

# Reviews Exchange

*Issue 3  
(March 2005)*



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And here we have the third issue of the Reviews Exchange, which is three more issues than I thought it would achieve when I first decided to go ahead with it. But fortunately enthusiasm for the project seems to be far greater than I originally anticipated. So here we have it: the third issue, with hopefully many more still to come...

So what do we have in this issue? Well, let's take a look...

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## *The Adventures Of Thumper: Wonder Wombat*

*By Sarazar*

*Review: Robert Rafgon*

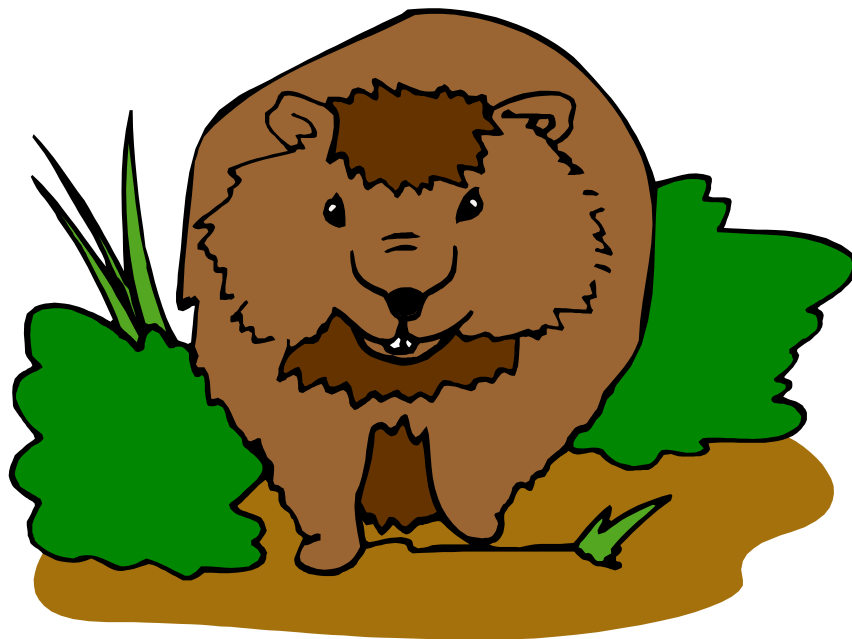
*Genre: Comedy*

*Platform: Adrift 3.9*

*Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/wonderwombat.zip>*

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When I was looking for a game to play, the description for the Adventures of Thumper - Wonder Wombat caught my attention and I decided to try it. The first thing I discovered is that this is a very funny game, although it is a fairly crude sense of humour. That doesn't worry me, but it may offend some people. There is a No Swearing gameplay option, which may improve it a little, but if you want to use this mode, then this game is probably not for you. Unfortunately this kind of humour does become a bit less funny after the first time.



One of the best features of the game is the many, many distinctive NPCs and locations. These all have humorous descriptions and it is fun to wander around and see what you can find. Unfortunately, the consequent large number of interactions has also made this into a weakness in the game, as there are some problems with sparse implementation. Whilst the game contains lots of rooms, these rooms are often empty of objects that can be interacted with. The objects that are there often do not have logical interactions included. I did not like that the "Ask Character About" command generates the same amusing response, no matter what topic is chosen. If this is the case in a game, I feel it would be better to instead just use a "Talk to Character" command, rather than give the illusion of choice.

Another bad feature is that there are timers that you regularly have to fulfil, which is a feature I really dislike in IF. One of these timers can kill you, if you wander around for too long without taking precautions. This is very frustrating, as when the game is restarted you have to sit through the long introduction again. The introduction was funny the first time, but grew progressively more annoying as I continued.



This game is very hard, which is mainly due to the illogical nature of the game world. This provides humour, but also creates puzzles where you are trying to guess the one solution that the author had in mind. The game sometimes failed to hint adequately as to what this one solution is. At times I found myself trying randomly to use all of my many inventory items, hoping that one of them would work (and generally none of them did). Many items do not have multiple uses and finding their one specific function is difficult. Unfortunately the longer you persist in trying to solve this game, the more you will probably become disillusioned with the game's weaknesses, especially when your sensible solutions keep failing.

The game suffers from being unclear, especially in not explaining why what I was doing would actually help me achieve the game's ultimate goal. Despite being a fun environment to wander around aimlessly in, I would prefer more of a sense of purpose. However, it is a testament to the game that I kept trying again and again (and failing again and again) to succeed until I eventually did, rather than just give up. In general I enjoyed playing the Adventures of Thumper - Wonder Wombat, but it could have been designed much better.

**Score - 7/10**

**Darkness**  
**By Richard Otter**

*Review: Red-Sith*

*Genre: Mystery Thriller*

*Platform: Adrift 4*

*Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/darkness.zip>*

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Darkness, I think, was a very fun game. It was very short and easy, but still fun. The game is about a lighthouse where “mysterious things” have been happening. You character hasn’t heard from the three workers in a week and is starting to become worried. So, you go to this lighthouse to try and figure out where they are and what has been going on.

For some reason, I think the game starts out a little like *Myst*. You begin on a boat at the Jetty on the lighthouse. You have to move east a few times and then you get inside of the lighthouse, where you have to move up and down a lot. There’s actually one certain item in the way beginning that if you don’t get you won’t get anywhere in this game. So after you have the torch and can see everything, the rest of the game is a bunch of examining. You basically have to go from room to room examining everything you can. Once everything has been examined and every item has been retrieved, all you have to do is put them in the right place, which is very simple. You really don’t have to think throughout this whole entire game.

The game is written well enough. It makes you feel like you’re in this lighthouse and you’re all alone. The game spits out little events every other turn that say things like: **You’re sure someone was behind you, but there’s no-one there.**

These lines are a little freaky in the beginning. You actually expect something to jump out at you, but once the 15<sup>th</sup> line happens and you realize nothing *is* going to jump out at you, you learn to completely ignore the words. Besides that, there are a bunch of spelling mistakes in the writing. Richard Otter made this game so fast I’m guessing he had didn’t take a chance to check for bad spelling. Also, the guess the verb

can get pretty annoying. For example, there's a lever in one of the rooms. You can't say "switch the lever", "move the lever", "turn the lever on" etc. You can only say "Pull the lever". It gets a little annoying.



The game is also very short. It took me about a half hour to beat, and I only used the hints once. As I said earlier, the whole game is basically examining things, and fixing a broken generator. However, even with all these minor flaws I still had fun playing this game. This game is for anyone who doesn't want a huge brain-busting game to play and just want a simple, short game they can beat in 30-60 minutes.

**5 out of 10**



## Hoedown In Ho-Town

By S. Welland

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Adult

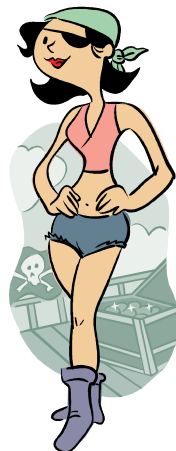
Platform: Adrift 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/hotown.zip>

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What is it about the adult side of the text adventure market that keeps me coming back for one last try? After all, for every good adult game I've played - which is a grand total of two actually with a couple of others showing promise - there are at least half a dozen I've hated. They've either been poorly written, riddled with so many errors they're almost unplayable, or just been so feeble and lacking in ideas that I've regretted ever downloading them in the first place. But *something* about the genre just keeps me coming back for one last game. Maybe I think that if I try hard enough I'll eventually be able to find another game as good as *The Backlot* or *Ghost Justice*.

Or maybe I'm just a glutton for punishment and don't know when to quit.



The last adult game I tried I didn't like but, undaunted, I decided to try another. This was the one I picked. I'm not sure why I picked it instead of any of the many, many others available at the Yahoo AIF Group (located at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aifarchive/> for anyone who's interested) but the title seemed rather amusing. So I embarked on *Hoedown in Ho-Town* hoping I wasn't going to regret it.

