Hardcoregaming101.net Presents:

The Guide to Classic Graphic Adventures

Edited and Compiled By Kurt Kalata

Hardcoregaming101.net Presents:
The Guide to Classic Graphic Adventures

By Kurt Kalata

All images are copyrighted by the developers and/or publishers of their respective games.

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

First Edition: May 2011

http://www.hardcoregaming101.net

Credits and Acknowledgements

Contributors

Brad Allison: Scooby-Doo: Classic Creep Capers

Kevin Anderson: Gateway, Superhero League of Hoboken, Sanitarium, Teenagent

Michael Boyd: Neverhood

Corwin Brence: Heart of China, Alien Incident

Ed Burns: Hugo

John Cameron: Tass Times in Tonetown, Beavis and Butthead

Paul Chênevert: Myst

Jason Johnson: Neuromancer

Ryan McSwain: The Dark Eye, Blade Runner (co-author), Orion Burger, The Space Bar, KULT, Nightlong, BloodNet, Wayne's World, Normality, Below the Root, Cosmology of Kyoto, Gadget, Obsidian, Bad Day on the Midway, Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, Snoopy, Plan 9 From Outer Space, Bureau 17, Tequila & Boom Boom, 9: The Last Resort, Morpheus

Samuel Melzner: Secret Files, Rex Nebular, Spellcasting, Gray Matter, Shadow of Destiny

Harry Milonas: Blade Runner (co-author)

Aiden Monnens: Blazing Dragons

Collin Pierce: Zork

Michael Plasket: Indiana Jones, Strong Bad, Loom, The Chzo Mythos

John Szczepaniak: Lost Eden, The Fish Files, Snow Job, Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken

Ryan Woodward: The Dig

All others by Kurt Kalata

Cover "feelies" designed and photographed by Kate Eggleston (kate.eggleston@yahoo.com), except for Purple Tentacle cross-stitch portrait by Brandi Swenson

Copy editing by Kevin Anderson, Samuel Melzner and John Szczepaniak

Special thanks goes to Kevin Gifford for the Japanese Shadowgate translations; Rick Barba and Peter Spear for their excellent strategy guides; anyone and everyone involved in the production of ScummVM and DOSBox; Ashley Day and Jack Allin for their help setting up interviews; Jeremy Parish, whose books inspired this one; Ryusui for filling in the blanks for Pegasus Prime; my parents for continuing to buy me games in my youth; my brother Alan for lending me his old laptop; and Sophia Freire for her endless encouragement.

Table of Contents

Introduction 9
Introduction to Sierra On-Line 13
King's Quest 16
Space Quest 39
The Black Cauldron 53
Leisure Suit Larry 55
Interview – Al Lowe 81
Police Quest 89
Gold Rush 104
Manhunter 106
Laura Bow Mysteries 110
Codename: Iceman 118
Conquests of Camelot / Longbow 121
Quest for Glory 126
Interview – Corey Cole 143
EcoQuest 150
Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist 152
Gabriel Knight 155
Pepper's Adventures in Time 165
Phantasmagoria 167
Torin's Passage 173
Shivers 176
Lighthouse 178
Interview – Josh Mandel 179
Dynamix
Rise of the Dragon 187
Heart of China 190
The Adventures of Willy Beamish 192
Rama 195
Coktel Vision
Gobliiins 196
Fascination 203
Bargon Attack 205
Ween: The Prophecy 206
Lost in Time 207
The Bizarre Adventures of Woodruff and the Schnibble 209
Introduction to LucasArts 211
Labyrinth: The Computer Game 213
Maniac Mansion 216
Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders 226
Indiana Jones 229
Loom 237
Monkey Island 241
Sam & Max 265
Full Throttle 282
The Dig 286
Grim Fandango 290
Introduction to Legend Entertainment 294
Spellcasting 295
Timequest 303
Gateway 306
Eric the Unready 310
Companions of Xanth 313

Superhero League of Hoboken 316
Death Gate 320
Mission Critical 322
Shannara 324
Callahan's Crosstime Saloon 326
Blackstone Chronicles 330
Interview – Bob Bates 332
Infocom
Zork 338
The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy 365
Leather Goddesses of Phobos 369
ICOM MacVentures 375
Déjà Vu 376
Uninvited 381
Shadowgate 383
Interplay
Mindshadow 392
Borrowed Time 393
Tass Times in Tonetown 394
Neuromancer 396
Konami
Snatcher 400
Policenauts 407
Shadow of Destiny 412
Access Software
Tex Murphy 415
Countdown 427
Amazon: Guardians of Eden 428
Horrorsoft/Adventure Soft
Personal Nightmare 429
Simon the Sorcerer 430
The Feeble Files 441
Westwood Studios
Circuit's Edge 443
Legend of Kyrandia 445
Blade Runner 452
Accolade
Les Manley 456
Altered Destiny 459
Exxos/Cryo
KULT: The Temple of Flying Saucers 461
Dune 462
KGB 463
Dragon Lore 466
Lost Eden 469
Delphine Software
Future Wars 471
Operation Stealth 473
Cruise for a Corpse 475
Core Design
Curse of Enchantia 477
Universe 478
Revolution
Lure of the Temptress 479
Beneath a Steel Sky 481

Broken Sword 484
Gold and Glory: The Road to El Dorado 495
Cyberdreams
Dark Seed 496
I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream 502
MicroProse
Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender 507
Return of the Phantom 509
Dragonsphere 511
BloodNet 513
Pendulo Studios
Igor: Objective Uikokahonia 514
Runaway 515
Divide by Zero
Innocent Until Caught / Guilty 522
The Orion Conspiracy 525
The Gene Machine 526
Take 2 Interactive
Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller 528
Bureau 13 531
Ripper 532
Black Dahlia 534
Dynabyte
Nippon Safes, Inc / Big Red Adventure 536
Tequila & Boom Boom 538
DreamForge Intertainment
Chronomaster 539
Sanitarium 540
inSCAPE
The Dark Eye 543
Bad Day on the Midway 546
Sanctuary Woods
Ripley's Believe it or Not! The Riddle of Master Lu 548
Orion Burger 550
Microïds
Amerzone 552
Syberia 553
Series
Jérôme Lange Mysteries 558
Hugo 560
The Journeyman Project 567
The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes 575
Ringworld 579
Star Trek 582
The 7th Guest / The 11th Hour 588
Myst 596
Call of Cthulhu 627
Discworld 631
Scooby Doo Mysteries 640
Beavis and Butthead 643
The Neverhood 648
The Longest Journey / Dreamfall 653
Secret Files 660
Individual Games
Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken 665

