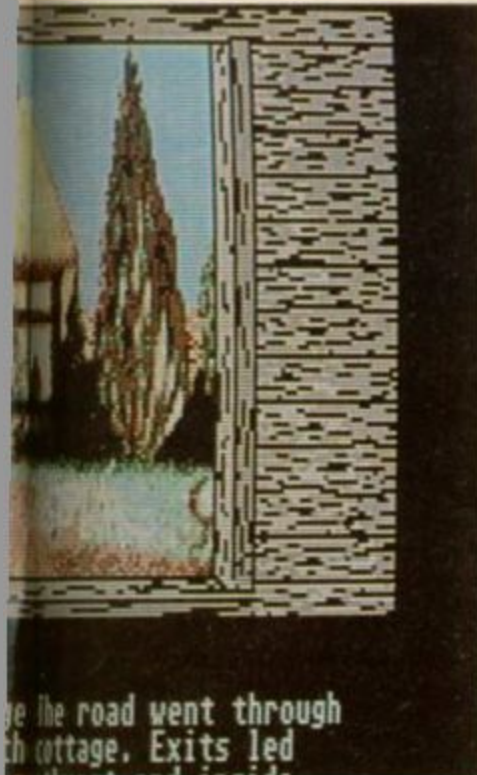




UNHUMAN

Having said all this I'm not sure I like running all over the place, true it may be more lifelike but it smacks of gimmickry and doesn't add anything to the game except speed of play. Commands such as FOLLOW and WAIT FOR are useful, as is the way other characters may be ordered about, but there seems to be something missing. Perhaps it's the plot, it is so far out of context with reality that it cannot possibly be believed and therefore fails to inspire the feeling of being involved. I realise

that many adventures are 'unreal' yet they at least either maintain some sort of human element or a semblance of reality via the game style. *Gnome Ranger* is defunct of humans and because every word that normally starts with 'N' is substituted by one spelled with a 'GN' (NORTH becomes GNORTH and so on) reality is lost; the Llama doesn't help the case either.

Escapism is fine as long as there is a thin strand included in it which will lead the player back to reality or at least remind him that it not too far away. From a personal point of view *Gnome Ranger* is very well implemented, but getting through it became nothing less than an arduous task. Eventually I could care less about the fate of Ingrid and indeed it was not too long before the digitised pictures faded to a blank screen.

Level 9 began their downhill slide with *Worm In Paradise* and have not yet produced a game good enough to drag them back up to the good old verb/noun days. I have added a Lastability rating to this review, a one-off as I feel it is important.

ATMOSPHERE 57%
INTERACTION 72%
LASTABILITY 19%
OVERALL 49%

SPACE QUEST

Sierra

AMIGA Diskette: £24.99

ATARI ST Diskette: £29.99

The system of planets known as Earnon has a dying sun, food is becoming scarce in the increasingly cold climate and the populace is incapable of doing anything about it. Help in the form of the scientific community of Xenon, which is developing a Star Generator, is their only hope and the plan is to convert one of the system's lifeless planets into a new sun. Spacelab Arcada is sent to the outer edges of Earnon to attempt the still experimental task, reporting to base frequently on developments and progress. Unfortunately these transmissions are picked up by the Sariens, a race of particularly nasty space pirates, who decide that the Star Generator would be a good weapon to have, and so, aboard their powerful battle cruiser Deltaur, they attack.

The adventure opens with the player in the role of a lowly apprentice sanitation engineer, who, due to his attempts at taking a quick nap in a convenient storage closet, is not discovered by the attackers as they rape and pillage. He waits quietly until the commotion has died down and eventually plucks up the courage to venture out into the corridor. The sight that greets his eyes is not a pleasant one, dead crew members litter the floor and damaged equipment smoulders quietly in a haze of blue smoke.

For a man with little brain he very quickly decides that he must escape the captured vessel and somehow render the Star Generator inoperative before the dastardly Sariens can use it.