### What's it about?

Well, it's a game about sex. That's probably a given considering its location at the Yahoo Adult Interactive Fiction Group but I thought I'd just clear that up in case anyone had missed the rather obvious reference to sex in the game's title or the bit above where it says "Genre: Adult".

You play a cowboy or drifter (or something similar) who has just reached the charmingly-titled Ho-Town and decided to stop here for, the game informs you, "a nice hot bath, a good shot of whiskey and a wild whore". Ho ho. (And that's "ho ho" in the laughing sense and not a reference to the "ho's" of the game's title.)

There are quite a few locations in Ho-Town yet at no time does it ever feel like you're exploring a real town. The descriptions are too short and basic for the most part - this is Middle Road:

**This is a fork in the road of this small town. The Ho-town Bank lies to the east. The road continues north and also to the west. Stiffy is here. You can move north, east, south and west.**

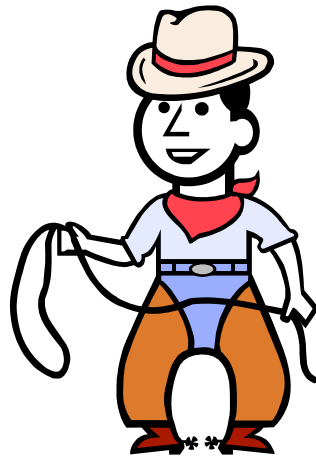
- and too little effort has been expended in fleshing them out. The few locations that show more depth are still nothing very special and often contain so many undescribed items that I wonder if the writer got bored before reaching the end of his game and just decided to rush the final stages.

### What's wrong with it?

If you're playing the game purely for the sex and don't give a hoot about the regular side of text adventures - storyline, item descriptions, logic, gameplay - then... well, you'll probably still notice the rather alarming errors that seem to plague the game. As sex is the aim of the game, it's kind of strange typing "[sexual swear word deleted here] Shanna" results

in being told that “I really don't think there's any need for language like that!”. Now that's the standard ADRIFT response for when someone comes along and types a naughty word in a game, but in a game where naughty words have to be typed - a lot! - to actually make any progress, the fact that the one you're going to need delivers a response telling you off for swearing is quite an oversight.

Guess the verb problems? Oh yes. In one location “[sexual swear word deleted here] Abigail” won't work yet sucking a part of her anatomy *does* work. The first displays a message telling you off for swearing. Ouch!



There is also one decidedly unpleasant scene that I felt was a bit extreme even for an adult game. In the morgue you find a dead body and the description of her is a bit *too* close to the cuff for my liking. You can also, ahem, have *relations* with the dead body if you're so inclined. Yuk.

There are the usual things that bring down most adult games: namely lack of descriptions for items. Okay, this is a game about sex, sex and more sex, but it's also a text adventure and a few descriptions for items would be nice. You don't need to spend an age writing descriptions for every blade of grass in a field but a game with decent descriptions is definitely better than a game with no descriptions.

Sloppy programming showed in several other places. In the general store I read a sign (examining it told me nothing) advertising condoms for sale, yet trying to buy a condom (singular) didn't work. Confusingly, trying to buy condoms (plural) results in a message telling you that you don't have any money whether you happen to be carrying any or not.

Remember those games back in the 80's with limited inventories? That died out because people thought they were a pain? Turns out they're not quite as extinct as you might originally have hoped. *Hoedown In Ho-Town* is one such game. Unfortunately, the precise science of determining what is considered "too much" to carry hasn't improved in the last twenty years, so while it's perfectly possible for the player to wander around town with a red velour chaise lounge chair and a claw-footed bathtub\*, try picking up a two-dollar bill and you're over the limit.

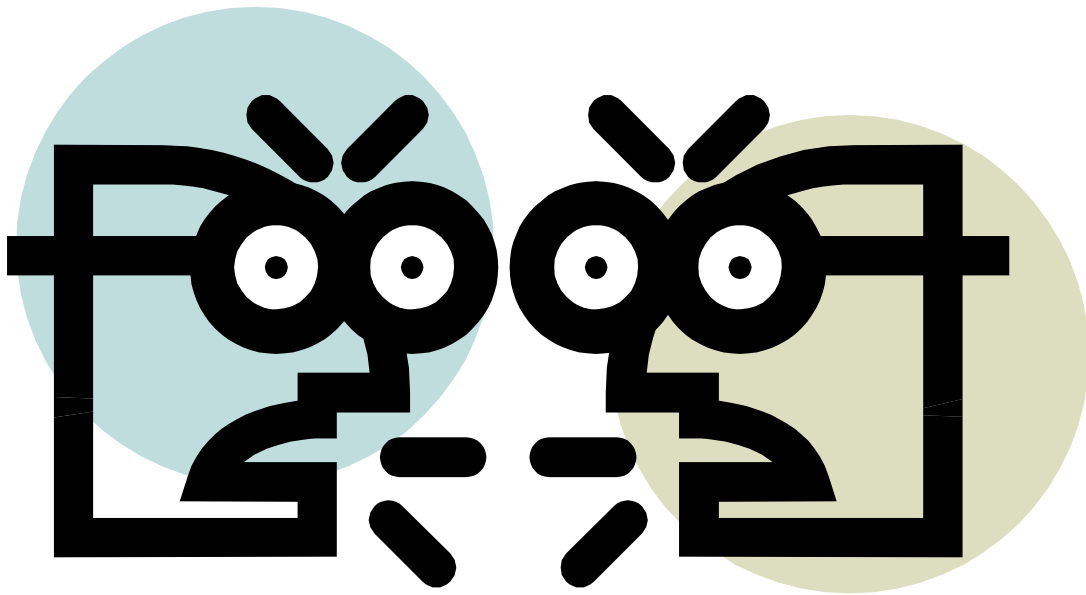
\* Both of which I'm pretty sure the writer intended to leave as static items but which he's put down as dynamic meaning you can pick them up and move them around all you like.

There are also more than a few genuine errors that will probably leave you shaking your head in exasperation. In the saloon, the in-game text advises you to solicit the young ladies by typing "solicit [name]" yet "solicit [every darn person's name]" just hits you with an error message: "I don't understand what you want to do with [name]."

The in-game text... ah, that's another thing that tends to lower my opinion of a game. Now I've never really been someone overly bothered with the whole "dear god, he's breaking *mimesis!* Lynch him!" idea, but when a game actually displays hints telling you what you need to do then the whole atmosphere (not that there is a lot here anyway) gets thrown right out of the window. Surely a better way of handling it would have been via conversation? Or a sign advising you to solicit the ladies? Or *something* else?



By far the worst thing about *Hoedown In Ho-Town* as far as I was concerned was the writer's habit of only covering the necessary responses to the majority of commands. If you type in a perfectly acceptable command - "open gate" or "x gate" in a location with a locked gate - you're just hit with default error messages until you're blue in the face. If you're especially good at text adventures, I suppose it's possible you might actually make it through the entire game without coming across one of these default error messages, but if you're like me you're probably going to be stumbling across them every five seconds. And when you've seen your fiftieth error message in ten minutes, you really wish the writer had gone ahead and found himself someone to test the game beforehand.



### Shoot the beta-tester!

Nice idea if there was one. Unfortunately there isn't. Now I'm not one of those people who cry out from the rooftops for every game ever released to be subjected to vigorous beta-testing - some simply don't require it, others are small enough for the writer to test himself, some are so bad that even beta-testing isn't going to save them - but this is a game that was clearly in need of some serious beta-testing. Want an example of something any half-competent beta-tester would have caught? Here's a classic:

**You see this blonde haired, blue-eyed goddess untying your horse from the post. She whispers softly, "Meet me in the hayloft later..."**

**With that, she flashes you a seductive smile and tends to your trusty steed. You can move north, east, south and west.**

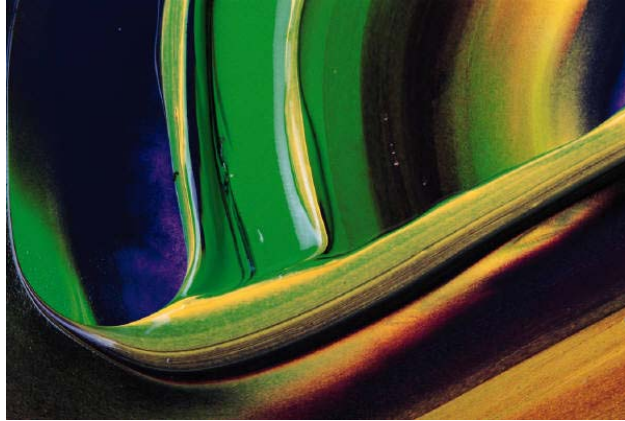
You see that after a little incident in the stable. It's fine the first time. But the second? And third? Fourth? Fifth? Etc...? Hell no. Yep, it's one of those annoying bugs you see displayed every time you visit the location outside the stable and how it got missed even by the writer is hard to imagine. It's even more annoying that the blonde haired, blue-eyed goddess can't even be examined or spoken to.