Enchanted Scepters 667
Below the Root 668
Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom 669
Murder on the Mississippi 671
Snoopy: The Cool Computer Game 673
Earthrise 674
Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure 675
Hook 676
Plan 9 from Outer Space 677
The Dark Half 678
Wayne's World 679
Gadget: Past as Future 680
Dreamweb 682
Inherit the Earth 684
Bad Mojo 686
Noctropolis 688
Flight of the Amazon Queen 691
Chewy: ESC From F5 693
Kingdom o' Magic 694
Cosmology of Kyoto 696
Snow Job 698
Touché 700
Teenagent 702
Blazing Dragons 703
Alien Incident 705
Harvester 706
Toonstruck 709
Fable 712
Normality 713
Bud Tucker in Double Trouble 714
Amber: Journeys Beyond 715
9: The Last Resort 716
Obsidian 717
The Last Express 719
The Space Bar 724
Duckman 726
Jack Orlando 727
Hopkins FBI 728
Starship Titanic 729
Nightlong: Union City Conspiracy 732
Morpheus 733
The Fish Files 734
Limbo of the Lost 735
Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People 737
A Vampyre Story 742
Gray Matter 743
Independent Games
The Chzo Mythos 748
The Shivah 756
Emerald City Confidential 758
Ben There Dan That / Time Gentlemen Please 760
Machinarium 765
Gemini Rue 767
Further Adventure Gaming 769
Alphabetical Index 770

Introduction

So when did the adventure game genre collapse? The genre started with the mainframe text game *Adventure*, which was expanded into *Colossal Cave*. This begat *Zork* and founded Infocom, while a little company called On-Line Systems (later known as Sierra On-Line) began putting graphics in these games and ended up with *Mystery House* and *King's Quest*. They exploded in popularity around the introduction of the CD-ROM, where the expanded storage space allowed for fancy multimedia productions. But all bubbles burst, and the cause was any number of issues. Part of the blame lays on outside factors, like the burgeoning popularity of first person shooters and real time strategy games. An equal part of the blame can be placed on the games themselves, which either diluted the experience in favor of serving a broader market, or failed to evolve and stuck with the same archaic puzzle solving mechanics they'd been maintaining for years. The European market continued to be sustainable, but in America, the adventure game had all but perished.

The genre has seen a resurgence lately, thanks to the rejuvenating efforts by Telltale Games, as well as an influx of Japanese games on Nintendo DS and a number of high quality independent games. It's still not as prominent as it was in its glory days, however, and older gamers will remember a time when LucasArts and Sierra reigned – the golden age of adventure gaming. While fans are mostly familiar with the likes of *King's Quest* and *Monkey Island*, there are hundreds of adventure games produced the world over, and this book aims to catalog them.

When this project started, my initial plan was to cover the "best of" adventure gaming. This included the entirety of LucasArts and Sierra, since they were by far the most popular, but I also wanted to include the works of Legend, since they were overlooked and their library is excellent. I had also wanted to include some of the better regarded series and games, like *Broken Sword*, *Simon the Sorcerer*, and *The Last Express*. However, as I began to work on this, it dawned on me how much this conflicted with the spirit of Hardcore Gaming 101. The other main goal of the site is to highlight lesser known games – focusing largely on LucasArts and Sierra would be like writing a JRPG book and only discussing *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*. And so the scope expanded to anything "significant", which ended up being both a good and a bad idea.

It was a bad idea from a project management standpoint, because "significant" is a nearly impossible word to define. Surely just because a game was unpopular didn't mean it was bad, right? Therefore, I ended up playing any game that sounded vaguely interesting, which soon expanded to practically anything I could find. The scope creep expanded the book from a planned 500 pages to over 750, and extended the planned release date by six months.

On the other hand, it was a pretty good idea in the end, because it made the book even more comprehensive. It still doesn't cover everything in the adventure game genre – such a thing would probably be impossible – but it does cover a gigantic chunk of it, so if you read the book cover to cover, you can consider yourself an expert. It was also good for me, too, as well as the other contributors, because it introduced us to some cool stuff we wouldn't have played otherwise. (Personally I'm glad I gave chances to *KGB* and *The Gene Machine*, and some contributors mentioned how much they enjoyed *Orion Burger* and *Tequila & Boom Boom*.)

We still needed to reign in the scope a bit, though. Originally I'd wanted to include games from all eras, but decided to focus on the "golden age", running from the release of *King's Quest* in 1984, up until roughly 2000. However, we still feature a number of newer games, mostly ones that have thematic ties to older titles, including *Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People* (which has a whole episode devoted to old school adventure games), *Secret Files* (obviously inspired by *Broken Sword*), *A Vampyre Story* (developed by a LucasArts vet), *Gray Matter* (designed by the writer of *Gabriel Knight*) and a few others. I also included *Runaway*, which is a series that's often suggested for fans of old LucasArts games, as well as *Syberia*, which is relatively popular too, and *Limbo of the Lost*, because it's the most derided game in adventure gaming history.

It's really tough to define "adventure game", because elements from it can blend into other genres. There are numerous games we had to discount because they were technically hybrids, but fell too closely on one side of the fence. For example, we included Horrorsoft's *Personal Nightmare*, since it felt like a text adventure, but didn't include its succeeding titles, the *Elvira* games and *Waxworks*, because they integrated RPG elements more heavily. On the other hand, we did include Westwood's *Circuit's Edge*, because it has a heavy focus on narrative, more so than most RPGs of the time (it was also released under the Infocom label). We didn't cover *Inca*, because while the puzzle solving parts are similar to other Coktel adventure games, a good chunk of the game is spent flying spaceships, so it's not really the focus.

The line similarly blurs when it comes to adventure and FMV games. In addition to *The Beast Within* and the *Tex Murphy* series, we included the likes of *Ripper* and *Black Dahlia*, because they more interactive than, say, *The Daedalus Encounter*. We also don't define adventure games as requiring puzzles – there are a handful of early games which focus almost solely on exploration and narrative, such as the Japanese titles *Cosmology of Kyoto* and *Gadget: Past as Future*.

We also wanted the focus to be specifically on "graphic adventures" rather than text adventures. We defined this as any game where your actions or movement are not solely controlled through a text parser. For example, in early Sierra games you had to type in commands, but you still moved an onscreen character with a keyboard or joystick. This meant that any game with a point-and-click interface also qualified, including some titles like *Tass Times in Tonetown*, which are technically text adventures with a bolted-on mouse-based interface.

We didn't want to focus too much on text adventures because there are numerous titles from the early days, and even far more in the modern underground interactive fiction movement. Still, it would be foolish to disregard them completely. A few of Sierra's early titles are covered where appropriate (*Mystery House* when discussing the *Laura Bow* games, and *Wizard and the Princess* when discussing *King's Quest*), as well as a handful of Infocom's more popular games, ones which later spawned graphic adventure sequels or remakes. We also featured all of Legend's games, to keep it consistent with the coverage for the entire company, and also because they all include graphical interfaces.

I'd also originally wanted to focus entirely on Western developed games, but decided to stick in a few Japanese titles, like *Portopia*, *Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom*, *Policenauts* and *Snatcher*. There are hundreds more, obviously, but sadly most of these have not been translated into English, and many others are too new, like *Phoenix Wright* and *Hotel Dusk*, thereby falling outside the scope. We also had to eliminate most educational titles, or anything too explicitly aimed towards kids – sorry *Fatty Bear* and *Putt-Putt*!

I'd wanted to stay away from *Myst* clones too – there are dozens upon dozens of them, and many do little to differentiate themselves. However, *Myst* itself is covered extensively, as are a handful of first person adventure games like *The 7th Guest* (which has more in common with something like *Professor Layton* in modern terms) and *The Journeyman Project*. We have covered Sierra's entries, and also stuck in *Obsidian*, *AMBER: Journeys Beyond* and *Morpheus*, because they are often cited as some of the best the subgenre has to offer.