Most of the screen in *Space Quest* is taken up by the animated, cartoon-style graphic portrayal of the adventure with a small area beneath for text input. Any relevant messages are shown in windows overlaying the main display with a help screen and inventory table available. Control of the main character's movement

PRESS
ANY
KEY

Looking heavenward I prayed. Please, not another one-word answer. But the gods were with me it seemed, for he continued: 'We have a large open-plan affair with smaller offices leading off. The central area is a very useful place to be if you want to learn the innermost secrets of forthcoming games.' Aiming to be professional, I adopted a puzzled look designed to coax him on. It worked: 'Here any puzzles and their solutions are inadvertently given away,' he went on, 'as the writers, excited and pleased by their work, come screaming out of their office and, well, BRAG!'

'Does this not give you an unfair advantage when playtesting their games?'

'I try not to listen!'

A small element of panic now crept into my brain. To try and maintain some sort of conversational flow I needed to ask about playtesting, or continue with the author theme. Having a quick brain, I decided to incorporate both ploys.

'When you playtest a game can you tell from the way it's written which of your colleagues wrote it?'

He smiled (wow), 'Oh yes, definitely. Jeff O'Neill (*Nord And Bert Couldn't Make Head Or Tail Of It*), for example, has a sardonic wit which is very bubbly and easily recognised...'

I interrupted, too quickly I think, 'And your own style?'

'I have a reputation for purple prose. My descriptions are what my

partners call 'flowery'.'

I desperately tried to remember a particularly flowery location in *The Lurking Horror*, failed miserably and blurted out something about the zombie waxing the floor.

'Did you realise that the whole of the GUE campus was actually fashioned on MIT which me and my buddies attended?'

'Was it really?' I asked realising that articulation may not be one of my stronger points.

'Yes, it's actually a mirror image of the place, and the dome and everything is really there. The guy who waxes the floor looked like a zombie and he did try to stop us students exploring all those little nooks and crannies and... 'he looked at me as though some revelation was due... 'there was a room along this featureless corridor which had a door marked Alchemy Lab.'

My eyes widened as I recalled what lay behind this door in the game.

'What was in this room?' I asked, hardly daring to listen to the answer.

'I don't know. I never went into it.'

Damn!! One shock horror scandal out the window. I would at this point have dearly loved to continue my in-depth questioning on *The Lurking Horror* (and perhaps even gleaned some tips), but professionalism took over, and taking a sip of nectar I decided to change the direction of my questioning. Unfortunately Mr Lebling couldn't hear me with my back to him so I turned round again.

DISCOUNTING GRAPHICS

'Do you feel that perhaps Infocom are being left behind by the likes of Magnetic Scrolls and Level 9, what with their complex parsers and picturesque graphics?'

'No.'

Aaaaaarrghhh... not again please. 'Why?'

'Discounting their graphics, they are doing what Infocom has been doing for years. It's very complimentary to have such skilled people emulate your efforts.'

Failing miserably to hide my shocked expression I grilled David on the graphics issue. 'Why do you discount their rather splendid graphics so easily, don't you like them?'

'Yes they're very nice, but do they actually add to the game and how one may play or win?'

I knew about these situations, I've watched Wogan. There is always a stage during the interview when the interviewee tries to turn the tables and take control. This was not going to happen to me.

Brilliantly turning his question into another I said: 'So you feel graphics are an extra to adventure games and have no real place among the prose?'

'That's right. Houses, trees and so on which appear in the pictures and not in the text cannot usually be examined or manipulated, and once they can we begin to approach that

"We use a Dec System 20 which is a large, early Sixties main-frame."



Any one for bridge? Amiga

may be gained by either by positioning the cursor in the area you want him to go to and clicking the fire button if using a joystick, left button if using a mouse, or by pressing the cursor keys. And our hero's walking speed may be selected as slow, normal or fast depending on the situation he is currently dealing with.

The parser is adequate, understanding phrases like 'Talk

to the gnome' or 'Give the keycard to the Sarien', and any words which the game does not understand are printed on screen with the message 'I do not understand'. - very helpful. Should you enter a particular location and not recognise what you are looking at, then LOOK AROUND gives a description of where you are and what surrounds you - ideal for

identifying certain obscure graphical representations.

Picking up, dropping, examining and using items found may be utilised via text input as can interaction with other characters met. Lots of useful functions are included in Space Quest such as a save/load option, the sound may be toggled on or off, the last input may be repeated and a line of text can be cancelled



should the player have a last minute change of heart.

