles too difficult, and it allows for multiple solutions at the most important juncture. When there is only one way to advance through the game, the action (and the fun) grinds to a halt pretty quickly if that route is difficult to find.

Jacks Or Better To Murder, Aces To Win (1999) by J. D. Berry, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The game is a series of you making some actions, then reading three paragraphs of deductions you make, then making some more moves, then reading three paragraphs about how you smash the conspiracy which of course you were tracking the progress of all along, and so on. Which is not to say this isn't a fun game ... it's just that, well, if the protagonist is so smart, what do you need me for?

Masquerade (2000) by Kathleen M. Fischer, reviewer Lucian Smith:

It was particularly frustrating to be stuck in the ballroom at the convenience of the plot and not in response to anything I typed differently.

Trading Punches (2004) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Mike Russo:

NPCs are a particular problem; there's no real ability to interact with them in any way. One can have conversations, but they all proceed automatically. Indeed, there's a troubling absence of player choice throughout the game — even the decision to kiss a girl or not is taken out of the player's hands.

Gilded: The Lily And The Cage (2005) by John Evans, reviewer David Whyld:

There are also times when [this game] goes into "auto pilot" mode. You know the thing. Your character creeps along a corridor and then, without you doing anything, he just rushes along and does something completely unexpected ... it might have been nice to be given the choice ... and not just have the game do it for you.

10.8. Insufficient Information

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

You have to choose which [tools] you want to take based on, er, not much besides your own intuitions. As in, you don't know much about what's coming, and you don't know how the interactions work, and you don't even know what the game considers important ...

It certainly enhances the replay potential, since it's impossible (or nearly so) to experience everything in the game with only one set of tools, but the tradeoff is likely to be frustration when the player realizes that his options are severely curtailed at move 300 because of a choice he made on move 5.

Space Horror I (2005) by Jerry, reviewer Mike Russo:

The player is left making choices in the dark, with no real information about the likely consequences ...

Progress in the game often resembles navigating a labyrinth more than creating a story; instead of picking what actions would make for the most compelling narrative, the player winds up backing up from dead-ends and going left instead of right, so to speak. Picking a [particular object] over [another one] will result in player death, but there's no a priori reason to know that.

11. Immersion

11.1. Realism

A Change In The Weather (1995) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The "magic realism" feel [of this game] — the fox's remarkable prescience, a certain change that the rain couldn't logically cause — don't break the logic, somehow, because they seem only just outside the realm of usual possibilities; they seem like the sort of things we feel could happen easily enough, given a minor incursion of the supernatural.

It's hardly less logical that the interlocking parts of the game come together in the way they do, after all, but the player isn't about to question that; likewise, the magical bits require only the sorts of suspension of disbelief that a player is happy to make anyway.

Babel (1997) by Ian Finley, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Small touches like tiptoeing across the cold floor in bare feet ... combined with broader strokes for an astonishingly realistic and well-written whole.

She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The author has clearly gone to great lengths ... to make sure that his NPC is one of the most realistic and satisfying in IF. The depth of this NPC works along with the game's outstanding prose to create an extremely realistic gameplay experience.

Friday Afternoon (1997) by Mischa Schweitzer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The great thing about [this game] is that by placing the to-do list in an office setting, the game gains a very realistic feeling. I really do deal with situations every day where I have a list of things that need to be completed before I can leave work, and so the logic of a game written around such a list feels quite genuine. This device allows the game to escape the aura of contrivance that mars other "recipe" games.

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The disabling of compass directions strikes a blow for verisimilitude, since cave navigation is typically too complicated for anyone to preserve a clear sense of direction; instead, the game provides `"forward"`, `"left"`, `"right"`, and such, and I found I didn't miss my compass at all.

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Mike Roberts:

[The] journey through the cave is rendered in very realistic terms — especially the dangers. It's as though we were actually exploring [a real cave], and experienced all of the discomforts and injuries that we'd really encounter — falling into pits, climbing chimneys, crawling through tunnels we can barely fit into. It's a novel approach to the genre, but it makes the game almost depressing.

Fort Aegea (2002) by Francesco Bova, reviewer Jess Knoch:

There were definite touches of realism (i.e., not everyone makes it) in the versions of the story that I saw. Great touch!

Rent-A-Spy (2002) by John Eriksson, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The first puzzle [was] an interesting, realistic bit of infiltration, broken up into several believable steps.

Concrete Paradise (2002) by Tyson Ibele, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I don't exactly demand a plausible world but I do expect a self-consistent one.

Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[There is a situation where you might want to use a towel]. Not only are they not implemented, neither is the reason for their absence. Certainly I'll grant that this level of realism is a lofty and difficult goal, but much of the game turns on the tension between the realistic demands of the setting and the ridiculous circumstances created by the plot. Players who are pushed and prodded about in the name of realism have the right to expect a satisfyingly thorough implementation thereof.

Identity (2004) by Dave Bernazzani, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Everything feels very mechanical, including the people and animals. For instance, there's a yak in the game, but the writing does very little to evoke anything yak-like about it ... [it behaves] like a yak-shaped car whose ignition key must be obtained (naturally) by solving a puzzle.

This puzzle, like many of the puzzles in the game, involves observing what few things are implemented and figuring out how they might interact with each other in game-logic. Not natural logic, of course, or else the solution to the yak puzzle would have worked equally well in another puzzle with a virtually identical objective. This approach isn't my favorite — I prefer the realism that's come in with the best IF of the last decade.

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The [thread where you are an unborn baby] has kind of a magical-realism vibe that keeps it from getting too silly (at least, if you're willing to buy it at all).

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

I had fun, but I started to almost wish there were a more realistic genre of IF where you really do take care of real-life challenges in a real way, but within bounds of the IF medium.

11.2. Plausibility

A Good Breakfast (1997) by Stuart Adair, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[You need to open] the washing machine, which requires finding something to pry it open ... which requires searching the house top to bottom because the premise requires a house in a mess with nothing in logical places and hence there's nowhere obvious to find this object ...

I have a problem, realism-wise, with discovering through a long slow trial-and-error process something about your personal life or home, something that you're not actually likely to have forgotten.

Cattus Atrox (1998) by David Cornelson, reviewer Lucian Smith:

The opening did manage to build up a certain amount of spookiness, but it was outweighed by the sheer farcicalness of it all. I kept wanting to try things like,

```
>KARL, TELL ME ABOUT WHY YOU'RE ACTING LIKE SUCH A LOON
```

The Pickpocket (2000) by Alex Weldon, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The premise of [this game] strains credibility considerably: a street urchin has made off with your money pouch, so you decide to wait until nightfall, then prowl into the most dangerous slums in the city to find the urchin and recover your money. Only in a text adventure could a character like this seem like a normal person.

At Wit's End (2000) by Mike Sousa, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

One puzzle in particular ... really strained the bounds of believability for me ... [When] rotten luck is part of a puzzle (especially the kind of rotten luck that makes you think "but that wouldn't really happen!"), it feels like the game is cheating.

The Evil Sorcerer (2001) by Gren Remoz, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The game has too many puzzles which involve finding keys in unlikely locations (the more unlikely since somebody supposedly lives in the house and needs access to the locations regularly).

Rent-A-Spy (2002) by John Eriksson, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

This is a spy game where you have no gadgets. I don't consider gadgets to be an absolute necessity for a spy game, but I do expect some reasoning as to why you don't bring basic equipment on a job like this, especially when you then have to improvise the equipment later on in wacky ways.

Bio (2003) by David Linder, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Why [the bad guys] spoke English when they were alone, I'll never know, but I'm grateful.

Sardoria (2003) by Anssi Raisanen, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I like this game ... but I do wonder why the king sleeps in the middle of his palace surrounded by a maze of traps. Like, how do courtiers come get him in the morning? And what if he has to get up to use the lavatory in the middle of the night? Wouldn't it be embarrassing to be snared by a booby trap and have to wait around in your pajamas for somebody to let you out?

Goose, Egg, Badger (2004) by Brian Rapp, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This is a] story of a young woman who lives alone on a farm with just her yak and her ape and her other animals for company. Plus her x-ray machine.

Of course, this doesn't explain why she turns into a robot some of the time, or why her electrical system is so tedious to use (forcing you to traipse back to the socket each time to turn off the power when changing appliances, and leaving trails of wire everywhere).

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Why does the enemy keep their magic artifacts so near their jail cells; why don't they, you know, leave some guards by your cell; why did the ancient people hide all the good stuff in their tomb if they were so big on their descendents taking over the world.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

As a work of fiction it doesn't work at all. The prison in which you're put is almost completely unguarded. You can walk around the castle and take precious items without problems — ridiculous stuff.

11.3. Mimesis And Immersion

A Party To Murder (2002) by David Good, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The author intrudes on my gaming experience by leaving a post-it note, a "Memo from the Author," in the medicine cabinet to do nothing more than tell me why there's nothing exciting in the medicine cabinet.

Now I know that medicine cabinets are a pain in the rear, because they're in almost every bathroom and they usually contain all sorts of little, fiddly objects. But please, I'd rather see a bare cabinet than a note from the author in an otherwise-serious game telling me why he didn't stock the cabinet. It isn't funny, but it does destroy the (otherwise quite interesting) mood you've created up to this point.

A Paper Moon (2003) by Andrew Krywaniuk, reviewer Lucian Smith:

The matches seemed oddly uniquely susceptible to soaking — nothing else in my inventory ever got wet ever, it seemed. This is a time-consuming thing to code, but if that's the puzzle you're going for, that's what you need to make it seem real — to uphold mimesis, as it were.

That's actually probably a key factor in mimesis — being consistent. OK, it's acceptable that in most IF, wading across a river doesn't get your possessions wet. But if you code up a puzzle where wading across a river gets *one* of your possessions wet, suddenly you're created a monster. The player will try to hide that item in other items, hold it above their head, put it in their hat, etc., and meanwhile wonder why their cup of coffee (which you left in the diner in your own playtest) didn't spill.

References (Mimesis And Immersion):

- [Crimes Against Mimesis](#) by Roger Giner-Sorolla.
- [Discussions about mimesis](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

11.4. Player Engagement

The Obscene Quest Of Dr. Aardvarkbarf (1997) by Gary Roggin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I stopped wanting to play the character, because my sympathy and identification were eroded by a stream of self-pitying text. Infidel plays a similar trick with an unsympathetic player character, but while Infidel at least gives you the pleasure of playing an outright villain, [this game] just provides the less thrilling experience of playing a pathetic whiner.

Enlisted (2000) by G. F. Berry, reviewer Emily Short:

Some bits [of the introductory text] are especially distant.

```
"This past year has been one to forget. You recall many fights
with your ex."
```

Who's that speaking? It's certainly not the PC's inner voice. It's a calmly distant narrator, speaking from somewhere behind my head and up to the left. A little mechanized. I'm not emotionally engaged at all ...

[In some other games] I had to make an imaginative leap to place myself in [the PC's situation], but at least I knew what I was aiming for: I had something particular to imagine.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The game leaves so much about the protagonist ambiguous for so long that it's difficult to connect to her emotionally. Some of the most emotional experiences for the protagonist come early enough in the story that the player is unlikely to be as strongly affected as he or she might be with some more setup and explanation.

Triune (2001) by Papillon, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Almost instantly, I cared about the character and about getting her out of [her] tight spot. Unfortunately, this particular tight spot wasn't really the focus of the game; the PC promptly jumps into a fantasy world ... which, initially, I found disappointing — if I have a real-life conflict, I want to do something about it, not just think about something else ...

The abrupt transition ... sacrificed the game's hook, which is a shame because it was a fairly good hook.

Moonbase (2002) by Mike Eckardt, reviewer Mike Russo:

I found that the cliched, video-gamey setup — lone troubleshooter sent to remote station overrun by aliens/demons/zombies — prevented me from really investing in the story.

Jane (2002) by Joseph Grzesiak, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

There are a couple inherent issues with trying to present this kind of thing as IF. First, there's the generic-PC thing: if you want to do a game about domestic violence, do you do it about generic people or do you do it about one specific person and risk having the issue as a whole get lost in the details?

[This game] takes the former track, and it's tough to second-guess these things, but I think it was a mistake ... the issue gets lost because of the lack of details. With nothing to connect with it's hard to really relate to what's going on beyond what you come in with.

Identity Thief (2002) by Rob Shaw-Fuller, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Through its excellent writing and careful plotting, the game ... cemented such a solid emotional connection between the PC and myself that I never flipped into the more "gamelike" state of mind that would attempt to obtain the most favorable outcome no matter how its methods might jar against the character or the story.

This sort of split consciousness is essential to dramatic irony, and is exceedingly difficult to achieve in IF. [This game] achieved it, at least for me, and deserves a great deal of praise for that.

Identity Thief (2002) by Rob Shaw-Fuller, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

... you never have a reason to feel involved. Stuff happens, but it happens in front of you, not to you.

On Optimism (2005) by Zach Flynn, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

For all his claims of sacrifice and suffering, we don't really see any evidence [of this] ... and for all the talk about how much the guy loves the girl, we don't ever get a reason for why he loves her ... if you want me as a reader to care, you've got to give me something to hang my emotions onto, or else they're just going to slip away.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Mike Russo:

What I really wanted to know was about what happened to the player character's brother, and the girl s/he had fallen in love with when s/he was young, and how s/he felt about the religious figures depicted in the shrine, and whether s/he was ever going to acquire a gender again. This is clearly a testament to the author's skill at getting me to care about the world and the protagonist.

Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty, reviewer Mike Russo:

Far be it from me to suggest that good stories require likable characters, but I do think there needs to be some means to allow audience investment, and I was less than excited about patching up this train-wreck of a relationship.

Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty, reviewer Mike Snyder:

[This game] doesn't ease slowly into its tale of love lost and memories shared ... I wish it did, even if only for a few more turns. Perhaps this could be a short lead-in where Valentine is on her way to meet Pete, before things get so serious. It was just hard for me to connect with the story in an emotional way.

Snatches (2005) by Gregory Weir, reviewer Mike Russo:

... the shifting POV means that the player never really invests in the characters. Because so little time is spent with each individual, they don't have enough room to breathe and establish themselves, and their eventual deaths fail to register as a result ...

