

Mr. Virgil, rapidly flicks a row
of circuit breakers, and you
feel a strange, melting sensation
all through your nervous
system. You black out.

You're on an immense
stage. In front of you, a
storm roars like thunder.
Someone has thrown a rose
and a Baby Ruth candy bar
onto the stage. High overhead,
a huge video screen displays,
over and over, the film of
Bobby Clemmons' assassination.
In tight sequined costumes, a
chorus of singers writhes,
imitating the gestures of the
fatally wounded figure on the
screen.

mind wheel

Coming Adventures State-of-the-art interactive fiction

by NAT FRIEDLAND
Antic Editor

Just as this **Antic** 1984 Adventure Issue was going to press, we got an advance look at two games that dramatically advance the state of the art in interactive fiction.

These groundbreaking adventures are **Alternate Reality**, a graphic scrolling role-playing fantasy from Marsten Systems, and Synapse Software's **Electronic Novels** text adventure series. These games should be out by the time you read this . . . or soon after.



The City from Alternate Reality

The authors of **Alternate Reality** are Phil Price and Gary Gilbertson of Hawaii's Paradise Programming. **Antic** readers saw Phil's innovative color manipulation program "Price's Picture Painter" in our August 1984 graphics issue, illustrated with an elaborate scene from the game.

Alternate Reality is to ultimately become a seven-disk series. However, if the game proves popular they can insert additional disk adventures into the middle of the series before reaching the final chapters, "Revelation" and "Destiny."

What's new about **Alternate Reality** is the way it combines super-detailed graphics with a very wide-scope game map plus music, scrolling text and

occasional animation sequences.

As for Synapse's **Electronic Novels**, they are all-text adventures that boast a parser (dialog interpretation program) that seems to be as advanced as Infocom's. Five of these games are under development and their major new advance is that they offer the highest-ever degree of interaction with the story's characters.

DEMO AT ANTIC

Gary Gilbertson came into **Antic**'s office with a nearly complete version of the first **Alternate Reality** disk. The only missing elements were comparatively minor details such as the sun rising and setting in condensed real-time. Day and night are important in this game because a lot of monsters come out only in darkness and one of your first tasks will be to accumulate enough money to pay for indoor sleeping quarters.

The opening disk of **Alternate Reality** is called "The City" and you'll have to own it in order to play any of the later disks. In terms of mapping, all the other disks in the series will display territories that are adjacent to the city in some way—"The Dungeon," "The Arena," "The Palace," "The Wilderness." However, all these upcoming disks are to be independent of each other so you won't need to buy them in any particular order.

"The Dungeon" is also promised for release by the time you read this. It's to be a 12-level maze featuring more than 250 monsters. Located beneath the streets of the city, there will be a couple of ways you can teleport back above-ground to store your treasures safely.

Essentially, what you do in "The City" is wander through the streets and buildings, and build up your power points for the future disks. You'll have confrontations with the 47 types of life forms that live there—including goblins, zombies, muggers, etc. You see eye-level front views wherever you go. And you won't be quickly bored—during the demonstration an unmarked map of the 4,000-location city matrix was brought in and it looked as convoluted as a Mayan tomb decoration.



The Bar from Alternate Reality

The authors warn that you're building up karma during this phase. If you act too ruthlessly as you advance your status in the local society, you can expect to be struck down by an avenging destiny.

UFO KIDNAP

The game starts with an outstanding animation sequence. You see a detailed cityscape as a UFO flies in to grab prisoners (including you, of course). Next you're looking through the UFO's front porthole as a long series of star-strewn galaxies flashes by. Genuine computer generated music, not merely sound effects, is heard throughout all this.

continued on next page

You awaken at the portal leading to Alternate Reality. It's an open archway with sets of numbers swiftly revolving at the top. When you hit the joystick button you pass through and your starting attributes are set at the point values which were showing at that instant. You emerge into the city's main plaza.

In theory, you could "win" the game by discovering how to be transported home, even if you never get any of the other disks in the series. But the clues hinted at by Gilbertson seem pretty well buried. For example, part of the solution may be gained by charting the patterns of the UFO's route through the galactic clusters.