### **Anything good about it then?**

A few things. It's got a better standard of writing than you generally tend to find in adult games. Not that the writer is likely to be winning any awards for his literary skills any time soon but at least I didn't find myself wincing every few words at spelling mistakes and grammatical errors (something that usually happens whenever I play an adult game). There are also some amusing moments which, while not making me burst out into hysterical laughter, raised a wry smile from time to time. Discovering that one of the whores I was trying to bed was actually a man (or maybe an hermaphrodite (I'm not sure of the exact details as I didn't hang around long after my unwitting discovery)) was quite funny.

### **But the sex! Tell me about the sex!**

I must be getting better at these adult games as I actually managed to reach a sex scene. Yes! A good sex scene? I prefer the real thing to reading about it on a computer screen but it certainly wasn't the worst one I have ever read. A little *too* graphic for my liking (the sex here is strictly hardcore so don't try playing this game if you're an old romantic at heart) and I think I was probably more thrilled to do well enough in the game to reach a sex scene than for the actual scene itself.



### **Not too horrible was it?**

No, not *too* horrible, but it's also a game clearly several stages away from being completed. There are so many rough edges that I haven't got the time (or the willpower) to mention and so many places in which the game is clearly crying out for improvements. So many missed opportunities. And even more instances that show a complete lack of any kind of testing. The writing is better than average for this sort of game and if the gameplay itself was a little more competent I might even find myself recommending it. Unfortunately in its current state it's in need of so much work that you're better off trying something else.

**3 out of 10**

## *Sun Empire: Quest For The Founders*

*By Tech*

*Review: Robert Rafgon*

*Genre: Science Fiction*

*Platform: Adrift 4*

*Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/sunempire.taf>*

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Sun Empire: Quest for the Founders (Part I) was the winner of the 2003 Summer ADRIFT competition. Having not been around IF at that time, I decided to give it a try, and see whether it could live up to this winner status. After playing the game I can say that to a certain extent it did. As you would expect from a competition winning game, Sun Empire: Quest for the Founders is well written, and it contains a good science fiction story about aliens and genetic manipulation.

The game does start very slowly, especially if you are like me and have trouble figuring out what you are supposed to be doing. You are given some vague hints that you should be working, but not where or how you should be doing this work. The laboratory is an interesting place, but also a little frustrating.

### **(SPOILER SPACE)**

The biggest problem that I had at the start of the game was a guess the verb puzzle in taking and analysing a sample. The game did not hint adequately as to the correct syntax, for example the description of the sampler suggested to me a use or push verb, which I couldn't make work.

### **(END SPOILER SPACE)**

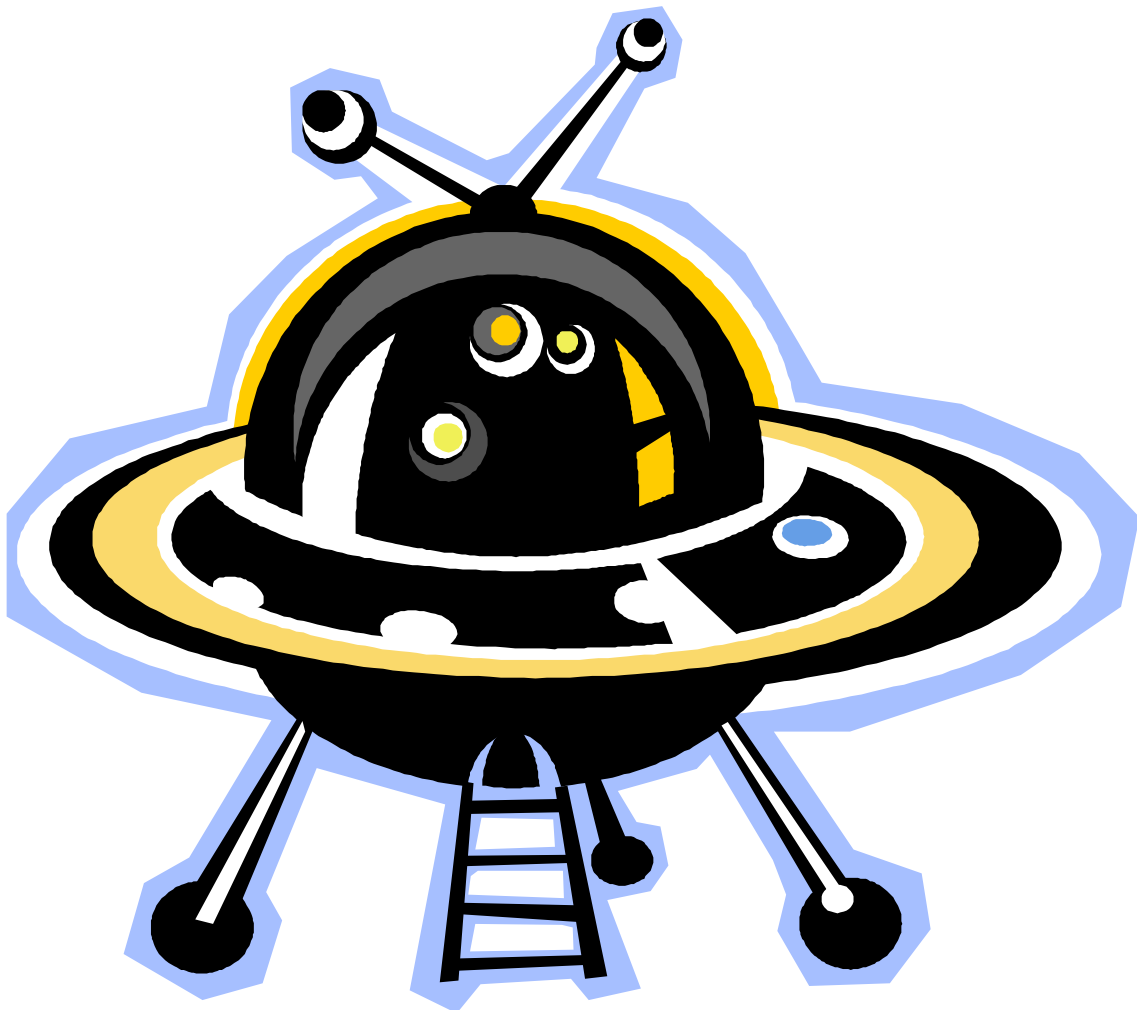
With the initial wandering over, the game really picks up. The exciting second half works well with the slow start, as the unusualness of the situation is emphasised. However, it is a pity that the game is over too quickly once the action starts. I really wanted to know more about what was going on, as not many reasons were given. As this game is subtitled



Part I, I assume that more games in the series were at least planned to have been written. Hopefully they will be released and when they are, they should explain the events better.

I enjoyed playing Sun Empire: Quest for the Founders (Part I), and I would recommend others to play the game. However, it is a little unsatisfying in its current short form, as in the end the game just left me wanting more.