Then there's the question of indie games. There are numerous excellent titles that herald back to the glory days of adventure gaming, but since there are so many, we just picked what we felt were the best or most interesting, including *The Shivah*, *Been There, Dan That!, Gemini Rue*, and a few others. If you've developed another awesome indie title that we passed over, we offer our apologies – we just didn't have the time/space to fit them in.

The cover was inspired by the "feelies" included in Infocom game packaging, which were nifty little physical goods based off something in the game. While the concept of feelies died out around the time Sierra and LucasArts took over the market, I thought it would be cool to feature some homemade replications of various in-game items. These include a stuffed doll of Max from *Sam & Max*, the Schattenjäger talisman from *Gabriel Knight*, King Graham's hat from *King's Quest*, a rubber-chicken-with-a-pulley-in-the-middle from *The Secret of Monkey Island*, and a cross stitch of Purple Tentacle from *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle*.

Review Standards

There still seems to be a lot of resistance against classic adventure games from those who didn't grow up with them – for me, some of first gaming memories involve trying to help my dad figure out some puzzles in a really old *Sherlock Holmes*-esque text adventure for our Atari 400, so they've been part of my consciousness since pretty much the beginning. Nowadays, there seems to be a consensus that the games are filled with illogical puzzles, instant-death situations and dead ends which render games unsolvable without returning to an earlier save game. Please note that we are reviewing games in a modern context, and there are certain game devices that really don't fly any more. The dead ends, for example, we consider a criminal offense. Similarly, we hate arcade sequences, including the numerous areas in old Sierra games where you needed to navigate narrow cliffs without falling off, and we are no fans of mazes, either.

However, we'll forgive overtly illogical puzzles if their solutions are funny (as is the case with LucasArts games), and we recognize that the threat of death was not only a vital part of many of these titles, but one of the main reasons to experiment. This is especially true in cases like *Leisure Suit Larry* and *Space Quest*, which were often darkly humorous. Besides, walkthroughs for practically anything are easily available nowadays, so even if you get stumped, it's only a few clicks away to GameFAQs.

Instead, we are judging the games on other criteria. If the puzzles are illogical, are there at least clues? Are the rules and solutions consistent with the game universe? Are goals clearly indicated? Are there clear directions, or are you expected to wander around? How large is your inventory? If the game is non-linear, are the options overwhelming? Stuff like that.

We do, however, place a greater emphasis on criticizing narrative over puzzle solving. If a game is too easy but tells a great story, or offers a great world to explore, we'll give it a good review. Is the game world immersive, atmospheric or original? Are the characters interesting or funny? How well is the dialogue written, or perhaps just as important, how good is the voice acting, if present? One of the major problems with modern adventure gaming is that many of them are developed in Europe and need to be translated into English – but due to budget constraints, the localizations are usually pretty dire. (See: *Runaway*, the fourth and fifth *Simon the Sorcerer* games, and *Syberia*, to a lesser extent.) One of the reasons why adventure gaming is such a fascinating genre is because it offers a greater focus on storytelling, without (usually) having to add in other elements, like shooting or platforming. Therefore, basing the review on how well it tells a story is one of the main points.

Please note that some reviews do contain spoilers, both in plot and puzzles. This was done intentionally as a reaction to most adventure game reviews, which tend to skirt around such subjects. This seems to miss the point – if you can't discuss anything for fear of ruining the story, then what's the point of critiquing it to begin it? We try not to ruin anything too major, but please beware if that kind of thing bothers you.

Also, the book is divided into three sections. The first classifies games by developer, the second by series, and the third by individual games which don't fall into the previous categories. If you're looking for a specific title, please refer to the index at the end.

Playing Classic Games on Modern PCs

There's no doubt that playing older PC games is a monstrous headache. Luckily in the case of adventure games there's ScummVM. ("SCUMM" stands for "Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion", which is the name of the engine that powers most LucasArts games, while the "VM" stands for "Virtual Machine".) ScummVM lets you import data files for dozens of adventure game and lets you play them on practically any modern operating system, including Windows, Macintosh and Linux, as well as other platforms, like the PlayStation Portable and Nintendo DS. (Note that you need a modded PSP or a flash card for your DS if you decide to try that route.) Practically every LucasArts game is supported, except for *Labyrinth* (which predated SCUMM)

and both *Grim Fandango* and *Escape from Monkey Island* (which used GrimE, a different engine.) It supports numerous other non-SCUMM games too, including a sizeable chunk of Sierra's library, presently up to and including the SCI1 games. They even offer additional functionalities, like support for different sound fonts, the ability to speed up the action, or in the case of the EGA Sierra games, an option to disable dithering. It's a brilliant tool.

Games not supported require a bit more work. Most titles of the era ran in MS-DOS, and thankfully the emulator DOSBox will run most of these. Proper utilization requires some knowledge of DOS commands and sound card configurations, although front ends can lessen the pain. Unfortunately some games still cause issues, but there are fixes for most. Check out **http://www.dosbox.com** for a compatibility list, which includes comments from other users that can potentially offer solutions. The website VOGONS, Very Old Games on New Systems (**http:// vogons.zetafleet.com**), also has a forum filled with tips on specific titles.

More of a headache are older Windows based games. If a title refuses to install or start up, try right-clicking the executable file, and change the compatibility settings to Windows 95 or 98. Some games also have patches to get games to run on Windows XP or later, so check around. Unfortunately, there's no single fix-all for these. During the course of writing this book, in some cases we had to use a different computer (for *Grim Fandango*, *The Journeyman Project*, *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon* and *Blackstone Chronicles*) and some just refused to run at all and had to be omitted (sorry *Ace Ventura*.) The only recourse is to either buy an older computer, or try installing Windows 3.1 or 95 under DOSBox or Virtual PC, which is a huge pain.

As for finding older games, some are available through downloadable services like Good Old Games (**http://www.gog.com**) or Steam (**http://store.steampowered.com**). In other cases, you can find practically anything for sale on Amazon Marketplace or eBay. Take note that Sierra in particular offered many compilations throughout the years, making them easy to obtain. The ones released during the '80s are often fully featured, with all available games during the time of publication as well as extras, while the later compilations published in 2006 and beyond are barebones and skip over certain games. (They only include the remade versions of the first game in each pack instead of the original, and in the case of *Leisure Suit Larry*, *King's Quest* and *Police Quest*, omit the later games.) LucasArts has also developed remakes of the first two *Monkey Island* games, which are downloadable on both consoles and PCs.

Of course, there's also the abandonware route. Sites like Abandonia (**http://www.abandonia.com**) catalog hundreds of older computer games and offer them free to download. Their legality is questionable, but they continue to operate because the games are (for the most part) no longer being sold, and therefore no profit is lost. Many publishers of these games are no longer in existence and it's not always clear who the license holders are, so re-releases of such titles are usually unlikely. Since most new computers don't even ship with floppy drives any more, finding a title through the internet may be the only way to get the files onto your hard drive to begin with. Just make sure the source is trustworthy, and have a virus scanner activated at all times.

With all of that in mind, please do enjoy this book! If you find this tome intimidating, note that the best places to start are with the LucasArts and Sierra articles – that's why they're at the front of the book! – and work your way from there. Other notable titles and series include *The Longest Journey* and its sequel, *Dreamfall*, *The Last Express*, *Beneath a Steel Sky*, *Broken Sword*, *Simon the Sorcerer*, *Snatcher*, *Blade Runner*, and *The Journeyman Project*.