Pruning things down so there are fewer balls in the air and the player could really start to care about the characters would have allowed the game to pack more of a punch and tell a better story ... Without player investment in the protagonists, monsters aren't frightening and death is greeted with a shrug.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Mike Russo:

The relationships between the three main characters ... are interesting, and really drive most of the action. Foregrounding them a little more, keeping the friend around for a while longer so the player can form an attachment to him, and keeping the story more focused ... would have made for a stronger, sharper, more affecting game.

Mortality (2005) by David Whyld, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

A character doesn't have to be nice to be interesting. I don't have to sympathize with someone to empathise with them. In this game, though, the characters are neither sympathetic nor interesting.

11.5. Depth Of Implementation

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game takes place on a beach whose implementation is exquisitely complete, a small space which allows a great number of options within it... narrow but very deep. In itself, implementation of this depth carries a kind of magic, the kind of delirious sense of possibility inherent in all the best interactive fiction.

Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

There's a huge number of things to play with; just plain old beach stuff. You can dig holes and build castles and jump on the castles. You can tie things to other things. (This is the most complete set of ropes-and-straps code that I've ever seen in a game. Most of it is just for fun).

Poor Zefron's Almanac (1997) by Carl Klutzke, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The] almanac contains a feature unique to all the `consult`able items in IFdom (as far as I know): it can be `browsed`. Browsing the almanac brings forth a random entry from within its pages; not only is it great fun to read these random entries, it also gives a sense of how thoroughly the almanac has been implemented. This device would be most welcome in other IF ... just having the book at hand lent a sense of scope and excitement to [the game].

She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

You wander around a wilderness, full of, well, everything ... more detail than you can shake a stick at, once you get the stick ...

There's so very much around that it's hard to examine the right things. For example, there are very specific "You can't go that way because ..." messages; most of them are scenery, but some are solvable problems. There's no good way to tell which is which.

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Not only is the cave vividly rendered, but the PC's experience of it is thoroughly, and harrowingly, done; no "cave crawl" in IF has ever taken such a toll on the PC over the course of the game ...

The layout of the cave as a whole makes sense in ways that most IF caves do not; you find standing water when you descend, for instance, and there is running water at the base of a canyon. Small details like this help make [this] such a well-realized setting that it puts most other cave crawls to shame.

Winter Wonderland (1999) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The attention to detail in the implementation is outstanding. Almost all of the objects mentioned in room descriptions can be manipulated to some extent, and a great many are responsive and helpful in some way.

Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The amount of detail in the game is amazing, especially given how large the setting is. Most of the detail isn't just superfluous, either — everywhere we go, we find bits and pieces that add to the overall story.

Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

A wonderfully immersive playing experience ... the objects by and large do what they're supposed to do when [they are transformed], and they interact with each other in plausible ways, nothing to sneeze at considering the complexity involved. Moreover, there are plenty of multiple solutions that draw on the various qualities of the [transformed] objects.

The PK Girl (2002) by Robert Goodwin and Nanami Nekono, reviewer Mike Russo:

Where [this game] really shines is in the incredible amount of stuff you can do. I wound up picking up an ice-cube tray early in the game; later on, I managed to fill it with water, stick it in a freezer, pop out the finished cubes, and started to make a frozen dessert with it. There was no obvious puzzle associated with it, although I'm sure there was a use for it ...

That level of interactivity is present throughout the game; you can help a character cook dinner, for example, or help comb another's hair. The sheer wealth of different objects to play and experiment with, some useful to the plot, some not, really makes the game feel more interactive and engaging than much story-driven IF.

Risorgimento Represso (2003) by Michael Coyne, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

The depth of implementation, of fun responses to nearly everything you can think to try, is superb.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

All nouns are well-covered, sometimes to a surprising degree. For instance, the intro uses a typically offhand-sounding SF metaphor when it says, `"The fog comes rolling over my memory like a morning on Tantus 7."` Later on in the game, you find a reference source in which you can look up further information on Tantus 7 and its famous fogs, even though the planet plays no other role in the game beyond that initial metaphor.

I love this kind of thing. A virtual world just feels so much more real when such care has been put into connecting its people, places, and things.

Square Circle (2004) by Eric Eve, reviewer Mike Snyder:

Bonus interaction abounds: you can draw on various things, you can wrap things around other things even though it doesn't help, some puzzles have multiple solutions, you can push objects around, the NPCs can talk about quite a number of things, and you can find objects which really have no importance.

It's great to have so much free interaction, but at the same time, it tends to obscure what's really important.

Splashdown (2004) by Paul J. Furio, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The implementation is almost comically rich in a couple of areas, particularly the cryotubes ... there are 125 of these implemented, each with its own personalized nameplate. I was so gobsmacked at this that I had to examine each one, and was rewarded with occasional jokes and geeky insider references. And so the ship's systems gradually failed as I went around autistically reading nameplates, but I loved it.

Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The detail put into this game is amazing ... almost everything obvious is implemented, and this includes more than just being able to look at what's around. Unnecessary actions such as jumping at the balcony or moving the body at the shore are anticipated and responsive.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The author has both come up with an interesting new world and implemented it enough that you have a real interaction with it over the course of the game ...

I was really pretty happy for the first hour and a half or so to just wander through the game poking at stuff.

11.6. Internal Consistency

Madame L'Estrange And The Troubled Spirit (1997) by Ian Ball and Marcus Young, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The relationship between what happens in the long text chunks and the actual game is often tenuous, as in the following:

```
Mr Jones stood up and thanked Madame L'Estrange

>look
Mr Jones is sitting in a comfy chair.
```

Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

```
>ask konstanza about mother's death
Chatting with Konstanza, even on frivolous subjects, was a
pleasant experience.
```

Beat The Devil (1999) by Robert M. Camisa, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Searching the shelves in one store [displayed a description which] didn't make much sense to me until I reached another store [and searched its shelves too] ... clearly, the game assumed I would search the shelves in the opposite order that I did ...

Writing text that is dependent on some other text already having been displayed is very tempting in IF, but you have to be careful that you take account of what happens if that text hasn't yet been seen.

The Evil Sorcerer (2001) by Gren Remoz, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

When Julia says you need a particular item, and she doesn't seem to notice it is there in the room with you, the sense of disbelief becomes strained.

Blade Sentinel (2002) by Mihalis Georgostathis, reviewer Mike Russo:

The conversation with the coworker is repeatable even when it's evening and saying `"Good morning"` no longer makes any sense.

Bio (2003) by David Linder, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

You awaken inside your room to find gas seeping in under the door ... examining the TV gives us this very amusing response:

```
>x tv
On the screen, you can see that it's a Fastlane rerun. Since it's
your favorite episode, you watch for a few minutes.
The room is nearly filled with gas!
```

Man, the PC must really love that show!

CaffeiNation (2003) by Michael Loegering, reviewer Lucian Smith:

```
"The screen shows a spreadsheet half-filled ...
The computer is currently switched off."
```

Gilded: The Lily And The Cage (2005) by John Evans, reviewer Robert Menke:

Breaking the mirror creates mirror fragments but does not remove the mirror from the room description.

Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty, reviewer Mike Russo:

Even if dinner comes out fine and has nothing to do with the fight, Peter later says `"It wasn't really about the lasagna, was it?"`, which makes very little sense in context.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Mike Snyder:

Gunfire in the club isn't noticed at all by the patrons ... the bouncer is described as being at the door, because the author hard-coded that into the room description. At times, the bouncer is actually in the alley instead. ...

I can take [an NPC's] gun, leave the room, drop it, come back, and somehow he still grabs it off the table where it no longer rests.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

Searching [a particular character] after he's dead leads to him swatting your hand away.

Vendetta (2005) by James Hall, reviewer Robert Menke:

The two guards still pace the room even after they have been killed. Talk about dedication...

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer Mike Snyder:

At times, I was able to do things while still inside the car, even though the game described me as standing outside.

11.7. Game Logic

Travels In The Land Of Erden (1997) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The author should get due credit for the idea [of the spell you cast] and for the comprehensiveness of the change. (And for the subtle effect after the spell has worn off. Very few games follow logical effects that way).

Outsided (1999) by Chad Elliot, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Early on in the game, the PC is given his briefcase. It's closed and locked. For some inexplicable reason, the PC doesn't know how to unlock his own briefcase. In fact, he never figures it out. The briefcase is never useful for anything.

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[You are] told something by the narrative voice that you couldn't possibly know, given that it's happening hundreds of miles away.

Screen (2002) by Edward Floren, reviewer Emily Short:

You can go down a chimney and come out in a room with no fireplace — how exactly does that work?

Moonbase (2002) by Mike Eckardt, reviewer David Welbourn:

I'm heading into a potentially dangerous situation without any equipment or precautions at all. Shouldn't I have a spacesuit in case the base is out of air or contaminated with germs or radioactivity? Shouldn't I also have a flashlight, a medical kit, a radio transmitter, and a weapon?

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer Mike Russo:

[I failed because] I hadn't bothered taking all the useless junk from earth (I'm sneaking on board a spaceship! Why, in the name of all that's holy, would I bring a mop?)

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

Large parts of the laboratory don't make sense: why place an immobile device and the immobile object on which it acts in different rooms?

Hello Sword (2005) by Andrea Rezzonico, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Weirdly, you don't use your Earth-knowledge of technology or anything, you just pick up a sword and a spellbook and start killing and/or zapping stuff.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

I can't help including this quote: `"You are aware that the club is silent, except for the loud music still playing."`

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Michael Martin:

Not only is [a certain command] uncued, the reply to the command indicates that the result seems to be triggered by physical contact, and as such it should probably be triggered by `searching` it as well. Worse, `looking under` it gives a reply indicating that you lift the object in question, and this doesn't produce the effect either. That really makes no sense.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Mike Snyder:

When searching boxes in one area, the PC finds nothing. I tried moving the boxes, but couldn't ... [the walkthrough says] you can look behind the boxes ... the PC then shifts the boxes around to see what's behind [them] ... it's frustrating to see the PC described as doing something you explicitly tried, in response to a different action.

12. The Player And The PC

12.1. PC Characterization

A Bear's Night Out (1997) by David Dyte, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The player is virtually never allowed to forget he is inhabiting a teddy bear's body, one of the best things about this game: [the author] evidently didn't simply throw together some puzzles and graft a funny plot on, and he clearly took some time making the game environment and gameplay appropriate to the game.

As a result, the cute and funny factor is considerable, which makes the game appealing in its own right even without good puzzles. When you climb down from something, for example, you get `"You tumble down, but being a soft bear, that's ok."`

Madame L'Estrange And The Troubled Spirit (1997) by Ian Ball and Marcus Young, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There is very little development of your own character; she has a mind of her own, in that she carries on conversations without your help, but not much of it actually says anything about her.

Glowgrass (1997) by Nate Cull, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

You get snippets about yourself, but not enough to really figure out who you are, what you were doing coming [here] in the first place, what you really think of ... the things you find.

Arrival (1998) by Stephen Granade, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Your identity, an eight-year-old, only surfaces intermittently ... you can largely forget that you're eight years old — and there are several moments ... that might be enlivened by commentary from an eight-year-old's viewpoint.

A Day For Soft Food (1999) by Tod Levi, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Toward the end [the animal PC becomes] rather anthropomorphic ... the player can too easily forget that the PC has limitations that don't afflict human PCs.

Dinner With Andre (2000) by Liza Daly, reviewer Emily Short:

Parser responses, inventory entries, internal monologue: everything was infused with the PC's attitude. I heard the voice of a very particular person in my head, and that person was spunky, interesting, and fun to be. That was what kept me entertained throughout the game.

Masquerade (2000) by Kathleen M. Fischer, reviewer Emily Short:

I liked how `>kiss ethan` at certain points caused my PC to blush as "unseemly thoughts" flitted through her head. Poor dear.

Rameses (2000) by Stephen Bond, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Your character's head is bursting with things to say (as evidenced by the menu), and yet he never says any of the things. There are always explanations, of course, some of them plausible — nasty insults are withdrawn with something akin to `"You'd rather not start a fight right now"` — but what emerges is a striking portrait of frustration, of a bottled-up character ...

[It's a] character whose fear of expressing himself borders on the neurotic, and drawing out that inarticulateness by trying a range of conversational options (from the polite to the highly antisocial), only to have the character reject all of them, is a nicely done depiction of the character.

Bio (2003) by David Linder, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I would have liked a little more characterization of the PC: we learn about him in the intro text, but then any response to his situation is left to the imagination of the reader. We're discovering dead bodies and evil plots, but not a hint of personality shows up in the PC after the first scene.

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer Jess Knoch:

[When something terrible happens,] there is nothing in the text to suggest the PC is shocked, surprised, dismayed, or anything of the sort. In fact, it doesn't say a thing about it. You are confronted with *dead bodies*, and the game just leaves you, the player, to come to your own conclusions and supply your own emotion.

On the one hand, that's okay, but on the other, it's not what I want out of a work of interactive fiction. Supply me some of the fiction. The intro text does such a great job of establishing the PC's character and driving force, that I want to see it fulfilled [when an event like this happens].

Episode In The Life Of An Artist (2003) by Peter Eastman, reviewer Mike Russo:

I don't know nearly enough about psychology to comment on the clinical accuracy of [this game's] portrayal of what appears to be a mildly autistic player character, but from a narrative point of view I found it thoroughly convincing. The constant quoting of not-quite-apposite proverbs, the skewed perspective that allows the protagonist to think of himself as an artist, his pattern of overreactions and underreactions — it all hangs together remarkably well, and it's the most interesting part of the game.

Baluthar (2003) by Chris Molloy Wischer, reviewer Mike Russo:

The opening sets us up to expect a tale of existential paralysis, but once in the dungeon the player character is disappointingly heroic.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer David Whyld:

By far the most annoying aspect of the game for me was the way the player will often talk out loud to himself ... [it makes] him come across as some overly dramatic loony.

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I wish the dreams had been developed better — they seemed like the start of some deeper character but never really went far enough.

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Definite points for ... the PC (shows enough development to be interesting, but not so much as to be unrealistic).

Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee, reviewer Mike Russo:

Knowing that the player character is continually stewing over her boyfriend's betrayal ... [makes] the protagonist that much more interesting. It's an elementary thing, but so many games neglect to have the protagonist react to what's happening in any but the most perfunctory manner that it's refreshing to see one that bucks the trend.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Mike Russo:

Too few games depict the player character reacting to events. There's a scene in [this game] where the player is controlling a little girl who, while hiding, overhears [something terrible] — this strikes me as a rather traumatic event, but for all the game discloses, the girl reacts with stone-faced impassivity.