**Score - 7/10**



# *The Timmy Reid Adventure*

*By Jonathan R. Reid*

*Review: Robert Rafgon*

*Genre: Real Life/Surreal*

*Platform: ADRIFT 3.8 (converted to 4)*

*Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/tra.taf>*

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The Timmy Reid Adventure comes from the ancient, almost prehistoric ADRIFT times of the year 2000. The game has good qualities but I found too many bugs for it to be really enjoyable. Some of the problems mentioned below may be related to the fact that the game was originally written in ADRIFT version 3.80, but I converted the game to play it in 3.90. However, the lack of availability of a 3.80 runner means that most other current players will be also forced to convert the game. I apologise to the author if the following comments are unjustified, but I am discussing my playing experiences and what I expect other players to also experience.



The first problem with the Timmy Reid Adventure is that the introduction does not show what the aim of the game is. On my first attempt I wandered around the town without having a clue what was going on. This problem is partly related to the fact that this game is also called the Jonny Reid Adventure Part II and is the sequel to the first part. I have not been able to find a copy of the first part, but typing in "show" and following the menu options can give you a fair idea of what the game was about. For a more specific aim for the Timmy Reid Adventure "show 21 items" works, and reveals that this game is a treasure hunt. These commands show the whole story for the game. The only plot during it is wandering around trying to find the missing items.

The best feature of the Timmy Reid Adventure is how the game successfully captures a kid's perspective and sense of fun. The writing makes you feel that you are actually wandering around the town. The map is very large, with a logical layout, but this is not surprising, as the author's notes show that the game was modelled on a real place and time. The best implemented location is the cottage at the start, with lots of minor details included. Unfortunately this level of detail is not maintained throughout the game. It almost appears that the further you walk away from the cottage, the fewer objects from the room description are implemented. The pier barely has any objects at all. These locations are generally not vital to the game's progress, but a few more objects would have been an improvement.



The most annoying feature of the Timmy Reid Adventure will probably become apparent on the first move. Move is the key word here. Whether it is the fault of the conversion or the author, for some reason north, south, east and west do not work in this game. If you type, for example "go north" instead, it will work, but this quickly becomes tiresome, especially when combined with the large map described above.

There are other serious bugs in the game, including one bug that I think makes it impossible to get two of the twenty-one items. This means that the game is unwinnable. There are also many guess-the-verb moments and illogical puzzles. I have no idea how players were supposed to come up with several of the puzzle solutions. The characters are also not very talkative, apart from on one or two selected topics.

There is a core of a good game in the Timmy Reid Adventure. The atmosphere is well done and there are lots of ways to have fun without solving puzzles, especially in the amusement park. If you like wandering and experimenting, and do not mind the lack of a resolution, then you may have more fun than me. Ultimately I found the problems meant that I was feeling more annoyed than enjoying myself whilst playing the game.

**SCORE - 3/10**

## *Varicella* *By Adam Cadre*

*Review: David Whyld*

*Genre: Espionage*

*Platform: Inform*

*Download: <http://adamcadre.ac/content/vgame.exe>*

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Okay, confession time. I've never been a big fan of Adam Cadre's work and have spent the last few years wondering if he's heavily into bribing people to say nice things about his games because I could never see what the fuss was. *Photopia* left me cold; *Lock & Key* confused me so much I don't think I managed to do a single thing right; I gave up with *Narcolepsy* five minutes into it despite telling myself I'd at least give it a fair go before passing judgement. So when I was looking around for a game to play and chanced upon *Varicella* I wasn't, despite its reputation, really expecting much. I figured that at best it would be a well written mess that had been heralded as a masterpiece for reasons which I would never understand (which is pretty much my opinion of *Photopia*). So imagine my surprise when not only did it turn out to be very good, but also one of the best text adventures I've ever played.



### What's it about?

The complicated goings-on at the Palazzo del Piemonte where you, one Primo Varicella, are the Palace Minister. Despite the rather grand title, you wield little actual power and your duties generally include those of a glorified butler. But you're a schemer and eager to seize every opportunity that comes along to better yourself. And if this comes at the expense of others, well... too bad.

And now such an opportunity has presented itself. The King has just died and his son, Prince Charles, is five years old. Soon there's going to be a power struggle for the position of regent (who will officially rule the land in the Prince's stead but unofficially can do pretty much what he likes) and you intend to come out on top. Of course, that means dealing with your rivals as quickly as possible but you have few qualms about that sort of thing. "Dealing" in the case being a polite term for murder.

The introduction is good. Very good. Primo Varicella at once becomes a real and believable character, although it's easy to see why he's held in such poor esteem by everyone he meets in the game. He's a fussy little man, obsessed with manicures and interior design who considers himself the only genuinely sophisticated person at the palace. He's also quite happy to murder anyone who stands in his way, hardly a quality likely to endear him to other people. On top of that, he has an over-inflated opinion of himself and his own abilities, as demonstrated so well during the introduction:

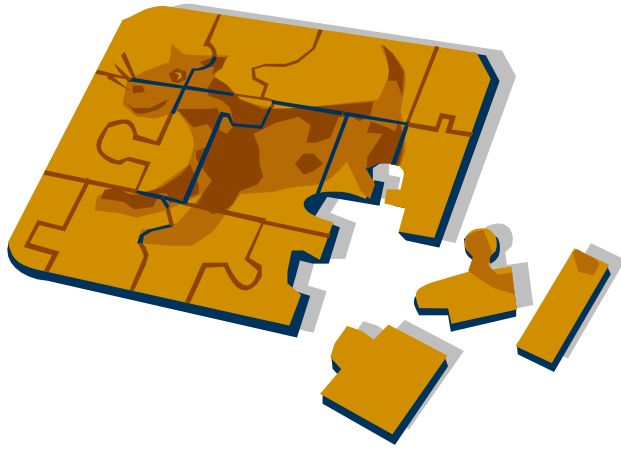
**Piedmont, it seems, will be requiring the services of a regent for the foreseeable future. And you can think of no better candidate than yourself.**

There you have the introduction which does an excellent job of setting the scene.

### Difficult game?

Oh yes. I've played some difficult games before but none that come close to *Varicella* in terms of sheer, downright impossibility\*.

\* Okay, maybe an exaggeration. After all, I've finished the game so I have firsthand knowledge that it's not impossible, but play it a few times and see how far you get. If you're like me, you'll spend your first four or five plays through the game not having a clue how to finish it.



My first time through the game I actually felt like I was making some pretty good progress. I wandered around the palace, chatted to people, discovered a few things, got a good feel for how I felt everything was likely to pan out - and then I got killed. Yep, soldiers stormed the palace, grabbed me and a moment later one of my rivals, clearly better at this sort of thing than I was, proceeded to shoot me in the head. Exit one fussy little man. Hitting UNDO didn't undo my problems unfortunately as the event with the soldiers and the subsequent untimely demise is on a timer and the program only allows one UNDO in a row. So all UNDO did for me was allow me to relive the moment of my death. Over and over again. Oh joy.

Undeterred, I restarted the game and tried to do better this time. I didn't succeed. Before long, I found myself replaying the final events of the previous game and getting steadily more annoyed at what I felt was an unfair and somewhat premature ending. I'd have probably quit then if not for the slight problem that *Varicella* was just so damn good that I couldn't *bear* to quit.

Part of its difficulty stems from the sheer shortness of the game. There is an incredible amount to do to reach an ending which doesn't involve one of your rivals killing you before you kill them and a lot of what needs to be accomplished to steer the game along the path you're after isn't at all straightforward or obvious. A lot, in fact, is the sort of thing you're unlikely to stumble across through sheer luck and instead needs to be plotted out very carefully over a period of many, many games. It's

possible to make a few wrong moves here and there, waste a *bit* of time, but the shortness of the game and the available time you have to complete everything you need to do means that time-wasting just isn't an option. If anyone tells you they finished this game on their first play through they're either a) lying, b) lying, c) lying or d) relying on a walkthrough. Even knowing roughly the sequence of events that you need to go through in order to win, it's still far from easy to actually get there in one piece.