Kurt Kalata
May, 2011

Introduction to Sierra On-Line

The '80s remain one of the most fascinating eras in the history of computers. While the industry is now ruled by multi-national conglomerates, back then the ground was still fresh, with gigantic businesses springing from the roots of ambitious ideas. Sierra On-Line is one such company, which was literally founded in a kitchen. The brainchild of husband and wife Ken and Roberta Williams, their company, originally named On-Line Systems Inc., was inspired by text adventures like *Colossal Cave*. They saw an opportunity to advance the genre by introducing static graphics, thereby making them more like storybooks. The technology didn't exist at the time, so they did the research to develop it themselves. Their first game, *Mystery House*, was quite a success, and soon the company developed five more text adventures. Their catalog spread, publishing titles from other up and coming developers (including *Ultima II* by the not-yet-famous Lord British AKA Richard Garriott), which were marketed in computer magazines and sent to customers in plastic bags. Eventually, the company was renamed Sierra On-Line. Ken handled the business side of the company, while Roberta remained as a game designer.

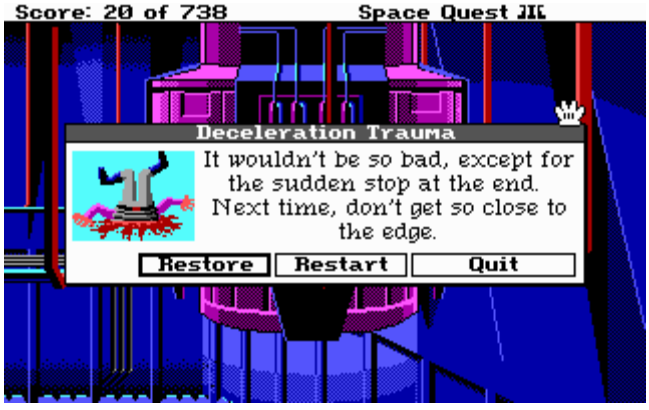
In 1984 Sierra published *King's Quest*, the product that would not only define the company, but also officially marked the beginning of a grand new genre – the "graphic adventure". They hired more developers and crafted other products using similar technology, each of which grew their fanbase. *Space Quest* was a science fiction comedy. *Police Quest* was a crime drama. *Leisure Suit Larry* was a sex farce. As technology expanded, so did the quality of their games, offering better scripts, painted backgrounds and, on their CD releases, full voice acting. Their other later popular series included *Quest for Glory*, an adventure-RPG hybrid, and *Gabriel Knight*, a series of supernatural thrillers. As one can see, many of their games had "quest" somewhere in the title, which helped to designate them as part of the Sierra family.

The fortunes of the company changed when Sierra was sold to CUC International, which shortly thereafter suffered under a series of scandals. The adventure game genre was declining and the corporate overlords had no need for the veteran staff, so many were laid off over the course of several years, eventually closing down the department after the release of the third *Gabriel Knight* game in 2000. At this point, Sierra was little more than a label used for certain types of games, and had absolutely none of the same spirit. Eventually they were sold to French mega conglomerate Vivendi Universal, and later to Activision, which keeps some of their games alive on digital distribution services.

The tragic demise of the company does nothing to undermine the quality of the games. While fans could debate the merits of Sierra games versus those of LucasArts, their biggest competitor, Sierra was unquestionably a far more prolific company, developing over 50 adventure titles, including its educational games and other off-shoots. Their quality was a bit more scattershot, of course, but there was always a consistent feel that you could expect from a Sierra game. The writing was almost always excellent, even in their lesser games. Unlike some of their competitors, Sierra games usually had a narrator to relate exposition or describe the scenery, who usually became an (unseen) character of their own. Like Activision in the days of the Atari 2600, Sierra championed its designers as celebrities, sticking their faces on the boxes and in marketing materials.

Today, Sierra games are lambasted for some seemingly archaic design decisions. Their games featured numerous dead ends, where forgetting to grab an item from an early section could render the game unwinnable. Most were also known for suddenly and ruthlessly killing their characters. Both of these elements require copious saving and reloading unless you wanted to spend vast swaths of time retracing your steps. To be fair, these elements were hardly new to the genre, and had been evident since the earliest text adventures. But the designers at Sierra were usually pretty tongue-in-cheek about this, often intentionally making the death sequences absurd and sticking in cute little messages to deride the player for dying. Since adventure games were often so linear and story-based, they offered little replayablity – finding all of the ways to

kill your character became sort of a meta-game. They also evoked an atmosphere of intensity missing in the friendlier LucasArts games. Eventually by the early '80s, Sierra's designers had learned quite a bit, and such frustrating elements became less frequent with each new product.



Death scenes like this, in the third Space Quest game, were remarkably common.

The main reason for the consistency between Sierra's games was due to the technology that powered them. There are five major generations of scripting interpreters, each of which introduced advancements in the graphic display, the sound and the interface.

Their text adventure era began with *Mystery House* and includes games like *Wizard and the Princess*, *Time Zone* and *The Dark Crystal*. Their writing was often simplistic compared to Infocom games and their text parser incredibly basic, but nearly all of them featured graphic illustrations, and thus was more appealing to many. The only game that didn't was *Softporn Adventure*, which is arguably the game that could've benefitted from them the most.

Their first graphic adventures were made with "AGI", which stands for "Adventure Game Interpreter". It used super low resolution 160x200 graphics, which means the characters and text were quite blocky. Its palette was also limited to 16 colors at most. The IBM PC versions only supported blippy PC speaker music, and the other computers weren't much better. As such, most games were played in silence, with some occasional sound effects. The characters are controlled entirely with a keyboard or joystick, and most interaction is handled through a text parser. Since the action takes place in real time, and doesn't pause when you type, certain games require that you either get better at your keyboarding skills or learn to "buffer" your commands before entering dangerous situations, typing out your actions but waiting to trigger them with the "enter" key when necessary. The writing in these types of games is sparse, and the main characters are little more than avatars for the player, with little-to-no personality. These games also tended to feature lots of "arcade sequences", requiring that the character navigate a series of narrow corridors or platforms. Given the controls, it's very easy to walk off cliffs or otherwise get yourself killed in rather stupid ways. Games that use these include *King's Quest I-III*, *Space Quest I-II*, *Leisure Suit Larry I*, *Police Quest I*, *Black Cauldron*, and both *Manhunter*s. The open source program ScummVM supports most AGI games, and adds in basic mouse control functionality, as well as slightly improved sound.

The next advancement was dubbed "SCI", which stands for "Sierra Creative Interpreter". It was later renamed "SCI0" when it was succeeded by newer technology. While still restricted to 16 colors, the resolution was expanded to 320x200. This allows for far greater detail, as many backgrounds are dithered to provide far more texture than the flat colors of AGI games. These games support mouse control for character movement. Pathfinding is basically non-existent, however, as characters only move in a straight line to their destination. Although arcade segments are still present, they aren't nearly as pervasive, and the pointer makes them easier to

navigate anyway. All interaction is still handled with text input, although it pauses the action whenever you hit the keyboard, and the parser window is hidden from view until you begin to type, allowing for a larger screen view. The writing became fleshed out, with many games featuring automated cutscenes at various points. They brought a greater focus on storytelling, although the protagonists were still more or less blank slates. SCI0 also supports soundcards, though music is still generally sparse. Some of the games using this interface include *King's Quest IV*, *Space Quest III*, *Quest for Glory II,* and *Police Quest 2*.

