

Adventure anecdotes from the U.S.A.*

Gregor Neumann and Boris Schneider

You wouldn't believe the complications you can encounter when trying to sell software. The adventure specialists at Infocom share their experiences with matchbooks, special types of paper, and freeze-dried astronaut food.

On the highway between New York and Boston a small Japanese car races through the first hours of morning. Inside are Gregor Neumann and Boris Schneider. Their destination: Cambridge, near Boston, the town of residence of the Infocom software company.

Once before we had a glimpse behind-the-scenes with the adventure experts at Infocom, when Steve Meretzky and Dave Lebling explained to us how they write adventure games in our first issue. Nevertheless, our morning drive to the Infocom headquarters is more than a courtesy visit. We are looking for new stories that may interest the readers of PowerPlay.

The offices of Infocom are located on the fifth floor of a very new commercial building. A sign saying "Infocom—Imagination sold and serviced here" is found next to the entrance.

As soon as we sit down with some of the staff to enjoy a cup of coffee a horrible sound reaches our ears, as if a

three-year-old is playing the violin for the very first time. Again and again the unnerving sound was heard. The people at Infocom seem to be used to it. Perhaps a poltergeist? It is then explained to us that the sound effects for the 16-bit versions of the adventure *Sherlock* are digitized and tested at that moment. Following some peculiar logic, the tests of the most ghostly sounds are the longest and loudest.



These are the people who invent the "feelies": Elisabeth Langosy, Gail Syska, Carl Genatoffio, and Angela Crews.

During a short tour we meet a number of known authors. Steve Meretzky (*Stationfall*, *Hitchhiker's*

*Originally published as "Adventure-Anekdoten aus USA" in PowerPlay Ausgabe 5 (pp. 26-27), a June 1988 special issue of Happy Computer magazine. Translated from German in 2015 by De Blauwe Schicht.

Guide to the Galaxy) is somewhat nervous, as his wife is expecting their first child; he leaves us after a short while. Brian Moriarty (*Wishbringer*, *Trinity*) is very excited because of the Macintosh II that had just been delivered and is abusing it with C-code. We also encounter Dave Lebling (*Deadline*, *Lurking Horror*) while he is trying a new Macintosh game (not an adventure!).



When he's not busy programming his Mac II, Brian Moriarty shows the holy Coconut of Quendor to astounded visitors.

We now arrive at our intended destination: the "Creative Services" department. Very rarely one hears of this team, yet they are perhaps the most important part of the company. This is where the packaging of the Infocom games comes into existence and where the "feelies"—the small items that are included in every game box—are invented. The "Don't Panic" button, a glow-in-the-dark *Wishbringer* stone, or a map of North Dakota in the year 2000. The inventors are Elisabeth, Gail, Angela, and Carl. These four people had many stories to tell that were so unbelievable that they simply had to be true.

There was for instance the problem of the matchbooks. This item is

included in the packaging of *Witness* and *Borderzone*. For safety reasons, Infocom uses non-flammable matches so that no errant infant will burn its fingers. However, safety regulations demand that the striking surface be located on the back of the match book. Had they been printed on the front, as is customary, then the match book could not legally have been included with a game that is accessible for children. Fortunately this regulation was discovered in time, otherwise a significant quantity of match books would necessarily have to have been disposed of¹.

The team had a very relevant proposition for the science-fiction game *Starcross*. The notion was to add actual freeze-dried astronaut food to the game package. Unfortunately this idea conflicts with several hygienic regulations, although it would have posed no technical problems.

Often a handwritten note or letter is included with a game. Of course these are printed, but still an original is needed. When handwriting is required, a few staff members are asked to provide manuscripts; the result that fits best, wins. The appropriate writer then may write the whole document (either flawlessly or with intentional mistakes, depending on the game).

It becomes downright complicated when paper becomes the object of interest. Carl related how he went to a museum for the letter in *Plundered Hearts*, to view examples of old paper. During a discussion with museum staff he discovered that they are

¹The match book included with *The Witness* actually has the striking surface situated on the front – the translator.

great Infocom fans. Naturally he received comprehensive support in examining centuries-old paper. Subsequently the search started for a US paper manufacturer that produces similar paper, preferably at a reasonable price. This does not always produce a satisfactory result. For example, for *Beyond Zork* a booklet was printed with a binding that looks like leather, but in fact is a particularly beautiful kind of cardboard. After the first thousand copies of *Beyond Zork* were sold and new booklets were needed, this type of cardboard was no longer sold. Other material for the binding was needed and found, but that did not look as nice as the first type. For this reason the first one thousand *Beyond Zork* packages have now become collector's items.

Attempts to make intentional errors are particularly interesting. With the adventure *Border Zone* a tourist guide is included that looks as genuine as possible. The authors tried to incorporate spelling and grammatical errors that are typical for such brochures. When the finished product returned from the printer for proofreading, it was found that the latter had kindly corrected all the intended mistakes.

It is just as difficult to make clear to printers of business cards that on the back of tens of thousands of cards there should be a handwritten note. Angela believes that such requests will cause many printers to shake their heads, but once they have understood what the purpose is for these odd re-

quests, they will be happy to be of service and even suggest improvements.



Genuinely awestruck; Gregor gazes upon the Infocom mainframe.

To finish, an important question: for which game was it the most difficult to provide "feelies"? The definite answer: *Trinity*. Carl says, "*Trinity* is a fantasy story about an atomic war; what could you add to that?" But even in this challenging case the Infocom people could think of something. The inclusion of folding instructions for a paper crane found in the game box has a deeper meaning: the crane is the symbol of the Japanese anti-nuclear movement. □