Saving your game regularly - the sort of thing anyone who has played more than a few text adventures knows to do instinctively - is less effective in *Varicella* due to the game's shortness. Several times after dying I reverted to a previous save only to find myself in another no-win situation because I hadn't performed a certain action by a certain time. In a lesser game this sort of thing would have driven me to distraction (and sent the game off to the recycle bin) but here it's almost forgivable considering the game's other strengths. *Almost*. When you've just died for the tenth time in a row because you missed something not particularly obvious right at the start of the game, it gets increasingly harder to keep feeling positive.





Persistence seems to be the best way to get anywhere. A couple of times I didn't even try to finish the game, I just explored different avenues that were open to me and if one avenue didn't seem to lead anywhere I restarted and tried something else. One entire game I sat by my surveillance equipment and watched everything I could through it, seeing what I could discover about my rivals that they might not want me to know. In the end, persistence *does* pay off in that you finally manage to put everything together but you might be forgiven for thinking that you're getting nowhere.

### Any characters?

Lots, and very good they are, too. They're a pretty despicable bunch for the most part and at times I was reminded of films like *Pulp Fiction* where every character, no matter who he or she is, is a nasty piece of work. You might find it hard to sympathise with them - they are, after all, a bunch of back-stabbing, conniving, evil little hellions who would throttle an old woman for her last coin - but it's possible to relate to them all the same. They're all interesting characters with a fully fleshed out background and while none are as well detailed as Varicella himself, they nevertheless perform their duties admirably in giving the player some worthy adversaries to pit himself against.

Not that everyone is against you. With a little bribery, you can find one ally and some detective work and inspired questioning will get you another. Asking as many questions as you can of the characters is a good way to learn things but this is best done in a session when you're not planning to finish the game as the sequence of events that trigger after a set amount of time are likely to come around long before you've exhausted every conversation piece you can think of.

Charlotte is perhaps the only character in the game who doesn't fall into the despicable category, although she has more than a few despicable acts done to her. She spends the majority of the game locked up in the asylum atop one of the palace towers following a mental breakdown after her husband was shot on their wedding day. Several of your rivals regularly rape her (an option, fortunately, you're not able to pursue yourself).

### **Not a game for kids**

There are several dark threads running through *Varicella*. Charlotte's rape is one of them. Spend enough time checking your surveillance equipment and you'll find an unpleasant scene (mercifully interrupted before its conclusion) with another of your rivals about to molest the young Prince Charles.

Now I started the game thinking that Primo Varicella himself was the lowest of the low due to his plotting to wipe out his enemies, but it quickly becomes apparent from playing through even a portion of the game that he's actually quite a lot less despicable than of his rivals. While more than happy to indulge in power-grabbing games and murder of people who haven't actually done anything to *him*, he's certainly more tolerable than his rivals. It's probably true to say that he's bad but not half as bad as anyone else.



### **The tale of the unsatisfying ending**

You know on internet forums how when they're about to tell you something that you might not want to know they tend to put a row of dots or SPOILER SPACE with the letters one per line so there's no way anyone can glance at the spoilers without realising what they're looking at? Here we have a single row that says SPOILER so skip over the next few paragraphs if you haven't reached the end of the game yet and don't want it spoiling for you.

## SPOILER

The ending was the game's weak point for me. Is there more than one ending? I'm not sure. I finished the game a couple of times and the ending I got was the same each time so I'm assuming it was the only one. If so, well... what a poor way to finish the game.

You win, defeat your adversaries, become regent for the land... and then the Prince grows up, turns into a real terror, stages an uprising, overthrows you and has you tortured to death. Hmmm....

While this certainly made a change from the usual run-of-the-mill game endings where you live happily after ever or find the big treasure chest or slay the evil dark lord and save the world, it's the kind of ending that makes me wonder what the whole point of the game was. Surely there must be a better reward for all that hard work than being tortured to death? Even the endings where I failed and got shot were more satisfying.

Of course, it's altogether possible that there *are* other endings that offer a more fulfilling conclusion to the game. But I finished it twice - once on my own (and slightly aided by the walkthrough) and once solely with the walkthrough - and both led me to the death-by-torture ending.

### **Better than *Photopia*?**

Definitely. Now if people spoke about *Varicella* in the same kind of hero-worship tones that they do *Photopia*, I could understand where they were coming from. But whereas I finished *Photopia* and was left wondering just what the big fuss was, when I finished *Varicella* I immediately played it again several more times just to see what else I had missed.

Recommended.

**9 out of 10**

## **Veteran Knowledge**

**By Robert Rafgon**

*Review: Cobra1*

*Genre: Wrestling*

*Platform: ADRIFT 4*

*Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/vetknow.taf>*

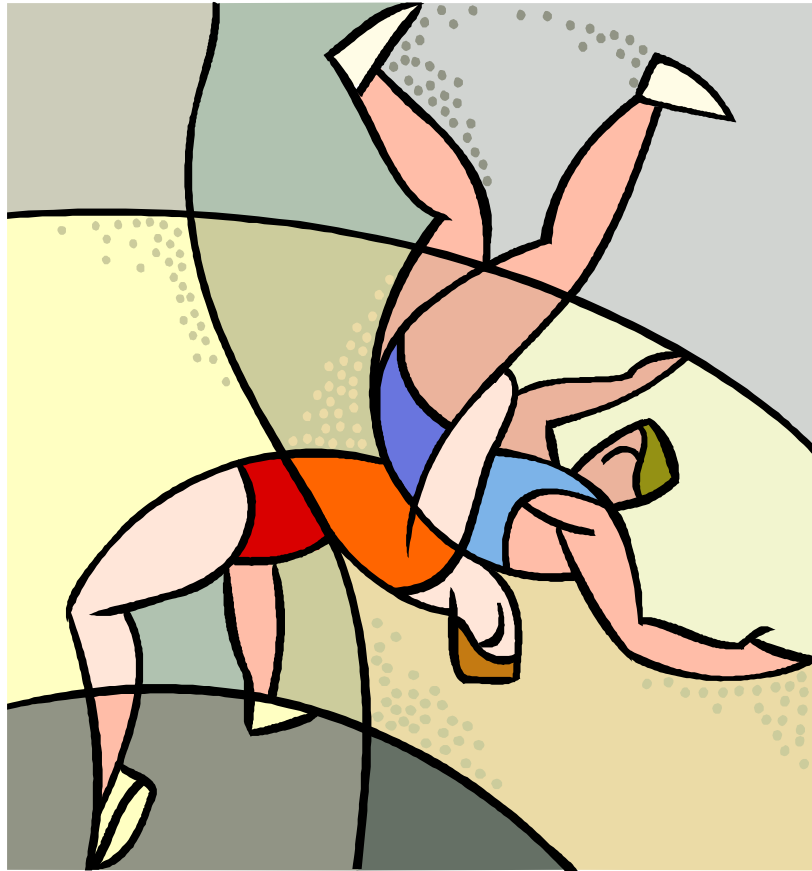
.....

Originally, Rafgon made this game as a three-hour comp entry a while back known as "Veteran Experience", but he decided to come back and make an "expanded" version. I admit, I wasn't thrilled with Veteran Experience and I wasn't excited about trying the new version of it. But I buckled under the weight of curiosity... Could Knowledge change my mind?

...Indeed. Rafgon fleshed out everything possible, everything from what really happened in The Brawler's car accident to adding even more for you to fight. This is just one of the remakes where the author goes back and fixes everything properly! The storyline is semi-plausible : You're a retired bummed-out wrestler known as The Veteran, forced to live on the streets. One day, a new wrestler named The Youth shows up. The Youth is the son of The Star, a wrestler responsible for humiliating you in the ring. Anyway, The Youth sees your condition and gives you the cold shoulder...quite harshly, too. Shortly afterwards, a flyer goes by advertising a wrestling tournament coming up very soon. You decide to clean yourself up and find a way to regain your title, no matter the cost! Unfortunately, you're also out of shape and have no uniform. Somehow, you'll have to get yourself straight and convince The Promoter you're ready for action...

Thus begins a quest where you're both the good and the bad guy, out to eliminate your opponents before they even reach the ring...even as they somewhat to try to do the same to you. GTV is nowhere in sight (at least not by my eyes) and the puzzles presented make a great deal of sense. Unfortunately, there were also few cases where I was actually puzzled.

