

IFOGRAPHY

May 2015

Volume 1 Issue 3

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Alice doesn't look 150

Conversation with
Carolyn VanEseltine

The many ways of
playing IF on your
mobile device



Welcome back, everyone!

BY MATT GOH

It has been more than two months since the last issue of IFography. Many people in the Interactive Fiction Faction, the private Google+ community that works on this magazine, got pulled away by real life. Now that most of our projects are completed, the group once again has a chance to continue on the magazine!

School has pretty much bogged me with boring biology and physics during the day, while "Counter Strike" took up most of my evenings. Good thing to state: I'm actually getting better in games!

But I did have some time for IF. With plenty of competitions held in the past few months, many players and judges have been busy with the large amount of games released. I took some time to play all of the Parsercomp games and vote on them. I was impressed by games like "Chlorophyll" and "Delphina's House." More of what I thought can be found in the reviews section. I hope to focus on Spring Thing games next issue.

These past two months witnessed the release of commercial games for free online. One of them is Peter Nepstad's "1893: A World's Fair Mystery," which typically takes 10 hours to finish. And in less purely positive news, Textfyre's closing prompted it to release its two games, "Jack Toresal and The Secret Letter" and "The Shadow in the Cathedral" for free.

This issue isn't all gloom, though, and we did our best to ensure that this issue is filled up with content that is both interesting and fun! Quality is assured as the team had help from two valuable IFF members, Hanon Ondricek and Andrew Schultz.

Submissions are welcome with open arms, so send us whatever you want to talk about or any changes that you feel should be in the next issue.

Contact us at ifography@gmail.com, and have a great day, folks!

IFOGRAPHY

This magazine brought to you by the fine folks at [The Interactive Fiction Faction](#), including:

Editors: Matt Goh, Marshal Tenner Winter

Designer: Robert Patten

Other contributors: Hanon Ondricek, Andrew Schultz, Neil Butters

On the cover: [Screenshot from Magnetic Scrolls' "Wonderland"](#)

Note: Links to other pages in the magazine might not work on Apple-created PDF interpreters such as Preview and iBooks.

IFOGRAPHY

A magazine for interactive fiction enthusiasts

INGREDIENTS

NEWS

Competition results. Free games!

QUESTIONS

Carolyn VanEseltine, IF author and comp organizer, answers questions about game development, "Rock Band," and roller coasters.

TOOLS

Want to play IF on the go? Want to make mobile IF? Read this article.

WORLD OF IF

Learn the thought processes behind making games based on songs. An interview with authors of last year's Shufflecomp.

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

150 years ago, the world went down the original rabbit hole. Check out Magnetic Scrolls' take on this extremely influential book.

REVIEWS

"Chlorophyll," "Six Gray Rats Crawl Up the Pillow," "Delphina's House," "The Zuni Doll," "Zombie Wizard of the Apocalypse."

And the winners of the XZZY Awards are ...

Every year, the community votes on the best IF works in different categories.

Basically, if the game is IF, was released in 2014 and people know about it, it's entered into the [XZZY Awards](#).

Two commercial games, "80 Days" and "Hadean Lands," did especially well.

- Best Game: "80 Days" (inkle, Meg Jayanth)
- Best Writing: "With Those We Love Alive" (Porpentine, Brenda Neotemie)
- Best Story: "80 Days" (inkle, Meg Jayanth)
- Best Setting: "Hadean Lands" (Andrew Plotkin)
- Best Puzzles: "Hadean Lands" (Andrew Plotkin)
- Best NPCs: "Creatures Such As We" (Lynnea Glasser)
- Best Individual Puzzle: The sequence of time-travel in "Fifteen Minutes" (Ade McT)
- Best Individual NPC: the Empress in "With Those We Love Alive" (Porpentine, Brenda Neotemie)
- Best Individual PC: the PC in "the uncle who works for nintendo" (Michael Lutz)
- Best Implementation: "Hadean Lands" (Andrew Plotkin)
- Best Use of Innovation: "Hadean Lands" (Andrew Plotkin)
- Best Technological Development: Twine 2 and Inform 7 6L02 (tie)
- Best Use of Multimedia: 80 Days (inkle, Meg Jayanth)

Spring Thing 2015 entries available

After a long time of waiting, the Spring Thing 2015 games are finally out! There will be two categories in the event, one being the Main Festival while the other being the Back Garden. Games in the Main Festival will receive prizes from the prize pool, while games in the Back Garden will not receive any prizes, but have easier entry requirements.

The Main Festival entries:

- "Toby's Nose" by Chandler Groover
 - "Ruiness" by Porpentine Charity Heartscape
 - "A Trial" by B Minus Seven
 - "Sunrise" by Lucky Sun Scribes
 - "Mere Anarchy" by Bruno Dias
 - "Doggerland" by A. DeNiro
- The Back Festival entries:
- "Dirk" by Andrew Schultz
 - "Aspel" by Emily Short
 - "Missing Since '77" by Andrew Watt

The voting deadline is until May 5.

Twiny Jam gets loads of entries

Popular Twine author Porpentine organized a jam for short games made with Twine. There were 239 entries.

Twiny Jam ended in April, but you can still visit its website and check out the tiny creations.

The entries range from short horror stories to slice-of-life games. Yes, there are a lot of them, but with only 300 words allowed per entry, it shouldn't

take terribly long to [play them](#).

Textfyre closes; releases games

Textfyre, a small IF publisher that intended to release high-quality commercialized text games during the past five years, closed its doors in March and released its games for free. Up to now, only two games have been released, which are "The Shadow in the Cathedral" and "Jack Toresal and The Secret Letter."

Textfyre has also been working on a game called "Empath's Gift," which will be released for free upon completion, it said.

Both released games are available for download in Glulx and executable formats.

[Go here for downloads.](#)

Get full version of 2002's '1893' free

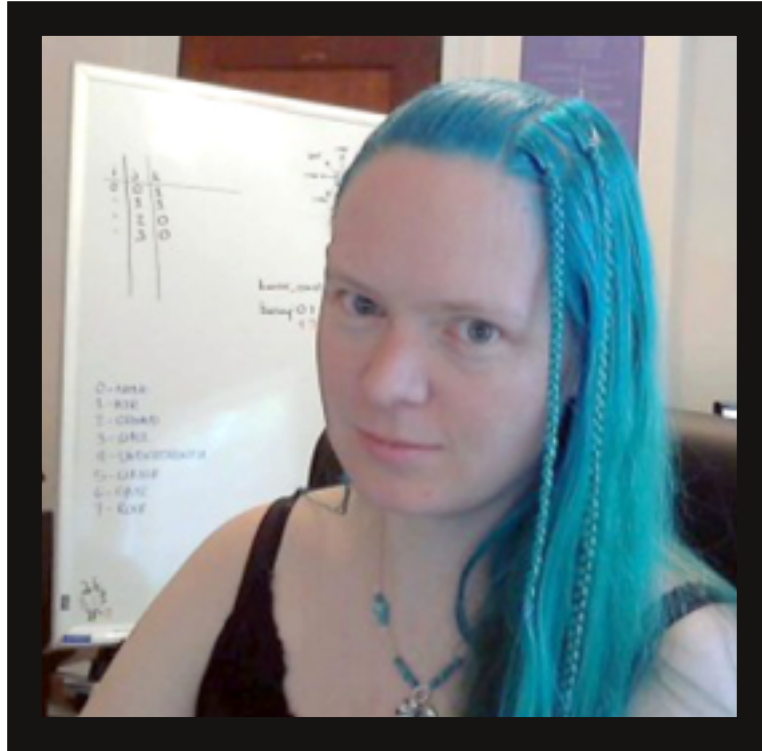
After being first released in 2002, "1893: A World's Fair Mystery" is finally uploaded and downloadable for free in the IF Archives – not the demo file, but the full version, together with its official manual and guide.

It received a lot of acclaim and praise by critics on its release, given its massive map, interesting story and brilliant, black and white photographs – nearly 500 of them!

The easiest way to get the game and feelies is by [going to the IFDB page](#).

The size of the game file is a whopping 69 MB due to all the images included.

Reinventing your own wheel



A conversation with Carolyn VanEselte

BY HANON ONDRICEK

Carolyn VanEselte is one of Interactive Fiction's hardest-working and most brilliant creative figures.

Newcomers to the community may have encountered her moderating the *intfiction.org* forum or breaking down the intricacies of *Inform 7* in a series of informative articles. On her website, www.sibylmoon.com, she compiles in-depth insights and details regarding her personal experience in the ever-evolving world of game design.

After securing a BA in English from Beloit College specializing in creative writing, she now works as a professional game designer and is an enthusiastic game dev hobbyist.

Her professional career in gaming began in 2002 working on "GemStone IV" at Simutronics

Games, and since then, she's worked for Harmonix ("Rock Band" and "Dance Central" franchises) and Giant Spacekat ("Revolution 60").

She has released three full-length interactive fiction games: "One Eye Open" (with Caelyn Sandel), "Beet the Devil," and XYZZY winner (for Best NPCs) "Ollie Ollie Oxen Free."

She resides in the Greater Boston area with fiancée Danielle Church and her dog Megabit.

What was your first encounter with computer/electronic games?

My dad introduced me to "Adventure" when I was 5 years old. When I got stuck, he printed out the Fortran source for me on our old dot-matrix printer. I used to bring the entire printout to daycare and comb through it during free play time.

Your first IFDB entry is "Phoenix's Landing: Destiny," which won IntroComp in 2008. Was that your first IF? Do you have any "cellar" games (i.e. THIS SHALL NEVER SEE DAYLIGHT!)?

Not at all. There have been a great many cellar games! Apart from that, I wrote multiplayer IF from 2002 to 2006, though never in IFDB-qualifying form. But to back up ...

IF has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. My parents were opposed to commercial games, so we didn't have any of the Infocom games at my house, but my dad was a computer hobbyist, and he used to write text adventures in Turbo Pascal on an old system called Grow. He wrote some of them on his own to entertain me, and he wrote others by asking me what should happen next.

I don't remember the details very well, but we made one game that was full of sorceresses and dogs and wizards, and there was a hostile rosebush that grabbed your ankle. That one triggered a choice-based interaction – you could either scream at it so that it would wilt, or uproot a tomato plant and throw it at the rosebush to distract it. (I'm glad this was choice-based, because talk about psychic author solutions! Of course, no one ever saw it but us.)

