

Two for Infocom*

Boris Schneider

The requests we receive prove it: the recently published Infocom adventures *Stationfall* and *The Lurking Horror* are great favourites among our readers. The respective authors let us in on some of their secrets.

We met Steve Meretzky (*Stationfall*) and Dave Lebling (*The Lurking Horror*) at the fringes of a computer exhibition somewhere in the United States, where they very kindly answered some of our questions.

Power Play:

Steve, Dave, please tell us how you joined Infocom.

Steve:

When Infocom was founded I was a student at MIT. I had nothing to do with computers, but I had met some Infocom employees at student parties.

I graduated with a degree in civil engineering, and then had a number of jobs in that field. I found them terribly boring. After a few years I was lucky enough to be hired at Infocom as a tester. I did that for a year, which I spent on finding bugs and suggesting improvements for *Zork II* and *III*, *Starcross*, *Suspended*, and *Deadline*. One day Marc Blank, the chief developer at the time, came to me and asked "Would you like to write a game of your own?" I just said "Great!" and started work on *Planetfall*. That is now

almost exactly five years ago.

Dave:

I can say that I started at the beginning; I was there when Infocom was born. The founders of Infocom were all professors or students at MIT. We belonged to a group of people who played the first real text adventure, the famous *Colossal Cave Adventure*. At first we thought "This is really great," and then "but we can do it better."

At that time *Zork* was started as a project on a mainframe. It was a diversion for us, just for fun. Then one day someone had this crazy idea: "If we publish this for home computers, someone might actually buy it." At this time (around 1980) only ten percent of all home computers in the United States had a floppy disk drive. We have never been able to do anything with cassette tape. On the other hand, ten percent were already quite a large number of systems. So we started to publish the *Zork* trilogy. The original mainframe *Zork* was cut in three parts and edited. After that, we simply never stopped writing new stories.

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Power Play:

So one might say that you are one of the senior employees at Infocom?

Dave:

At first I only worked at Infocom in my free time; my day job was at MIT. Only two years ago I left MIT and joined Infocom full-time. Many people find it extraordinary that I worked on eight games without actually being employed by Infocom.

Power Play:

Do you have many freelancers, or are your authors part of the regular staff?

Dave:

Essentially all are regular staff. There are only a few people outside the company who work for us, like for example Douglas Adams, who worked on *Hitchhiker's Guide* and *Bureaucracy*.

Power Play:

What programming language do you use to write your adventures?

Dave:

The language our authors use to write the games is called ZIL; that is short for Zork Implementation Language. ZIL in turn is written in Muddle. Muddle is a kind of pet name; it's actually called MDL. We wrote Muddle at MIT as a language for artificial intelligence. One could say that Muddle is a cousin of LISP. When we implement new functions (such as the *oops* function), we change ZIL's instruction set; this implies programming in Muddle. However, the stories in the adventures themselves are entirely programmed in ZIL. For every computer, whether it be the IBM PC, the Commodore 64, or

the Atari ST, there is an appropriate Muddle/ZIL interpreter. When a program runs on our mainframe, it can be immediately transferred to a target computer.

Power Play:

There is a rumor that many of your authors can write in ZIL in their sleep, but actually don't know BASIC¹.

Dave:

I have never touched BASIC! I suppose I should be able to read and understand a BASIC program, and reasonably quickly learn the fundamentals and write a ten-line program. But at the moment I don't know the language at all; I am an old Muddle fan. Other programming languages that I know are Pascal and LISP, for example.

Steve:

I hate computers. I really don't know how they work. I haven't the faintest idea. The only thing that I can do is write adventure games. I also dislike the term "programming". I can't do that. I write stories in the ZIL language. Many folks I talk to are dumbfounded when I tell them that I have never owned a computer.

Dave:

I don't own a computer either. There are enough of them at Infocom.

Steve:

You have a PC at home, don't you?

Dave:

Yes, but it's not mine. It belongs to the company.

Many of our authors know a little of a few programming languages. The only expert among our authors is Brian Moriarty (*Wishbringer*, *Trinity*),

¹A popular beginner's programming language that came with most home computers in this period – the translator.

who arrived at Infocom in an unusual way. Steve started as a tester, Amy Briggs (who has just finished writing *Plundered Hearts*) started as a tester, Jeff O'Neill (has just completed *Nord and Bert...*) started as a tester, Dave (*Hollywood Hijinx*) started as a tester. Brian started as a system programmer. He wrote ZIL interpreters for a number of home computers and worked on the Infocom Plus system. He knows computers and many programming languages inside out, but he is the exception that proves the rule.



Dave Lebling

Power Play:

On the whole your adventure system has stayed the same since the days of *Zork*, not counting the Infocom plus games. Are you planning any changes in this area?

Dave:

At the moment Brian is working on a *Zork* sequel named *Beyond Zork*, which will be our first game with a new look. It will feature role-play elements and windows. *Beyond Zork* should be ready in November.