The SCI was revamped again in 1992, with the "SCI1" interpreter. This allowed for 256 color graphics, resulting in a huge jump in visual quality, although it stayed at 320x200 resolution. The backgrounds were usually paintings that were scanned into a computer, and the characters were often rotoscoped actors. It also ditches the text-based input entirely and focuses on a mouse-driven icon-based parser. Most games use the same four icons – "Walk", "Look", "Interact", and "Speak" – although some have additional icons, like the "Smell" and "Taste" icons in *Space Quest*, and the "Zipper" icon in *Leisure Suit Larry*. This is also when Sierra started releasing its games on CD-ROM, so many of these have full voice acting. Their early games were pretty amateurish, as they used random people around the office as their cast, but they eventually hired more professional actors. The storytelling improved too, as many previously silent protagonists took on greater roles, the narrators grew personalities of their own, and various NPCs were much better characterized. It's here that Sierra games became the most popular, as their ease-of-play allowed most non-gamers to enjoy them and, due to multimedia hardware, they coincided with the IBM PC boom of the '80s. Some of these include *King's Quest V-VI*, *Leisure Suit Larry 5*, *Space Quest IV-V*, *Quest for Glory III*, and several remakes of earlier Sierra games, including *Space Quest I, Police Quest I* and *Quest for Glory I*.

The next advancement was with "SCI2". Most of the improvements it offered were technical in nature, as it runs in 32-bit mode and utilizes better memory management, as well as offering support for Windows 3.1. Some of the early games look functionally identical to those on SCI1, like *Quest for Glory IV* and *Gabriel Knight*, although the interpreter added in support for SVGA graphics, as well as movies. The advancements became more apparent once *King's Quest VII* was released, which finally took advantage of the 640x480 SVGA display. Later games like *Torin's Passage* and *Space Quest VI* continued to look like animated cartoons, while *Phantasmagoria* and *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery* used fully digitized graphics that resembled a movie. Despite ostensibly improving the visuals, the interfaces, with a few exceptions, were paired down to a single cursor. While making them easier to play, it also ruined some of the narrative depth, since the number of hotspots was greatly reduced. This, however, was averted with *Leisure Suit Larry: Love for Sail*. "SCI3" was eventually developed which, on the surface, wasn't drastically different from SCI2, but allowed better support for Windows 95.

From here the generational designations grow murkier, as later games almost grew out of the adventure gaming genre entirely. *King's Quest: Mask of Eternity* is more of an action game, and *Quest for Glory V*, despite retaining the point-and-click interface, feels more like a straight RPG. The only game that kept a similar structure was *Gabriel Knight 3*, which was one of Sierra's only adventure games done entirely in 3D.

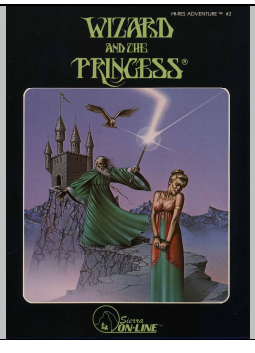
Outside of their internal development teams, Sierra also bought a number of other companies which made similar games. One of their early acquisitions was Dynamix, an Oregon-based company that specialized in tank and flight simulators. They also made three adventure games – *Rise of the Dragon*, *Heart of China* and *The Adventures of Willy Beamish*. These ran on Dynamix's own technology and have their own unique style. The Dynamix team was later put to work developing *Space Quest V* using the SCI1 engine. Sierra also purchased French studio Coktel Vision, which had an even more bizarre design aesthetic. Their main title was the *Gobliiins* series, which was more focused on puzzle solving than Sierra's other titles. They also specialized in trippy multimedia projects like *Inca* and *Lost in Time*, which featured a substantial amount of computer graphics and full motion video. In spite of their originality, Coktel games were not only frustratingly designed, but also too weird for the general audience.

King's Quest

Ostensibly Sierra's flagship series, *King's Quest* is practically the progenitor of the graphic adventure genre as we know it. Designed and conceived by Roberta Williams, it sought to break free of text adventure conventions by switching to a third person view, giving the player an avatar to guide around the game world. It was also at the forefront of their technological advancements. Every time Sierra introduced a new engine, with improvements to the graphics, sound and interface, *King's Quest* was always the title leading the way.

In many ways, the quality of the *King's Quest* games have been surpassed by other titles – while innovative, Sierra's other games were often better designed and more inspired. But the series still has a style all of its own, however quaint it may be. The world of *King's Quest* takes the basic medieval tropes – knights and dragons, swords and sorcery – but draws heavily from classical mythology and folklore from all kinds of cultures. It's sort of a weird hodge podge, where you run into Little Red Riding Hood one moment and Count Dracula the next, but the occasional twists on the formula make for some interesting scenarios.

Each game stars one of the members of the royal family of Daventry. The first game puts you in the shoes of Sir Graham, a loyal knight who is chosen to take over rule of the country. In the second game he seeks a bride, the beautiful Valanice. The third game appears unrelated, putting you in the role of a young boy enslaved to a wizard, but at the end it's revealed he's actually Alexander, the long missing son of Graham and Valanice. The fourth game features their daughter, Princess Rosella, as she teleports to another land to save her father. The fifth game returns you to the role of King Graham, now with graying hair but still a strong adventuring spirit, to rescue his kidnapped family. The sixth game features Alexander again, now a proper prince, as he seeks a wife, much like his father had done four games before him. And the seventh game features both the return of Rosella and the first adventure for Queen Valanice, now a rather grandmotherly woman. The eighth and final game breaks from this tradition and has little to do with anything. Although each game takes place in completely different lands – Daventry, Kolyma, Llewdor, Tamir, Serenia, Land of the Green Isles and Eldritch – there are some small elements of continuity, particularly in the later games.



Wizard and the Princess / Adventures in Serenia

Initial Release Date: 1980
Platforms: IBM PC / Apple II / Commodore 64 / Atari 8-bit
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: On-Line Systems

Wizard and the Princess is not technically part of the *King's Quest* series, but it definitely laid the path for the later games. As the documentation relates, Princess Priscilla of the land of Serenia has been captured by the evil wizard Harlin. Her father, King George, offers half the kingdom to any soul who can bring her back alive. That soul just happens to be you.

Wizard and the Princess was On-Line System's second title after *Mystery House*. The text parser is roughly the same quality, which is to say, not very good. It can only understand two word sentences ("VERB NOUN"), the writing is terse, and it rarely understands what you type in anyway. It does improve on *Mystery House*'s simple black and white graphics by adding a bit of color. The Apple II didn't have great display capabilities, so the color is quite limited and usually

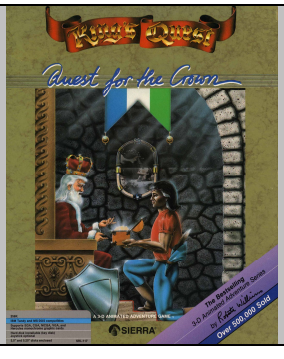
relegated to background objects, although it uses a fair bit of dithering to give objects some texture. The IBM PC and Atari versions look similar, albeit with somewhat worse colors, and the Commodore 64 version probably looks the best of the bunch, as it gets rid of the dithering entirely and makes better use of color.