Later, I got my hands on LOGO, and I tried to write a text adventure with it. I wanted to accept

verb-noun commands, but I hadn't figured out how to build a parser, so GET ROCK had its own subroutine and GET COINS had its own subroutine and ... you get the idea. It did navigate nicely between rooms, though, so that was something.

Fast forward to 2002, and Simutronics hired me to work on "GemStone IV." I sometimes describe GS4 as "the last of the really great pay-for-play MUDs." (It's a reference to "The Last of the Really Great Whangdoodles," though no one ever gets it.) In many ways, working on GS4 felt like coming home for me. It had the text-based interface that I loved, but with thousands of other people all playing at the same time. I joined the Quests and Events team, and we made stories for our players to experience. We told big stories about invasions by extra-worldly monsters and struggles between god-chosen paladins, and we told small stories about people finding self-confidence and laying old ghosts to rest. We told our stories with specially crafted areas, prewritten game code, and GM-inhabited NPCs. The stories were magical, and through our stories, we made an RPG into a universe.

But by their nature, these stories were ephemeral. We didn't run and rerun our epic events – we planned and prepared for months, but the actual in-game event would only happen once, leaving only repercussions, memories, and player



Screenshot from GemStone IV taken April 25, 2015, in Chrome.

logs behind. It made major events special, but there was something dismaying about it as well.

When I discovered Inform 6 and the existence of the single-player IF community, I jumped at the chance to write something more permanent.

My first solo, single-player IF game was the typical terrible "my apartment" first game. It was called "The Daily Grind," and it was about trying to get to work on time despite being trapped in your apartment by a bright orange Chow Chow with a nasty temperament. I wanted to enter it into IFComp, but the organizer told me firmly that I'd missed the deadline. (Stephen Granade, I owe you one.)

I got the impression that you primarily write horror, but I think "Smoochiepoodle and the Bastion of Science" has probably one of the funniest premises I've come across. Where do you get inspiration, and have you ever considered an expansion of "Smoochiepoodle"?

I actually think of myself as a fantasy writer first and a science fiction writer second, with horror somewhere after that. My games have been all over the map – "One Eye Open" is psychic horror, but "Beet the Devil" is religious comedy, "Homecoming" is twisted sci-fi humor, "Wildflowers" is somber slice-of-life, and I don't even know what to call "Monkey and Bear" or "Ollie Ollie Oxen Free." Games, I guess? They're definitely games.

"Smoochiepoodle and the Bastion of Science" came out of a desperate attempt to fulfill as many



of the SpeedIFJacket prompts as I could.

Here's the list I was working from:

"Much time is wasted in irrelevant flirting between parser and PC. >GET ROOM, guys." – Sam Kabo Ashwell

"Not, surprisingly, an unreliable narrator game." – Caelyn Sandel

"The writer is a strange, strange, strange individual." – Tanga

"I'll never look at frozen peas the same way again." – C.E.J. Pacian

"It's painfully obvious that the entire game was written solely to set up one rather weak pun." – David Fletcher

"At first I thought this was just another boring empty-apartment game. Then came the piranhas." – Sarah Morayati

"Brilliant! This is the first four-move game I've actually enjoyed." – Royce Odle

"With a naked eye or microscope you will be able to identify 180 hardwoods, softwoods and tropical woods." – Roger Carbol

"The wryly savage condemnation of the 17th-century Neapolitan court is a knee-slapper, despite being couched so shyly in metaphor." – S. John Ross

"Writing a keyword-based game using no verbs, not even in the descriptions, must've been nothing short of impossible." – Marius Muller

I didn't successfully use them all, but I still assert that "Smoochiepoodle" is the only possible game that I could have written from those prompts. And no, I've never considered expanding it. I think one version is enough!

Props to ClubFloyd – I can't believe they won before checking the walkthrough. I was pleased with the core solution, but I thought it was dreadfully cued.

You've experimented with multiplayer and persistence in interactive fiction. Do you have ideas about how you'd like to push this further?

Multiplayer IF fascinates me. No matter how beautiful an IF game is, there's a certain measure of soullessness that comes from knowing that it's just you and you alone. Interacting with other real people through a game – that's powerful.

I have a number of multiplayer IF experiments in process, both choice-based and parser. Most of



them, like "This Is A Real Thing That Happened," handle multiplayer asynchronously – you are affected by the people who played before you, and you will affect the people who play after you, but you don't interact in real time. The exception is "Greetings, Survivors," which would be synchronous if completed, but which is less groundbreaking than the others.

You've collaborated multiple times with Caelyn Sandel. Do you recommend collaboration for other people? What do you look for in a collaborator?

I like collaborating with other people because projects that I build with other people are so different than projects I build alone. With the right people and the right project, there's an upward spiral of energy and excitement, and the end result is better than anything I would have made alone. "One Eye Open" and "Does Canned Rice Dream of a Napkin Heap?" are shining examples.

But whether a collaboration succeeds or fails really depends on who I'm working with and what we're working on. With the wrong people or the wrong project, it goes the other way – everyone loses enthusiasm, energy and motivation, and eventually everyone hates the project. I've had a couple projects fall apart that way, and it's pretty awful.

As for whether I'd recommend it – I do think it's worth trying! I suggest that smaller events like Ectocomp or Shufflecomp are a great opportunity to find out whether this will work for you. If you

find a good teammate on a three-hour project, then you have the starting basis to try something larger.

One thing to note: In the commercial game dev scene, most devs work in small groups, rather than working alone. Notch, Dong Nguyen, and the Toady One do exist, but they are exceptions rather than the norm. Knowing how to collaborate creatively is an optional skill in the IF authoring community, but it's a critically important skill for professional game devs.

You were an associate producer at Harmonix. Did you work on "Rock Band" and "Dance Central"? Did you have any input on the direction of those games?

I worked on a number of titles in both the "Rock Band" and "Dance Central" franchises, but I didn't directly affect their design.

"Producer" is an important role in the video game industry, but it's sometimes tricky to define. A former director of mine once put it well by saying, "The director's job is to determine what and why. The producer's job is to determine how and when." In essence, a producer's job is to ensure that the game gets made – not by making the game, but by ensuring that the people who are making the game can do so with maximum efficiency and minimal interference. In the day-to-day, it involves a lot of risk assessment, scheduling, communication, and paperwork.

The Rock Band Network was my favorite project at Harmonix. The RBN was a user-generated content project of unprecedented

magnitude. It allowed any musician to put their music into "Rock Band," as long as they had separated stems and rights to the masters. The artists received a cut of the payment for their songs, just like artists featured in regular DLC.

I originally joined the Harmonix web team as a QA specialist on the RBN project, but eventually I joined the production team as the RBN producer (under the project director, Matthew Nordhaus). It opened up a whole world of music – not just to me, but to everyone else discovering new music via "Rock Band." In my three-plus years on the RBN, we released over 2,000 songs!

You wrote about how you learned to sing playing "Rock Band." If someone puts you on the spot, what track do you choose?

Depends on which songs are available! I just went to a Jukebox the Ghost concert last week, so if you put me on the spot with my own library, I'd pick their song "Empire" (from the Rock Band Network). If I had to stick with official Harmonix DLC, I'd pick "Somebody to Love" by Queen, because I'm proud of being able to hit Freddie Mercury's high notes. And if I had to stick with on-disc songs, I'd pick "Roundabout" by Yes, because the harmonies are gorgeous.

"Fish Dreams" was shockingly disturbing. Are these the kinds of dreams you normally have?

I am very happy to say no.

Roller coasters: Do you love them, or are they twisted monstrosities of potentially deadly kinetic energy? ("What Are Little Girls Made Of?" was an Ectocomp 2012 entry involving a terrifying experience on a roller coaster)

The last time I was on a roller coaster, it was the Yankee Cannonball at Canobie Lake, and I was sitting with Rob Noyes (Spatch). I didn't have contact lenses at the time, and as we took the first drop, my glasses jounced straight off my face. Rob reached out and snagged them out of the air like "'tain't no thing." I will never stop being impressed by this.

For my part, I clung to the bar and tensed up so hard that my shoulder spasmed and I had to use a heating pad for the next three days.

TL:DR; Twisted monstrosities of potentially deadly kinetic energy that tried to steal my vision. Run away! Run away!



I've noticed AI seems to recur as a theme in your games. Do you have any specific interest in producing machine intelligence beyond "graceful NPCs"?

From a Feb 25, 2015 chat log:

Caelyn Sandel: This is you: "I can write a game without an AI!!!! am writing a game without an AI RIGHT NOW, ok back to writing games about AIs"

It's true – I'm fascinated with artificial intelligence. I got to dig into heuristics and metaheuristics while writing "The Chessboard Lethologica," because I had to explain a fictional breakthrough in AI technology without actually having an AI programming background. That was a lot of fun! (Also, I got to make a whole lot of chess references. Yay for chess references!)

More than half the incomplete games in my I7 folder deal with AI in some form. I think it stems from the same root as my fascination with multiplayer IF – I want the player to have a believable, meaningful experience of the game responding to the player. I'm also drawn to the idea of machine intelligence because it would be like and yet unlike us, which always produces fertile space for fictional exploration.

Actually working on machine intelligence would be fascinating, but it seems like the kind of thing that isn't realistic at the hobbyist level – either you do it, or you don't do it. Right now, I'm opting for "don't do it," but I make no promises about the future.

Have you ever had a game concept that just got out of hand, like you were designing for technology that doesn't exist yet? How do you keep things manageable?

This hasn't really happened to me. Odd as it sounds, this is my coding speciality. Given an engineering problem (or a game concept), I can generally solve it with the tools at hand – regardless of whether or not those tools are the best tools existing for the job.

This is kind of the opposite of "If you only have a hammer, everything looks like a nail." To push the analogy, if I have a hammer, but the problem is a screw, then I'll screw it in with the hammer-claw. It might make more sense to go find a screwdriver, and it would certainly be easier on the screw if I did – but if there isn't time to find a screwdriver, I can get the job done anyway.

The downside is that I am terribly prone to reinventing the wheel or (among other things) the hash table, the state machine, and the strategy pattern ... not to mention quite a few Inform 7 extensions. This is not particularly efficient, and I'm working to overcome this tendency.

From your articles on your blog, it seems you know or are learning an extremely great number of languages and coding systems. What are your favorites and how do you think you might use them and/or apply that knowledge for interactive fiction or any other application you might design in the future?

Inform 7 is far and away my favorite – it's just so excellently made to fit its intended purpose. I also found it extremely accessible at a time when I didn't have experience with non-scripting languages.