I'm not lobbying for histrionics here, but any human being would be really upset in this situation, and the tension of perhaps calling attention to yourself could make for a more dramatically interesting scene.

Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

The main character is quite unconvincing — at the time when the story finishes we don't know anything about her.

References (PC Characterization):

- [Player Character Identity in IF](#) by John Wood (XYZZY News).
- [Discussions about the player and the PC](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

12.2. Out Of Character Actions

She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Some of the puzzles required me to act in a way that I felt was out of character ... the protagonist is supposedly a regular, kind person — for her to [take something] from a man who shows her nothing but kindness and hospitality is a significant break from character, especially since [he] does not grant permission to do so.

The Obscene Quest Of Dr. Aardvarkbarf (1997) by Gary Roggin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

A few of [the puzzles] seemed to be based on wanton destruction for no satisfying reason. There's nothing anywhere in the prose to indicate that the character is evil ... so puzzles which require highly destructive actions went against the grain for me.

The Clock (2000) by Cleopatra Kozlowski, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

At the very beginning of the game, you find a note from your friend instructing you very strongly not to touch anything. After reading the note, the game tells you `"You decide to do pretty much as she says — but surely it couldn't hurt to look around a bit, so long as nobody finds out!"` So that's what I tried to do — look around a bit, but do pretty much as she says and not touch anything ...

The dilemma I found myself in is whether I should behave like a standard text adventurer (search everything, take anything that isn't nailed down, etc.) or like the character the game was shaping for me. It soon became apparent, however, that the latter choice was pointless, because if I follow it, the game goes nowhere.

Consequently, I had to start pillaging. I didn't like it. What [the game] didn't seem to grok is that lots of players take their behavioral cues from the character the text suggests. If you have to deliberately break character in order to succeed in the game, then the game has basically shot itself in the foot.

Not Much Time (2002) by Tyson Ibele, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[You are encouraged to respect your Aunt's privacy; for example:]

```
>x journal
This is your Auntie's journal. But you probably shouldn't read it
because it's rude to read other people's things.
```

Heeding this advice, I went through the game trying to respect those boundaries as much as I could ... by the time I figured out I was stuck, I had forgotten about my decision not to invade Auntie's privacy, turned to the hints, and discovered that invading her privacy was exactly what I needed to do ...

This is fiction and interactivity at each other's throats. As a player, I tend to be drawn more to story than puzzles, and consequently I was trying to cooperate with the demands of the story, but the interactivity roadblocked me from proceeding through the story until I had broken character rather thoroughly.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

If you're particularly nice to a certain NPC, you might get a slightly better winning ending. However, the initial scene gave me reason to distrust that NPC, and consequently I was only as friendly to her as seemed appropriate for the PC's professional demeanor. When the game later upbraided me for not being nice enough, I felt a little jerked around.

12.3. PC Motivation

A Bear's Night Out (1997) by David Dyte, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

There is a side plot that separates out from the main plot after a certain point — and though it is fairly obvious that you need to solve the relevant puzzles, it isn't clear why until the very end of the game ... it might have helped to have the reasoning for pursuing the puzzles better incorporated into the story.

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer Mike Russo:

The game establishes backstory and motivation in a few quick paragraphs; the player immediately knows what to do and why, which always pleases me.

The Atomic Heart (2003) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Mike Russo:

Motivation is inadequate throughout. While the initial section of the game is on railroads, once things open up, I was at a loss to figure out why I was still sticking around ... while the logic becomes clear once the endgame is reached, it all comes off as rather contrived; the only reason I [stayed there] was because the game wouldn't let me go anyplace else.

Ruined Robots (2004) by Gregory Dudek, Natasha Dudek and Nicholas Dudek, reviewer Mike Snyder:

In the intro to the game, the player is looking for relaxation. This quickly turns into the desire to go adventuring, as the game gets started. The help text ... says your goal is to take over the world. It doesn't seem like an intuitive goal based on the PC's original motives.

Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff, reviewer David Whyld:

You're a saboteur aboard a spaceship ... quite why you've decided to sabotage it is something of a mystery.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Mike Russo:

The player is from the first locked in a game of cat and mouse with [his pursuers], and while it's not terribly hard to avoid them, it does make moving from one end of the ship to the other more involving than it might otherwise be.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[Stealing things all the time] is especially weird since the idea of the game is that just getting out with the package is enough to set you up for life — if that's the big score, why spend time worrying about the penny-ante stuff?

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Lucian Smith:

I chalk this game up to the "noble experiment" form of game design, where the idea was that the player would have lots of freedom to take the game in different directions, but what actually happened (to me, at least) was that I had no motivation to actually do anything.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

It left me a bit cold, perhaps because my character was given insufficient motivation. I'm shunted into a charitable quest and I'm not given a strong indication that my character particularly cares about others' welfare.

Off The Trolley (2005) by Krisztian Kaldi, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The main difficulty was that I was never really convinced it was a good idea to crash my trolley into a building.

Off The Trolley (2005) by Krisztian Kaldi, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

I was bugged by the seeming superficiality of my motivation, but, hey, at least I was given some motivation.

References (PC Motivation):

- [The Player Character's Role in Game Design](#) by Duncan Stevens (Brass Lantern).

12.4. Player And PC Knowledge

Glowgrass (1997) by Nate Cull, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The plot is presented extremely well; you discover things along with the protagonist.

Photopia (1998) by Adam Cadre, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

In one sequence, your character explains the basics of [various] astrophysical phenomenae; it is *very* hard, unless the player has ample background in astronomy, to avoid the feeling that you are watching a conversation unfold, not participating in it.

I don't think it's impossible to give the character more knowledge than the player is likely to have, and then have the player act on that knowledge. But that requires more development of the character than [this game] affords.

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The player is essentially told at the outset that this is an exploration game, so go poke around and see what turns up, and then gets sat down at the end for a debriefing that makes it fairly clear that your character had some goals in mind ... the character may — indeed, should — have known about these goals all along, but he didn't share that knowledge with the player.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The major] plot twist is heavily clued and rather predictable to begin with, so I was a little chagrined when the game pretended that I hadn't put the pieces together until the climactic scene.

Sting Of The Wasp (2004) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The author does a good job of tracking your actions ... as you obtain clues and witness various events, the PC's reactions to situations (particularly in conversations) will change. Once you discover the existence of a locker (for instance), it becomes available to you without any note-taking or fancy lock-turning. As your character's understanding about various things improves, these things become a part of your interactions.

All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I don't think this game plays fair with the concept of the accretive PC ...

[In the game Varicella, the PC] has a devious plan to take over the regency. At the beginning of any session with Varicella, the PC knows what this plan is, but the player may or may not. It's only through experiencing multiple iterations of the game, and thereby learning all the things that [the PC] already knows, that the player can hope to embody [him] successfully enough to win the game.

I call this sort of PC "accretive" because the player's accreting knowledge allows the PC to become more and more himself on each playthrough, and once the player's ingenuity matches that of the PC, she can successfully complete a game. When that happens, it's as if the real story is finally revealed, and all those other failed attempts exist only in shadowy parallel universes ...

An accretive PC allows the player to catch up with the PC through the device of past lives, and as long as the PC is established as already having all the knowledge that the player is able to gain, it all works swimmingly.

At first, [this] appears to be exactly this sort of game ... [However, a] successful traversal ... requires not only knowledge of the circumstances and the setting, but advance knowledge of something that the game itself definitively states that the PC does not know in advance. Here, I cry foul.

Redeye (2004) by John Pitchers, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The twist ending is one of those irritating ones that's telegraphed extensively but you can't do anything with the info except wait to be "surprised" when it shows up.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game has] the problem that the help tells us from the beginning that it's a zombie game, so then the PC looks like an idiot when they can't figure this out; either don't tell the player in the beginning, or make the PC catch on faster.

Snatches (2005) by Gregory Weir, reviewer Mike Russo:

I also was frustrated at one point by having more knowledge than the character I was controlling did; I'd already learned that [a certain object] had some protective power against the monster, but since the character didn't, my attempts to manipulate [the object] were futile.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

At the beginning of the second section, I had a pretty good idea of what I was doing and where, but I didn't know my specific purpose until I examined [an object]. That's kind of irksome: PC knowledge shouldn't be concealed from the player unless there's a good reason.

Quote from reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The problem with learning by death, quite aside from the realism issue ("I'd better drop the gun because I remember from the last time that the police will kill me if I'm holding it when they get here"), is that it makes a game less enjoyable; there's nothing like playing through a scene 50 times to make it unspeakably boring.

References (Player And PC Knowledge):

- [Discussions about player and PC knowledge](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

12.5. Point Of View

Piece Of Mind (1996) by Giles Boutel, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The author [pays] serious attention to the relationship between the player and the protagonist ... some of this is the bantering tone of the writing. This is a great demonstration of the potential of first-person IF; the protagonist comes through beautifully as a personality in his own right. Game text as spoken dialog, rather than exposition.

Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

Probably the greatest technical achievement of the work was the transformation of the game from second person present tense to first person past. The whole tenor of the game was affected, and very effectively, too. It's neat to know that this can be accomplished without being a hindrance to game play.

Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The first-person-singular-past narrative ... reinforces that the story is happening to a real character, not the player in period costume, and also conveys the feeling that the story is a reminiscence, not a happening-right-now tale of adventure that the character has to make his way through.

Downtown Tokyo, Present Day (1998) by John Kean, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

You're in a movie theater, watching the protagonist perform. (And this whole situation is described by a not-entirely-invisible narrator, who talks, for example, about "our hero." So we actually have first, second, and third-person narration going on here — heh.) I like the effect, but it's probably good that it's such a short game; the gimmick would get old fast.

Captain Chaos (1999) by Shay Caron, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The third-person viewpoint, though an interesting experiment, doesn't really work. All it does, in fact, is add a further chatty persona, the invisible narrator, who spends at least as much time talking as the nominal main character does.

Captain Chaos (1999) by Shay Caron, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

This game is written in third-person. I've now tried several third-person IF games, and I just don't like the effect. It's distancing, it's jarring, and it throws me out of any feeling of complicity.

Captain Chaos (1999) by Shay Caron, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The game uses a third-person narrative form, and the main character occasionally talks directly to the player ... [this lets] the main character have an explicitly separate personality from the player, so the player doesn't have to role-play for the main character's personality to come out.

My Angel (2000) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

... the first-person thing still doesn't work for me. No matter how many times I try it. I can, after playing halfway through the game, get used to first-person prose enough to ignore it; but it's never anything but an obstacle.

The Beetmonger's Journal (2001) by Scott Starkey, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game begins, told in the first person voice by the Dr. Watson-ish assistant to Victor Lapot, famous archaeologist ... [Lapot's] actions are controlled by the player, even as the results continue to be reported by the assistant in a third person past tense voice, resulting in exchanges like this:

```
>x me
Lapot looked over in my direction. I stood close by, available to
offer my assistance in any way possible. Just in case, I kept my
possessions handy: ...
```

This response ... immediately [made] clear that the voice of the parser and the object of the commands were two different characters.

Heroes (2001) by Sean Barrett, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[When the PC is a particular creature] ... it speaks in first person plural, past tense, which makes it sound oddly grandiloquent.

The Granite Book (2002) by James Mitchelhill, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The game ... uses "us" and "we" which has always been great in IF for drawing the player into the game. Oh yeah, it was past tense also, but that doesn't bother me at all the way it does some people. I thought it was done very well here ...

[There was a] high level of involvement, a lot of which was due to the plural [first]-person format.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Oddly [the game is written in the] first-person, for no good reason that I can see.

References (Point Of View):

- [Discussions about player perspective](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

12.6. Multiple PCs

Zombie! (1997) by Scott Starkey, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The viewpoint shift caught me off-guard, and it worked marvelously. I felt like I had a better insight into my character after having seen him through the eyes of another ...

Viewpoint shifts in traditional fiction can make for a dramatic effect; interactive fiction, with its customary second person form of address, made the shift all the more dramatic, at least this time.

Jane (2002) by Joseph Grzesiak, reviewer Jess Knoch:

It is a little disorienting to switch from one character to another — yes, I know everyone always says that. It doesn't make it any less true, and it's also true that it detracts from the overall feel of character and cohesiveness of the story. At the same time, though, the two scenes near the beginning that we get from the husband's point of view are invaluable for a deeper understanding of the complexities of the topic.

Luminous Horizon: Earth And Sky Episode 3 (2004) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

New to this game: free swapping between characters, and you can get game hints from your partner. This is ... super-smooth, comfortable to use, and keeps the game from ever becoming non-fun.

The Big Scoop (2004) by Johan Berntsson, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The PC ... [is initially] framed for murder. It's not easy to escape from this grim situation, but when she does, the perspective shifts: now the PC is a reporter investigating the murder, and it becomes clear that the first scene was simply a swollen prologue.

This structure worked well for me — the urgency of the initial scene carried over nicely into the rest of the game, and having played the victim of the framing, I never had any doubts that she was innocent, which helped me buy into the reporter's quest to clear the victim's name.

Snatches (2005) by Gregory Weir, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I am all for IF games being told from multiple viewpoints, but more than ten seems a little excessive, especially since this means each viewpoint ends up only getting a half-dozen moves or so.

Off The Trolley (2005) by Krisztian Kaldi, reviewer Mike Russo:

Suddenly jumping to an entirely new character in an entirely new environment is disorienting.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Mike Russo:

... without warning, the setting abruptly shifts, without the player being aware of what exactly has happened ... [later] the player is thrust into two vignettes, widely separated in time and space, which are likewise fairly disorienting.

References (Multiple PCs):

- [Discussions about multiple PCs](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

12.7. Meta Commentary

Mother Loose (1998) by Irene Callaci, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The parser often delegates one of the NPCs in the vicinity to make comments to you, which I thought was great.

Captain Chaos (1999) by Shay Caron, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The game uses a third-person narrative form, and the main character occasionally talks directly to the player, similar to the LucasArts graphical adventures. The effect is great for a tongue-in-cheek game like this; having the main character acknowledge the presence of the player by talking directly to us makes the whole thing seem less serious.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

A clever bit of meta-commentary on the peculiar nature of IF, that allows one to shift in time by `save/restore/undo`, is stitched into the story itself.

