

Z-code Text Adventure Collection #6 for Commander X16

Many of us played and loved the text adventures (AKA interactive fiction) produced by Infocom in the 1980's. They were rich in story and puzzles, and contained some excellent writing. In the years since Infocom's demise in 1989, there have been a lot of good games produced using Z-code - the game format that Infocom was using. Many of these games run fine on the Commander X16, using a Z-code interpreter. There is currently only one Z-code interpreter available for the Commander X16 - Ozmo.

I decided to create a collection of some great Z-code games for the Commander X16. All in all, this collection holds ten games, which were initially released in 2000-2026.

If you want more of a background on Infocom and the game format they used, you should read the chapter about The Zork Machine at the end of this document. There is also a chapter about building other Z-code games for play on Commander X16 and, finally, a chapter about writing your own games.

If you are new to text adventures, you may want to start by reading a short guide on how to play at <https://www.microheaven.com/ifguide/step3.html> or you could start by playing The Dreamhold, which was written to guide new players. The Dreamhold is part of Z-code Text Adventure Collection #1 for Commander X16, which can be found at <https://microheaven.com/ztac/> . Or you could play The Mystery of Winchester High, which is part of Collection #5. It starts off in Tutorial Mode, meaning it'll try to help you figure out how to play.

I created this documentation as a PDF, so that you could easily print it out and keep it nearby as you're playing the games on your Commander X16.

You will always find the latest version of this collection at <https://microheaven.com/ztac/>

Enjoy!

Fredrik Ramsberg, September 2026
Email: fredrik.ramsberg AT gmail.com

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The Games

All That Shimmers

Folder name: SHIMMERS

Genre: Humor

Year: 2025

Release / Serial No: 6 / 251031

Author: Andrew Apted

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=r4bhpydkl46q68lf>

“A young witch has moved to your normally quiet town of Dimpleford and something is brewing in that cauldron of hers, something EVIL.

Can a mild-mannered school teacher with an unusual ability discover her weakness and defeat her before it is too late?”

[-- author’s blurb]

Note: There is extra material for this game, which you can obtain by downloading the game from the IFDB link above.

Blue Chairs

Folder name: CHAIRS

Genre: Surreal

Year: 2004

Release / Serial No: 2 / 041229

Author: Chris Klimas

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=uva1vc6ico5u65zg>

She turns and looks at you curiously. 'You're here. You really came.'

'Of course I did,' you say. 'What happened?'

'I was dreaming,' she says with a sudden, awkward smile. 'I was dreaming of monsters.'

[-- author’s blurb]

Fail-Safe

Folder name: FAILSAFE

Genre: Science Fiction

Year: 2000

Release / Serial No: 1 / 001218

Author: Jon Ingold

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=c6x835i6o9zqfc59>

“A brief game with a novel premise that it would be disastrous to describe. This work plays some interesting games with the player/player-character/parser identities. It also turns off meta-verbs, so be prepared for the fact that you won't be able to save and restore. The game is so brief, thought, that it probably won't matter much. Definitely worth a try.”

[-- Emily Short]

Forsaken Denizen

Folder name: DENIZEN

Genre: Horror

Year: 2024

Release / Serial No: 17 / 240821

Author: C.E.J. Pacian

Loader image by: NSJNDD1

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=n984c6iwadr9slkj>

"THIS GAME CONTAINS SCENES OF IMPLICIT VIOLENCE AND GORE.

* * *

(A text-only survival horror.)"

[-- author's blurb]

Note: There is extra material for this game, which you can obtain by downloading the game from the IFDB link above.

LASH - Local Asynchronous Satellite Hookup

Folder name: LASH

Genre: Historical / Science Fiction

Year: 2000

Release / Serial No: 11 / 000806

Author: Paul O'Brian

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=frfoh6e7hur2beiu>

"In this historical drama and treasure hunt set in 2062, you have rented a robot called a MULE that you can control remotely to salvage artifacts from an abandoned irradiated plantation near Macon, Georgia. Before the Second American Civil War, the site was the home of notable historian Thomas Percy and his wife, Lisa, a pioneer in the field of mental imaging. The original plantation owner was Nicholas Duke, who aided the Confederate army in the First American Civil War.

Content warnings: graphic violence, very offensive language."

[-- blurb from IFDB]

Search For the Lost Ark

Folder name: LOSTARK

Genre: Religious

Year: 2023

Release / Serial No: 1 / 230629

Author: Garry Francis

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=6ygpowwk3melmsfs>

"The stories about the Ark of the Covenant are well known, but its current location is a mystery. According to French author Louis Charpentier, the Ark was taken to the Chartres Cathedral by the Knights Templar, but no one outside the cathedral has ever seen it. There may be a good reason for this.