Only once did I have to consult the Generator, and after I saw it, the puzzle made perfect sense. While that means you are unlikely to have real trouble, it's also not likely to keep you busy for hours on end...



The descriptions of most objects have been extended to provide a little more detail, as has the background. I also never had the feeling of actually being lost, as the map was well laid out and directions were everywhere. The extra fight added to the end was just icing, but made for a nice close to the story.

The only real problem I can see is that it's fairly short, even with all of the additions...Go ahead and try it. You won't regret it.

**8/10 (Heavyweight Contender)**

## **Veteran Knowledge**

**By Robert Rafgon**

Review: David Whyld

Genre: Wrestling

Platform: ADRIFT 4

Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/vetknow.taf>

.....

*Veteran Knowledge* is an updated and enlarged version of *Veteran Experience*, an entry in the second Three Hour ADRIFT Competition from 2004. While playing the original game first isn't a necessity, it's probably a good idea to play that one first to give you an indication of just what improvements and changes have taken place. This isn't, as I had first thought, just a slightly bigger version of the original but a whole new game instead.

### **From Three Hours To Infinity**

I wasn't expecting to like this game very much. It had originally been entered as *Veteran Experience* in the second Three Hour ADRIFT Competition and came a respectable second and while it was a fair game in its own right (especially for one written by a newcomer to the ADRIFT scene *and* in three hours to boot), I wasn't sure how it could really be expanded upon to turn it into a full size game. Add a few extra opponents to fight? Change the way some of the puzzles are handled? Make it harder?

So I was pleasantly surprised to find that the writer has taken the original idea - that of a has-been wrestler trying to win the world title fight - and fleshed it out into a full size game. The main character, the Veteran, is given a better background than in the original game and whereas *Veteran Experience* took place wholly in the arena where the title fight is staged, *Veteran Knowledge* begins outside an alley where you are now begging for a living and expands to encompass the arena later on. A flyer blows

past and alerts you to the world title fight which, by the kind of remarkable coincidence that only exists within the confines of a text adventure, is due to take place very soon *and* is only a five minute walk from where you are. Enough of begging, you decide, it's time you returned to your old profession.

This sounds *kind of* plausible but I have no doubts that a has-been wrestler who's been living rough on the streets for the past few years and has a drinking problem on top of that, would ever be able to be considered for the world title fight. Are contenders in such short supply that drunken has-beens (and unpopular ones at that) are the only choice?



### The Villain's Point of View

There aren't many games I've played where the main character is actually a bad guy. More often than not, you play some kind of hero figure either striving to save the world from darkest evil, defeating criminals or you're on the traditional treasure quest (playing a character who strictly speaking is a murderer and a thief but who is still portrayed as a hero). So it was refreshing to play a game where you play first and foremost a villain. And a remarkably unpleasant one as well. The Veteran, your character, is a particularly nasty piece of work and no mistake. A former wrestler gone to seed, he now spends his days begging for money or, when the begging doesn't succeed, mugging people. On top of that, he's

got a drinking problem. Hardly your typical hero figure then.

The main problem with playing the game from the viewpoint of such a thoroughly unpleasant individual is that it's hard to find yourself rooting for him. While several of the opponents you face are equally despicable, most are closer to the traditional hero figures you'd find yourself playing in other games and it's difficult to sympathise with your character throwing acid in someone's face or bashing them with a crowbar while they're otherwise distracted. Part of me would have preferred a less dubious way of handling some of the game's puzzles, but maybe that's just me.

Then there's the fact that the player isn't just horrible to his opponents but to everyone he meets. He makes his living (if you can call it that) by begging and mugging. He can steal from a shop run by an old blind guy. He even beats up a couple of kids and steals some oil from them. All in all, not a nice guy by any stretch of the imagination. And yet the feeling seems to be that the player is one of the good guys and that doing what he does *is the right thing*. Or maybe this is one of those cases where the player reads far more into a game than the writer ever intended.



Your character is seriously outmatched by every one of your opponents and so if you're going to win then you have to resort to underhanded methods. Only one of the opponents do you actually fight in the wrestling ring but whereas he seems quite content to fight fair 'n' square, you end up going at him with a chair, a fire extinguisher and a crowbar. Why not just step into the ring with a rocket launcher and be done with it? I'm not even going to mention the rules of wrestling which I'm pretty sure



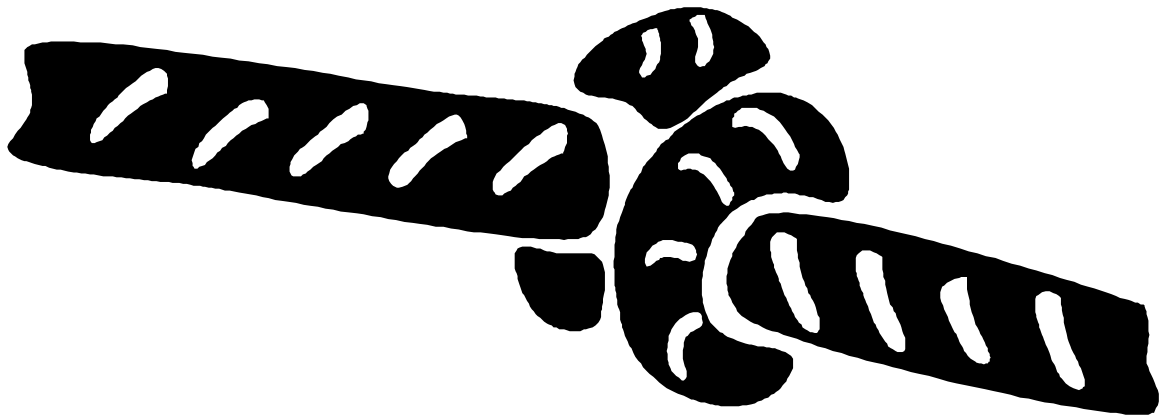
prohibit such out and out cheating...

While the end of the game and its seriously over the top fight with the Star (the main enemy) was amusing, I can't help but be disappointed that I wasn't able to defeat even one of my enemies in a fair fight. Even if the fair fight option proved to be unsuccessful, it would have been a good idea to include it for anyone willing to give it a shot.

### In The Good Corner

Aside from the refreshing change to the villain's viewpoint, *Veteran Knowledge* was well written and fairly easy to make progress with. I stumbled in a few places due to non-obvious commands but most of the puzzles are simple and straightforward. On top of that, there's an excellent hints system although you'll kick yourself if you use it and then find that the solution was so easy you could have worked it out anyway. I resorted to hints on several occasions but all the puzzles were easily solvable even for someone who can't get his head around half the puzzles in modern games.

The game layout was easy to get to grips with and there weren't many times I found myself checking the map to keep track of where I was.



## In The Bad Corner

Few games are perfect and *Veteran Knowledge* is no exception. However, the problems here are all relatively minor and don't let the game down in any noticeable way. The only two areas that I felt needed some work on were the dialogue and the way certain puzzles are handled.

The dialogue? Okay, let's be blunt: it's bad. None of the characters in the game come across as real or believable and most have a tendency to sink into Evil Super Villain Rant Mode when speaking to the player. Here is what the Monster says when you first encounter him:

**"How dare you touch those kids! They are my fans, carrying out my bidding. I want damage, destruction and mayhem. I don't want to waste this bottle of acid I was saving for tonight on you, but I am going to make you wish that you had never even looked at them!"**

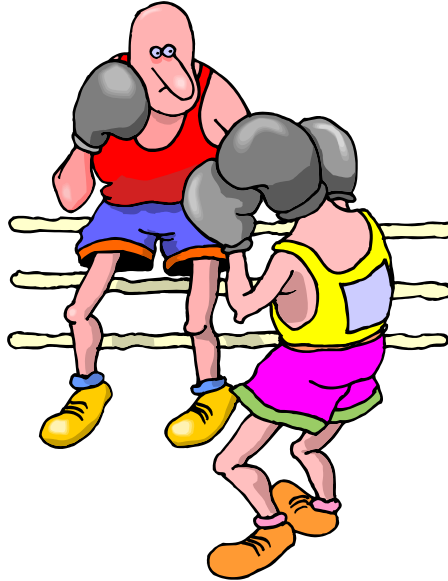
And the Evil Twins are even worse. Seldom do any of the characters in the game give a believable bit of dialogue; at worse they sound like they're reading their lines from a poorly written prompt card; at best they're caricature villains lacking depth.