I'm enjoying C# a great deal these days, but my purpose is quite practical: C# is a powerful, versatile language that is heavily used in game dev. I plan to build my mostly-undiscussed solo commercial project (aka Project Sunflower) in Unity with C#.

What's it like running your own comp? Any suggestions you can give to would-be comp organizers or participants in the future based on what you've experienced?

Running ParserComp has been fantastic! I've been delighted by the strong positive response, both among authors (there were 14 submissions!)

and among reviewers.

My advice to other first-time comp runners would be to read the full rules of other IF competitions, figure out what questions everyone else had to answer, and make sure you have answers for them.

I never thought to specify a) whether beta testers could judge games they tested or b) whether or not people could update their entries later on. If I'd considered it in advance, I wouldn't have had to scramble when both of those questions came up.

OK, you're on a desert island maintaining an outpost by yourself for eight months with no Internet and lots of free time and scant luggage space. What single video game do you take with you? What one magazine or publication would you have delivered? What book that you have been meaning to read do you take along?

Video game: "Dwarf Fortress"

Magazine: The Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Book: I'd take my Kindle! The fact that 90% of my library can fit in my purse simultaneously is one of my favorite things about the modern age.

Interviewer's note: Not to mention neatly circumventing James Lipton-style psychological questions!

Carolyn's most recent project is "Does Canned Rice Dream of a Napkin Heap?" (with Caelyn Sandel, Danielle Church and Jamie Sandel) It's part of Antholojam 1: Golden Age of Sci Fi, an experimental collection of 15 short games organized by Zoe Quinn and Alexander Lifschitz. She tells us about it here.

"Canned Rice" is a graphical, reverse-IF storytelling comedy. Two aliens, a robot, and a canine cosmonaut walk into a bar, and you have to entertain them with a tall tale so that they'll pay for your drinks. The press has been extremely positive, and the transcripts have been hysterical!

[Play "Does Canned Rice Dream of a Napkin Heap?"](#) either in your browser (requires Unity plugin) or pay what you want for a download of all the Antholojam games!

WORLDS

IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND

Illustration by Miguel Ugalde/Freeimages

A guide to enjoying & creating IF on mobile devices

BY HANON ONDRICEK

With the power of computers, adventurers can explore nearly anywhere an author's imagination can take them. One surprising fact to know is that the original astronauts – adventurers for real – landed on the moon using a guidance computer with a 1MHz processor and 4kB of memory, which is possibly less memory than some robust Inform 7 extensions. Most everyone who carries a smartphone has more processing power in their pocket than the early space shuttles.

Gaming has exploded on portable devices, as smaller devices encourage different types of games without triple-A requirements and budgets, shorter development times, and smaller teams of programmers. Mobile gaming blockbusters can be created entirely by one person with a great idea and a little know-how.

Interactive fiction, with story games with minimal requirements and its use evocative text to take the place of extensive graphics and mechanics, should fit well here. The stumbling block for IF ironically turns out to be its unique feature: extensive written text. Phones and tablets haven't always been great devices supporting extensive typing. Choice-based narratives would seem to have an advantage here with the option of tappable hypertext, but unless authors are web-savvy and aware of mobile display options, even the most beautifully arranged text can become mangled, so that the story just becomes plain unreadable and the game unplayable.

Mobile interactive fiction gaming is just beginning to solve these problems and connect the two halves of the bridge between author and player in a variety of different ways.

Many of the resources listed are for authors to create and distribute their work, but links will

also be provided for players searching for interactive stories to play and read. What follows is by no means an exhaustive list, but some of the current best options in a field that is constantly expanding.

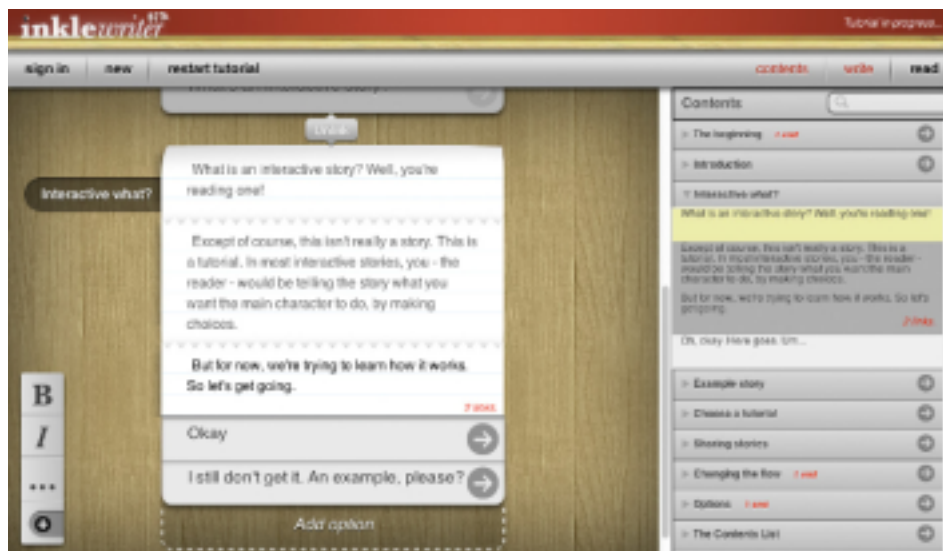
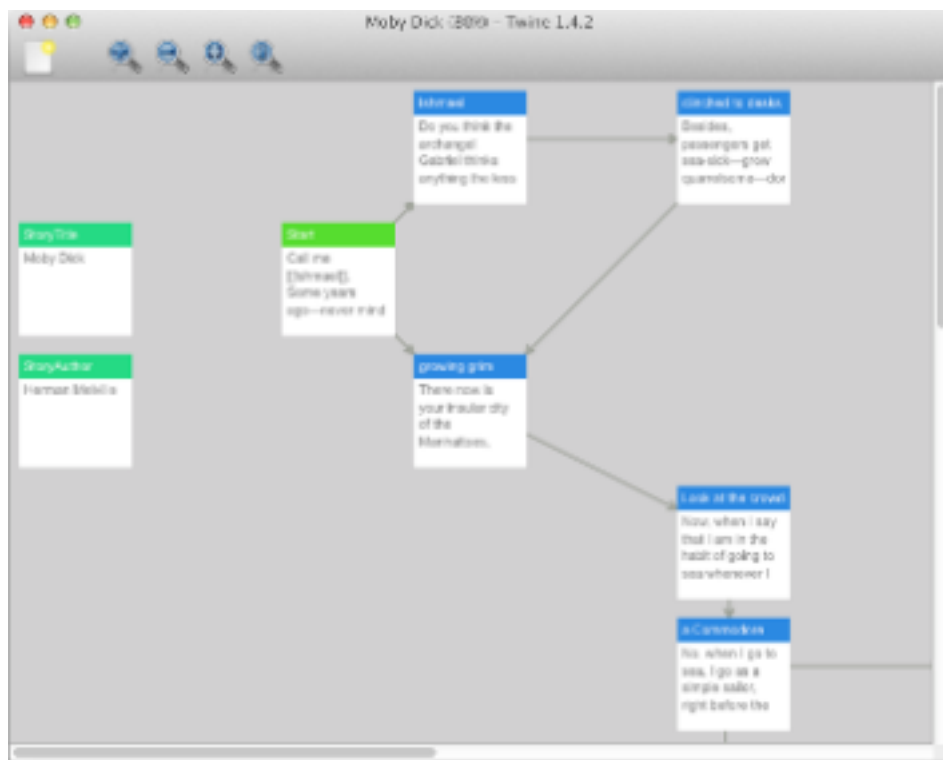
Twine

Twine is in a period of adjustment. Twine 2.0 is currently having the bugs worked out, but its default Harlowe output is a lot friendlier for mobile devices (and visibility in general) with nicely-sized book-like serif fonts and text that word-wraps for individual screen size.

Much of the published Twine, however uses the old Sugarcane format which can be dreadful on a small screen due to hard margins--if the text is scaled up on a small device, that means zooming into the screen and panning back and forth (that's if your phone can scale a Web page).

Savvy authors have accommodated for this; Porpentine always supplies nice big readable text, and Lynnea Glasser worked some magic for her Twine remake of Coloratura in Sugarcane to remove the static left bar and let the text wrap readably onto any screen.

With the new version of Twine presenting a sea-change to hardcore users, and an alternate branch of Twine called Sugarcube that is highly popular, Twine remains easy to pick up and use, but can be a bramble-



Two environments for creating choice-based stories: Twine 1.4, top, and Inklewriter, both from their respective websites.

search to create something innovative and completely user-friendly, especially for mobile play.

inklewriter

Another option is to use a development system specifically designed to optimize mobile display. Inklewriter is easy to use (created by the designers of "80 Days" and "Sorcery!" and ostensibly part of the base code for these offerings) providing authors an online GUI for creation of short to moderate-length texts, and an ultimate static URL for distribution.

Though not as flexible as Twine (no color choices, no inline links to the story), hosted images and external Web links can be part of the text. The output on a small screen is comfortably readable like an e-book, and the buttons for choices are large and nicely tappable.

I like the idea that the stories are hosted and created all on one website. Even though authors can't extract the game and put it someplace else, the URL inkle provides can be used as a direct link on IFDB or any page. Also, development is in-browser on the website, so writing is impossible offline.

Creating stories is free, but inkle also offers a special option for a small fee to convert an inklewriter text into a Kindle format which does become an external file that can be sold on the Amazon store. Due to the process involved, certain features of inklewriter (extensive variables, story looping) won't work in the conversion, but this is one route available for authors to actually sell their work.

Choice of Games

Choice of Games is one of the more successful publishers of longer novel and novella-sized choice-based works, and it's actually got a working business plan. Authors may submit completed works to them for hosting on app stores, or query the company to get commissioned to write for its banner Choice of Games label.

The Choice of Games titles have a very established house style that authors must adhere to, but hosted games are much more open to what can be accepted.

The ChoiceScript language has perhaps a tiny speedbump to get started, since code must be written in a text editor and compiled, but tools developed by their community make this much easier, and I was able to export an HTML from an online tool in a snap.

Authors are free to use ChoiceScript for anything provided that they do not sell their work, but creating a commercial game means getting hosted through CoG or making alternate royalty arrangements.

The community is active and quite friendly; it's like an American going to Iceland where everything is just a little different.