Space Quest is huge and once you get used to the regular disk accessing (every location!), the game becomes very enjoyable. It is perhaps a little slower than the more text orientated adventures - forgetting to pick up the cartridge, for instance, until just about to board the shuttle is a bad situation as it takes an age to trek back to the computer console and then back down to the docking bay, by which time the ship one is trying to escape from has probably blown up.

The graphics themselves are nothing to inspire and the spot FX are barely functional but there is something about the game which is highly addictive and very enjoyable. One just has to keep

thin line which divides arcade and adventure games.'

This was obviously a huge topic for debate. Sadly time was against me and a couple more questions had to be answered and quickly if I was to make it back to fortress Newsfield before nightfall.

Forget the flow I thought, just ask the questions. 'What machine do you write your adventures on David?'

'We use a Dec System 20 which is a large, early Sixties mainframe with thousands of megabytes at its disposal. It's a very fast machine of an architectural type no longer made. Visually it's reminiscent of something used in the early Flash Gordon movies, all wheels and pipes.'

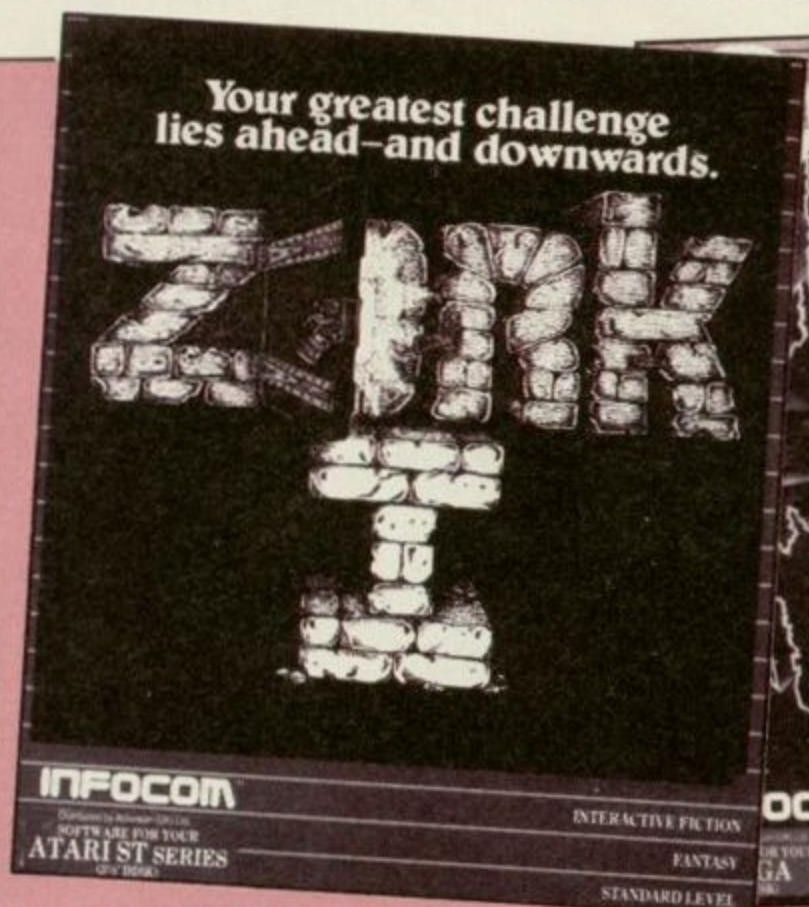
'Finally,' I lied, 'where do you see Infocom going?'

'Our games system Zil has been updated to Xzil (don't ask), and it's on this utility that Beyond Zork has been written.'

'Beyond Zork?' I asked, pretending to know nothing about this venture.

'Yes, Beyond Zork. It's our new game. We're very excited about it as it incorporates more of a role-playing style with statistics such as strength, charisma and so on, being available to the player. These will be shown on screen in the form of bar charts ...'

He must have seen the look of sheer horror on my face because he quickly added: 'In no way will it detract from the adventure element of the game. It will add to it. There's even the option to work your way through the game as a text adventure with hardly any role-



"I have a reputation for purple prose. My descriptions are what my partners call 'flowery'."

play elements at all. Our playtesters have had more fun playing this game than any other adventure we've done, we take this as a good sign pointing the way for us to go.'