13. NPCs

13.1. NPCs In General

Four In One (1998) by J. Robinson Wheeler, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The place where the game's technical proficiency shines the most is in its characters. [This] is a the most character-intensive piece of IF I've ever played. Almost every location has one or more characters in it at all times, and these characters are as fully implemented as they need to be ...

Every character has responses about the things they should know about ... after I had solved the game, I went back and just chatted with the various characters, and was delighted with the extent to which they are implemented.

Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[This game] makes a valiant attempt at bringing out the psychologies of its characters and making them central to the game. The reasons for many NPC actions are quite subtle — they may be doors to unlock in some instances, but they certainly are interesting doors.

The Temple (2002) by Johan Berntsson, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Early on in the action, you acquire a sort of "sidekick" ... he serves an interesting purpose in the story's structure, functioning as a sort of nominal hint system in his sporadic knowledge of the environment. Best of all, he and the PC really function as a team in several instances ... I thought [this game] was an excellent example of how to really create interdependent action between a PC and an NPC.

The Temple (2002) by Johan Berntsson, reviewer Mike Russo:

The inclusion of an NPC in the same situation as the player was a nice touch ... cleverly allowing the author to play up the horror of the situation without being forced to manipulate the player too heavy-handedly.

History Repeating (2005) by Mark Choba and Renee Choba, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

My main disappointment with the game was there didn't really seem to be much interaction you could do with the other characters.

References (NPCs In General):

- [Creating Dynamic Characters in TADS 3](#) by Mike Roberts.
- [Discussions about believable NPCs](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

13.2. NPCs As More Than Obstacles

She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[The main NPC] is noteworthy ... because he's one of very few NPCs that can't be reduced to an obstacle; more often than not, characters represent puzzles, locked doors upon which you need to use the right key to get the needed object or bit of information.

Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Some of the puzzles break the feel of the story. One in particular requires calculated manipulation of a character to achieve certain ends, different in process but not in nature from manipulating objects to pass obstacles, as might happen in your conventional puzzle-oriented game. It makes your character less human and sympathetic to have to figure out which of another character's buttons to push.

This is not an atypical IF experience, particularly in NPC interaction, when many games require the character to fire off conversation topics until the right one unlocks the door, so to speak, of the NPC — but [this game] stands or falls on its NPCs, and it's disappointing when they become doors to unlock.

13.3. NPC Characterization

Babel (1997) by Ian Finley, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

One of the best parts of [this] story is the believability of the characters it depicts: though you never interact with them over the course of the game, your discoveries about them make them as real as NPCs that are actually present. [The author's] writing deserves the credit for that; the dialogue is good enough to supplement rather than drag down the story ... and what you see of the way the characters interact both fills out the plot and gives them some life.

On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The grandparents] act a lot like real people ... the game does an effective job of giving depth and life to its NPCs by making choices that go against stereotypes. Because the grandparents in [this game] don't always do what we might expect, they seem just a little more real.

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

What struck me was that I believed in the characters, even though I didn't like most of them all that much; two of them in particular both had enough warts and enough intriguing layers to make me interested in learning more about them.

Screen (2002) by Edward Floren, reviewer Emily Short:

[The characters in this game] need some more development in order to provide an emotional grab. [One NPC is] apparently intended to be a touching figure, but there's not much at all to characterize him, since his house is stripped of any distinguishing features.

Shadows On The Mirror (2003) by Chrysoula Tzavelas, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[The author] has taken what feels like a standard novelist's approach to the characterization in this game: the protagonist is fairly well-known, with little details being drawn out and discussed, and the [main] NPC ... is something of an enigma who mostly acts as a sounding board for the PC ...

The problem is that this is exactly backwards for how IF characterization tends to work. Because the PC is "me" I already feel like I know about myself — it's the other people I want to find out about.

Risorgimento Represso (2003) by Michael Coyne, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Some NPCs don't appear directly in play, and you *still* have a sense of who they are: Emily the cheesemaker and Renaldo are pretty weighty characters, for all that you never get the chance to interact with them.

The Great Xavio (2004) by Reese Warner, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[The author] tosses in just the right amount of characterization for the various characters, sketching out their personas without shoving them down our throats.

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[This game] does a really good job of creating specific characters with not-entirely-clear motivations.

Waldo's Pie (2005) by Michael Arnaud, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The story's villain is never really given a motive.

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer Mike Russo:

I think the choice of making the bad guy a *really* bad guy broke the emotional realism of the scenario.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer David Whyld:

The NPCs never really seem believable, although it isn't helped that several of them are just referred to as "bursar" and "barber."

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Mike Russo:

The number of NPCs is initially a little overwhelming, but the author does a very good job of giving each of them a distinctive feature, so that the player soon remembers which is the crazy one, which is the terse, practical one, and so on.

References (NPC Characterization):

- NPC Characterization by Emily Short.
- Discussions about NPC characterization on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

13.4. NPC Behavior

She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game's primary NPC ... is coded very well. He goes about his business with or without the player's presence, and it is possible to have a long conversation with him without breaking mimesis.

She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[The primary NPC] is worth noting because he's the rare example of an NPC who is much more developed than he needs to be; in fact, he's a relatively ordinary character with an ordinary life which you can even witness in all its glory ... the mundanity of it all makes him feel more real ...

It isn't, of course, unprecedented to have an NPC who plays encyclopedia for the game, but [he] also carries on complicated time-sensitive tasks of his own.

Adoo's Stinky Story (2003) by B. Perry, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

NPCs wander around the landscape in a convincing manner, going about their own lives and even interacting with each other, rather than sitting and waiting to be activated by the PC.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer David Whyld:

[The NPCs] often wander away partway through a conversation with you.

Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff, reviewer Michael Martin:

NPCs do things on their own (this was good and bad; the bad came from the fact that no attempt was made to ensure that the PC wouldn't get unavoidably trapped).

References (NPC Behaviour):

- [Discussions about NPC motivation and behaviour](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

13.5. NPC Responsiveness

Transfer (2000) by Tod Levi, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

[The NPCs] don't appear to notice much of the havoc you wreak; evading their notice could have been a puzzle in itself in several cases, but the game doesn't take that opportunity. (Which makes the one instance when you're told not to wander around in plain sight a little confusing — it's not necessarily apparent why the characters who were blind and deaf a moment before would be so alert now).

Transfer (2000) by Tod Levi, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game's major flaw ... is the unrealistic behavior of its NPCs. These NPCs are well-characterized, but implemented much too shallowly. I know this because I was so into the story that I found it extremely frustrating when I wasn't able to progress in the plot even after telling an NPC about some stunningly important clue, or showing them some highly significant objects I'd acquired.

In fact, there are times in [the game] when something obviously alarming is going on, but the NPCs ignore it completely, going robotically about their daily rounds despite my best efforts to draw their attention. Because the rest of the work was so involving, the characters' unresponsiveness became a real point of frustration for me.

A Party To Murder (2002) by David Good, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The NPCs ... will sometimes react sensibly to strange actions on the player's part; for instance, walking into the teenage daughter's bedroom while she's making out with the neighbor elicits angry responses from both of them, escalating in intensity the longer the PC hangs around. Snooping around the objects in the house, though it's necessary, also provokes suspicion from some of the NPCs.

Then again, nobody gives you a second glance when you walk through the house carrying an 8-foot ladder, so this realistic implementation is really rather patchy.

Murder At The Aero Club (2004) by Penny Wyatt, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The mystery is pretty easy to solve (unlike the mystery of why nobody at the club seems especially bothered by the dead body lying there).

Sting Of The Wasp (2004) by Jason Devlin, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The NPCs ... are pleasingly attentive to your out-of-character IF antics.

The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

Fairly responsive NPCs (including one who actually took me to task for not talking to him before poking around his house; I liked that).

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

I dent the car and the bouncer doesn't care. I try to shoot the car and my action is dismissed out of hand. I try to shoot the bouncer and get a similar dismissal. Sorry, no biscuit for a game that doesn't anticipate even the most obvious actions.

13.6. Conversation With NPCs

Lomalow (1999) by Brendan Barnwell, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Everything you want to do can be accomplished by `>ask npc about x`. So the experience is much more like reading a book. Except that it gets to be quite difficult to figure out what to ask about next ... at the end of the game it goes for a big emotional payoff, and there just isn't one to be had, because you're in a bad mood from trying to figure out the right topics to ask about ...

IF NPC interaction technology just isn't developed enough to have the kind of real conversations I think he was looking for.

Best Of Three (2001) by Emily Short, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Unlike most games, the PC is in control of the conversation only about half the time ... I guess this is not enough for me, and I end up feeling swept along a lot of the time.

Eric's Gift (2002) by Joao Mendes, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I have always liked games that interpret my `"ask NPC about object"` as real words, and then tell me what those real words are. Er, at least, I thought I did until I played this one. I still like it when `"ask NPC about object"` gives "So, NPC, what can you tell me about the object?" before the NPC's response, but I don't like when the conversation goes in a direction I didn't mean for it to go.

For instance, I type `"tell Mrs. Chandler about me."`

I get: `"'So you do remember me, Mrs. Chandler. I was wondering if you would,' you say."`

A Party To Murder (2002) by David Good, reviewer Mike Russo:

The cast is probably too large; writing interesting, convincing characters is hard enough in IF, and having half a dozen people wandering around the house proves taxing for the player as well as the author. None of the characters seem to have much interesting to say, and I quickly gave up on interrogating anyone in much detail, given their predilection for leaving rooms mid-conversation.

The Temple (2002) by Johan Berntsson, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The PC's sidekick is] well-implemented, responding to lots of sensible queries, including many of the things mentioned in his responses to the PC's initial questions (second-level conversation topics, I suppose).

Shadows On The Mirror (2003) by Chrysoula Tzavelas, reviewer Mike Russo:

Certain questions will be answered in different ways depending on the context in which they're brought up ... and the conversational threads actually change as more information is revealed, a welcome relief from the static conversations of most IF.

Shadows On The Mirror (2003) by Chrysoula Tzavelas, reviewer Emily Short:

[I] liked the fact that if I reused a conversation topic on which there was no more content, I got back a summary of what had been said so far; that's an interesting approach, which neatly answers both the need to be able to recall already-said conversation, and the desire to avoid a repeato-bot NPC.

[The NPC I was talking to] also had a nice spectrum of flinches, gazes, dark looks, and moody silences with which to ward off my more impertinent questions.

Adoo's Stinky Story (2003) by B. Perry, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The NPCs] have randomly varied "I don't know that topic" responses, which greatly helps the illusion that they're more than chunks of code.

A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz, reviewer James Mitchelhill:

There's not enough to talk about. Things that I wanted to talk about didn't seem to be implemented, which discouraged me from asking about others ... the inclusion of a default list of topics seems to discourage the player from exploring outside those boundaries.

References (Conversation With NPCs):

- [Discussions about conversation with NPCs](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

13.7. Conversation Systems

Photopia (1998) by Adam Cadre, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

I found the conversation trees the least successful part of [this game], because they completely destroy what illusion remains of interactivity ...

Having severely limited conversation topics is not essentially different from `ask/tell` with only a few subjects available, admittedly. But most games that implement `ask/tell` do not put words in the player-character's mouth to the extent that [this game] does, and leaving to the player's imagination how he or she would have phrased a question keeps the admittedly clunky interface from breaking mimesis excessively.

Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang, reviewer Lucian P. Smith:

The game did a very credible job of portraying characters and the PC in a believable light that did not, in general, depend on any tricks to make it more believable — they were all implemented within the rubric of the `ask/tell` model, which is an amazing accomplishment. It did, of course, break down a little around the edges, but even these edges (default responses to undecipherable input) had personality and charm that rounded them off, so that the illusion was almost perfectly carried off.

Chicks Dig Jerks (1999) by Robb Sherwin, reviewer Mike Roberts:

The game uses a menu-driven conversation system, which works perfectly for this kind of scene — the conversations are able to develop the player character by having him converse in character rather than in generic terms ...

The only thing that disappointed me is that the conversations don't have any context — there's no thread of conversation with a character, just a one-liner statement or question from the player, and the response from the character.

Masquerade (2000) by Kathleen M. Fischer, reviewer Lucian Smith:

The traditional `"ask Mr. x about thing y"` interface has been discarded. In its place is `"yes"`, `"no"`, and `"talk to Mr. x"`. The game fills in your dialogue after you make those basic decisions.

This was a very wise choice. Though "Galatea" has proven that `"ask about"` can work, the volume of responses that must go into a single conversation is staggering. In a story such as this that covers any ground at all, trying to implement an `"ask about"` interface would likely have fallen flat. This was a much more attainable goal.

Best Of Three (2001) by Emily Short, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

This game's conversation system is a really impressive achievement compared to Pytho's Mask, which in turn is impressive compared to Galatea, which in turn is still better than any other conversation system anyone else has come up with even today.

Best Of Three (2001) by Emily Short, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The format is the same blend of `ask`/`tell` and menus that appeared in Pytho's Mask: you have a variety of lines to try on any one topic, but you can also heave a topic entirely and choose to discuss [something else] ... if you've tried some topics that don't turn up anything and you want to go back to the last menu, `untopic` sends you back there, and `think about` doesn't produce any spoken output but occasionally yields something you might want to talk about ...

If there's a drawback, it's that you can get a conversation that veers wildly from topic to topic with no apparent discomfort from the NPC.

Shadows On The Mirror (2003) by Chrysoula Tzavelas, reviewer Mike Russo:

The use of both `"ask"` and `"tell"` allows the player to pursue different strategies; when I favored the former, the player character felt much more inquisitive and uncertain, while leaning towards the latter made her seem assertive and confessional, and mixing the two together did a good job of mirroring the give-and-take of normal conversation.

Shadows On The Mirror (2003) by Chrysoula Tzavelas, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game keeps many] topics locked until a leading topic has been broached, or perhaps until a particular item has been examined. There are a few problems I can think of with this strategy. First, when I attempt a topic and get one of the game's default "no answer" messages, I take that response as a signal that the topic has not been implemented ...

Second, closing off some topics is particularly misguided in an extremely small game like this one. When I'm restarting often, I'm not really keeping track of which session has revealed which tidbits, and more than once I was flummoxed by getting a default response to a topic I knew I'd seen implemented.