AXMA StoryMaker logo

AXMA StoryMaker

I'm a huge fan of AXMA StoryMaker, a Russian-developed, fully-enclosed choice-based development system that writes a lot like Twine, and has some features baked in, (real time clocks ... sprites?) that Twine authors would need to find plugins for and fiddle with.

Version 3 has online and offline IDEs, graphic, sound and music support, and the developers are now tinkering with including sprites, I'm guessing for applications such as a world-map and movable markers on it.

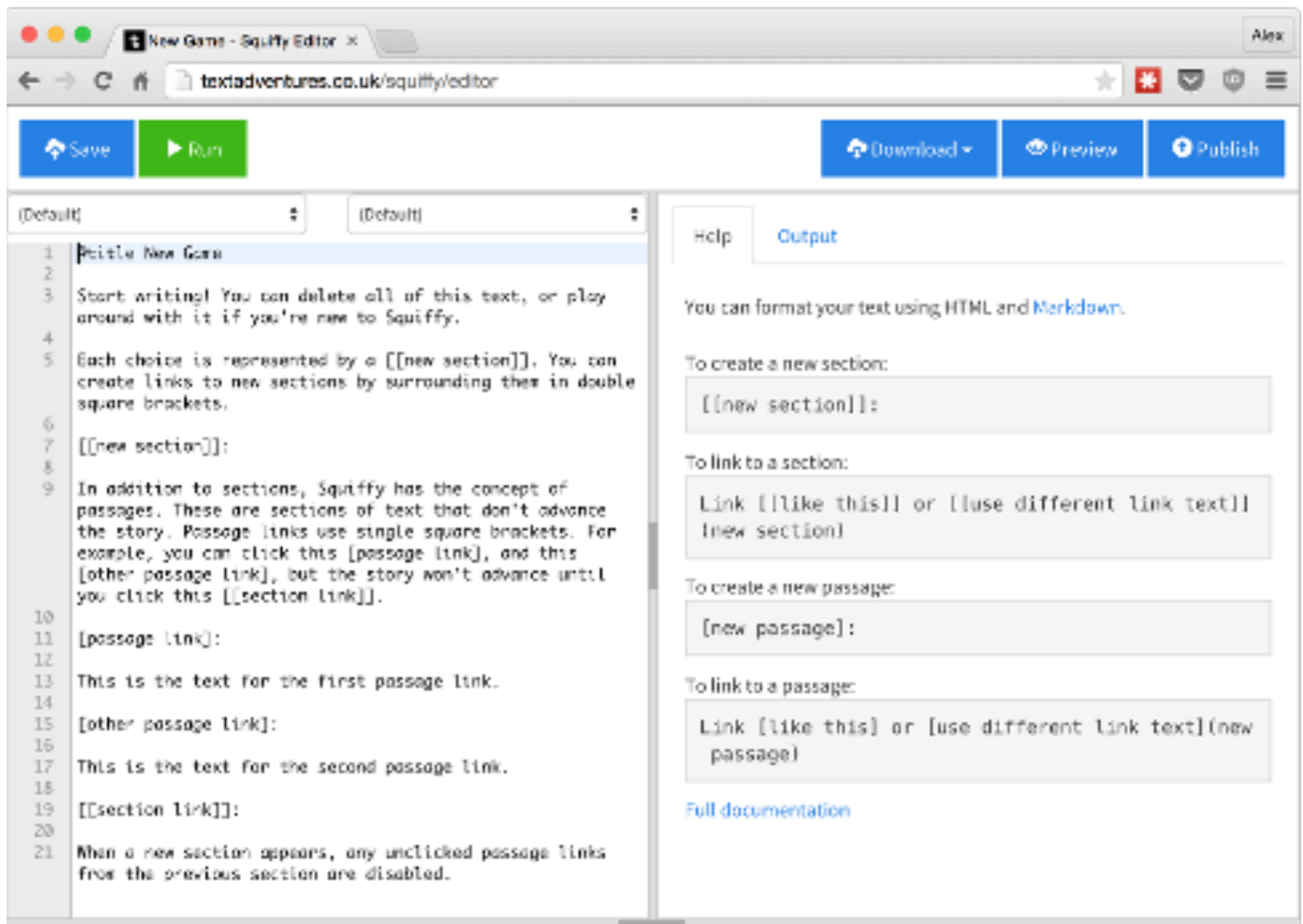
For someone like me who doesn't do JavaScript and has only a glancing understanding of HTML and CSS, this will produce a nicely formatted and readable story. Version 3 includes much specific improvement for mobile devices and text and menus scale and work spectacularly without fuss most of the time.

Authors can use AXMA for free; however, EPUB and direct export to HTML are a paid feature (for a one-time fee of approximately \$45).

Paid users can also customize the exported HTML.

For non-paying users, AXMA provides an online library that is sparsely populated on the U.S. website, but has a loyal user base on the Russian side.

Potential players can be directed to this library to (and authors also can) download the HTML build from there.



This demo screenshot shows Squiffy's new browser-based editor.



StoryNexus

One of the more popular persistent online games, "Fallen London," surprisingly, does not work well on small mobile devices, consisting of an interface with tabbed menus and hard-sized boxes of text that require the zoom and pan method if the the text is too small in full-screen. It's very surprising that Failbetter Games haven't at least created phone-optimized app.

Its user creation tool, StoryNexus, fares no better, and has had the system for an author monetizing a world removed, making it a

choice for creating "Fallen London"-ish games only if the deck-drawing storylet model works for the specific game a creator wants to make. Its IDE and the games created with it are also online-only, but quite accessible after a slightly moderate learning curve.

Squiffy

Squiffy, still in development, is a new, lightweight, choice-based authoring system from Alex Warren, the creator of Quest. It strips away a lot of Twine's overhead and offers some intelligently simple text variation and tag-and-replace features, resulting in a plain HTML file with an eye toward packaging the resulting output as mobile or desktop apps.

For authors who aren't looking for jiggly text but might wish to play around with presentation, it's very straightforward.

Warren's latest innovation is a browser-based editor, which means users don't have to use the command-line interface anymore to compile their stories. We'll be watching this as it develops.

Finding choice-based games

For a player desiring mobile play, choice-based games are everywhere, and many are hosted directly on a website with no download required. These websites can be a bit scattered, but many are searchable via IFDB.

Philome.la is a great site for authors to host Twine games for free (requiring a Twitter account to log in) but does not have any apparent means to list out or search through all the existing games.

Similarly, the IF Archive offers direct search, but is more of a backend to host games (again, for free) and display them on IFDB.

Parser gaming on iOS

Most everyone who uses a smartphone that can run a browser and apps is accustomed to typing on their phone in quick bursts for text messages and email. To play a game with a full parser can be a similar experience, since many of the commands are reduced to abbreviations. The problem that arises is switching back and forth between lengthy text and touch-screen keyboard entry.

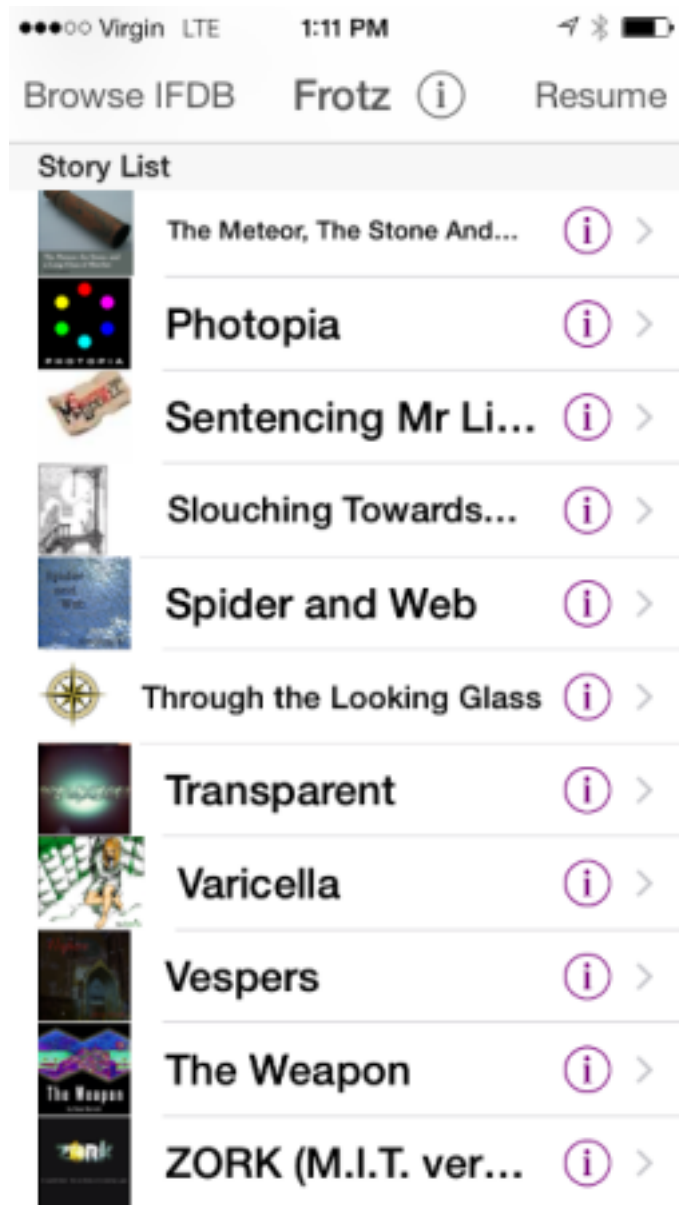
The ideal phone interpreter has probably not been created yet, but the closest I've experienced is Frotz on iOS.

For authors, all one needs do is have a game listed on IFDB with an IF Archive entry and it's available to Frotz by tapping the blorb link.

I don't use TADS, but my large Inform 7 game with images and sound downloaded and ran perfectly minus the sound. It seems most any modern Inform 7 game using the standard included features will work, however heavily customized games that go outside the parameters to do fancy tricks such as real time or java or object creation may not.

This may not be as much of a problem as expected, as I actually downloaded and ran the first bit of "Counterfeit Monkey" successfully and it included a zoomable (but low-res and unresponsive) map.

I haven't gotten far enough so it might eventually crash and burn, but this is impressive from what I understand about how complicated the game mechanics are under the hood.



The Frotz game menu, as seen on an iPhone 5c.

The last time I tried mobile Frotz was on an Android device, and it worked passably, but was an ultimately disappointing experience. To my great surprise, the current version has a new host of conveniences. I tested on my iPhone 5c, so earlier versions or low-powered devices may differ in functionality.