Power Play:

A very different subject. Steve, you

have written some of the World's funniest adventures. They range from profound satire to absurdity. Are you as humorous in your private life?

Steve:

I am not funny at all. I'm a rather serious type of person. I have never really made anyone laugh; I can't force myself to be funny. It's different when I write; then I can work for hours refining a joke, and I don't have to read it out when I'm done.

Power Play:

You certainly appear to be a very funny author. One thinks of the articles that you wrote for *The Status Line* (Infocom's in-house magazine that is sent to members free of charge). Presumably you have also contributed some texts in the *Hollywood Hijinx* package. At least, they are signed with your name.



Steve Meretzky

Steve:

Oh, that's Dave "Hollywood" Anderson's joke when he was preparing stuff for the game. He knew that Brian Moriarty – who has also served as "author" for the packaging – and I are great movie fans. Brian is very fond of

B-movies and has seen the most awful films ever made several times. If there would be a new *Godzilla* movie in the cinema right now, it would be as if Christmas had come early. I did write the articles in *The Status Line* though.

Power Play:

What can you tell us about the famed packagings? Is that also done by the authors, or is that the work of a separate department?

Steve:

Yes, we have a dedicated department that is involved with the packaging. The ideas of the authors are welcome, however. Actually, it is decided in a meeting what is going to be in a game box. Take the blueprints found in the *Stationfall* box, for example. I absolutely wanted those in there. The forms are also important – they are needed to solve the game. The *Stellar Patrol* patch on the other hand was a group idea.

Dave:

I just remember a funny story that I really have to tell you. When we were finishing the *Lurking Horror* packaging, we wanted to put a rubber bug in the box. We wanted to set the mood by giving the player a fright when he opens the box, and our colleagues had to select the nastiest bug from a large range of possibilities. All Hell broke loose for two weeks: on monitors, in coffee cups, under the phones, on lamp shades; those little creatures were stuck everywhere. A few self-proclaimed statisticians kept notes about who was how much frightened by what specimen.

After two weeks the episode was over. I went to the design department

and asked whether they had made a decision. One of them nodded and opened a drawer. This drawer was filled to the brim with beetles, insects, snakes, all kinds of vermin. She then dug nonchalantly in this mass of miniature monsters and says “No, it’s not here.”. She then opened another drawer, also full of this stuff, and then more digging. Finally she held up a bug and tersely said “This is it.”

Power Play:

Brian is a fan of B-movies, Dave insists on horror and fantasy, what does Steve Meretzky like?

Steve: (with a straight face)

What do I really like? Carrot cake.

Power Play:

I must have misheard. Carrot cake?

Dave:

He has you now, Boris.

Steve:

That wasn’t a joke. My wife makes a great carrot cake. But to answer your question, I’m a great science-fiction fan. I also enjoy going to the cinema. Unlike Steve, I like good movies! And I like baseball.

Power Play:

After *Stationfall* there will be a long vacation, right?

Steve:

Yes, I have just returned from a long vacation and I have started working on my next adventure. Well, actually I’m still finding out what the next game will be about.

Power Play:

How does that work at Infocom? Can everyone just program their own adventures the way he likes, or are there specific rules?

Dave:

We don't impose restrictions on our programmers. No one interferes with anyone else, although we often ask one another for advice. Everyone has a list of things that he or she would like to do some time. When someone starts a new project, he goes through his list and discusses it with his colleagues.

Steve:

Of course one has to make sure that a theme is not too complicated or strange to come across with the public. Apart from the fun at work we should also sell a few games to make a living. And we have to make sure that not all authors are working on a murder mystery, in order to have a diverse range of games. Similarly, we have to produce games with different difficulty ratings and not only make very hard or very easy games.

Power Play:

Dave, your new game doesn't really have a plot. The player wanders through the rooms of the university and runs into gruesome things. We don't find out anything about the background.

Dave:

Yes, that was intentional. I have deliberately avoided a story because I wanted to write a game like *Zork*; simply explore, find objects, without a particular purpose.

Also, I find horror stories that have a logical solution at the end rather boring. It's only really scary when there is no real end. That way, the evil can strike again at any time. When there's a real end, you close the book and you

can go to sleep without being afraid. That wouldn't be a good horror story.

Power Play:

The Lurking Horror cries out for a sequel because of the open ending. Will there be one?

Dave:

Yes, there are often sequels to stories. For example, *Stationfall* is a sequel to *Planetfall*. *Zork II* is a sequel to *Zork I*. You never know if there is going to be a sequel.

Power Play:

Speaking of the subject, Steve, will there be a sequel to *Hitchhiker's Guide* soon? I think that many fans are waiting for it.

Steve: (grinning broadly)

Yes, there are often sequels to stories. *Stationfall* is a sequel to *Planetfall*. *Zork III* is a sequel to *Zork II*. You never know if there is going to be a sequel.

Steve: (laughs)

Let's put it like this: no-one would be surprised when there would be a sequel to *Hitchhiker's Guide*. □

