Enchanter

At *Creative Computing* we don't look down our noses at "twitch-style" arcade games. We love them, and we play them regularly. A good hand-eye arcade game can provide hours of excitement and have an addictive power that keeps you coming back time after time.

In Praise Of Twitch Games

One of the outstanding qualities of a good arcade game is its accessibility. Boot one up and start playing immediately—no long-winded documentation to wade through, or abstract objectives to ponder. Wives, kids, friends, even parents can sit down and become quickly absorbed in a colorful, tuneful environment where the laws of physics have taken a decidedly whimsical turn.

For the fervent micro gamester, however, these games can begin to wear thin. After dozens of hours with *Miner 2049er*, even this magnificent game may seem a bit shallow. The time comes when you begin to long for a different kind of diversion. Something that ideally requires intelligence, strategy, a grasp of overall concepts, and no emphasis on physical coordination.

In Praise Of Text

That is where the text adventure excels. Nowhere can graphics or sound seem more real than in your own mind. Here a sense of narrative may unfold, as it unfolds in a novel or movie, with the power to involve you in strong and subtle ways. But a computer adventure is more than a mere novel or movie. Here the interactions of the story can be *initiated* by the user. The challenge of solving a story-puzzle can be maddeningly frustrating; likewise it can be, in its solution, very satisfying.

John Anderson

In Praise Of Infocom

And when it comes to text adventures, Infocom excels. In our reviews of the *Zork* series, murder mysteries *Deadline* and *Witness*, science fiction sagas *Starcross*, *Suspended*, and *Planetfall*, we have said it again and again: Infocom can't be beat. For richness of description, unfolding of storyline, sharpness of wit, and challenge of puzzles, Infocom has no equal in the software business.

In Praise Of Fantasy

As a software house, they have focused specifically on the text adventure, and in the process raised the genre to high art. With *Enchanter*, they have scored again. *Enchanter* is the debut package in a new line of fantasy adventures from Infocom.

In some ways it marks the return to the old Zorkish formulas of D&D (donuts and dragoons) style fantasy—sorcerers and warlocks, sweeping medieval stories of magical, untainted heroism and terrible, unthinkable evil. These are the tales that myth is made of, and they seem so at home on microcomputers by now it seems they have been there always.

Although we have enjoyed contemporary and science fiction adventures from the

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company, *Enchanter* is a special treat. We have grown to love the *Zork* series, and somehow the modern stories, though extremely involving, seem a bit antiseptic by comparison. They are at times very cerebral exercises in logical problem-solving—a bit lacking in the fantasy elements that can turn a person in an armchair into Merlin the Magnificent. *Enchanter* marks a welcome return to the swords and sorcery micro owners have come to know, love, and accept.

An Enchanting Scenario

In *Enchanter*, you are a wizard third-class, chosen for a special mission specifically because of your amateur status. According to the top-flight sorcerers, who may or may not be quaking in their own upturned boots, if any of *them* were to attempt to depose the evil warlock reigning

Enchanter, continued...

over the countryside, they would be detected immediately. You, on the other hand, are insignificant enough to gain access to Krill's castle undetected by his powerful mind-probe. At the same time, there is an outside chance you might just be competent enough to flush out the evil magician. Thus the die is cast. And take it from us, you are bound to die quite often before you prevail.

As is our custom in reviewing these sorts of games, we will offer nothing in the way of hints to spoil your enjoyment of the game. You must have a full opportunity to savor every breakthrough. But a little bit of description won't hurt.

Spelling It Out

Your only weapons in *Enchanter* are magic, so don't waste much time looking for swords, maces, or tactical nuclear weapons. You will, however, come upon spells, which you may write to your spell book. Because you nearly flunked out of the wizard program, only six of these at a time can be committed to your somewhat dull memory. It is, hence, a very good idea to rememorize the spells in your spellbook every morning before breakfast.

Some of the spells we have come upon so far are the following:

• *Blorb*. Comes in the basic wizard's kit. Allows you to protect one treasured possession. Very handy to have around, but anything so protected is no longer portable.

• *Cleesh*. Turns beings into frogs. Guess who gives you this one.

• *Exex*. Makes things move with greater speed. We are sure this is important, but we haven't yet used it effectively.

• *Frotz*. Another one you have with you from the outset of the game. Turns darkness into light. Cannot be used in the way we initially thought, resulting in much lost time "frotzing" around.

• *Gnusto*. Allows you to write spells to your spell book. Once written, you won't lose a spell after its first casting—merely rememorize it to use it again. Another spell that comes as standard equipment.

• *Krebf*. Repairs willful damage. Important at least once to obtain another spell. Probably handy again.