The thing that makes Frotz vastly useful is that it connects directly to the IFDB website, allowing a player to browse and download games directly to the app.

It comes with a list of classic games built in, but many more can be added up to the limit of phone storage and memory.

Frotz allows saves and restores to be uploaded to a cloud or a Dropbox account to transfer them back and forth between desktop and device.

You could work your way through a list of comp games on a long commute (provided, of course, that they had entries on IFDB.) Typing is as good as expected depending on a specific device with a pop-up keyboard. The app does a good job vanishing and reappearing it intuitively.

Instead of the customary > prompt, the game shows a book icon. Tap that, and a list of common verbs appears.

There is also predictive text with autocorrect, as always good and bad. In a session of "Ad Verbum," which wants you to specify unique verbs, I had to fight with the correction a bit.

I did note that suggested words seem to be contextual and possibly derived from the source text.



'Counterfeit Monkey' on Frotz on iOS.

Frotz even makes notes. Swipe right-to-left to access a notepad specific to each game that retains what is typed there. Even more impressively, I was able to switch between open sessions of multiple games and Frotz intelligently saves the game and the notes and remembers what turn I was on – even through a complete phone restart.

I'm sure there must be a limit to this which is probably dependent on how much memory the device has, but it almost makes me want to slot my phone into one of those Bluetooth keyboard contraptions for tablets and do all my parser gaming there, the switching is so instantaneous.

I haven't used WinFrotz, but is there an interpreter for a much more powerful desktop environment that holds your place in multiple games at the same time? Why hasn't this been invented yet?

As before, not every game will work on mobile – "Counterfeit Monkey" was a happy surprise – but there are enough good games on IFDB that you can while away hours with a handheld device and an internet connection or preloaded up for a long trip beforehand. This gives me no excuse to not start spackling in the gaps in my IF knowledge.

Parser gaming on Android (by Matt Goh)

Are phones actually worth playing parser IF on?

Smartphones can be useful in their own way, but they have their annoyances too. Let's see how good phones are from my perspective using Android.

If you use an Android phone, you will be disappointed to find out that the apps on the market there basically only support Z-machine and TADS files.

The advantage of playing IFs on Android is that you can find more apps/interpreters on the market that can play Z-machine games.

On the I'm writing this, I found five different apps supporting IFs. The best one available, Son of Hunky Punk, supports both Z-machine and TADS games, as mentioned above, together with an easy-to-use interface and great saving capabilities. The rest only support Z-code games or lag during command input and are mostly slow.

Not unique to Android IFers is making spelling errors when entering commands into the parser.

To be honest, you will still encounter some slowdowns while typing if you attempt to rush through the game and typing too ferociously, like me. Just remember to slow down while you type.

Another thing that I've noticed while playing these games with phones is that puzzles are probably one of the hardest things to solve. I couldn't progress far at all during my first attempt in "Slouching Towards Bedlam."

For one thing, I was not able to quickly type in inputs to experiment with the puzzles. This is a slow touch keyboard we are talking about, not those plastic keyboards that you can type fast with.

Also, most phone) can only display one app at a time, and when if you are stuck at an area in the game, trying to look at a walk-through using the phone's browser will really slow you down as you need keep rotating between the apps.

Also, entering a browser using a slower phone will take time, thanks to the amount of memory that these browsers take.

Your phone's home button will probably break in time if you keep exiting and re-entering apps. (On the bright side, you can use that as an excuse to get a new phone.)

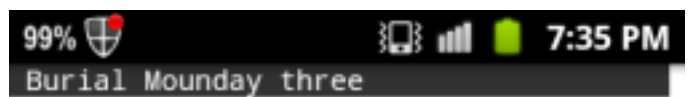
To save time, I download an offline browser to save my walkthroughs in case I need help, and best of all, it doesn't take long to rotate.

Unfortunately, even the supported formats don't always work correctly.

Some games like "Shrapnel" just run weirdly on the Android apps. It's probably because they lack a feature that available on PC Frotz, so it's a strike-out. Z6 games are not playable on Android phones either, as they contain graphics and a special interface.

Despite the limitations of Android interpreters, I could finish "Anchorhead" while I was busy having a vacation in another country using a less-than-powerful smartphone.

Next thing on my list when visiting another country: complete "Curses."



> **put first finger on flute**
Which do you mean, the first flute hole or the first pictogram?

> **hole**
You can't see any such thing.

> **put finger on first gole**
You can't see any such thing.

> **oops hole**
Which do you mean, the first flute hole, the second flute hole, the third flute hole, the fourth flute hole, the fifth flute hole, the sixth flute hole or the seventh flute hole?

> **first flute ole**
You can't see any such thing.

> **put finger on first flute hole**
(first taking the strange metal flute)
You place your finger over the first flute hole.

> |

Matt 'I have 10 thumbs' Goh experiences the frustration of touchscreens on his Android phone while playing 'Anchorhead.'

Links

[Twine](#)

[Inklewriter](#)

[AXMA StoryMaker](#)

[StoryNexus](#)

[Squiffy](#)

[IFDB](#)

[IF Archive](#)

[Philome.la](#)

REWINDING ...



By Cornelius Danger via The Noun Project

...TO 2014 SHUFFLECOMP

Four questions for commended authors

BY NEIL BUTTERS

In 2014, Sam Ashwell conceived of and organized a competition for interactive fiction in which authors wrote IF that was inspired by songs sent to them by other participants. Players could vote for commendation with either a yes or no, and the top 30 percent of entries with the greatest proportion of yes votes to total votes made the final list of commended works.

The 2014 event was a huge hit, with 33 IF works produced from more than 50 intents. The quality of IF was, perhaps surprisingly, high given the short writing period. As they say, the crowd wanted more, and ShuffleComp: Disc 2 was started in mid-March with me taking over as organizer.

With Disc 2 under way, I decided to look back at last year's event by posing the same four questions to the authors of last year's commended entries. The questions covered game design as well as whether or not newly-discovered songs and artists had a lasting

influence on the listening habits of the authors:

Q1: What was one thing that you really liked about your entry, and why?

Q2: What one thing didn't seem to work so well, and why?

Q3: What three games in the 2014 ShuffleComp did you particularly enjoy or think were interesting?

Q4: If you discovered any artists from the 2014 ShuffleComp that you continue to listen to, who were some of them?

I managed to contact all 10 of the authors and received replies from eight:

Caleb Wilson, 'Holy Robot Empire'

A1: My favorite thing about Holy Robot Empire is the two songs – it was really fun writing alternate robot- and IF-themed versions of "The Doxology" and "Ave Maria." There's one puzzle I like a lot too: one reviewer called it



"insidious" and another reviewer thought it was a sign of my own ignorance of civilized behavior. Overall, I liked that this competition got me back into writing IF after a break of about 10 years – I came across the announcement at the perfect time.

A2: I could have brought more intention to the design. I created the map and puzzles mostly intuitively, adding and adjusting pieces until it felt right. In the end everything worked OK, but I probably could have made all the parts a little more harmonious with better planning or better revising. I know how to revise prose, but meaningfully revising IF is still a little beyond me.

A3: "Invisible Parties," "Cryptophasia," and "The Peccary Myth."

A4: I'll listen to the song "Robot High School" by My Robot Friend occasionally.

Carolyn VanEseltine, 'Monkey and Bear'

A1: I really liked the binary sequences in "Monkey and Bear." The people who took the time to decrypt them seemed to get a huge kick out of that element.

A2: The sheer repetitiveness of the game (if you failed to win on the first pass) didn't work very well. The game was originally supposed to have much more variation during the village sequences, and I wish I'd gotten that in.

A3: "Cryptophasia," "Light My Way Home," and "Sequitur."

A4: The Gabe Dixon Band and Wolfmother.

(I'd encountered Wolfmother before Shufflecomp, as they had six songs in "Rock Band," but "Colossal" was the song that made me really sit up and take notice.)

Hanon Ondricek, 'Groove Billygoat'

A1: The *one* thing I liked? I think my favorite part was writing stuff for Betsy to do. The concept of this uncompromisingly jaded little 6-year-old orphan who has no concept of subtext or subtlety or blending into the plot cracks me up to no end.

A2: The thing that didn't work ... I suppose the fight with the multicolored thugs confused a lot of people. ClubFloyd worked so hard on it without the hints. I also should have allowed a shortcut through the dance after the player completes it the first time.

A3: I was happy someone picked my suggestion of "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" (50 Shades of Jilting) because that so obviously screamed for either a one-move game or an escape the room type of thing. I also remember "Monkey and Bear" because I tested it, and I had great fun adding the Bear's unsaid dialogue into the transcript (very much likely to Carolyn VanEseltine's chagrin "DANCE WITH ME, MY LITTLE MONKEY FRIEND!") I am surprised now that I *didn't* play a lot of these...I think I finished "Groove Billygoat" and stepped off the Shufflecomp bus and immediately right onto the IFComp shuttle. Oh, I did admire "Invisible Parties" a lot when I read the source





didn't connect it. Like I said, my experience when that comp went up was pretty much, "OK, I'M DONE NOW I HAVE TO BUILD SOMETHING ELSE BYE!"

Juhana Leinonen, 'Sparkle'

A1: I'm pretty happy that I managed to make something coherent with a nonstandard gameplay element in that short period of time. It was also a good opportunity to try out the new version of Inform 7 that had just come out.

A2: The game's setting is an abandoned hotel. One of the locations is a corridor that leads to several of the hotel's guest rooms. They are inaccessible except for one of them that can be entered using a key found elsewhere. Designing that part took several iterations and testing, and it still doesn't work quite as smoothly as it should. Communicating the idea that most of the doors are just scenery isn't very easy. If I had to do that part again, I'd just make the whole area with the guest rooms inaccessible and place the plot-important things somewhere else.

A3: I liked "Little Bird" in all its absurdness, also "The darkness of mere being" with its fast-moving "War of the Worlds" style setting, and "Tea and Toast," which has a certain zen-like presence to it.

A4: As a song, the one I used as inspiration for the game isn't really the genre I'd otherwise enjoy listening, but from the big list of all songs



submitted to the comp, I have listened to Peter Gabriel from time to time.

Caelyn Sandel, 'Light My Way Home'

A1: It felt like I really nailed the mood. I wanted the game to feel lonely and contemplative and a little bit magical, and I feel that I managed to create that atmosphere effectively. Having a relatively polished game helped with that. I rarely write parser IF, so I was a bit nervous about implementation and polish, but I'm happy with how clean it turned out to be.