Finally, even if this were a larger game ... [it] forecloses the player's ability to make intuitive connections [and ask about topics ahead of time, before the game expects them to be asked about].

Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti, reviewer Mike Snyder:

I was very impressed with the conversation system — not because menu trees are new or unique, but because it stays up and remains responsive even while normal actions work ... you could take any actions you like (except leaving the room) while the conversation was going on.

History Repeating (2005) by Mark Choba and Renee Choba, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

There are hordes of NPCs, none of whom are terribly responsive: if you're not going to implement `ask` and `tell` fully, you might as well stick with the menu system.

References (Conversation Systems):

- Conversation by Emily Short.
- Choosing a Conversation System by Mike Roberts.
- Discussions about conversation interfaces on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

14. The Parser

14.1. Unrecognized Commands

The Obscene Quest Of Dr. Aardvarkbarf (1997) by Gary Roggin, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

"`Open desk`" never works — you need to "`open drawer`" ... often, "`up`" and "`down`" aren't implemented and the game requires "`climb object`", which would be acceptable in 1983 but [not in modern IF].

Stone Cell (1999) by Stephen Kodat, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Think about the things you might do if you were trapped in a dungeon. Perhaps you'd listen at the door? Smell your straw mat? Feel along the walls, hoping to find a secret passage? If you did find a crack, might you try to pry it with something? I think so. Yet "`listen`", "`smell`", "`feel`", and "`pry`" are all unimplemented, along with a host of other verbs that ought to be there.

Authors, take note: if you plan to trap your players in an enclosed space, and make a puzzle out of how they are to get out, the puzzle won't be much fun unless that space is very well implemented. The more often a player tries logical things that aren't accounted for in the parser, the surer that player will feel that the solution is simply arbitrary.

On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts, reviewer Mike Roberts:

A few two-object verbs that should be symmetrical required a particular order ("`attach x to y`" would work but "`attach y to x`" wouldn't).

Screen (2002) by Edward Floren, reviewer Emily Short:

I don't like typing >`climb` and being told "`if you want to go up, please type UP.`" As a general rule of thumb, I figure that if the game knows what you want to do, it should let you do it. The parser should only request a rephrasing if the way the player phrased the instruction is unparsable.

Constraints (2002) by Martin Bays, reviewer Jess Knoch:

When the game tells me "`Breathe. You've got to breathe`", well, I'm going to try typing "`breathe`", and it's a tad jarring when it says that isn't a verb it recognizes.

The Atomic Heart (2003) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

If you're going to have a setup where a lot of plugging and unplugging cables is required, please make sure that >`plug`, >`connect`, >`attach`, etc. all work.

Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

If an author tells me, "`you're certain that you can jump into the spaceship with little difficulty`", I expect >`jump into the spaceship` to be implemented.

The Erudition Chamber (2003) by Daniel Freas, reviewer Mike Russo:

I got stuck on [one puzzle] because `pour vial on [object]` wasn't an acceptable alternative to `pour liquid on [object]`.

Stack Overflow (2004) by Timofei Shatrov, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The only way to use the tape player is to `"turn player on"` — implementing `"play tape"` and `"push play"` and others might be a nice addition.

History Repeating (2005) by Mark Choba and Renee Choba, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

Any game that implements a locked door needs `knock`.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It was often the case that I knew what I needed to do but couldn't work out the exact phrasing.

Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko, reviewer David Whyld:

One of the first locations I found myself in was the cafeteria where I was advised to get some food. Unfortunately upon trying `get food` I was advised that `"the food isn't important."`

I tried examining a few of the things I could see but as it happened I couldn't see any of them as the author hadn't bothered including a description for them. `buy food` didn't work. Nor did `buy burger` or `purchase burger` ... I finally resorted to the walkthrough and saw that `ask chef for burger` [was the desired phrasing].

Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff, reviewer Mike Russo:

At one point, the player needs to vocalize a password, and `say [password]` causes the interpreter to return `"I don't know the word [password]"`, which isn't true, as `say "[password]"` is necessary to progress.

Waldo's Pie (2005) by Michael Arnaud, reviewer Timofei Shatrov:

Simple commands like `"enter house"`, `"take [object]"` and so on do not work when they HAVE to. You have to type `"go in"` or `"take [objects]"` instead.

Son Of A ... (2005) by C. S. Woodrow, reviewer Mike Snyder:

I tried to `"climb"` something at one point, but the game only understood `"up"` there.

Son Of A ... (2005) by C. S. Woodrow, reviewer Robert Menke:

If there is any sort of electrical equipment in a game, `"plug something into something"` should work.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Mike Snyder:

I'm in a dance club, but `"dance"` wasn't implemented as a verb (of course, the PC wouldn't dance, but some response was probably in order). The PC can't attempt to kick down a wooden door. Again, it doesn't have to work — but it should probably be recognized, given the PC's profession in law enforcement.

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The "key hole" in the elevator can't be referred to as `"hole"` or `"key hole"`, because the author implemented a variation, `"keyhole"` (one word, not matching the text) instead.

Quote from reviewer Dan Shiovitz and reviewer Michael Martin:

If there's a toilet in the game, it should support >`flush toilet` ... if there are kittens, >`pet kitten` must work. [In general], if a prop of some kind has a useless but traditional action associated with it, allow this useless but traditional action.

14.2. Non Standard Commands

Ralph (1996) by Miron Schmidt, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

Doggy verbs implemented include `bark`, `bite`, `growl`, `scratch`, `pee on`, `lick`, `smell`, `slobber`, `wag` — and when the verb is transitive, there are logical responses for most of the objects in the game.

Arrival (1998) by Stephen Granade, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This] is one of the better games I've seen this year at unexpectedly understanding input and giving snarky responses to strange commands, which has been one of my favorite things about text adventures ever since I first played Zork.

Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I kept finding myself surprised at just how many actions were accounted for. Even those that were disallowed were often disallowed with a message that was specific to the particular circumstances of the PC, and that sometimes gave a clue as to how to proceed.

Scary House Amulet! (2002) by Ricardo Dague, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game has] some great verbs added for fun:

```
The bat shrieks, "You must fear me! Fear me!"

>fear bat
You do fear the horrible bat!
```

Goose, Egg, Badger (2004) by Brian Rapp, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] kept on thrilling me with all the things it understood. Over and over, I'd try a kooky verb and find that the game handled it with a response that was usually funny and occasionally even useful. It's clear to me that a whole lot of effort was poured into expanding Inform's standard library of verbs, and the result is a parser that kept making me smile and say, "Wow!"

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen, reviewer Robert Menke:

`"Drive to"` was unnecessarily difficult. Perhaps a menu of known locations should have been provided?

14.3. Default Messages

Augustine (2002) by Terrence V. Koch, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The following interaction occurred during a fight scene:]

```
>slash at kasil
Kasil isn't important.
```

Isn't important? The guy I'm currently swordfighting with, who is currently trying to kill me ... isn't important? Not to you, maybe.

A minute after I got that response, I figured out that Kasil had actually moved to the north, and therefore was no longer in that location to be slashed at. But in that case, the response should be `"Kasil isn't here."` He's certainly still important.

Rent-A-Spy (2002) by John Eriksson, reviewer Emily Short:

[A truck] passes through the room in which you're standing and then cannot be referred to again ... the game ought at least to recognize [references to it] with comments like `"the truck has gone by too quickly for you to catch."`

Jane (2002) by Joseph Grzesiak, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

At its worst moments, the clash between the intense action of the story and the standard Inform library responses evoked by my actions was outright comical, completely defeating the drama:

```
John's lost in his mind again. "You ARE nothing!" he shouts again.
He steps forward quickly and shoves you back, causing you to
stumble to keep your balance. "You're useless! You're so
[expletive] useless!"

>push john
That would be less than courteous.
```

Identity Thief (2002) by Rob Shaw-Fuller, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Where the game falls apart ... is in its depth of implementation. The first part of the game has the PC hunting for a particular object, but a great many reasonable commands related to such a hunt were met with the response `"You have better things to do."`

This is unsatisfying not just because it thwarts my attempts to solve the puzzle, but because it's patently false — the PC's highest priority ought to be to carry out just such actions.

CaffeiNation (2003) by Michael Loegering, reviewer Mike Russo:

After attempting to `"break [object]"`, the game returns the stock response `"Violence isn't the answer to this one!"`, when in fact it is ([it's just that a different syntax is required]).

Domicile (2003) by John Evans, reviewer Emily Short:

[I find a key] and try to unlock the locked doors with it, but both of them say that they are `"not something you can unlock."` Okay, maybe there's no key to them in the game, but if they don't have a keyhole (say), it seems like there should be a special message to that effect. If they do and [this key] doesn't fit, then they deserve to have a statement saying that.

Who Created That Monster? (2004) by N. B. Horvath, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

```
>x mysterious note
It looks like an ordinary mysterious note to me
```

If the game can't be bothered to provide some detail about the objects in its world, how am I supposed to become immersed in that world?

Cheiron (2005) by Sarah Clelland and Elisabeth Polli, reviewer David Whyld:

There was an amusing bit at the start of [this] game about doctors and hospitals when I tried to examine the patients and was told I wouldn't need to refer to them during the course of the game.

The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street, reviewer Mike Russo:

[The response to `x me`] riffs on Inform's default response ... by this stage of the Comp, I'd seen enough `"as good looking as ever"`s to really find the line amusing.

Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

You get responses like:

```
"The cooked lasagna does not appear to be edible"
"The cooked lasagna hits Peter without any obvious effect, and
falls to the carpet."
```

Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods, reviewer Jake Wildstrom:

The first three objects I examine give default responses. The next two are scenery-coded and unimplemented respectively. This should never, ever happen.

Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter, reviewer Mike Russo:

Trying to hit people or objects causes the game to ask `"Who do you think you are, Mike Tyson?"`, which I presume is an unchanged default response, but is singularly and anachronistically mimesis-breaking nonetheless.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Mike Russo:

[The PC starts in] a cell which reeks of death which nonetheless doesn't `smell` of anything in particular.

Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan, reviewer Michael Martin:

There are a lot of places where default responses happen where they really, really shouldn't. If my duty is mopping floors, `mop floor` should really work. Likewise, `clean floor` should give something better than `"You achieve nothing by this."`

Likewise, when I'm taking my daughter to her birthday party, `hug daughter` should not give the default `"Keep your mind on the game."`

References (Default Messages):

- [Discussions about game responses](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

14.4. Berating The Player

Lunatix: The Insanity Circle (1999) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

```
>fill water gun
Your logic, although interesting, is flawed.

>turn on faucet
That's a pretty crazy idea, but it didn't work.
```

These kinds of responses make me want to scream obscenities at the game, and sometimes I did, along with feeble protests like "No it isn't! Wanting to fill a water gun with water is not flawed logic! Turning on a faucet isn't a crazy idea!" ...

The problem with this kind of message is that the game is willfully occluding its own shortcomings at the player's expense.

Marooned (2000) by Bruce Davis, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Parser Manifesto [Tenet #2:] Parsers must not give smarmy, unhelpful error messages ... probably the worst offender was this one:

```
>undo
I can't undo your blundering.
```

Let me tell you an easy way to get me angry fast: give me an insulting message in response to a reasonable command. This one broke all previous speed records.

A Night Guest (2001) by Valentine Kopteltsev, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

This game also does that big game design no-no, berating the player each turn you fail to solve a puzzle.

Janitor (2002) by Peter Seebach and Kevin Lynn, reviewer Jess Knoch:

Authors, please consider NOT insulting the player who looks for hints. You want people to play your game, right? You want people to see all your cool stuff, your neat ending, your funny bits, right? My advice: don't discourage players by insulting them ...

Even comments like "all of our beta-testers were able to beat the game" are insulting, although not as much as "these puzzles are so easy, you shouldn't need hints."

14.5. Implicit Actions

Risorgimento Represso (2003) by Michael Coyne, reviewer Mike Russo:

The author should be congratulated for removing much of the annoyance often associated with IF: doors automatically open and unlock, for example, which makes exploration stress-free.

All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] does a wonderful job of automating mundane actions ... I can't tell you how pleased I was to see something like this:

```
>n
(first opening the door to the Deutsch lab)
(first unlocking the door to the Deutsch lab)
The Deutsch Laboratory
```

The Great Xavio (2004) by Reese Warner, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

In my editorial [for SPAG #34], I argued that things like opening and unlocking a door to which you have the key should be handled automatically by the game, rather than forcing the player to manually go through all the fiddly steps of door and lock management ... the game should keep an internal model of the PC's knowledge and intentions; it should automate fiddly steps only when they match the set of actions that the player knows how to do and clearly intends to do.

Within that structure, I'd like to offer a further refinement to my argument: IF games should automate actions which require little to no thought on the part of the PC. Any of us who have spent time using hotel keys ... know that it quickly becomes second nature. We don't need to think through every step — rather, we form the intention of entering the room and habit takes care of the rest.

References (Implicit Actions):

- [Discussions about implicit actions](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

14.6. Abbreviations

She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game keeps track of the last NPC with whom the player has interacted and what type of verb (e.g. `"give"`, `"ask"`, etc.) was used in that interaction. Then whenever the player is around that NPC and types in a word not recognized as a verb by the parser, the game tries to use that word to interact with the NPC, using the current verb type ... this is a very smart move, and it works superbly in the game.

Shadows On The Mirror (2003) by Chrysoula Tzavelas, reviewer Mike Russo:

The author mercifully provided abbreviations which condense `"ask [NPC] about"` and `"tell [NPC] about"` into one letter each.

Splashdown (2004) by Paul J. Furio, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

One section of the game requires a lot of talking to the computer, using syntax along the lines of `computer, display help screen`. You can't call the computer `comp` or anything like that, and you can't just say, for example, `display help`, or better yet, `help`. Given the number of times I had to type out commands like this, I was mighty annoyed at the lack of abbreviations after a while.