You were raised in a small village about 100 km from Chartres Cathedral. According to local legend, the Ark was secretly transferred from the cathedral to your village's church, where it was safe from tourists and treasure hunters.

Prior to World War I, the Ark was hidden in the local forest so that it would be safe from the invading German army and it has remained there until this day.

The priest that hid the Ark recently passed away, taking the location of the Ark to his grave. The Church Council has decided that it's time to recover the Ark. As a seminarian (or trainee priest), they have asked you to return to your local village, use your local knowledge to find the Ark and return it to its rightful place on the altar in your church."

[-- author's blurb]

Slappy Squirrel Gets the Girl

Folder name: SLAPPY

Genre: Humor

Year: 2026

Release / Serial No: 1 / 260626

Author: Charles Moore Jr.

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=tail9uwzs0scswta>

"Someone's been toon-napped and taken to Toonopolis. It's up to you, Slappy squirrel, to rescue her."

[-- author's blurb]

Note: The author has provided hints for this game, which you can obtain by visiting the IFDB link above, and following the link to itch.io.

Textfire Golf

Folder name: GOLF

Genre: Game

Year: 2001

Release / Serial No: 1.01 / --

Author: Adam Cadre

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=ezi1n3a1idd6bn3>

"Stand steady at the tee... head down... slow backswing. Now, drive your tee shot 220 yards down the fairway, splitting a pair of sandtraps. Loft a five iron onto the green. And sink a twenty foot putt for a birdie!

You control the swing and aim throughout 9 championship quality holes. The fairways and greens are beautifully manicured, but the sand traps are deep... and the rough is... rough!"

[--blurb from IFDB]

The Weapon

Folder name:WEAPON

Genre: Science Fiction

Year: 2001

Release / Serial No: 1 / 010706

Author: Sean Barrett

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=tcebhl79rlxo3qrk>

"The Weapon is an excellent, polished puzzler. You are handcuffed and taken in to understand a piece of technology left by an ancient space-faring race. You have your own agenda, though."

[-- MathBrush]

Note: There is extra material for this game, which you can obtain by downloading the game from the IFDB link above.

Yes, Another Game With A Dragon!

Folder name: YAGWAD

Genre: Fantasy / Humor

Year: 2000

Release / Serial No: 2 / 001121

Author: John Kean

Link: <https://ifdb.org/viewgame?id=ljqfvoa6dshtk8xa>

"In this game, you play as a brawny adventurer heroically rescuing a fair maiden from a fire-breathing dragon. Oops, sorry, no, that was just a dream. You're actually an out-of-shape drunken lout. But then King Alfie proclaims that Princess Rosebud has been abducted by a dastardly dragon and that whoever rescues her will gain half the kingdom and her hand in marriage! Wow. Will you make the attempt to win the princess? Or will you go have another pint in the tavern? It's a tough choice."

[--blurb from IFDB]

Technical Information

Here you can find a bit more information about Infocom, the game format they developed, how you can find more Z-code games and make them playable on the Commander X16, and what you need to write your own text adventure.

The Zork Machine - past and present

In 1977, a few guys at Massachusetts Institute of Technology played Adventure, which is widely considered to be the first text adventure. They decided to write their own adventure game, first called Zork, then Dungeon, then Zork again. In 1979, they started a company called Infocom, to make business software. They needed a source of income as they were starting up, and they thought Zork could provide that, if they could only get it to run on the micro computers of the time. The game was about 1 MB in size, and the computers they needed to run it on typically had 32 KB of memory. Also, the game was written in Fortran, which wasn't available for micro computers. On top of all this, there were new computer models coming out all the time, and they wanted the game to run on as many different platforms as possible.

To solve this equation, they designed a virtual machine, an imaginary computer never meant to be built, but to be emulated. The machine was called the Z-Machine (Zork Machine), and it was designed only for running text adventures. They then created their own programming language called ZIL (Zork Implementation Language), heavily inspired by MDL, the language they wrote the first version of Zork in. They wrote a compiler called Zilch, which compiled ZIL programs to Z-code, programs ready to be run on the Z-machine. They then wrote a separate ZIP (Z-machine Interpreter) to emulate the Z-machine on each platform they wanted to support. The end result was that they could, after the hard work of writing all this software was done, release their text adventures for many different platforms without rewriting any of the code.

While the Z-machine was heavily optimized to make text adventures compact, Zork was still too big. They split up the game into three parts, added some pieces and removed others, to make three different games, each one of them playable on a micro computer with a disk drive attached. An entire game would fit on a disk, and the computer would use virtual memory, copying the parts of the game that it needed at the moment from disk to memory. In this way, games of up to 128 KB in size could be played on a computer with as little as 32 KB of memory. Zork I was released in 1980, and became a commercial success. Infocom kept on making text adventures for about ten years, producing a number of great games.