A2: I'm not actually that good at writing puzzles, particularly for parser IF, and I think that showed here. The puzzles felt somewhat contrived, but I felt obligated to have them and to make them work with my limited coding capacity. People still seemed to like them well enough, though.

A3: "Cryptophasia," evocative, colorful, and well-designed, this weird game really gripped me even if it wasn't too much of a "game." It reminded me of Porpentine's work, in a good way. "Monkey and Bear," a parable about free will, with the lyrics of the inspired song seamlessly intertwined with the story. The twist ending is kind of inexplicable, but otherwise a great piece. "An Earth Turning Slowly," a compelling story with a clean presentation, wasn't deeply striking, but it was implemented really well and a good read.

A4: I didn't, sorry!

Matt Weiner, 'Tea and Toast'

A1: I think the thing I liked most about "Tea and Toast" is that it gives you some ordinary things to do without making them into puzzles or getting boring or linear. I mean, the thing I really like the most is that the characters (I think) came off the screen a bit, and that my system for triggering memories succeeded, but none of that would have worked if the actual process of making tea and toast were buggy or excessively fiddly or hard to figure out or too linear.

A2: I would've liked there to be a sense that your memories change and evolve given what you do and what you remember, and I'm not sure that came across. A big part of this is that I just couldn't write as many memories as I'd have liked. But also I tried to have some systems to shuffle the memories and I'm not sure that they did anything effective in the end. Also, I tried it out on some non-IF people and they uniformly hated the parser and couldn't deal with the game at all. That made me sad.

A3: I really liked "An Earth Turning Slowly," "Monkey and Bear," and "Holy Robot Empire." HRE was a cool old puzzlefest with a nice setting and sense of humor, "Monkey and Bear" was an eerie tale that really felt like what a Joanna Newsom song would be if it were a text game, and AETS would make this on the setting alone, or story alone, or interface alone—I'd really like to see more done with that system.

A4: It's a bit hard because I usually listen fanatically to instrumental music, which was underrepresented on the playlist for some reason, but Animal Collective and The Avalanches.

Nigel Jayne, 'Sequitur'

A1: I really tried to add dimension to the characters and suggest a divide between the player and the PC. The detective isn't really smart or even interested in what he is doing. He isn't an alcoholic, though he likes gambling. He's divorced and estranged with his daughters. Jenny isn't perfect. She's intelligent, but not necessarily attractive (at least according to the detective). She is more than just a hint dispenser. She has a history and readily responds to questions, including looking things up on the Internet. She initiates many of her



own actions. I like the "role reversal" at the end of the game where Jenny leaves her wheelchair, but the detective ends up in it. It suggests a promising future for her but maybe not for him. I also tried to suggest that the player was a distinct entity, independent of the detective. The game is in third person and never says that the detective actually types anything, except when he's checking sports scores. The "Sequitur" program responds directly to the player's commands. Of course, this illusion can't be pulled off completely – the player needs to ask Jenny questions through the detective – but the idea is there. I also tried to give the people in the footage some personality, and in later releases of the game players can ask Jenny to look up biographical information on them.

A2: I think players may have had problems with the interface and figuring out what exactly was going on. I don't think the interface was really a problem; there are a lot of commands, and they will allow you to do what needs to be done. I think, though, it's deceptively complicated because there are a lot of them and, sometimes, you may need to use a combination of commands to do what you want. So a real issue may have been fitting the footage together logically, which was the point of the game! I think there may have been too many tracks, and having two sequences may have been confusing. In later releases, the detective points out when a link is made, which should help players feel like they are making progress, and he comments on how the footage fits together, which may help players get a feel for how they should try to think.

A3: I really liked the way the artist and



By Jason
Rogers via
Flickr

Shufflecomp: Disc Two

ShuffleComp is being held once again this year by organizer Neil Butters.

The rules are to be the same as before:

Each entrant gets eight songs and eight pseudonyms and will have to make an IF game out of that song and get to use a pseudonym.

Currently, entrants have received their songs and will be working on their games. The deadline for entries is on the May 5, and results will be announced on May 27.

Further details are available on the [ShuffleComp website](#).

song were integrated into "Groove Billy-goat" and, accordingly, the singing and dancing aspects of the game. I liked the story and interface of "An Earth Turning Slowly." I liked the idea behind "Illuminate," but it did need a little something more. I didn't play "Invisible Parties" during the playing period, but I really liked the post-comp release, so I guess it technically shouldn't make this list.

A4: The Aquabats, Architecture in Helsinki, Jim's Big Ego and The Mountain Goats.

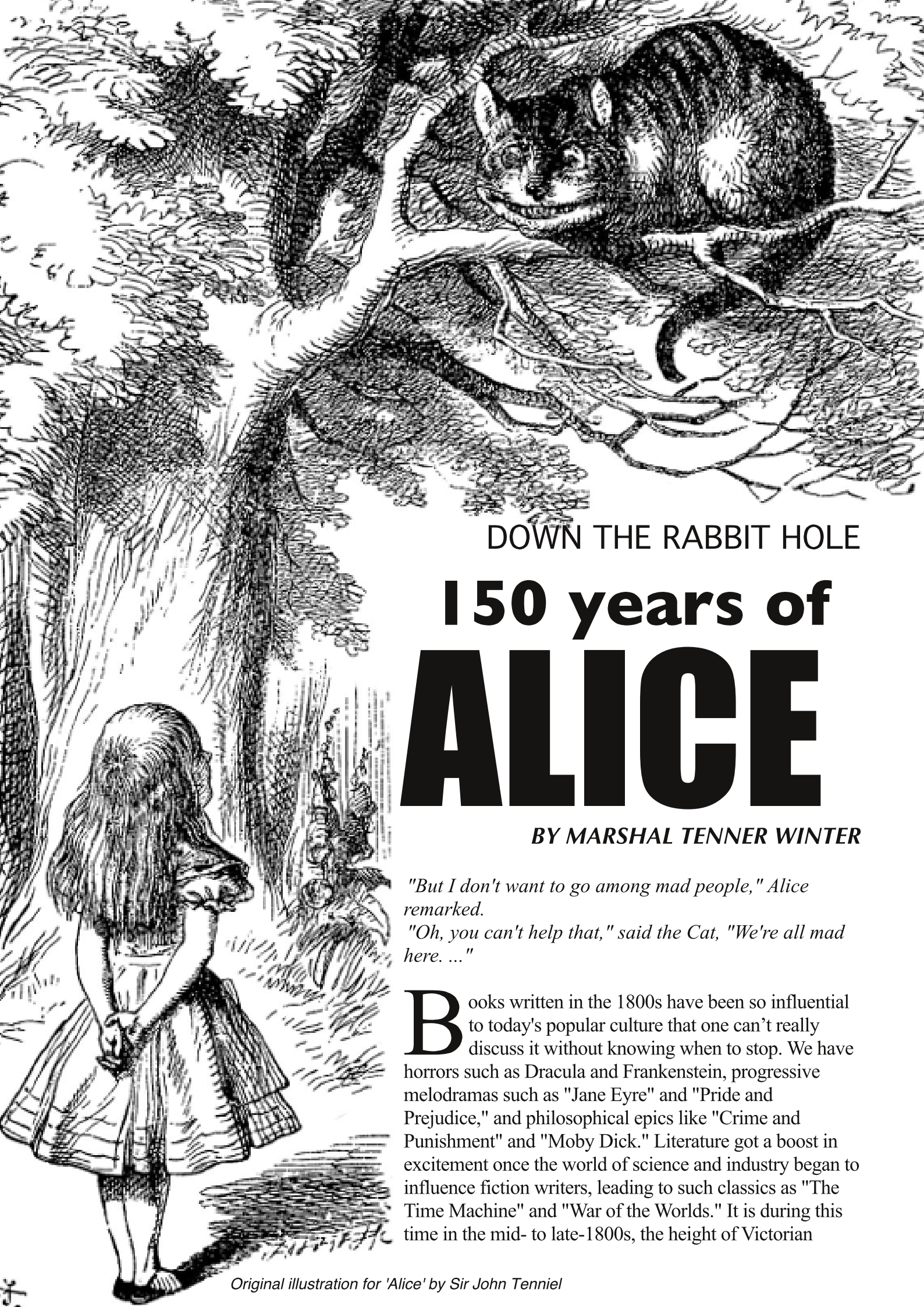
Yoon Ha Lee, 'Mirrorwife'

A1: I enjoyed being able to set a mood that was so different from the in-your-face balladry of the source song. (Emily Short really said it best in her review of the game!) Playing the song straight would have been too easy and not very interesting, plus I enjoy melancholy/spooky/surreal settings, so twisting it in that direction was a lot of fun.

A2: I'm still very inexperienced in using Twine as a medium. (I had previously only coded a tiny exercise and a very brief, um, slash math erotica game, also tiny, more as a joke than anything else.) I got the impression from reviewers (and I agree) that "Mirrorwife" didn't really give a sense that the player was affecting the outcome – even to me it feels very static, like a mood is being experienced rather than the player is protagging their way through the game. Partly this was due to my decision to make the game very small code-wise, but partly lack of knowledge in how to leverage CYOA-style structures to give the player a sense of agency.

A3: My favorites of the ones I had time to play were "More" by Jason Dyer, "Tea and Toast" by Matt Weiner, and "The Peccary Myth" by Pergola Cavendish. Caveat: I was a playtester for "The Peccary Myth," so I experienced it rather more thoroughly.

A4: No, alas. I am picky/eclectic in my music tastes. But I enjoy venturing out from under my rock once in a while!



DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

150 years of **ALICE**

BY MARSHAL TENNER WINTER

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat, "We're all mad here. ..."

Books written in the 1800s have been so influential to today's popular culture that one can't really discuss it without knowing when to stop. We have horrors such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, progressive melodramas such as *"Jane Eyre"* and *"Pride and Prejudice,"* and philosophical epics like *"Crime and Punishment"* and *"Moby Dick."* Literature got a boost in excitement once the world of science and industry began to influence fiction writers, leading to such classics as *"The Time Machine"* and *"War of the Worlds."* It is during this time in the mid- to late-1800s, the height of Victorian

Original illustration for 'Alice' by Sir John Tenniel

stuffiness, that a mathematician made up a child's fantasy novel on a whim during the last part of a long boating excursion to entertain three bored sisters, one of them named Alice. This novel would come to influence our own society's entertainment and culture more than any other book written in that 100-year span.