The dialogue situation isn't helped much either by the fact that it seems to remain constant and unchanging throughout the entire game. Speak to the same character a dozen times and you get the same stilted dialogue on each occasion. A few variations, even the characters getting miffed at your repetition, might have been a good idea.

Certain puzzles? I struggled with parts of the game - nothing new as I generally struggle with every game at some point. But this one involved looking 'under' another item. I'd tried looking under items before that one and not met with any kind of success (generally receiving the exact same response as if I'd tried to examine it in the normal way) so when I came to the one item that I *did* need to look under, it didn't occur to me to even try. It's probably one of those things that doesn't seem relevant to the author but to the poor player it makes a big difference.

Other peeves with the game were minor: you can't enter the High Flyer's house (typing "go house", strangely enough, moves you one location further *away* from the house!) ; there are some crates later in the game that you're told you can't open with your bare hands yet trying with the crowbar just tells you that there's nothing in the crates that you need -

why not just tell you that first off so you don't go hunting for something to open them with?; the Brawler's car can't be "smashed" but it can be "broken" (actually it can't be "broken" either but "breaking" it returns a proper message whereas "smashing" it returns the ADRIFT default error message).



### **Short But Sweet**

Even enlarged from its original three hour beginnings and considerably fleshed out, *Veteran Knowledge* is by no means what you would call a big game. Allowing for time spent struggling with puzzles, I guess I got through the entire thing in little more than an hour; replay value, something I value in games, isn't high. This is one of those games whereby once you've played it, you've seen everything it has to offer and there is little inclination to try it again.

There are times in the game, particularly right at the start, where it might seem like there is very little to do and no actual way of making meaningful progress. Certain characters only appear and events only trigger after other events have been acted out so you might wander across, say, the north end of the park and find nothing happening there and yet return after a bit of dubious underhand action involving the Brawler to find a couple of brats messing around with an oil can. In a larger game, this sort of thing would be a major problem as you would need to continually wander around every location in the game to try and see if anything had changed, but in a game of relatively modest proportions like this one it's not too much of a hassle. Even so, I think I entered the park a couple of times after the brats were there before

noticing them because it's not often I reread a room description every time I visit the room.

### **A Worthy Update?**

I think the answer has to be a resounding yes. There are several aspects of the game that need working on – the dialogue being the main one and perhaps adding a bit of believability to some of the characters – but other than that this is a solid game in almost all respects. The game understands every command that you might think to try and even surprised me a few times with responses to commands I really didn't expect the author to have covered.

**7 out of 10**

## **A Walk At Dusk**

***By Eric Mayer***

*Review: David Whyld*

*Genre: Real Life/Mystery*

*Platform: ADRIFT 4*

*Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/dusk.taf>*

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New ADRIFT games – and by “new” I mean those not entered in the various competitions which seem to have comprised about 90% of ADRIFT’s recent output – are a rarity these days. The only exceptions seem to be the joke games put out by people who aren’t anywhere near as clever as they like to think or the games people upload when they’re “learning the system” and would be better off sent straight to the recycle bin. So when I saw there was a new game out, I hurried over and downloaded it.

### **Initial Impressions**

Some games start well and then go bad, others start bad and then become good. *A Walk At Dusk* was a bit of a mixed bunch. It started fairly well and if the storyline – involving the player deciding to look for a tree frog during a walk – didn’t blow me away, it at least wasn’t so horrible I thought about quitting. At least it made a nice change to the “save the world” storylines that populate so many games and nor was it some deep and fundamental game with ‘serious’ issues.

### **Purpose**

My first time through the game led me feeling as if there wasn’t a lot of point to what happened here. I wandered around, examined a few things, became alternately impressed with the decent standard of writing and depressed with the often clumsy programming, and then I found what I

was looking for - a tree frog - and the game ended. It told me I'd achieved four of the ten things I would have wanted to do and nicely listed them for me (I say nicely because it was nice idea not because of the formatting used for the listing which was a bit of a jumbled mess). Which left me sitting thinking "well, is that *it*?"

I played it again to see if there was anything else I had missed. There were a few things, mostly to do with examining bits of the scenery I hadn't thought to examine the first time, but overall it seems that, yes, that *is* it. Which isn't to say that what's on offer here isn't enough for a bite-sized game to while away half an hour on a rainy afternoon.

In the end I was left with the impression that *A Walk At Dusk* isn't so much a game as an exercise for the writer in telling a story using ADRIFT. The intro states that this is "an interactive essay" and there is a definite 'story' feel to the game that is a break from the norm.

Looked at from the viewpoint of "something to pass the time" or "a story with ADRIFT", it's quite likeable. It's certainly well written (mostly anyway) and while the occasional lapses in programming *are* a pain, they don't distract too much from the game itself.



### Problems

As with the writer's last game - *Wax Worx* - there are some great pieces of writing in *A Walk At Dusk* often let down by some exceedingly poor game writing and general lack of attention to detail. Some objects listed

in the room descriptions can be examined, others can't. Some obvious commands are missed out in one location yet equally obvious ones in another location are covered; this leads to the sneaking suspicion that this was a game written very quickly indeed and subjected to no more than cursory testing.

The lack of attention is bad in several places, notably the very first location in the game where the room description notes a field off to one side but trying to examine the field produces the default error message: "You can't see that here." Strangely, just about every other item in the location can be examined and most of them have nicely detailed descriptions.

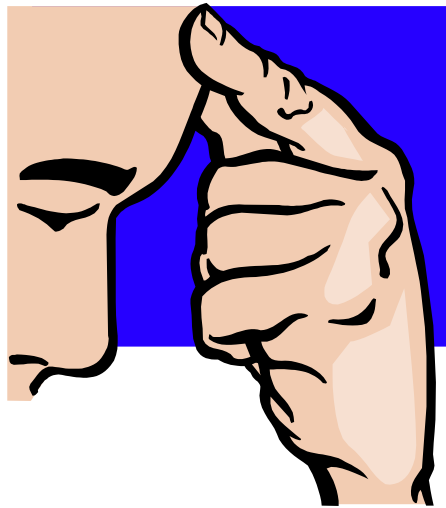
In other places, the description of a single item seems to have been used to cover the descriptions for many (a case of the writer cutting corners?). The description of the trees and shadows in one location returns the same description for each, which also happens to double (triple?) as the room description. Clearly the three are separate and should be treated as such for the sake of descriptions.



Sometimes the responses you get from the game aren't what you'd expect. I walked into a spider's web at one point and tried to break it with some wire I was carrying yet the game seemed to think I was trying to break it with the board.

There are no real puzzles in the game\* but sometimes the game's unhelpfulness can lead to unexpected puzzles arising. One command, in particular, needs to be repeated at the end of the game yet why would the player type it twice when the first time it didn't produce anything special? As it happened, I only typed it the second time because I had run out of things to do and was going through the various items in the room description and just typing "x [item]" one by one to see if there were any that I had missed. By chance I typed the same one as I had already typed and this time I got a meaningful response whereas the first time I hadn't.

\* Okay, there's one but it's so simple and straightforward that I doubt many people are going to struggle to get across the stream.



The only other problem I had with the game was with its often strange spacing between various parts of text. Sometimes the room description will immediately follow the direction command, other times there will be several lines between the two. There are also quite a few instances of weird spacings in the text itself with multiple spaces separating words in the middle of a sentence. No big deal and hardly the sort of thing that is going to either make or break a game but a little unusual all the same.