Computer graphics have come a long way since 1980.

The land of Serenia is fairly large, and the whole game is basically one giant maze. Nearly all of the screens look alike until you stumble upon a major destination. And since your character can and will die of thirst, you can't wander too far unless you refill your flask at a waterbed. You'll wander through deserts and forests, sail across the waters, and eventually find your way into Harlin's castle. Most of the roadblocks involve various animals or fairy tale creatures, including gnomes and giants. The opening segment has a strange love/hate relationship with snakes – your first goal is to kill one by smashing it with a rock, then you need to drive away a second by waving a stick at it. Then you come across third snake, pinned beneath a rock. Save him and it turns out he's the king of the snakes, and will tell you a magic word out of gratitude in spite of the nastiness you inflicted on his subjects moments before.

Wizard and the Princess is obviously an important part of history, although it only ties in vaguely with the *King's Quest* games. The IBM PC version is known as *Adventures in Serenia.* Although the documentation claims that the game is a sequel, it's exactly the same game. Taking place in the future, long after Harlin's defeat, he claims that he cannot be beaten twice and so turns back time, as another adventurer is forced to relive the quests of old.



King's Quest: Quest for the Crown

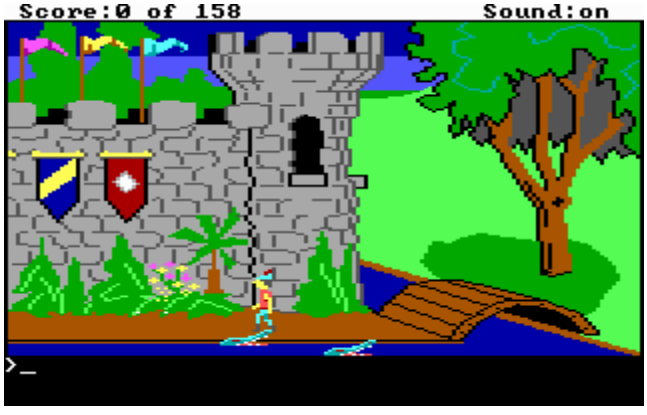
Initial Release Date: 1984
Platforms: PCjr / IBM PC / Amiga / Apple II / Apple IIGS / Atari ST / Macintosh / Sega Master System
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The Great King Edward, kind ruler of the Kingdom of Daventry, is old and frail. With no heirs, he tasks his loyal knight, Sir Graham, with a quest: hunt down three magic artifacts and bring them back, and he shall bequeath the throne. This is about all the guidance you get, and Graham

is left to wander the land searching for them. The artifacts include the mirror, which can predict the future and is guarded by a fire-breathing dragon; the shield, which can protect the user from mortal harm and has been stolen by a group of leprechauns; and the chest, which has a limitless supply of gold coins and is in the possession of a giant who lives up in the clouds.

Daventry runs eight screens east and west, and six screens north and south, wrapping around infinitely. The supplementary documentation explains this bit of video game phenomenon as "The Magical Law of Containment", which prevents characters from leaving the land. At least a few of the essential items are found simply by looking in tree stumps or moving rocks. Some puzzles involve a degree of knowledge of fairy tales – it's quite fun to enter the gingerbread house, open up the stove, hide in the back room, wait for the witch to enter, and then shove her into the flames. Less fun is trying to guess the name of the mysterious gnome. It's pretty clearly supposed to be Rumpelstiltskin, with a twist – you're supposed to "think backwards". One would assume that you simply spell his name in reverse, but no – it's his name spelled in the backwards alphabet, with Z being substituted for A, Y for B and so on. Therefore, the correct solution is actually "Ifnkvohgroghprm", which is ridiculous. The 1990 remake actually fixes this puzzle so the game will accept the more logical "Nikstlitslepmur".

To the game's credit, this puzzle isn't mandatory – you get a bag of beans, which is used to plant a beanstalk and climb into the sky. But there's another way to enter the sky realm without dealing with the troublesome gnome, one which yields less points, but is still as effective. You can also dispose of your enemies in a variety of ways, although the game yields more points for the less violent (and thus arguably cleverer) methods. Try dousing the dragon with a bucket of water, for example, rather than throwing a dagger at it.



Many unfortunate adventurers have fallen off into the moat, right here on the first screen.

In an attempt to make the experience more like an arcade game, there are also other enemies that appear throughout the land. They each inhabit certain screens, although their appearance is random. These baddies include dwarves, who can steal your treasure, effectively sticking you in a dead end situation since they can't be recovered; enchanters, who can paralyze you for other enemies to take you out; and wolves, which will eat you outright. All of these can be avoided by leaving and re-entering the screen. More perilous are the lakes, rivers and cliffs throughout Daventry. Graham can swim in certain bodies of water, but you need to type "swim" within a few seconds or else he'll stupidly drown. It's extremely easy to walk into the moat right on the first screen, immediately disposing of your hero before he can even talk to the king. More annoying is the beanstalk climbing sequence, which suffers from utterly terrible collision detection and will send you falling to the ground at seemingly random points, or the stair-climbing segment, which requires careful navigation lest you accidentally fall to your doom.

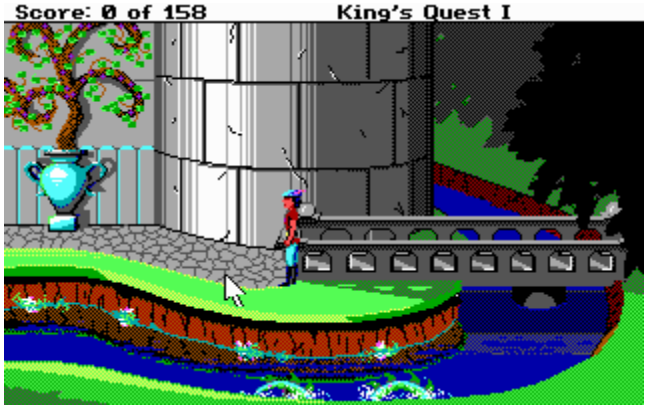
These "arcade sequences" were a notorious part of Sierra's AGI games, although it's surprising to say that this, the first *King's Quest*, is far from the worst of them.

The music is of course sparse, with the main theme being a simple rendition of "Greensleeves". Outside of occasional sound effects and various ditties, the only other music is played when you die, which is a standard death theme with a jaunty little finish. The Game Over window includes a message from Sierra thanking you for playing and even offers some encouragement if your score is high enough.

King's Quest is, of course, a simple game, one which may seem borderline unplayable compared to the numerous adventure games that succeeded it. Its historical importance can't be denied though. With a bit of patience, transport yourself into the mindset of a computer user in the mid-1980s, long before the internet became widespread, when hard disks were insanely expensive, and 128k was a helluva lot of RAM. When PCs were mostly used for business applications and many games were, at best, shifty arcade ports or amateur software, *King's Quest* was a fantastic world inside your computer, one which was more than a series of static screens, with lush scenery and terrifying monsters, and which promised hours upon hours of adventure. It might be hard to appreciate now, but it was an amazing accomplishment at the time.