The story, of course, eventually came to be known as "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," and its characters and events have become archetypes of an almost-Jungian status. The author, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, adopted the alias Lewis Carroll. Besides being a mathematician, he was also a clergyman, a teacher, a photographer, and, most importantly, a writer. Not everything he wrote was as nonsensical as Alice is, but as a mathematician, he came equipped with the logic and reason needed to balance the absurdity in such a work. Indeed, the genre of nonsense requires a balance between reason and absurdity.

Perhaps it says something about our popular culture that a novel in this genre is one of the most influential through time.

Close your eyes and think of 10 things on your own that are inspired by "Alice." Perhaps you think of Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" song, or the first Matrix movie, or any cartoon that includes a Wonderland-themed episode, or perhaps you think of the television show "Once Upon A Time In Wonderland." If you really need proof of the influence of "Alice," check out Wikipedia.

Interactive fiction is not an exception. We'll only take a look at one such Alice-inspired work here, but there are many more. Search for "Alice" in IFDB.

One game that both offered an interactive journey into "Alice" as well as competent graphics to add a splash of pizzazz was Magnetic Scrolls' "Wonderland." Even without the graphics, this game stands out for a few reasons.

It really opens the world of Wonderland to the player to an extent that one doesn't feel on-rails as much as when playing other IF.

Sure, there are parts, as in any IF, that bottleneck the player to get the plot going, but otherwise, one can wander the world of "Wonderland" pretty much left alone until reaching key points, such as Alice reaching



Top: Cover from 1898 edition. Bottom: Box art of Magnetic Scrolls' take on the book.

areas in the forest that open up new chapters.

This game was also made in 1990, during IF's commercial death-rattle. But this allowed the game to offer features unseen in other works. It offered multiple windows to separate the graphics from your inventory and your inventory from the story screen. These windows, much like the windows we are all used to by now, could be resized and moved about the screen. The interpreter I played didn't feature all this and that's just as well. I simply wanted the story and the graphics to play, of course.

Wandering around in peace is always welcome, but there is a lot of old-school adventure backtracking. Traversing back and forth between locations where you need to be can be a royal pain. For example, I found myself at the Mad Tea Party with the Mad Hatter, March Hare and Dormouse, and the puzzle there involves me eating a piece of mushroom obtained from the Caterpillar, a fellow I've not met yet. This kind of thing leads to hours of game play, like it or not.

The new content in the game, that is, content that is not in the actual book, is actually very effective and very in-tune with the flavor of "Alice In Wonderland." This is unlike some text adventures, like [Melbourne House's "Lord of the Rings: Game One"](#) which included an Orc rock band and the ability to find and smoke cannabis. In "Wonderland," you can find (and then take) a fork in the road (adding this fork to your inventory). You can find yourself in a music room where the chairs dance around a self-playing



Getting curiouser and curiouser?

[Check out "Wonderland" on IFDB.](#)

[Learn even more about the game.](#)

piano. Even simple locations do very well paying homage to Lewis Carroll and his merry creations, such as finding a treacle well in your travels.

In honor of the 150th anniversary of the publication of "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," I tried out all the Wonderland-themed IF that I could find. Magnetic Scrolls' is a gem for an old-school IF. I definitely suggest giving it a try. We've included a handy link to a place where you can play it (but you may have to play with your Flash settings to get the interpreter to run, if you don't already have an interpreter for it, that is).



Screenshots from 'Wonderland.'

Warning: MIGHT CONTAIN PARTIAL SPOILERS. READ AT YOUR OWN RISK!

Reviews by Matt Goh unless otherwise noted.

'Chlorophyll' by Steph Cherrywell

It's hard to offer more than "Gee, I liked that," to a polished, clever, funny, game. Still, it's more fun for a reviewer to break down fun stuff than annoying stuff. That'll be my job reviewing "Chlorophyll" by Steph Cherrywell. It deservedly took first place in most categories in this year's ParserComp. The setting is well implemented and matched with this year's crop of XYZZY award Best Setting nominees. It has a great story and puzzles that add to its premise.

"Chlorophyll" is a science fiction game in which the PC is one of a strange, human-like plant race of creatures who must absorb sunlight for food and therefore live in sunlight to survive. The game begins in a Planet Roller with your mother and is meant to establish that Toris Zo, the main character, finds her mother tedious, which spread to the game somewhat. But once I was free to explore, the game opened up for me.

Somehow, the author has managed to capture the environment using the familiar architecture of abandoned shopping malls and railway stations familiar to most people, perhaps because we visit these places often as the main settings

for creepy horror movies, such as "Night of the Living Dead"! The writing is detailed and imaginative, as mentioned above, giving players a clear look into the stores and rooms of the setting. The writing is clear and easy to comprehend.. User-friendliness was emphasized by the author. The best parts of this game lie near the beginning, in the stores and main hallways.

Most of the puzzles are fair, and be solved without the walkthrough if you examine your surroundings carefully. Many revolve around entering a part of the ship that is closed off or fixing some mechanical hardware. The end puzzle might cause some confusion due to some implementation of an object that does not seem enterable but actually is. But the walkthrough takes care of all that and then some. It's as well-organized as the game, giving general hints and specific commands.

Indeed, the walkthrough covers every section and puzzle, and hints can be found within a second or two.

The walkthrough covers both ways to complete the challenging ending, and it gives concise explanations and gives a command-by-command look at the ending.

There are many fun things to do in this game, such as driving a mini-car around the area and discovering the enemy of light-absorbing life organisms. Can you guess what it is? Look at the garden outside your house to get a rough idea. It's pretty amazing

how in the story one small girl can overcome every living horror that is thrown at her: monsters, puzzles, a missing mother, and being stuck in no-plant's land. Part of what makes it believable is the funny stuff. I did enjoy pushing the Sorry Pad 10x in a row as the responses were quite funny.

The parser is very smooth, and understands most of what I threw at it. Although the author predicted every suitable command to implement, there were maybe a few missing synonyms that could be fixed in a post-comp release (TURN ON works; PRESS BUTTON doesn't.) But the planning and knowledge of parser games was clearly there. The author's third place 2014 IFComp entry, "Jacqueline, Jungle Queen," and she brought the same organization to "Chlorophyll."

Overall, this is an impressive game and although it started out slow, it immediately gained its pace soon after and hooked me to the end. Story, puzzles and setting are brilliant and brought together by the author well enough to earn it first place.

Summary: One of the best games in the competition. What else is there to say?

Verdict: 9/10

'Six Gray Rats Crawl Up The Pillow' by Boswell Cain

Here we have a horror game from the ParserComp competition! Announced as a gothic horror tale by the author, I turned on this game excitedly

in my seat. What I saw pretty much disappointed me, as "horror" isn't exactly the right word to describe this game.

"Gothic," maybe. Or "comedy."

One might say, "But Matt! This is a horror game! There's a supposedly haunted house and a dead body in it! And worst of all, you are going to sleep in it in the dead of night?" Well, yes. It does showcase a haunted house with a dead body in it. The only thing separating horror from this game is its total lack of disturbing and terrifying atmosphere. The dead body doesn't feel, well, properly disturbing.

Let's use "Anchorhead" and "Shade" as examples. In "Anchorhead," during the third night (SPOILERS!), you are stalked by a madman who has every intention of ripping your throat into pieces, and you are stuck in an asylum with that monster. The feeling of being stalked is unsettling. This, together with the writing, makes me feel as though I'm in danger at every corner. Once I make the wrong step, pop goes the weasel. In "Shade," there are no ghosts or monsters, but the very atmosphere of the room is disturbing. The claustrophobic feeling from being in that tight, dark space imposes a feeling of terror. The setting is not your usual horror location; it's just a shady room with a not-so-clean bathroom and kitchen, and a plant in the corner that happens to shapeshift once in a while.

So this game did not scare me a bit. It contains nothing that made me feel unsettled for even a second. "Horror" conjures up an image of a larger house than the one in "Six Gray Rats,"

there is no disturbing backstory to discover, and although the ending might go somewhere out-of-the-ordinary, it doesn't affect the player. There is a man with guts in the start who loses his nerve when he enters the house, and the game forces the player to do unnecessary tasks to help him to sleep. I would just laugh at this whole concept. And, that is what the game is trying to make you do: laugh. Therefore, it succeeds in its attempt to bring dark comedy to the story.

These are my complaints, but the game still offers a lot. As I mentioned above, some interesting comedy for us in the form of the PC's preferences. He is a very rare, delicate species that insists on certain conditions before he is comfortable enough to fall asleep, which in turn provides the bulk of the gameplay as he turns the house into his personal bedroom to sleep in. There is at least no furniture rearrangement to be found here, just minor adjustments to block or hide anything disturbing from the PC's view for him to feel relaxed enough to doze off.

The game doesn't text-dump much, and keeping it short helps the humor work. Just seeing how the PC is scared of everything in the author's words makes it hilarious to read and to experience. Typing THINK helps pace the humor with a backstory, including an awful dream that feeds into one of the game's puzzles. One of the best thoughts of the author is this awful dream that he had which will become one of the game's puzzles. Just remember to keep

an eye on the backstory.

The author focuses more on puzzles and plot over setting. The mansion rooms have almost no props, and most background objects are scarcely described. In a way, this helps the tiny atmosphere of this game which is supposed to be a haunted house with no inhabitants.

The thing that affected me the most is the lack of in-game hints. Let's just say that I had missed a clue, which in retrospect was fair, and a small nudge from a HINT meta-command would've helped. I'm more of the walkthrough guy than the I-will-spend-an-hour-on-thinking-how-to-finish-this-puzzle guy, so I'm aggressive about using hints. Though I felt disbelief over how easy the solution was once I saw it, I'd still have liked the safety valve.

The parser was very smooth, and understands a lot of the commands that I typed into it. Being a small game, there aren't many special verbs that you have to dig out, and successfully entering what you want into the parser was a breeze. The very few strange verbs are mentioned in the game shouldn't blur you unless you are likely skip a bit when you read.

For the ending, the only word that I can say is "anti-climatic." I expected a lot more out of it, maybe a secret plot to kill me in my sleep, or a group of spirits waiting for me in front of my bed, or even a ghostly woman to appear beside me. But I got none of that. Just a simple sentence to partially explain the strange things that occurred to me, and that's it. I

expected a bit more story from the buildup.