14.7. Disambiguation

The Frenetic Five vs. Sturm Und Drang (1997) by Neil deMause, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game also had a few regular bugs, including the most egregious occurrence of the typical TADS disambiguation bug I've ever seen — when I and my team members were tied up, and I tried to do something with the ropes, I was asked:

```
Which ropes do you mean, the ropes, the ropes, the ropes, the
ropes, or the ropes?
```

The End Means Escape (2000) by Stephen Kodat, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[The implementation is very thorough] ... consider, for example, this startling disambiguation question:

```
>x young
Which young do you mean, the young man, the marking, the young
man's head, the young man's hands, the young man's skin, the young
man's feet, the young man's head of hair, the young man's
forehead, the young man's eyebrows, the young man's eyes, the
young man's eyelashes, the young man's ears, the young man's nose,
the young man's mouth, the young man's chin, the young man's neck,
the young man's fingers, the young man's thumbs, the young man's
torso, the young man's arms, the young man's legs, or the young
man's hips?
```

2112 (2001) by George K. Algire, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The parser has a very useful and ingenious way of disambiguating. For instance:

```
>drop note
Which of the following do you mean? 1) the small yellow note, 2)
the pile of notebooks? Just hit 3) to forget it.
```

After issuing this question, the game disables all keys except 1, 2, and 3, thus preventing accidental input while preserving (through the last option) player freedom. I thought this was a great way to prevent the pernicious `"Let's try it again: Which do you mean, the note or the note?"` problem.

Baluthar (2003) by Chris Molloy Wischer, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There are a couple of instances where the game, presented with several choices for how to interpret a noun, chooses the least obvious or least useful option. For instance, at one point the game describes a figure whose hand is clutched in a fist. So the obvious action is `examine fist`, right?

```
>x fist
(your hand)
Your hand is very muddy.
```

No, not my hand! The thing that's so specifically called a fist! A little `ChooseObjects` or `parse_name` trickery would go a long way here.

The Atomic Heart (2003) by Stefan Blixt, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

[If your game has] multiple cables but each one can only go into one kind of slot, please work this out for me: do not always go asking me `"Which cable do you mean, the foo cable or the bar cable?"` when it should be obvious based on what I'm plugging into.

Cheiron (2005) by Sarah Clelland and Elisabeth Polli, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

You get asked to disambiguate between anywhere from three to a dozen objects ... this much disambiguation is crazy and the parsing should have been smartened up to avoid it.

References (Disambiguation):

- [Discussions about disambiguation](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

14.8. Homebrew Parsers

SNOSAE (1999) by R. Dale McDaniel, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

It's a DOS-only program, a PC executable with an apparently homemade parser ... on the whole, [the game] doesn't do a bad job, but as usual it's not up to the very high standard set by Inform, TADS, Hugo, and their ilk.

There's no `"script"` capability ... the `"oops"` verb is missing, which is a minor inconvenience. `"undo"` is also missing, which is a major inconvenience, especially considering how thoroughly this game is infested with instant-death puzzles.

Escape From Crulistan (2000) by Alan Smithee, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Since [dropping the language requirements for the IF comp], every single year the comp has seen at least one "homebrewed" game — that is, a game written without the aid of a major IF language such as Inform, TADS, or Hugo. And not one of those games, not one, has had a parser and model world to match that which comes automatically with the major IF languages.

Some have had their own nifty features, to be sure, but the core of IF ... is the parser and model world. When that is lacking, the game is just not going to be good, no matter what else it has going for it.

2112 (2001) by George K. Algire, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It is in fact possible for a home-grown system to have a parser comparable to TADS/Inform/Hugo, as this game demonstrates ... the question, I guess, is what does this all buy you?

It seems like it's sort of a pity when you go to all the trouble of hand-rolling a parser ... and then you write a game that's basically a pretty standard work of IF ... you should take advantage of the strengths of your chosen platform, and if those aren't portability and standardization, you shouldn't try and compete with games written on those grounds ... [better to] do things you can't do elsewhere, wacky things with displays or user interface or graphics.

Lunatix: The Insanity Circle (1999) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Parser manifesto ...

[1] Parsers must not pretend to understand more than they do.
[2] Parsers must not give smarmy, unhelpful error messages.
[3] Parsers must not ask questions without being prepared to receive an answer ...

These kinds of problems have been more or less eliminated in the default library parsers used by most major IF tools ... the beauty of the modern IF languages is that they have freed designers from most of the hassle of worrying about the parser, allowing them to focus the bulk of their creative energy on the story.

References (Homebrew Parsers):

- [Discussions about writing IF in a general language](#) and [parsing](#) on the RAIF newsgroup.

15. User Interface

15.1. Display

Piece Of Mind (1996) by Giles Boutel, reviewer Lucian Smith:

There were some formatting problems that occurred (presumably) because the author didn't take into consideration different playing window sizes.

Winter Wonderland (1999) by Laura Knauth, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

With an interpreter that handles color correctly, the status line changes color subtly to enhance the atmosphere of the area the PC finds herself in. When she's by a roaring fire, the status line is yellow and orange. When she's in a moonlit snowscape, the letters are various shades of lighter and darker blues. What's more, in some snowy scenes we actually see a few snowflakes show up in the status line, another attractive touch to embroider this already charming game.

SNOSAE (1999) by R. Dale McDaniel, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

There are ... some cool things about the [DOS] interface. It uses colors to nice effect, putting room descriptions in light blue, commands in dark blue, inventory listings in white, etc.

The Beetmonger's Journal (2001) by Scott Starkey, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

[The game] set the background to be white, but didn't bother changing the text color... a note to HTML-TADS authors: If you're going to take control of the game's look, go all the way with it, please; also, you might want to test it on several interpreters with preferences set to various combinations of colors just to see how it turns out.

The Beetmonger's Journal (2001) by Scott Starkey, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

A little ways in, the game does a POV shift ... and this shift is handled as neatly as can be. The background color changes, the tone of the writing alters a little, and little touches like an epigram, a printed date, and and a cleared screen smooth the transition handily ... at intervals, we get glimpses of what's happening in [the] frame story, and those bits are literally enclosed in a frame, backgrounded with the appropriate color from that narrative layer.

Volcano Isle (2001) by Paul DeWitt, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The best [use of HTML TADS] is when the PC enters a pitch-black room. The background goes black and so does the text. The effect feels remarkably similar to what it's really like to be in a pitch-black room — you know you're doing something (like typing `"turn on light"`) and it's having an effect, but you can't see it happening. Then, when the action is successful, the evidence of activity is visible once more. I thought this was a pretty neat effect.

Constraints (2002) by Martin Bays, reviewer Emily Short:

If you're doing colors or any other wacky behavior, make sure you test it (or have it tested) on a variety of interpreters, and if you can find any that don't work, include some instructions in a *readme* file ... [I know] these things are supposed to be fully portable, but they're not, quite.

The Granite Book (2002) by James Mitchelhill, reviewer Jess Knoch:

The error messages, nonproductive commands, and words not understood by the game are all pointed out to the player in brackets, in a different color from the rest of the text ... it made it very easy to see what was important and what was not.

Redeye (2004) by John Pitchers, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The first thing this game did was assault me with an "angry fruit salad" melange, blocks of text in no less than eight different colors. I found all these colors pointless and distracting — they add nothing to the game.

Worse than this, the game set the background to black but somehow failed to set the color for the foreground text, and consequently I couldn't see what I was typing, since it was black-on-black.

Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin, reviewer David Whyld:

[The pop up quote boxes] would often appear right over the text I was trying to read which meant bashing return a few times to shift the text up the screen a bit and allow me to read it.

References (Display):

- [Discussions about the user interface](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

15.2. Sound And Graphics

Arrival (1998) by Stephen Granade, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game handles] both pictures and sound brilliantly ... the pictures are delightful — the crayon drawings evoke a great sense of childhood and wonder while continuing the humorous feel of the whole game. The spaceship (two pie plates taped together) and the aliens ... are a scream — I laughed out loud every time I saw them ...

The sounds, though sparse, are equally good — the sound of the alien spaceship crash-landing startled the heck out of me. I'm not used to my text adventures making noise! But a moment later I was laughing, because the noise was just so fittingly silly.

Six Stories (1999) by N. K. Guy, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

It's the multimedia that drives the game. Without it, the game is fine. Not bad or anything ... but with the multimedia [this game] is transformed into a full-out extravaganza. Hear the intro, see the snow, watch the pretty flashing lights, listen to the stories, and so on.

Another Earth, Another Sky (2002) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

I liked the use of Glulx to put giant cartoon sound effects in. Nothing like stomping on the floor and getting a good ol' `THOOM!` out of it, or typing `>hit robot` and getting `SKRANG! SKRANG!`

Another Earth, Another Sky (2002) by Paul O'Brian, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I feel strongly that more problems in IF games should be resolvable by smashing things. [After playing this game] I also feel that this smashing should be accompanied by a big `"KER-POW"` or `"BLAMMO"` to let me know that the smashing was successful.

References (Sound And Graphics):

- [Discussions about graphics and sound in IF](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

15.3. Status Line

A New Day (1997) by Jonathan Fry, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The game included some nice coding touches, including an exits list on the status line which was context-sensitive depending on what section the game found itself in.

Unholy Grail (1997) by Stuart Allen, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

The lack of a status line and room name threw me out of my ingrained IF reading habits, the disorientation of which probably contributed to my difficulty in following the author's long narrative strands.

My Angel (2000) by Jon Ingold, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The lack of the normal status line confuses things ... the status line serves one practical purpose: it tells you when you've moved. In this game, flailing for context of where I was and what was going on, I really missed that.

15.4. Command Prompt

SNOSAE (1999) by R. Dale McDaniel, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] displays the available exit directions as part of the prompt, like this:

```
n,s,e,w,u> ...
```

I liked that, although I found it didn't really add that much to the gameplay experience.

Captain Chaos (1999) by Shay Caron, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

There are several kinds of prompts in the game (command prompt, the options menu, the hints menu). They all look identical. Very hard to tell what's going on as you use them.

Stone Cell (1999) by Stephen Kodat, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

The famous "yes/no prompt" bug ... at one point, you're asked a question. The normal game prompt appears; but it's actually a modal prompt, to which you can only answer `"yes"` or `"no"`. This is horribly confusing, because

(1) Any random command you type, such as `"look"` or even `"save"`, is interpreted as a `"no"` without any indication, and

(2) It messes up the undo sequence. (`"undo"` at that point is ignored, and `"undo"` a move later seems to undo two moves.)

Moral: implement `"yes"` and `"no"` as regular verbs, as well as variants such as `"say yes"` and `"woman, yes."` If you're absolutely unwilling to make this effort, at least put in a blatant prompt: `"How do you answer? [yes/no]."`

Threading The Labyrinth (2000) by Kevin F. Doughty, reviewer Robert Menke:

The story needed more prompting between cut scenes. There was no indication that it was waiting for a keystroke.

16. Miscellaneous

16.1. Testing

Risorgimento Represso (2003) by Michael Coyne, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

This author benefitted from a healthy six-month-plus development schedule that allowed for approximately ten weeks of beta testing. He also had a sterling team of testers who clearly gave the game a thorough workout. The depth of implementation, of fun responses to nearly everything you can think to try, is superb. Good work, everybody.

Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder, reviewer Mike Russo:

The puzzles are reasonable, and solving the game definitely feels satisfying ... the `about` notes imply that the author put [this game] through some beta testing, not just for stability, but also to tweak the puzzle design, and the effort paid off.

The Pickpocket (2000) by Alex Weldon, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

One of the most important reasons for betatesting is that once players encounter a serious bug, they're unlikely to take the rest of your game very seriously, having lost faith that it knows what it's doing.

The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore, reviewer Mike Snyder:

The great thing about beta-testing is that you don't have to change everything testers try, to accommodate [all of their alternative solutions]. You can leave the game and the story untouched, and simply add meaningful, legitimate reasons why those things won't work. It will also help you identify where clues are lacking, to help direct the player to the proper path.

The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio, reviewer Mike Snyder:

Beta-testing is almost as important as writing a good game to begin with, and no good game is great without it.

Castle Amnos (2000) by John Evans, reviewer J. Robinson Wheeler:

Learn how fast you work and budget as much time for testing as possible.

References (Testing):

- [Finishing]() by Graham Nelson (*The Craft of Adventure*).
- [Discussions about testing]() on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

16.2. Replayability

Four In One (1998) by J. Robinson Wheeler, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

[This game] does an outstanding job juggling all [of the] characters, giving them just the appropriate depth of implementation so that the game really rewards replay.

Guess The Verb! (2000) by Leonard Richardson, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

Another great feature of this game is its impressive replayability. The plot branches randomly into five small scenarios, and I don't think that all five scenarios are reachable in a single play session ... each scenario is well worth visiting, even the briefer ones, so there's a reason for replay right there.

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

The game is difficult enough that you're unlikely to find anywhere close to the whole story on the first run unless you resort to the walkthrough. This is compounded by only being able to pick a few of the initial devices to take with you: this adds to replay value but lowers the value of any given playthrough. Whether this is a worthwhile tradeoff is a hard call to make.

Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski, reviewer Duncan Stevens:

The replay potential assured by the limited tool capacity might have been achieved by diverging paths of sorts, where alternative story branches offer different information, which would be a little less frustrating than you-see-the-opportunity-for-wondrous-insight-but-damn-you-brought-the-wrong-tool.

CaffeiNation (2003) by Michael Loegering, reviewer Jess Knoch:

I find myself tempted to play through again and try to get a better score.

The Erudition Chamber (2003) by Daniel Freas, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

Each puzzle has four kinds of solutions (physical brute force, mental brute force, analysis, and evasion) (if some of these sound similar, well, it's probably because this is an IF game and not real life ... but still, it's a good idea and adds some good replay value).

All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows, reviewer Andrew Plotkin:

It's exactly big enough that replaying it is interesting — you know you're going to do better this time. On each retry, doing everything right is neither too easy (boring) nor too hard (complicated).

History Repeating (2005) by Mark Choba and Renee Choba, reviewer Dan Shiovitz:

I was surprised by the ending somewhat ... because the authors decided to make it require replaying the game from the beginning (wait! don't go away yet! it's stupid game design but it really doesn't take very long to replay).

Die Vollkommene Masse (2004) by Alice Merridew, reviewer Mike Snyder:

I generally don't like replaying a game unless there are clues and things I want to catch and understand better the second time around (sometimes just a different ending isn't enough).

References (Replayability):

- [Replayability in Adventure Games](#) by Lucian Smith.
- [Discussions about replayability](#) on the `rec.arts.int-fiction` newsgroup.