King's Quest was initially released for the PCjr in 1984. Due to the unpopularity of the platform it went largely unnoticed until it was ported to other computers, where it sold substantially better. Although it loads instantly when installed on the hard disk on DOS-based computers, many other ports were not so lucky. In versions such as the Apple II port, disks need to be swapped continuously and it takes several seconds to load each screen, as it slowly draws the outline of the scenery and then fills in the color.

In 1989, *King's Quest* was ported to the Sega Master System and published by Parker Brothers, one of the only third-parties to release games for the system. The Master System has both a larger color palette and a higher resolution, so the game doesn't look nearly as blocky. However, due to the limited ROM space and the tile-based nature of 8-bit console graphics, many of the areas lack the detail of the PC version. Since there's no keyboard, actions are accomplished by accessing a menu, which lists all possible verbs and nouns available for the current screen. While cumbersome, it makes dealing with the game's limited vocabulary much easier. Since the cartridge lacks a battery backup function, progress is saved via a password.



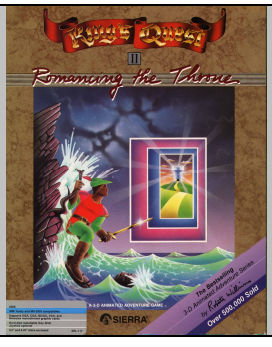
You can still fall into the moat on the first screen of the SCI remake.

As the years went on, Sierra eventually upgraded its interpreter to allow for higher resolution and better controls. They also decided to remake some of their earlier games using this improved technology. *King's Quest* was the first to receive this treatment, using the SCI0 interpreter – and it was also the only remake under SCI0. The other Sierra remakes, including *Space Quest*, *Leisure Suit Larry*, *Police Quest*, *Mixed-Up Mother Goose*, and *Quest for Glory*, used the

more advanced SCI1. While still limited to a 16 color palette, the resolution is doubled, allowing for much, much more detailed characters and backgrounds. The visuals are entirely new, and are a vast improvement over the original's. However, the revised version of Daventry is much darker and more foreboding than the lush, bright greens in the Daventry of old. The enemies still pop up, but rather than appearing right when you enter the screen, they won't show up until you've wandered into the middle, making it harder to run away from them.

Although it's limited to a text input parser, you can at least use the mouse to control Graham's movement. Although the plot is still sparse, there's more writing when you examine things or are killed. This is where the awful death puns that became a *King's Quest* trademark first popped up – try getting kidnapped by the witch in the candy home to be turned into a "Graham cracker". There are more cutscenes too – the part where Graham walks into the castle and talks to the king is controlled entirely by the computer. A few puzzles have changed, and now there's a particular order to find the treasures. You can find the mirror or the chest whenever you like, however, the shield must always be found last.

In 2001, a fan group called AGD Interactive remade *King's Quest I* using the Adventure Game Studio engine. In addition to using a fully icon-based parser, all of the visuals have been upgraded to 256 colors, looking much like Sierra's VGA games. The artwork is all based on the 1990 remake, so it looks quite similar in style. Most of the text is taken from this version as well, although it's all fully voiced. Josh Mandel, the Sierra designer/writer who voiced King Graham in the CD-ROM version of *King's Quest V*, returned to provide his voice, which is quite classy. The project has been updated several times since its initial release, substantially improving it over time.



King's Quest II: Romancing the Throne

Initial Release Date: 1985
Platforms: PCjr / IBM PC / Amiga / Apple II / Apple IIGS / Atari ST / Macintosh
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Having won the crown of Daventry, King Graham realizes that his rule is a bit lonely without a queen. Rather than taking the usual dating route, he looks into the magic mirror and sees the visage of a beautiful young woman held captive in a quartz spire by a witch named Hagatha. His adventurous spirit leads him to rescue this fair maiden, which takes him to the land of Kolyma. The subtitle is a reference to *Romancing the Stone*, a Robert Zemeckis film released in 1984.

There's not a huge difference between *King's Quest II* and its predecessor. It runs on the same interpreter, looks more or less the same, and has the same basic fetch questing. The overall goal is to find three keys which unlock a mysterious door on the east side of Kolyma. Unlike its predecessor, where you could accomplish any of your tasks anyway you liked, here you need to find each key in order, giving it a more rigid structure. While Kolyma loops around north or south, it has definite barriers on the east and west sides.

Despite the change in name and the different geography, Kolyma is much like Daventry, consisting of forests, lakes, swamps, and a mish-mash of allusions to literature, fairy tales, and mythology. You'll find Little Red Riding Hood running around on one screen, and Neptune, God of the Sea, just a few screens over. One task involves finding a genie's lamp to grant a series of three (predetermined) wishes, one of which awards you with a magic carpet out of the *Arabian Nights*, while another quest will put you toe to toe with Count Dracula.

Many of the "puzzles" simply involve rooting around in trees, logs, and other holes to find various artifacts, some of which are simply treasures that increase your score but have no other real use. There's a bit of weirdness to some of these – one of them will cut to an impromptu advertisement for another Sierra game, and if you have the right luck, you can catch the Batmobile driving around outside one of the caves. You'll still randomly be accosted by witches, dwarves and enchanters, although you can still be blessed by one of the kingdom's fairies to render yourself temporarily safe from their attacks.



The infamous rickety bridge in King's Quest II.

The most remarkably cruel aspect of *King's Quest II* is a rickety bridge, which leads to the door you need to unlock. It never clues you in, but you can only cross this bridge a very, very limited amount of times – in fact, only enough to allow you to beat the game. So if you cross it one too many times, it'll collapse, and you'll be completely unable to continue. Some kind of warning would have been nice! (This bridge was later referenced in *Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist*.)

There's not much to say about *King's Quest II*, except that it's more of the same. It does little to improve the formula, but doesn't really screw it up much either.



The fan-made remake borrows its look and feel from King's Quest V.

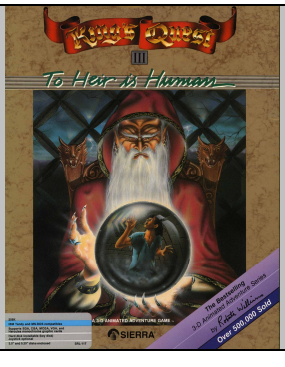
In 2002, AGD Interactive remade *King's Quest II*, updating it to use 256 color graphics, a point-and-click interface, MIDI music, and full voice acting, roughly in the style of *King's Quest V*. While their remake of *King's Quest I* was largely based on Sierra's own revision, they put substantially more work into recreating the sequel, to the point where it far exceeds any of the work Sierra themselves put into any of their VGA remakes. There are numerous cinemas, the script was rewritten from scratch, and it really is practically an entirely new game that takes the original and runs in a whole different direction.

There's a brand new intro which shows Graham talking to one of his advisors, and he arrives in Kolyma via boat, rather than simply showing up on its shores. The magical door is no longer plopped in the middle of the woods, but rather it's a talking rock formation in the side of a mountain. Instead of three keys, you need to get three stones, hence the change in the subtitle, "*Romancing the Stones*". And the bridge no longer collapses either, thankfully.