This game isn't perfect. It has interesting comedy elements but poor setting and nonexistent horror elements. It picked up third place in the Best Writing category of the ParserComp, which is well earned, but the game itself could have been improved. Still, it successfully made me laugh, which was the game's main objective, so that was a job well done.

Summary: Interesting comedy elements with a dark comedy theme, but at the cost of a mediocre setting.

Verdict: 7/10

'Delphina's House' by Alice Grove

Games rarely make me feel at home. They usually thrust me into another world, where I'm pushed to take the role of a random character to complete certain objectives. But if a game is done right, the situation will change and will give players a great feeling of peace and relaxation. It all depends on the setting of the diversion and how puzzles are laid out accordingly to their theme. A good example is games that contain childhood elements and situations 'that mostly remind us of the best time of our lives. This is where "Delphina's House" excels.

You, Delphina, are a small girl who is going to move to another house, with just enough time for a final journey around your old house. There is a "time machine" that you've built that

will allow teleportation to parallel worlds. You will get to explore them and leave your final mark in the place you grew up in.

The parallel setting contrasts nicely with "Chlorophyll's" sprawl, and if I liked that ParserComp game slightly more, that is no shame for "Delphina's House." It's not a big game. Your house has three rooms, and so do versions in the parallel universes. Each features beautiful scenery and a variety of puzzles. Detail is not lost in any of the worlds, and the immersion is increased through the usage of sounds during certain puzzle-solving sequences. Using different senses helps you feel you're solving a fun puzzle, not just an abstract one.

The prose is written in such a way that it shows how a 6-year old child will think, with landscapes with plenty of fantasy elements and mixed with one's wild imagination. It might be even strange to many grown-up players, whose slight inability to relate to their younger selves will make what they are looking at seem too-good-to-be-true and complex. The game's main mechanic (if we can use a stuffy adult word) is that real-life objects can be changed into something else according to the world that they are in. For example, crackers in reality will change into chimes in the Realm of Glass.

As for the puzzles, they are separated in each world, so there's no need to worry about accidentally interfering with them when you are in different

places. The puzzles are fair and well-hinted, although some trial-and-error is needed to complete certain sequences.

There are multiple solutions for some puzzles, which decreases the difficulty of the gameplay. The player will be given the choice of either using the long, winding solution, or the straightforward and common-sense based one

If players encounter difficulties while solving the puzzles, they can use the PDF walkthrough file provided with the game. It is unlike the generic minimal walkthrough that you see on the forums, because it captures the alternate routes through the game. Each world has three puzzles to solve, for the beginning, middle and end. The walkthrough reflects this with a very readable table of solutions. This is necessary, as it's tough to eliminate all confusion since the puzzles in parallel worlds don't seem to be specifically connected. So I worried I might be solving the "wrong" puzzle first, as in theory, the same items are used, but in different presentations. However, there is no wrong way through. You may solve the first puzzle in the Realm of Stars, the next puzzle in the Realm of Glass, and the final one in reality. Since solving a beginning puzzle in one world eliminates its parallels in the other two, you'll need to play "Delphina's House" three times to try everything.

During my short experience in "Delphina's House," I felt a sense of happiness that I rarely feel. It might be because of how special the real and the fantasy

worlds collide so elegantly, and how the items change from being boring-normal to interesting-special, according to their theme. Certain results pop out surreally, but sensibly, when a puzzle is successfully completed. Brace yourselves for happiness when you play this game. It's hard not to feel that way.

Summary: A puzzle-focused game fused well with fantasy elements, which makes players feel warm and fuzzy within.

Verdict: 8/10

'The Zuni Doll' by Jesse Burneko

Let's say someone mentions the word "doll" in a terrified voice to you. What is the first thing that will come to your mind? For the last 20 years, the word has been constantly related to the horrifying "Child's Play" movie (the one where a possessed Chucky doll started a killing spree).

Jesse Burneko recalls that idea and uses it in a game. The result is "The Zuni Doll," which bears a strong resemblance to the movie "Trilogy of Terror." The main story of this game is that you, a person who collects strange relics and objects as a hobby, happens to take home an ugly Zuni doll.

The backstory of the doll that is told to you in the store makes the situation sound really disturbing as the Zuni doll isn't really a make-believe toy, but a real object that was cursed a while back. You can try searching it up on the Internet to see how it came to be.

The shopkeeper gave me a warning just before I went back home: "Whatever you do, do not lose that pendant on the doll's neck. If it's gone, the spirit in it will be free and it will kill you."

Your character just returns home and goes to sleep. When you wake up in the middle of the night, your cat appears in front of you with a pendant in its mouth. And that, my friend, is how you make a horror story. I had instant goosebumps after finishing up the intro of the game.

Everything seems pretty normal as you try to step down from your bed. No sudden noises, no shadows or something like that. Just as you touch the floor, the doll (which I assume is as big as Chucky and Annabelle from the movie, maybe 24 inches?) instantaneously appears and starts stabbing at you with its "sword." To tell the truth, the whole situation is pretty much hilarious to me. I mean, can you just imagine some small thing trying to stab and hit you with some cheap sword? It's just like an infanthaving a tantrum in your bedroom starting to hit your leg just because you won't get him or her a new phone.

"The Zuni Doll" starts with a puzzle, which might seem simple after you figure the whole thing out. But if you have just started playing, the solution might not seem too obvious as you have to hunt from usable props in your bedroom to use on the rampaging doll. But once done, things get much easier after that. Just remember, the whole

game is just about you trying to destroy the thing from hell with plenty of puzzles, so don't expect much of a story here.

There were one or two bugs that I've found while playing this game. For example, trying to enter or exit a room from my bedroom (GO TO TOILET, OUT) will give me the "You aren't anywhere at the moment error. I could only type compass directions to navigate my way around the game, which isn't really an obstacle, but could become irritating at some times as I don't really keep track of my directions very well. But other than that minor bug, the game is pretty much playable and winnable, so an update is not really needed — not that I expect one, as this game is almost 15 years old.

Of note is that this game was made in only four days in Inform 6.

Because this game is made in such a short time, the author decided to concentrate on puzzles rather than the story itself. Other than the intro itself, the whole game has short and brief descriptions of objects and scenery. I can't say much about this, but it would have been much more enjoyable and immersive if the game had something else other than one-liners of how your house looks like.

This game is mostly linear due to its small size and quick action. Most results and activity that happen in "The Zuni Doll" is scripted, which means that there is no way to avoid something that occurs to you. Some examples of games are "Photopia," "Half-Life" and

"Call of Duty." I usually prefer these games, as they are easy to keep track of and to know what to do next. The final puzzle in this game is not easy to solve, because you have to know how to use the many objects that are in your inventory. A lot of logic is needed to finish it, but if your mind is feeling a bit strained, you can use the walkthrough provided on the game's page. Cheers to the walkthrough's author, Ambat Sasi Nair.

If you dedicate yourself enough to this game (with the help of the walkthrough), you can finish it within 100 moves. The best time to play this is right before you sleep, where some horror can help shake things up and significantly delay the time that you enter slumberland. (OK, you know what? Just play it in the morning so the game doesn't freak you out.)

Summary: Nothing beats horror games like "The Zuni Doll" that aren't too lengthy and were made in a short period of time.

Verdict: 7/10

Bonus content: A look at [Andrew Watt's 'Zombie Wizard of the Apocalypse' series](#) by Hanon Ondricek

Last year I was trolling IFDB for something to read and possibly review, and I ran across a game called "Zombie Wizard of the Apocalypse: Episode One" that had just been posted. It sounded like your typical game with zombies: lofty and overly ambitious by someone who had just discovered Twine. I thought I'd dash off a quick and snarky horrible review (which, as we know, are most everyone's favorite kind to write.)

As I expected, it was quite short, littered with random death-end choices and highly scatological humor. I was cast as a bearded wizard named Nimrod Supertramp on a bus with some type of mythical boil on my ass and frequent choices to "cast diarrhea hex" or "crap your pants" in reaction to various events. Despite all this, the writing was surprisingly deft, free of typos, and had a very unusual style: sort of Monty Python meets Kevin Smith.

The first episode is merely getting off the bus and dispatching a bounty hunter named Steve who stands in your way. The aforementioned spell doesn't work, but one of the choices is to call your friend, Marvyn the Devourer, who

apparently owes you a favor. Turns out he's pissed that you called him away from his baking for such an unworthy threat, and the side conversation that ensues in front of Steve the Bounty Hunter is nothing short of hilarious.

I praised the writing, but complained about the frequent dying and restarting. Andrew Watt actually responded to my review, asked questions, and took my reactions seriously and constructively, a rare quality in an artist.

Andrew has now released four installments of ZWotA (which, as I said in my review on IFDB, needs the title rendered in a heavy metal font with the sound of a wailing noodly guitar riff behind it).

Each episode improves the play structure (ditching the cheap random deaths) and inches the meandering but nonetheless epic tale of Nimrod Supertramp forward a chess square or two.

There actually seems to be a ton of world-building here.

Each chapter is preceded by a quote from a book that gives a glimpse of the expanded universe and makes me believe that Watt is actually going somewhere with this. Episode 4 ("The Martian Fields") even changes up the protagonist and lets the player experience Arth as Nimrod's unlikely female companion.

There are typical CYOA "fake" choices, but on occasion the narrative will fork dramatically and each half of the choice will have its own sequence of events and gags before rejoining the main path, so replay is often warranted. These singular fake choices usually have good varying result text. Even if the actual choice doesn't advance the story, it serves to let readers improve the dialogue of this crotchety old lich as snarkily as they want.

Check these short games out if you've got a half-hour to spare, and a taste (well, maybe not taste) for body humor jokes and a goofy subversive fantasy tale expertly told by an author who is more skilled than may first be apparent.

Addendum: Also check out Andrew Watt's just-released Spring Thing entry "Missing Since '77," which is a departure from scatological fantasy, and from what I can tell so far is an intriguing investigatory dual-narrative Twine piece that references the setting for "Zombie Wizard."

PLAY IT

Recommendations of the month

- ["TUNDRA" by PaperBlurt](#)
- ["Tonight Dies the Moon" by Tom McHenry](#)
 - ["Let's Go Eat" by Tom McHenry](#)
 - ["Leadlight Gamma" by Wade Clarke](#)
- ["Fight For The Glory Of Rome!" by ClickHole](#)
- ["Harrison Squared Dies Early" by Daryl Gregory](#)
- ["Death Attends The Matinee" by ClickHole](#)