'It does sound very interesting,' I said. 'What if it flops?'

'Then we go back to the old style game.'



"Our playtesters have had more fun playing Beyond Zork than any other adventure we have done."

NORD AND BERT COULDN'T MAKE HEAD OR TAIL OF IT

Infocom

ATARI ST Diskette: £24.99

AMIGA Diskette: £29.99

PC Diskette: £29.99

COMMODORE 64/128 Diskette only: £24.99

AMSTRAD Diskette only: £24.99

ATARI XE/XL Diskette: £24.99

Oh oh, someone's nicked the Star Generator - Amiga

going against all odds to see what lies in the next screen and ultimately exactly how big this adventure is. I was quite pleased with myself when I eventually escaped the ship and landed on the planet, only to find out that I had barely scratched the surface (pun intended). I shall keep returning to *Space Quest* until I surface the victor, but in the meantime I thank Sierra for supplying a very good game.

ATMOSPHERE 79%
INTERACTION 58%
OVERALL 74%

It is confession time I think, I have never played *Ballyhoo!* I mention this because *Nord And Bert*... was written by the same guy, **Jeff O' Neill**. Jeff (born 1958) left California State University armed only with an undergraduate degree in journalism and began his career with Infocom as a game tester - he specialised in playing *Hitchhikers Guide To The Galaxy*. His influences are Nietzsche (a prominent German Philosopher who, among other things, developed the theory of Superman (no, not the one who wears his knickers outside his trousers!)) and Mort Sahl (who didn't!). The very first Infocom story he wrote was *Ballyhoo*.

Nord And Bert is a decidedly different sort of offering from the *Zork* zone than we have come to expect. The first thing to note is that it is a collection of eight short stories each of which involves punning, wordplay and general

verbal trickery. The scenarios are played independently of each other although a password has to be gleaned from the first seven (the order in which they are tackled is entirely up to the player) to enable access to the last story, which is

entitled *Meet The Mayor*. The necessity for mapping is made redundant as accessible locations are displayed at the top of the screen and movement is gained by inputting the appropriate name. Examining items may be achieved by simply typing the name of the object the player wishes to study - no more examine errors! - although a closer look may require inputs such as LOOK INSIDE or LOOK THROUGH 'object name'.

The basic idea of the game is to study the locations and objects or characters in the vicinity and try to spot the spoonerisms (words with sounds transposed such as the 'well-boiled icicle' and the 'well-oiled bicycle') or homonyms (differing words which sound alike, 'stair' and 'stare' for instance) to solve the puzzles. Whilst in the British aisle within the Shopping Bizarre scenario the player is confronted with a Box Boy who is busy putting boxes onto shelves beneath a sign which reads 'Putting Area'. The way to dispose of this boy is obscurity at its worst; the idea is to input the words 'Pudding Section' to clear up the putting area and reveal a line of ants which of course will transform into bustling ladies when the player types in the word Aunts. A tantrum throwing little girl appears at one point, the ribbon in her hair carries the words 'worst brat', if the player is getting into the swing of the game then it will

PRESS ANY KEY

SLOW ON THE 64

Here it was then. The final question, the one which I had been building up to all through the interview, hoping I'd have the courage when it came to it. I did. 'Why is the disk access time on the Commodore 64 versions of your game so slow?'

He stared at me with those eyes of his (what else?). The ground trembled and beams of light shot into the sanctum (as Clare opened the door). Would David Lebling, this king of adventuredom actually bother to answer, or would he just end the interview here and now with but a flick of a hand? To my relief he smiled and spoke...

'At this present time our days are taken up developing new systems and writing new games. When things quieten down sufficiently we will certainly make time to work on this problem. Obviously the larger the game is the more the smaller machines such as the 64 have to access the disk. But until we develop the system, players will regrettably have to sacrifice speed for size.'

Throughout our short time together my opinion of Mr Lebling had grown higher and higher. His calm thoughtful answers, and his patience in dealing with a none too-experienced interviewer were certainly elements of the day which I would remember. All too soon, and feeling a mite drained, I departed for the domain of the innkeeper to collect my thoughts on the very pleasant previous hour.