• *Nitfol*. Makes you into Dr. Doolittle—allows you to talk to the animals. So far we haven't made much more than small talk, but perhaps we haven't conversed with big enough animals.

• *Rezrov*. Opens locked or enchanted objects. As indispensable as a church key at a picnic. Handy multiple times.

• *Zifmia*. Theologically and ontologically significant, but it doesn't look to be of much more use. Does, however, allow you to meet God.

Living Right

Speaking of breakfast, you must keep yourself well fed and watered, and get enough rest. Otherwise you will end up passing out or getting so tired your mind will begin to cloud. This is not to say that you shouldn't do a bit of sneaking around in the dead of night. Just make sure you get your beauty sleep.

If you are lucky enough to find a way into Krill's castle, you may learn of possible means to dispose of him. But beware: the castle is full of dangers. The cannibal pagans, for example, only have you for brunch in order to *have* you for brunch. They are a rather ill-mannered bunch of fellas. While there are no nasty grues lurking in the dark corners of Krill's castle, the dark remains about as dangerous as it is in *Zork*, so watch your step.

Enchanter is full of the delightful little touches we have come to expect from Infocom. It has a developed sense of humor. Our realization of the significance of the *Zifmia* spell left us smiling. By the time we made sense of the Burma-Shave sign, we were in hysterics. But more important, *Enchanter* has a good sense of

synergy: this is the ability of an overall narrative to become more than the sum of its parts—to totally envelope the user within it—and to build story involvement to the point at which disbelief is suspended. This is the point at which the landing gear of a good adventure leaves the ground, so you can soar into the air of imagination. Rest assured, Infocom hires only the best pilots around.

In Criticism Of The Best

This is not to say that absolutely everything about Infocom is perfect. Debugging programs of this nature is necessarily tricky, and early versions may evidence undiscovered bugs. The Commodore 64 version of *Planetfall* we received was good enough to boot, but too flaky to play for very long. It soon came up with bizarre and fatal errors, and even more insidious stuff, like suddenly making the food you were carrying disappear off the face of the planet. This was enough to stop our playtesting sessions cold. (We are happy to report that the Apple version is fine and has us losing sleep regularly.)

Then there are the "brick walls." If you are not a hot-shot adventurer, and usually even if you are, you will reach points in any and every adventure where all areas seem mapped, all grabbable objects seem to have been grabbed, all transactions seem transacted, and all possibilities seem exhausted. You simply reach a point where you are plumb out of ideas.

This very problem explains the aversion of many people to the text adventure. Maybe diehard adventurers don't mind spending eight months solving a single title, but most normal people do. This is why embedded hints are so important. *Enchanter* has them, and like its predecessors, is wonderfully documented. It includes a parchment with seal and a Guild Directory (wizard's local) to help get you started.

Still, you are bound to hit frustration points. Like its predecessors, *Enchanter* is tough and designed to last. You won't be solving it in one night, so you might as well take your time. Rushing will only result in missed opportunities.
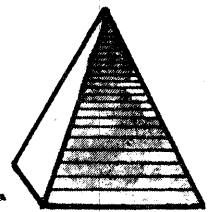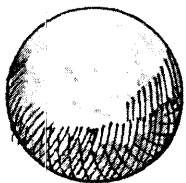
Making Adventures Better

Around the lab we have some pretty strong feelings about the future of text adventures, so feel free to disagree. Here goes.

A major thrust should be to make text

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adventures more accessible, even to people who would ordinarily select a "twitcher" instead. Several approaches to this idea may be used in concert to bring adventures to a mainstream micro audience.

Suspended took a step in the right direction with the inclusion of a fold-out gameboard that mapped the adventure in its entirety. Admittedly, giving the user a complete floor plan may make things a bit too easy. But an alternative is to provide a partial map, with unexplored areas remaining a secret. Or, as in the case of *Suspended*, an adventure may not make the mapping phase critical to the unfolding of the story. Purists offended by the idea of a pre-drawn map can choose not to use it. It might be packed in a sealed envelope to allow freedom of choice. But a well designed adventure need not have mapping as a main component.

An oracle of some type should be available to aid in dissolving "brick walls." This might take the form of nested helps, wherein each time you ask for help, you get a different, and more detailed, clue. Or it might take the form of an oracle within the plot line of the story itself: perhaps even something along the lines of a guardian angel or wizened sage.

Needless to say, hints should always be vague and tricky, and never reveal actual answers. The idea is rather to continue a flow of information so that the user does not run out of ideas. Good hints can be as tough to crack as game puzzles themselves. The feat is to reveal just enough to allow the adventurer to discover something new.