### **"I don't understand what you mean!"**

The default ADRIFT response of "I don't understand what you mean!" pops up often, usually in response to commands that really should have been covered but, for some reason, aren't. There's a stream the player has to cross at one point yet the option to swim across it isn't covered

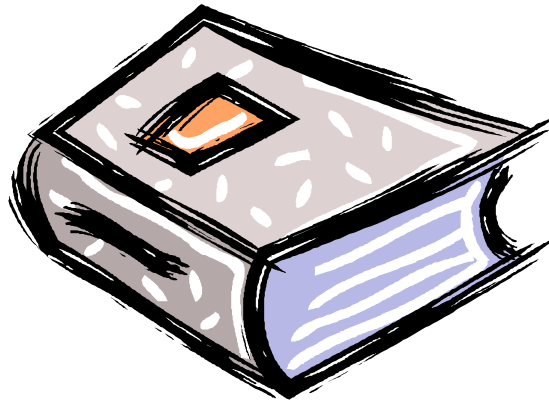


despite this being the first thing a player is likely to attempt. Elsewhere there's a fence but it can't be climbed. The same goes for several trees.

### Conclusion

Although I wasn't much impressed with *A Walk At Dusk* after my first play through it, subsequent playings (as I tried to figure out just what it was I needed to do to get the best possible ending) impressed me more. There's quite an involved game here and the idea is a lot cleverer than it first appears. Puzzle-less IF has never been a favourite of mine (despite the fact that I'm hopeless at most puzzles and inevitably start typing "help" the first time I come across one instead of trying to figure it out myself) but, handled well, it can certainly work and while I don't think that this game has quite succeeded it was nevertheless worth playing. A more polished version, or perhaps a larger and more ambitious game along similar lines, might be an interesting idea.

**5 out of 10**



## *A Walk At Dusk*

*By Eric Mayer*

*Review: Laurence Moore*

*Genre: Real Life/Mystery*

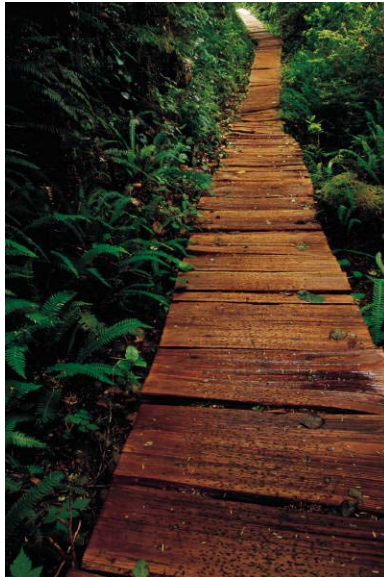
*Platform: ADRIFT 4*

*Download: <http://www.shadowvault.net/games/dusk.taf>*

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There is a certain style and flair about Eric Mayer's writing style. That's the thing: it has style. It's not just words strung together. *You are on a hard road. The trees are swaying in the wind. Exits are north and south.* Not, of course, that there is anything wrong with that type of description. It's just that when Mayer writes you get the feeling that here is a guy who labours over every word and every sentence. Nothing is wasted. Everything has purpose. Here is a guy comfortable with words. But, does that, alone, make an enjoyable gaming experience...?

Read on...



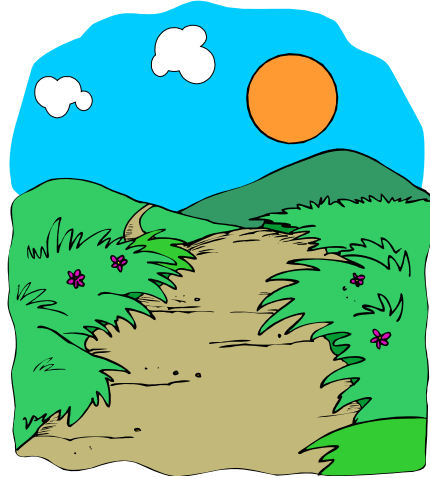
**A Walk At Dusk** is the first new Adrift release of 2005 (where are the others? Stop vaporising, get writing!!) It is billed as an interactive essay (whatever that is supposed to be) and the opening description is nicely drawn. *A country road. Hard packed dirt. You can feel embedded pebbles beneath your worn out running shoes.* Nice, very nice, but who am I? What's going on here? Okay, I'm out for a simple walk in the country to locate a unique frog that I have never seen. Well, it's a refreshing change from searching for the golden wotsit in the dungeon of the wotsit demon. Here, the more obscure verbs in text adventures - such as listen, touch and smell - have all been implemented and, when used, the resulting descriptions are nicely detailed (and well written) evoking a true sense of just *being there*. Average writers tell you where you are. Good writers make you *feel* where you are.

So, here I am, but am I enjoying the stroll? Well, yes...and no.

It's detailed. It's well-written. It's a small game intended to be nothing more than a pleasant diversion but...perhaps I would prefer to be searching for the golden wotsit rather than looking for a frog in dusky, tranquil surroundings...but I am now noticing a few odd display problems - double spacing appearing here and there and not after comma's. Sometimes I don't notice it. Sometimes it makes the text look a tad disjointed.

Anyway (minor spoiler) I have now acquired a plank (no lamp or keys here) and I'm trying to use it across the stream (or the pond). No joy, the stream is too wide, but didn't I see the stream elsewhere? Okay, that's the place, I'm across.

At this point I am still enjoying the outing but, equally, I know there is not going to be a dramatic shift in tone or development in plot. This lovingly rendered environment is not about to darken with something malevolent. This is akin to a nature hunt. Nothing more. However, the writing is good so I am determined to finish it. Now I've eaten a strawberry, found another object and I'm trying to fend off rampant poison ivy.

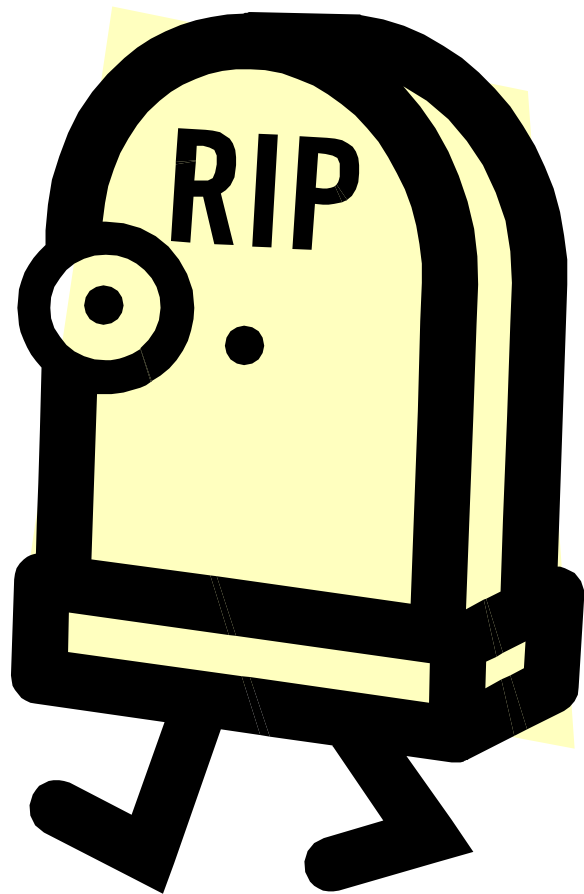


Okay, okay, is this any good?

Well, it depends what you are looking for. If you want a detailed and pleasant trip through the dusk hunting a rare frog, sniffing and smelling and touching everything in sight, then download and enjoy the well crafted words. If you're hoping the frog will turn into a *killer frog* and the game will open up into a pretty big adventure then...you might be a touch disappointed.

A one shot deal.

**6.5/10**



# Credits

*Many thanks to:*

*Cobra1 for his review of **Veteran Knowledge***

*Laurence Moore for his review of **A Walk At Dusk***

*Red-Sith for his review of **Darkness***

*Robert Rafgon for his reviews of **The Adventures Of Thumper: Wonder Wombat**, **Sun Empire: Quest For The Founders** and **The Timmy Reid Adventure***



Want to submit a review? Make a comment on the issue? Offer suggestions for future issues? Send an e-mail to [dwhyld@gmail.com](mailto:dwhyld@gmail.com)

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