16.3. Unfinished Games

The Water Bird (1999) by Athan Skelley, reviewer Paul O'Brian:

I've expressed this opinion before, and it hasn't met with general approval. Nor do I expect it to now, although to me it seems like sheerest sense. But I just have to say it: if your competition entry isn't ready by the deadline, and by "ready" I mean fully proofread, beta-tested and (please) played through at least once to ensure that it's finishable, DON'T ENTER IT. Don't even breathe a word of its existence. I adamantly maintain that you gain no appreciable benefit from entering an unfinished game into the IF competition. Instead, it's detrimental to you in several ways.

First of all, many people who might have been open to playing your game will write it off as buggy and poorly done, and probably never come back to it again. After all, why should they bother with your rough draft when there are so many pieces of really good IF being published each year, and a wealth of older classics in the archive, all available for free? The audience for IF isn't so large that an author can afford to alienate such a significant portion of it; as the hoary cliche goes, "you never get a second chance to make a first impression."

Secondly, releasing an unfinished game tarnishes your reputation as an author, since it implies that you really don't care how good your work is before it's released, that you don't take pride in it. But perhaps most heartbreakingly of all, it's so agonizing for a player to go through a game that has lots of good pieces but is an overall bad game, and bad not because its author can't write, not because there's anything wrong with the concept or the programming or anything, but just because it's NOT FINISHED. It's like biting into a pancake and finding that inside it's still just batter. It's so much more disappointing than going through a game that just plain stinks on ice, because it's so clear how much unrealised potential is present in the unfinished game.

I'm an author myself, and I understand how much time and energy goes into the writing of an IF game. Why would you want anybody to see that game before you've honed it and worked out the kinks? Why waste all that good effort? Instead of entering that game, finish it. Do it right. Then release it in the Spring, or the Summer. Or if you really want to be in the competition, enter it in the next year's competition where it has a chance of kicking some serious butt over all the unfinished games in that year's field. Exercise a little patience.

Appendix A: Referenced Games

2112 (2001) by George K. Algire
A Bear's Night Out (1997) by David Dyte
A Change In The Weather (1995) by Andrew Plotkin
A Day For Soft Food (1999) by Tod Levi
A Day In The Life Of A Super Hero (2004) by David Whyld
A Good Breakfast (1997) by Stuart Adair
A Light's Tale (2004) by Zach Flynn
A Moment Of Hope (1999) by Simmon Keith
A New Day (1997) by Jonathan Fry
A New Life (2005) by Alexandre Owen Muniz
A Night Guest (2001) by Valentine Kopteltsev
A Paper Moon (2003) by Andrew Krywaniuk
A Party To Murder (2002) by David Good
Adoo's Stinky Story (2003) by B. Perry
Alien Abduction? (1996) by Charles Gerlach
All Roads (2001) by Jon Ingold
All Things Devours (2004) by Half sick of shadows
Amissville II (2005) by Santoonie Corporation
Amnesia (2003) by Dustin Rhodes
Another Earth, Another Sky (2002) by Paul O'Brian
Arrival (1998) by Stephen Granade
At Wit's End (2000) by Mike Sousa
Augustine (2002) by Terrence V. Koch
Babel (1997) by Ian Finley
Baluthar (2003) by Chris Molloy Wischer
Beat The Devil (1999) by Robert M. Camisa
Best Of Three (2001) by Emily Short
Beyond (2005) by Roberto Grassi, Paolo Lucchesi and Alessandro Peretti
Bio (2003) by David Linder
Blade Sentinel (2002) by Mihalis Georgostathis
Blink (2004) by Ian Waddell
Bliss (1999) by Cameron Wilkin
Blue Chairs (2004) by Chris Klimas
CC (1998) by Mikko Vuorinen
CaffeiNation (2003) by Michael Loegering
Captain Chaos (1999) by Shay Caron
Castle Amnos (2000) by John Evans
Cattus Atrox (1998) by David Cornelson
Cerulean Stowaway (2003) by Roger Descheneaux
Chancellor (2005) by Kevin Venzke
Cheiron (2005) by Sarah Clelland and Elisabeth Polli
Chicks Dig Jerks (1999) by Robb Sherwin
Chronicle Play Torn (2004) by Penczer Attila
Coffee Quest II (2002) by Dog Solitude
Color And Number (2002) by Steven Kollmansberger
Colors (2001) by J. Robinson Wheeler
Concrete Paradise (2002) by Tyson Ibele

Congratulations! (1997) by Frederick J. Hirsch
Constraints (2002) by Martin Bays
Curse Of Manorland (2003) by James King
Delusions (1996) by C. E. Forman
Delvyn (2002) by William A. Tilli
Die Vollkommene Masse (2004) by Alice Merridew
Dinner With Andre (2000) by Liza Daly
Distress (2005) by Mike Snyder
Domicile (2003) by John Evans
Down (1997) by Kent Tessman
Downtown Tokyo, Present Day (1998) by John Kean
Dreary Lands (2005) by Paul Lee
Enlightenment (1998) by Taro Ogawa
Enlisted (2000) by G. F. Berry
Episode In The Life Of An Artist (2003) by Peter Eastman
Erehwon (1999) by Richard Litherland
Eric's Gift (2002) by Joao Mendes
Escape From Auriga (2004) by Florin D. Tomescu
Escape From Crulistan (2000) by Alan Smithee
Escape To New York (2005) by Richard Otter
Evacuate (2002) by Jeff Rissman
Exhibition (1999) by Ian Finley
Fear (1996) by Chuan-Tze Teo
Fifteen (1998) by Ricardo Dague
Film At Eleven (2001) by Bowen Greenwood
For A Change (1999) by Dan Schmidt
Fort Aegea (2002) by Francesco Bova
Four In One (1998) by J. Robinson Wheeler
Four Seconds (1999) by Jason Reigstad
Friday Afternoon (1997) by Mischa Schweitzer
Gamlet (2004) by Tomasz Pudlo
Getting Back To Sleep (2004) by Patrick Evans
Gilded: The Lily And The Cage (2005) by John Evans
Glowgrass (1997) by Nate Cull
Goose, Egg, Badger (2004) by Brian Rapp
Gourmet (2003) by Aaron A. Reed
Grayscale (2001) by Daniel Freas
Guess The Verb! (2000) by Leonard Richardson
Halothane (1999) by Quentin D. Thompson
Happy Ever After (2000) by Robert M. Camisa
Hello Sword (2005) by Andrea Rezzonico
Hercules' First Labor (2003) by Bob Brown
Heroes (2001) by Sean Barrett
History Repeating (2005) by Mark Choba and Renee Choba
Hunter, In Darkness (1999) by Andrew Plotkin
I Didn't Know You Could Yodel (1998) by Andrew Indovina and Michael Eisenman
I Must Play (2004) by Geoff Fortytwo
Identity (2004) by Dave Bernazzani
Identity Thief (2002) by Rob Shaw-Fuller
Internal Documents (2003) by Tom Lechner

Internal Vigilance (2005) by Simon Christiansen
Jacks Or Better To Murder, Aces To Win (1999) by J. D. Berry
Jane (2002) by Joseph Grzesiak
Janitor (2002) by Peter Seebach and Kevin Lynn
King Arthur's Night Out (1999) by Mikko Vuorinen
Kissing The Buddha's Feet (1996) by Leon Lin
Koan (2002) by Esa Peuha
Kurusu City (2004) by Kevin Venzke
Little Blue Men (1998) by Michael S. Gentry
Lomalow (1999) by Brendan Barnwell
Luminous Horizon: Earth And Sky Episode 3 (2004) by Paul O'Brian
Lunatix: The Insanity Circle (1999) by Mike Snyder
Madame L'Estrange And The Troubled Spirit (1997) by Ian Ball and Marcus Young
Magocracy (2004) by Joseph Rheaume
Maiden Of The Moonlight (1996) by Brian P. Dean
Marooned (2000) by Bruce Davis
Masque Of The Last Faeries (2000) by Ian Ball
Masquerade (2000) by Kathleen M. Fischer
Metamorphoses (2000) by Emily Short
Mingsheng (2004) by Deane Saunders
Mix Tape (2005) by Brett Witty
Moments Out Of Time (2001) by L. Ross Raszewski
Moonbase (2002) by Mike Eckardt
Mortality (2005) by David Whyld
Mother Loose (1998) by Irene Callaci
Murder At The Aero Club (2004) by Penny Wyatt
Muse: An Autumn Romance (1998) by Christopher Huang
My Angel (2000) by Jon Ingold
MythTale (2002) by Temari Seikaiha
Neon Nirvana (2005) by Tony Woods
Nevermore (2000) by Nate Cull
Not Much Time (2002) by Tyson Ibele
Of Forms Unknown (1996) by Chris Markwyn
Off The Trolley (2005) by Krisztian Kaldi
On Optimism (2005) by Zach Flynn
On The Farm (1999) by Lenny Pitts
Only After Dark (1999) by Gunther Schmidl
Order (2004) by John Evans
Out Of The Study (2002) by Anssi Raisanen
Outsided (1999) by Chad Elliot
Persistence Of Memory (1998) by Jason Dyer
Phantom: Caverns Of The Killer (2005) by Brandon Coker
Photopia (1998) by Adam Cadre
Phred Phontious And The Quest For Pizza (1997) by Michael Zey
Piece Of Mind (1996) by Giles Boutel
Planet Of The Infinite Minds (2000) by Alfredo Garcia
Poor Zefron's Almanac (1997) by Carl Klutzke
Prized Possession (2001) by Kathleen M. Fischer
Psyche's Lament (2005) by John Sichi and Lara Sichi
Purple (1998) by Stefan Blixt

Ralph (1996) by Miron Schmidt
Rameses (2000) by Stephen Bond
Redeye (2004) by John Pitchers
Remembrance (1999) by Casey Tait
Rent-A-Spy (2002) by John Eriksson
Research Dig (1998) by Chris Armitage
Risorgimento Represso (2003) by Michael Coyne
Ruined Robots (2004) by Gregory Dudek, Natasha Dudek and Nicholas Dudek
SNOSAE (1999) by R. Dale McDaniel
Sabotage On The Century Cauldron (2005) by Thomas de Graaff
Sardoria (2003) by Anssi Raisanen
Scary House Amulet! (2002) by Ricardo Dague
Scavenger (2003) by Quintin Stone
Screen (2002) by Edward Floren
Shade (2000) by Andrew Plotkin
Shadows On The Mirror (2003) by Chrysoula Tzavelas
Shattered Memory (2001) by Andrés Viedma Peláez
She's Got A Thing For Spring (1997) by Brent VanFossen
Six Stories (1999) by N. K. Guy
Slouching Towards Bedlam (2003) by Star Foster and Daniel Ravipinto
Small World (1996) by Andrew D. Pontious
Snatches (2005) by Gregory Weir
Son Of A ... (2005) by C. S. Woodrow
Space Horror I (2005) by Jerry
Splashdown (2004) by Paul J. Furio
Spodgeville Murphy And The Jewelled Eye Of Wossname (1999) by David Fillmore
Square Circle (2004) by Eric Eve
Stack Overflow (2004) by Timofei Shatrov
Sting Of The Wasp (2004) by Jason Devlin
Stone Cell (1999) by Stephen Kodat
Strangers In The Night (1999) by Rich Pizor
Sun And Moon (2002) by David Brain
Sunset Over Savannah (1997) by Ivan Cockrum
Sweet Dreams (2003) by Papillon
Tapestry (1996) by Dan Ravipinto
Temple Of Kaos (2003) by Peter Gambles
Temple Of The Orc Mage (1997) by Gary Roggin
Terrible Lizards (2002) by Alan Mead and Ian Mead
The Atomic Heart (2003) by Stefan Blixt
The Beetmonger's Journal (2001) by Scott Starkey
The Best Man (2000) by Robert Menke
The Big Mama (2000) by Brendan Barnwell
The Big Scoop (2004) by Johan Berntsson
The Case of Samuel Gregor (2002) by Stephen Hilderbrand
The Chasing (2001) by Anssi Raisanen
The City (1998) by Sam Barlow
The Clock (2000) by Cleopatra Kozlowski
The Color Pink (2005) by Robert Street
The Cruise (2001) by Norman Perlmutter
The Djinni Chronicles (2000) by J. D. Berry

The Edifice (1997) by Lucian Smith
The End Means Escape (2000) by Stephen Kodat
The Erudition Chamber (2003) by Daniel Freas
The Evil Sorcerer (2001) by Gren Remoz
The Frenetic Five vs. Sturm Und Drang (1997) by Neil deMause
The Gostak (2001) by Carl Muckenhoupt
The Granite Book (2002) by James Mitchelhill
The Great Xavio (2004) by Reese Warner
The HeBGB Horror! (1999) by Eric Mayer
The Isolato Incident (2001) by Alan DeNiro
The Last Just Cause (2001) by Jeremy Carey-Dressler
The Moonlit Tower (2002) by Yoon Ha Lee
The Obscene Quest Of Dr. Aardvarkbarf (1997) by Gary Roggin
The Orion Agenda (2004) by Ryan Weisenberger
The PK Girl (2002) by Robert Goodwin and Nanami Nekono
The Pickpocket (2000) by Alex Weldon
The Plague (Redux) (2005) by Laurence Moore
The Plant (1998) by Mike Roberts
The Recruit (2003) by Mike Sousa
The Ritual Of Purification (1998) by Jarek Solobewski
The Sword Of Malice (2005) by Anthony Panuccio
The Temple (2002) by Johan Berntsson
The Town Dragon (1997) by David Cornelson
The Water Bird (1999) by Athan Skelley
Threading The Labyrinth (2000) by Kevin F. Doughty
Till Death Makes A Monk-Fish Out Of Me! (2002) by Mike Sousa and Jon Ingold
To Otherwhere And Back (2001) by Gregory Ewing
Tookie's Song (2002) by Jess Knoch
Tough Beans (2005) by Sara Dee
Trading Punches (2004) by Mike Snyder
Transfer (2000) by Tod Levi
Trapped In A One-Room Dilly (1998) by Laura Knauth
Travels In The Land Of Erden (1997) by Laura Knauth
Triune (2001) by Papillon
Unforgotten (2005) by Quintin Pan
Unholy Grail (1997) by Stuart Allen
Vendetta (2005) by James Hall
Vespers (2005) by Jason Devlin
Vicious Cycles (2001) by Simon Mark
VirtuaTech (1997) by David Glasser
Volcano Isle (2001) by Paul DeWitt
Waldo's Pie (2005) by Michael Arnaud
Who Created That Monster? (2004) by N. B. Horvath
Winter Wonderland (1999) by Laura Knauth
Xen: The Contest (2005) by Ian Shlasko
Zombie! (1997) by Scott Starkey