Fast forward to the nineties. Infocom had been bought by Activision and eventually shut down. Some fans gathered together over the now emerging Internet, and started figuring out just exactly how the Z-Machine worked, by reading the machine code of the interpreters used (ZIPs). They called themselves The Infocom Taskforce. A guy in England called

Graham Nelson saw what was happening and started to write his own programming language, compiler and text adventure programming library, based on the findings of the Infocom Task Force. He called his system Inform. While he was developing it, we also wrote his own game in Inform, called Curses. When Inform hit version 5, it had matured enough for a much wider audience to use it. Graham made Inform available for free, along with Curses.

Since Curses was using the same virtual machine as Infocom had used, it could also be played with the same ZIP:s that Infocom had produced, but soon enough other people started to write new Z-machine interpreters, for modern computers. Graham also created two new versions of the Z-machine, called version 7 and 8 (Infocom created versions 1-6), which allowed for bigger games. A version 8 game can be up to 512 KB in size, which allows for truly huge text adventures. It has been estimated that Infocom's first two trilogies (Zork 1, 2, 3 + Enchanter, Sorcerer and Spellbreaker) could be combined into a single game without hitting this limit.

Inform 5 was used to produce a dozen games or so. Then came Inform 6, which has been used to write hundreds of games. After that came Inform 7, which is very different from the earlier versions. It has been used to create hundreds of games as well. To allow for even larger games, and to make it easier to incorporate graphics and sound into text adventures, a new virtual machine, Glulx, was designed by Andrew Plotkin. Inform 7, as well as the more recent versions of Inform 6, can produce both Z-code and Glulx games.

Building Z-code games for play on Commander X16

There is currently only one Z-code interpreter for the Commander X16 - Ozmoos.

Ozmoos and instructions on using it can be found at <https://ozmoos.online>

You go to the website, upload a Z-code file, specify your build options, and press a button. This produces a zip archive which you can then download, unzip and play on your Commander X16.

All games produced by Infocom should work fine on the Commander X16. The games with graphics (Zork Zero, Arthur, Shogun and Journey) can't be built through the web site though.

As for Z-code games produced post-Infocom, you can generally expect all games that were built using Inform 6 to work well. Some lightweight Inform 7 games may also work reasonably well, but most Inform 7 games are just too slow. Inform 7 typically produces code that is very demanding for the computer, and an 8 MHz 8-bit computer isn't up to the task.

A few modern games show some Unicode characters which can't be displayed on a Commander X16. These characters will just be omitted in output when playing on a Commander X16. If you want to play a game in German, French, Spanish, Italian, Danish or Swedish, Ozmoos has you covered though, as it can use a custom font which replaces some graphic characters with the accented characters you need.

Writing your own text adventures

You can of course write your own text adventures as well. Some popular tools include Inform 7, Twine, ChoiceScript, TADS 3 and Adrift.

If you want to produce Z-code games, and have them playable on retro computers, these are the obvious options today:

- ZIL: Use the Lisp-like language used by Infocom. The compiler and some pointers can be found at <https://foss.heptapod.net/zilf/zilf>
- Dialog: A language inspired by Prolog. It's quite advanced and powerful, but the games produced are a bit too heavy to run on your typical 8-bit machine. 16-bit machines and newer machines are better suited to run these games. Find out more at <https://www.linusakesson.net/dialog/>
- Inform 6 with its standard library: Similar to C in syntax. Games produced are a bit too heavy for most 8-bit machines, but most of them run fine on Commander X16 and 16-bit machines. There is a (no longer maintained) site at <https://www.inform-fiction.org/>
- Inform 6 with the PunyInform library: With a much more lightweight library, you can produce games that run fine on all sorts of 8-bit computers for which there are Z-code interpreters (~30 different platforms). Of course, the games will also run fine on newer computers. The homepage is located at <https://github.com/johanberntsson/PunyInform>
- A new option has appeared in 2026: Arcturus. Very lightweight, and aims to be easy to get started with. Check it out at <https://github.com/ByteProject/Arcturus>

I am a co-author of PunyInform and perhaps not surprisingly, I think PunyInform is the easiest option for writing Z-code games for retro computers. While the library is designed to be much smaller and faster than the standard library, it has most of the functionality of the standard library, plus some that the standard library lacks.

No matter which system you choose, or even before you choose a system, I recommend the friendly forum at <https://intfiction.org/> as a place to get support, encouragement, feedback, playtesters, and all sorts of useful pointers.