Using a parser (text-translation subroutine) as excellent as those in the Infocom series would allow asking for clues pertaining to *specific* stumbling blocks. "Help unlock castle door" might return a clue designed for just that problem. Even these hints can be nested, so that the fifth or sixth time you ask for help on one problem, you get as solid an answer as you will get.

The hints could recycle beyond that point.

Purists may cry treachery at the suggestion of hints of this kind. We submit that just as a map can remain unopened, hints can remain unasked for. But the idea that enough hints reside within an adventure to allow even novices to complete it successfully would change the whole psychological tone of the game by diffusing the onset of frustration.

Another concept we would like to develop is the notion of logical incidence. This device allows new events which modify the overall story to transpire in a specific place at a specific time. But there is a danger here. The concept must foremost fit logically into the flow of the narrative. It should be used sparingly, and only where it is telegraphed. This gives use of the device much greater impact, and adds to the overall synergy of the story.
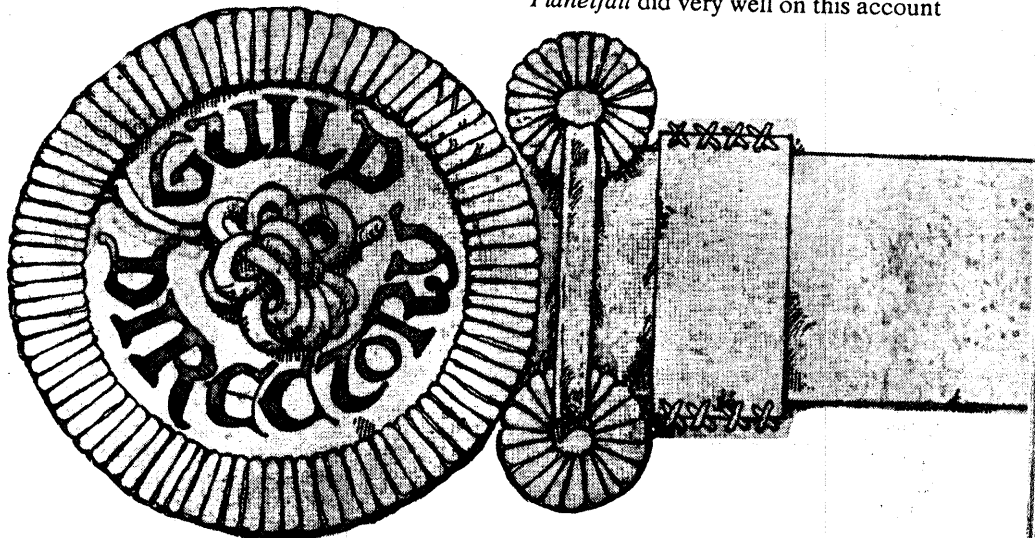
For example, good use of logical incidence might consist of the following:
- If you don't seal the room in which the murder was committed, evidence may be removed or tampered with when you are out of the room.
- If you are in the room with the radio on at 4:00, you will hear the important announcement you have been clued in on.
- If you keep cleaning something long enough, you will finally be able to read the inscription on it.

Shoddy use of the same device has already taken the following unfortunate forms:
- A safe has possible combinations from one to a thousand, and no clue to the right number is given.
- If you don't look in the box three times, you don't see everything.
- If you don't say "yoho" for no foreshadowed reason, you can't leave your apartment.

The key to logical incidence is the word

logical. Don't bring something in out of the blue and make all further progress hang on it. Let the story tell itself completely enough to allow the crafty adventurer to deduce a next move. The logic that applies need not be the logic of real life as long as it is consistent with the story, and the user has some notion of it. If, for example, there is a magic word that gets something to happen, telegraph this to the user, and give him a way to learn it.

And while richly documented adventures are a joy to pore through, an adventure program should not be too dependent on its documentation. Ideally, we should learn enough from the outer packaging to get going, then refer to enclosed material during game play to fill in the gaps and further progress. If you have to read for an hour before you can boot the program, enthusiasm may wane.

Planetfall did very well on this account and took it a step further: you have no clear idea of just *what* the objective is when you start off. This is a clever approach, of which we would like to see more.

Another feature we look forward to in adventures to come is multi-player capability. When more than one person sits down to play currently, everyone debates about what the sole character in the story should do next. Imagine being able to activate more than one character in a story, so that each player gets a turn to further his or her *own* plot line. Different players might actually have different objectives, conceivably opposing, and operate out of different locations that eventually culminate in common events or "the big showdown."

None of these suggestions should be interpreted as mitigating the achievements of the Interlogic series; we just want to offer enough feedback to keep the juices flowing. Keep 'em coming, Infocom. We can't wait. █