Appendix B: Game Authors

Adair, Stuart — *A Good Breakfast* (1997)
Algire, George K. — *2112* (2001)
Allen, Stuart — *Unholy Grail* (1997)
Armitage, Chris — *Research Dig* (1998)
Arnaud, Michael — *Waldo's Pie* (2005)
Attila, Penczer — *Chronicle Play Torn* (2004)
Ball, Ian — *Madame L'Estrange And The Troubled Spirit* (1997); *Masque Of The Last Faeries* (2000)
Barlow, Sam — *The City* (1998)
Barnwell, Brendan — *Lomalow* (1999); *The Big Mama* (2000)
Barrett, Sean — *Heroes* (2001)
Bays, Martin — *Constraints* (2002)
Bernazzani, Dave — *Identity* (2004)
Berntsson, Johan — *The Temple* (2002); *The Big Scoop* (2004)
Berry, G. F. — *Enlisted* (2000)
Berry, J. D. — *Jacks Or Better To Murder, Aces To Win* (1999); *The Djinni Chronicles* (2000)
Blixt, Stefan — *Purple* (1998); *The Atomic Heart* (2003)
Bond, Stephen — *Rameses* (2000)
Boutel, Giles — *Piece Of Mind* (1996)
Bova, Francesco — *Fort Aegea* (2002)
Brain, David — *Sun And Moon* (2002)
Brown, Bob — *Hercules' First Labor* (2003)
Cadre, Adam — *Photopia* (1998)
Callaci, Irene — *Mother Loose* (1998)
Camisa, Robert M. — *Beat The Devil* (1999); *Happy Ever After* (2000)
Carey-Dressler, Jeremy — *The Last Just Cause* (2001)
Caron, Shay — *Captain Chaos* (1999)
Choba, Mark — *History Repeating* (2005)
Choba, Renee — *History Repeating* (2005)
Christiansen, Simon — *Internal Vigilance* (2005)
Clelland, Sarah — *Cheiron* (2005)
Cockrum, Ivan — *Sunset Over Savannah* (1997)
Coker, Brandon — *Phantom: Caverns Of The Killer* (2005)
Cornelson, David — *The Town Dragon* (1997); *Cattus Atrox* (1998)
Coyne, Michael — *Risorgimento Represso* (2003)
Cull, Nate — *Glowgrass* (1997); *Nevermore* (2000)
Dague, Ricardo — *Fifteen* (1998); *Scary House Amulet!* (2002)
Daly, Liza — *Dinner With Andre* (2000)
Davis, Bruce — *Marooned* (2000)
Dean, Brian P. — *Maiden Of The Moonlight* (1996)
Dee, Sara — *Tough Beans* (2005)
deMause, Neil — *The Frenetic Five vs. Sturm Und Drang* (1997)
DeNiro, Alan — *The Isolato Incident* (2001)
Descheneaux, Roger — *Cerulean Stowaway* (2003)
Devlin, Jason — *Sting Of The Wasp* (2004); *Vespers* (2005)
DeWitt, Paul — *Volcano Isle* (2001)
Doughty, Kevin F. — *Threading The Labyrinth* (2000)

Dudek, Gregory — *Ruined Robots* (2004)
Dudek, Natasha — *Ruined Robots* (2004)
Dudek, Nicholas — *Ruined Robots* (2004)
Dyer, Jason — *Persistence Of Memory* (1998)
Dyte, David — *A Bear's Night Out* (1997)
Eastman, Peter — *Episode In The Life Of An Artist* (2003)
Eckardt, Mike — *Moonbase* (2002)
Eisenman, Michael — *I Didn't Know You Could Yodel* (1998)
Elliot, Chad — *Outsided* (1999)
Eriksson, John — *Rent-A-Spy* (2002)
Evans, John — *Castle Amnos* (2000); *Domicile* (2003); *Order* (2004); *Gilded: The Lily And The Cage* (2005)
Evans, Patrick — *Getting Back To Sleep* (2004)
Eve, Eric — *Square Circle* (2004)
Ewing, Gregory — *To Otherwhere And Back* (2001)
Fillmore, David — *Spodgeville Murphy And The Jewelled Eye Of Wossname* (1999)
Finley, Ian — *Babel* (1997); *Exhibition* (1999)
Fischer, Kathleen M. — *Masquerade* (2000); *Prized Possession* (2001)
Floren, Edward — *Screen* (2002)
Flynn, Zach — *A Light's Tale* (2004); *On Optimism* (2005)
Forman, C. E. — *Delusions* (1996)
Foster, Star — *Slouching Towards Bedlam* (2003)
Freas, Daniel — *Grayscale* (2001); *The Erudition Chamber* (2003)
Fry, Jonathan — *A New Day* (1997)
Furio, Paul J. — *Splashdown* (2004)
Gambles, Peter — *Temple Of Kaos* (2003)
Garcia, Alfredo — *Planet Of The Infinite Minds* (2000)
Gentry, Michael S. — *Little Blue Men* (1998)
Geoff Fortytwo — *I Must Play* (2004)
Georgostathis, Mihalis — *Blade Sentinel* (2002)
Gerlach, Charles — *Alien Abduction?* (1996)
Glasser, David — *VirtuaTech* (1997)
Good, David — *A Party To Murder* (2002)
Goodwin, Robert — *The PK Girl* (2002)
Graaff, Thomas de — *Sabotage On The Century Cauldron* (2005)
Granade, Stephen — *Arrival* (1998)
Grassi, Roberto — *Beyond* (2005)
Greenwood, Bowen — *Film At Eleven* (2001)
Grzesiak, Joseph — *Jane* (2002)
Guy, N. K. — *Six Stories* (1999)
Half sick of shadows — *All Things Devours* (2004)
Hall, James — *Vendetta* (2005)
Hilderbrand, Stephen — *The Case of Samuel Gregor* (2002)
Hirsch, Frederick J. — *Congratulations!* (1997)
Horvath, N. B. — *Who Created That Monster?* (2004)
Huang, Christopher — *Muse: An Autumn Romance* (1998)
Ibele, Tyson — *Concrete Paradise* (2002); *Not Much Time* (2002)
Indovina, Andrew — *I Didn't Know You Could Yodel* (1998)
Ingold, Jon — *My Angel* (2000); *All Roads* (2001); *Till Death Makes A Monk-Fish Out Of Me!* (2002)

Jerry — *Space Horror I* (2005)
Kaldi, Krisztian — *Off The Trolley* (2005)
Kean, John — *Downtown Tokyo, Present Day* (1998)
Keith, Simmon — *A Moment Of Hope* (1999)
King, James — *Curse Of Manorland* (2003)
Klimas, Chris — *Blue Chairs* (2004)
Klutzke, Carl — *Poor Zefron's Almanac* (1997)
Knauth, Laura — *Travels In The Land Of Erden* (1997); *Trapped In A One-Room Dilly* (1998); *Winter Wonderland* (1999)
Knoch, Jess — *Tookie's Song* (2002)
Koch, Terrence V. — *Augustine* (2002)
Kodat, Stephen — *Stone Cell* (1999); *The End Means Escape* (2000)
Kollmansberger, Steven — *Color And Number* (2002)
Kopteltsev, Valentine — *A Night Guest* (2001)
Kozlowski, Cleopatra — *The Clock* (2000)
Krywaniuk, Andrew — *A Paper Moon* (2003)
Lechner, Tom — *Internal Documents* (2003)
Lee, Paul — *Dreary Lands* (2005)
Lee, Yoon Ha — *The Moonlit Tower* (2002)
Levi, Tod — *A Day For Soft Food* (1999); *Transfer* (2000)
Lin, Leon — *Kissing The Buddha's Feet* (1996)
Linder, David — *Bio* (2003)
Litherland, Richard — *Erehwon* (1999)
Loegering, Michael — *CaffeiNation* (2003)
Lucchesi, Paolo — *Beyond* (2005)
Lynn, Kevin — *Janitor* (2002)
Mark, Simon — *Vicious Cycles* (2001)
Markwyn, Chris — *Of Forms Unknown* (1996)
Mayer, Eric — *The HeBGB Horror!* (1999)
McDaniel, R. Dale — *SNOSAE* (1999)
Mead, Alan — *Terrible Lizards* (2002)
Mead, Ian — *Terrible Lizards* (2002)
Mendes, Joao — *Eric's Gift* (2002)
Menke, Robert — *The Best Man* (2000)
Merridew, Alice — *Die Vollkommene Masse* (2004)
Mitchelhill, James — *The Granite Book* (2002)
Moore, Laurence — *The Plague (Redux)* (2005)
Muckenhoupt, Carl — *The Gostak* (2001)
Muniz, Alexandre Owen — *A New Life* (2005)
Nekono, Nanami — *The PK Girl* (2002)
O'Brian, Paul — *Another Earth, Another Sky* (2002); *Luminous Horizon: Earth And Sky Episode 3* (2004)
Ogawa, Taro — *Enlightenment* (1998)
Otter, Richard — *Escape To New York* (2005)
Pan, Quintin — *Unforgotten* (2005)
Panuccio, Anthony — *The Sword Of Malice* (2005)
Papillon — *Triune* (2001); *Sweet Dreams* (2003)
Peláez, Andrés Viedma — *Shattered Memory* (2001)
Peretti, Alessandro — *Beyond* (2005)
Perlmutter, Norman — *The Cruise* (2001)

Perry, B. — *Adoo's Stinky Story* (2003)

Peuha, Esa — *Koan* (2002)

Pitchers, John — *Redeye* (2004)

Pitts, Lenny — *On The Farm* (1999)

Pizor, Rich — *Strangers In The Night* (1999)

Plotkin, Andrew — *A Change In The Weather* (1995); *Hunter, In Darkness* (1999); *Shade* (2000)

Polli, Elisabeth — *Cheiron* (2005)

Pontious, Andrew D. — *Small World* (1996)

Pudlo, Tomasz — *Gamlet* (2004)

Raisanen, Anssi — *The Chasing* (2001); *Out Of The Study* (2002); *Sardoria* (2003)

Rapp, Brian — *Goose, Egg, Badger* (2004)

Raszewski, L. Ross — *Moments Out Of Time* (2001)

Ravipinto, Dan — *Tapestry* (1996); *Slouching Towards Bedlam* (2003)

Reed, Aaron A. — *Gourmet* (2003)

Reigstad, Jason — *Four Seconds* (1999)

Remoz, Gren — *The Evil Sorcerer* (2001)

Rezzonico, Andrea — *Hello Sword* (2005)

Rheaume, Joseph — *Magocracy* (2004)

Rhodes, Dustin — *Amnesia* (2003)

Richardson, Leonard — *Guess The Verb!* (2000)

Rissman, Jeff — *Evacuate* (2002)

Roberts, Mike — *The Plant* (1998)

Roggin, Gary — *Temple Of The Orc Mage* (1997); *The Obscene Quest Of Dr. Aardvarkbarf* (1997)

Santoonie Corporation — *Amissville II* (2005)

Saunders, Deane — *Mingsheng* (2004)

Schmidl, Gunther — *Only After Dark* (1999)

Schmidt, Dan — *For A Change* (1999)

Schmidt, Miron — *Ralph* (1996)

Schweitzer, Mischa — *Friday Afternoon* (1997)

Seebach, Peter — *Janitor* (2002)

Seikaiha, Temari — *MythTale* (2002)

Shatrov, Timofei — *Stack Overflow* (2004)

Shaw-Fuller, Rob — *Identity Thief* (2002)

Sherwin, Robb — *Chicks Dig Jerks* (1999)

Shlasko, Ian — *Xen: The Contest* (2005)

Short, Emily — *Metamorphoses* (2000); *Best Of Three* (2001)

Sichi, John — *Psyche's Lament* (2005)

Sichi, Lara — *Psyche's Lament* (2005)

Skelley, Athan — *The Water Bird* (1999)

Smith, Lucian P. — *The Edifice* (1997)

Smithee, Alan — *Escape From Crulistan* (2000)

Snyder, Mike — *Lunatix: The Insanity Circle* (1999); *Trading Punches* (2004); *Distress* (2005)

Solitude, Dog — *Coffee Quest II* (2002)

Solobewski, Jarek — *The Ritual Of Purification* (1998)

Sousa, Mike — *At Wit's End* (2000); *Till Death Makes A Monk-Fish Out Of Me!* (2002); *The Recruit* (2003)

Starkey, Scott — *Zombie!* (1997); *The Beetmonger's Journal* (2001)

Stone, Quintin — *Scavenger* (2003)
Street, Robert — *The Color Pink* (2005)
Tait, Casey — *Remembrance* (1999)
Teo, Chuan-Tze — *Fear* (1996)
Tessman, Kent — *Down* (1997)
Thompson, Quentin D. — *Halothane* (1999)
Tilli, William A. — *Delvyn* (2002)
Tomescu, Florin D. — *Escape From Auriga* (2004)
Tzavelas, Chrysoula — *Shadows On The Mirror* (2003)
VanFossen, Brent — *She's Got A Thing For Spring* (1997)
Venzke, Kevin — *Kurusu City* (2004); *Chancellor* (2005)
Vuorinen, Mikko — *CC* (1998); *King Arthur's Night Out* (1999)
Waddell, Ian — *Blink* (2004)
Warner, Reese — *The Great Xavio* (2004)
Weir, Gregory — *Snatches* (2005)
Weisenberger, Ryan — *The Orion Agenda* (2004)
Weldon, Alex — *The Pickpocket* (2000)
Wheeler, J. Robinson — *Four In One* (1998); *Colors* (2001)
Whyld, David — *A Day In The Life Of A Super Hero* (2004); *Mortality* (2005)
Wilkin, Cameron — *Bliss* (1999)
Wischer, Chris Molloy — *Baluthar* (2003)
Witty, Brett — *Mix Tape* (2005)
Woodrow, C. S. — *Son Of A ...* (2005)
Woods, Tony — *Neon Nirvana* (2005)
Wyatt, Penny — *Murder At The Aero Club* (2004)
Young, Marcus — *Madame L'Estrange And The Troubled Spirit* (1997)
Zey, Michael — *Phred Phontious And The Quest For Pizza* (1997)