Marsten plans to price "The City" at \$49.95 and the follow-up disks at \$34.95. You'll also be able to get a \$14.95 utility disk for saving six characters.

SAMPLING FIVE NOVELS

To sample the five Electronic Novels, I drove over to Synapse Software's

quarters in an office park just north of Berkeley. The novels resided on a Corvus 10-megabyte hard disk accessed from an IBM PC. Richard Sanford, the project manager, explained that IBM and Apple will get the releases first. And then the programs will be adapted for the Atari and Commodore. Shipment is promised for before the end of the year, at a price of \$39.95.

The two opening games in the series, "Mindwheel" and "Essex" were complete enough to be playable . . . although it wasn't difficult to run into the boundaries of the unfinished programming as you got past the opening situations.

In the other three games, about all you could do at that point was explore the introductory scenes and pick up the overall flavor of the themes. However, even these glimpses were enough to provide a tantalizing overview of the scope of the series.

"Breakers" is set on an Outlands-type mining planet which you enter

by way of a sleazy interplanetary bar-room reminiscent of the Star Wars cantina. "Brimstone" will have Sir Gawain descending to hell on a knightly quest, but the exits from Camelot castle weren't in place yet. "Ronin" has a great atmospheric samurai setting, and it was very frustrating that the program wasn't yet developed enough for me to save the geisha by taking on the ninja with my sword.

WHEEL OF WISDOM

Mindwheel was farthest along at the time of my preview. This adventure's dense, symbol-packed prose is far different from the kind of tongue-in-cheek stage directions we all got used to in the earlier generations of text adventures. The plot is a lot more abstract too . . .

You become the first person to survive Dr. Virgil's mind transference experiment. It's up to you to save the planet by travelling through the minds

continued on page 33

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COMING ADVENTURES

continued from page 30

of a Dictator, a Rock Star, a Scientist and a Poet. When you get back to the primal level of history, find the mystical wheel of wisdom and bring it back with you. The journey starts with you as the Rock Star, performing at a huge, unruly concert and threatened by violent thugs.

I was able to move a little way into a couple of other minds from this rock concert setting, and the imagery is definitely something out of Dante's Inferno.

GIANT ROCKETSHIP

Essex is a somewhat unevocative title for the final adventure in this first batch of Electronic Novels. Actually, the Essex is a giant rocketship that's under attack from mysterious interplanetary saboteurs. As the game starts, you stumble across a murder and get a cryptic message to pass on to the captain.

I managed to get aboard the Essex just as it was blasting off. But before long I was bogged down trying to figure out how to use the computerized transporter systems and make my way to the bridge via the rocket's vast multiple levels of corridors.

This game provided an excellent example of what Synapse calls the "asynchronous universe" feature—which translates to random events. As you try to find your way around the rocket, you regularly ran into a mixed group of humans and non-humans who say different things at different meetings. Sometimes you could obtain valuable clues by speaking to these beings, at other times you just got a joke punchline.

Similar randomizing showed up in Mindwheel several ways. The rock concert crowd would start yelling song requests or throwing souvenirs every once in a while. If you got into a duel with the thug, you'd choose your weapon from one of three sealed boxes. But at various times the same box might contain either a magic talisman or a pizza.

TALK TO CHARACTERS

A lot of the data you need for advanc-

ing in these games is obtained by talking to characters. The effect can be eerily like a real dialog at times, though in other sequences it becomes obvious that this technique is still in its infancy.

It's going to be a real challenge for authors to suggest to game users when to start a dialog with the other characters, without being overly obvious about it. The situations here are somewhat more subtle than the earlier generation of text adventures where you'd be going down a murky tunnel and see a giant spider ahead.

In Mindwheel, for example, a bodyguard approaches you and says something like, "If you'd care to come with me to the green door, I might have something interesting to tell you."

Naturally, the longer inputs mean you must do more typing than if you were simply entering N, or GET LAMP. Synapse is still trying to simplify the response format before release. At the moment, you could get an answer by typing in as little as:

doc "who am i

In response, you'd see:

Doctor Virgil looks at you and says, "You're the first person whose brain wasn't fried by the machine." A

MANUFACTURERS OF THE GAMES DESCRIBED IN THIS ARTICLE

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