

Mainline



BY ALEX GATES

PLAYING Adventure on a main-frame computer is a tough nut to crack, taking months and months to solve. But that doesn't stop people sneaking into the computer room after dark to tackle it.

Most large makes of computers can run a variety of games but Adventure is the most popular and best suited. It is much more of a test than a micro based game because of the massive storage capacity mainframes have, extending the vocabulary into the thousands.

Many more details of scenery are available than on a micro and there are far more places to get lost in, more treasure to find, more dangerspots and hazards to overcome.

The principle of the game is the same as any adventure game. You have to find a certain number of treasure pieces which are dotted about an area littered with dangerous objects and evil beings.

Not only do you have to find the treasure but there is also a points system clocking up your score. You get 10 points for finding a piece of treasure, 10 points for getting it safely back to the store room, one point for each room you manage to enter but you lose 10 points if a piece of treasure is stolen by pirates, dwarfs or trolls, who are all out to trick or trap you.

Usually the top score is about the 350 mark: obviously you must try not to give away any points while you're on the treasure trail.

When you get down to a serious game of Adventure, it is best to keep a record of where you have been in map form.

The sooner you find out the boundaries of the area in which the treasure is hidden, the sooner you can positively start looking for it by gathering information and clues. Be brave and try going in every direction possible and in to every building (whether it's a safe looking barn, an evil smelling dungeon or a mysterious mist shrouded tower).

What it boils down to is that the game can only successfully be played by trial and error, frustrating though it may be.

A noteworthy tip in case you foolishly set foot in the labyrinths of underground mazes is to leave behind some of the least valuable clobber you are carrying. By leaving a marker behind you'll save a lot of time aimlessly walking through corridors and tunnels which look exactly alike.

If you leave a pointer, say some food (which always attracts the malicious dwarfs), or



your water bottle or a couple of coins (providing your lamp isn't going dim in which case you will need them to put in the vending machine for new batteries), you can quickly establish a map of the maze and get yourself out safely.

Console yourself with the knowledge that the computer is not always as tight-lipped as you may at first think. For instance it gives away some clues, subtle as they are, but your knowledge of classic fairy tales comes in handy.

To find any piece of treasure you have to follow each step in the correct sequence. You'll be hitting your head against a wall if you get to a stage when you know you should be able to use the tantalizingly near object to

obtain some treasure but you are lacking a vital item. An obvious example is the bird chirping happily in the sky. You know you need it for something but forgot to pick up the cage to catch the flighty creature in at the previous step.

Before, during and after you experience a close encounter of the kind you would rather not have, with trolls, dwarfs, wizards and elves, you are bound to have the opportunity of picking up a variety of objects. Some of these are worth having, the lamp, money and weapons are good bets for a kick off, but some are just put there to lead you astray. It's up to you to decide which you are going to need.

And unfortunately it's only your good judgement and luck which will reveal the three or four magic words which are vital for finding the treasure. Often you just stumble against them, and sometimes you're given a clue in the form of a riddle which you have to puzzle out.

There are going to be times when you will want to beat up the computer yet the only way to vent your anger and frustration is to swear at the machine. It only makes you feel even worse. It will either answer you back with whatever expletive you used, or it will chastise you with: "tut, tut. Mind your language, please".

At the end of the game, either when you have found all the booty or been killed or committed suicide (yes, even that's possible if you can't take the strain), the print out will give you an assessment of how well you fared, along with your points score.

It's just as well there are no hard and fast rules to stick to. If there were it would be far too easy and the fun would be taken out of it.

And once you have been whisked away by a crowd of laughing elves into the sunset having found all the treasure there is little left to hold your attention.

Adventure

BY KEITH CAMBELL

ADVENTURE is arguably the most popular game so far adopted by the computing fraternity. It tempts the data processing professional to give up his lunch hour to search for hidden treasure in the mainframe and is also finding its way onto many a home and even business microcomputer.

It is a game which generates fervent enthusiasts. I was staying overnight at Brighton on a business trip and, to pass the evening, walked along the seafront, finding myself eventually in a little back street pub. Armed with a pint, I found the only spare seat next to a young man and started a conversation, during which it emerged that I wrote for a computer magazine.

"I know nothing about computers", said my companion, a microbiologist, "but I suppose you have one of those Pet things". Whereupon, a fellow sitting on a nearby bar stool interrupted. "Are you in computing? I am half of a software firm writing commercial software for Pets."

"I'm a Tandy man myself," I told him, feeling that was almost like a declaration of war. A lengthy discussion followed on the relative difficulties of programming the Z 80 against the 6502. Neil, our biologist, yawned and sipped his tequila. Until the conversation turned inevitably to Adventure.

"Isn't that a computer version of *Dungeons and Dragons*?" he asked, suddenly awake again. From that moment, the only lull in the conversation before closing time was when a round was bought. Three enthusiasts could not be stopped.

Adventure did originate from *Dungeons and Dragons*. It has appeared on many mainframe computers around the world. The original was written in Fortran and required 64K storage plus disc back-up. In this age of the micro, a fairly complex Adven-

ture consisting of about 30 locations and a similar number of objects can be loaded into 16K of RAM.

Scott Adams scarcely exaggerates when he proclaims in the instructions appended to the Adventure series, that the player is able to experience an adventure without leaving his chair. For the Adventure formula is a game suited ideally to computers. A good Adventure can be totally absorbing and the danger of making a false move can become very real, as can the excitement of discovering a new exit or chamber.

So, for the uninitiated, what is Adventure? The game consists usually of a logical network of locations which must be explored or traversed. The locations can contain objects, creatures/monsters, and/or treasures, which may be carried and manipulated in sometimes obscure ways to achieve the objective of the game.

That objective may be to collect treasures, to carry out some specific act — like prevent a time-bomb from detonating — or to escape the network unharmed. That is achieved by entering instructions in plain language, usually a verb followed by a noun — e.g., go north, take keys, kill dragon.

In some games, movement is achieved by means of arrow keys. An Adventure is always words but sometimes may be augmented to a greater or lesser extent with graphics.

The player — unless he cheats by listing the program — has no way of knowing how many locations or objects exist but can plot

a logical geo-schematic map of the network to aid him in his travels.

Most Adventures are written in source code, rendering them more difficult to analyse by listing, or disassembling, than to solve.

Machine-code games, as well as having the advantage of space economy, have an apparently instantaneous response adding to the dramatic effect of surprise.

If your machine-code Adventure is baffling you and you want to cheat, try breaking, re-setting or quitting the game — without turning off — and then enter this from command mode: FOR I = (start address of user RAM) TO (end address of user RAM): PRINT CHR\$(PEEK(I)); NEXT

That will not give you an instant solution, but all the displayable characters will scroll up the screen, giving you a few good clues!

The most difficult part of writing an Adventure is to establish the theme and the plot. It is really like writing fiction, as it is necessary to have some theme which will hang everything together, while absorbing the player.

When you have hit on a theme, ask yourself if it has been done before. Once you have established your theme and plot, roughly draw the map of the network and place your objects. Think through your plot in some detail, making sure you have an in-built impossibility — e.g., you cannot get the axe until after you have chopped down the tree. Then think around some of the programming difficulties. I will start giving you tips on them next month.



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