The geography of the land is similar, but has gone through numerous alterations. It's technically a bit smaller and no longer wraps around at all, but the swamp is its own maze, and there's now a small town to the north. The plot is greatly expanded, and many of the other characters have not only been fleshed out, but some have been reimagined considerably. Count Dracula has been changed to Caldeur, and while he still lives in a creepy castle in the middle of the swamp, he isn't quite as evil, nor quite as blatantly plagiarized. Little Red Riding Hood is now named Possum and does quite a bit more than simply handing you some food. Hagatha's role is fleshed out and tied more closely to the *King's Quest* storyline told in later games. Connor Maclyrr, the hero of *King's Quest: Mask of Eternity*, even makes an appearance.

The basic tasks are very similar but have been drastically expanded. You still need to go underwater to meet with King Neptune, but here you spend much more time riding the seahorse, including an arcade sequence. There are numerous additional puzzles, including one where you need to reunite a talking baby pumpkin with its family. On the same note, some aspects have been removed, like the fairy, and other puzzles have changed.

It's a different enough game that it's probably worth playing both side by side to compare and contrast them, but there's no doubt that the remake is a more engrossing, and ultimately much more enjoyable product. Some fans have expressed annoyance with the way the writers played with the *King's Quest* canon though.



King's Quest III: To Heir is Human

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: PCjr / IBM PC / Amiga / Apple II / Apple IIGS / Atari ST / Macintosh
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: Sierra On-Line

King's Quest III leaves behind the adventures of King Graham and instead focuses on the life of a young boy named Gwydion. This poor young orphaned boy lives under the servitude of the evil wizard Manannan, an abusive bastard who will quite literally kill the boy if he's lax in doing his chores. Obviously needing to escape, your goal is to sneak into Manannan's study, learn to create some magic spells, and scour the land of Llewdor to find the perfect ingredients to get rid of your captor once and for all. The subtitle is a play on the term "to err is human".

King's Quest III works on a real-time clock, which is displayed at the top of the screen. This is important for tracking Manannan's location, because he takes journeys in roughly half-hour cycles. When he's away, it's a race against the timer to collect all of the items you need, store

them in some place he won't find them, and make sure to cover your tracks so he can't tell that you've been mucking around in his room. It's a remarkably tense experience, even though it can get quite frustrating if you take too long and inadvertently get caught.



A magic spell goes horribly wrong.

The realm of Llewdor is quite small compared to Daventry, consisting mostly of a small town, a cottage inhabited by three bears (you need to steal their porridge for one of the spells, and can sleep in one of their beds, if you feel like causing trouble), and a never ending desert inhabited by the snake woman Medusa. However, you can find a magic map that can warp you anywhere almost instantly, with one small issue. Manannan's house is on top of a mountain with a narrow, windy path, which needs to be navigated very carefully. The map will only transport you to the base of the mountain – each and every time you want to return to the house, you need to walk this same narrow path upwards, which gets quite harrowing if you're running short on time.

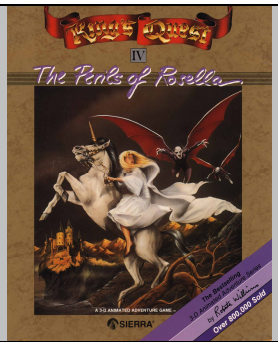
Creating spells is also a gigantic hassle. In addition to the numerous items you need to create the half-dozen or so magic spells, you need to use them in the precise order and speak a number of enchantments. Since the original release is entirely text-based, you need to type in each and every one of these commands – if you forgot to get an item or make a typo (even a misplaced comma), you'll screw up the process and inflict some comical ailment on yourself, triggering a Game Over. Not all of the spells are necessary, but some of them allow for alternate puzzle solutions. Of course, once you leave Llewdor there's no way to create any more spells, so this is an easy way to mess up your game.

Once you've finally gotten rid of Manannan, the game leads you to stumble on its twist – that Gwydion is actually the long-lost son of Graham and Valanice, who had been kidnapped in his youth. An oracle tells him of his twin sister Rosella, who has been kidnapped by a three headed dragon, so Gwydion signs up with a group of pirates to take him back to the land of Daventry to save the kingdom and become reunited with his family. It's here that *King's Quest III* mostly drops its adventure game pretenses and instead turns completely linear, as you navigate a series of mountain paths to find your way to the dragon's lair. This generally involves walking along narrow paths or climbing over rocks, always the most clumsily implemented aspects of Sierra's AGI games. The first part of the game is fairly strong, so it's a shame that it ends up on such an annoying note.

There are not one but two fan remakes of *King's Quest III*. The first, released by Infamous Adventures in 2006, is a pretty faithful recreation of the original game, while the second, released in AGD Interactive in 2011, is a more substantial overhaul. Both were created with Adventure Game Studio and feature the same interface, VGA-style graphics and full voice

acting. The assets in both cases are completely different, though. In general, the graphics and voice acting in the AGDI version are far superior over Infamous Adventures'.

Both versions are similar in expanding the land of Llewdor, as well as removing the looping in favor of natural boundaries. Some of the puzzles have been changed – you need to figure out a password to get into Manannan's lab in the AGDI version – and the spell enchanting is much less irritating, largely thanks to the icon-based interface. There are also numerous cutscenes to flesh out the story – the Infamous Adventures' version depicts Gwydion's nightmares of being kidnapped, and another that ties the characters from *King's Quest III* with the events of *King's Quest V*, while AGDI's version also not-so-subtly gives away the twist. The major difference between the two is that Infamous' version stays very close to the storyline of the original game, while the AGDI version expands it a bit, and ties in a bit more with their *KQII* remake. Indeed, the AGDI version is the better of the two, besting the Infamous version in practically every category, but both are fairly decent, and are more enjoyable ways to experience *King's Quest III* than playing through the AGI original.



King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Apple IIGS
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: Sierra On-Line

King's Quest IV begins with Alexander returning home, and the royal family united once again. Before their happiness can truly settle in, King Graham has a heart attack and falls ill. He will die, unless he receives a magical fruit from the land of Tamir. Rosella is teleported to the faraway land with the aid of a fairy named Genesta. However, Genesta is in a weakened state due to her nemesis, the evil witch Lolotte. So Rosella not only needs to find the fruit to save her dad, but also cure Genesta so she can return home. The subtitle, *The Perils of Rosella*, is inspired by the classic serial *The Perils of Pauline*.

King's Quest IV represents a major step forward in technology for Sierra, as it's their first game to utilize the then-brand-new SCI engine. Although still limited to 16 colors, it doubled the resolution to allow for substantially more detailed graphics, in addition to adding support for MIDI music. Although you still interact with the world using a text parser, you can now command your character to walk with a mouse pointer, although the pathfinding is dreadfully simple. Rosella can also swim on her own without being told to, a great step forward in the intelligence for video game characters.

At the time, Sierra wasn't sure if the PC gaming public had the proper hardware to run this new interpreter, so it also released a separate version of the game using the old AGI engine. It runs at a lower 160x200 resolution and is missing the niceties of the improved interface, but is structurally the same as the SCI release. The AGI version also has a hidden Easter egg near the end of the game, where you can visit with the game's development staff in a futuristic room. (There is also a flying hamburger in the background, for some reason.)

Regardless of the version, Sierra hyped up *King's Quest IV* as one of the most important computer gaming events in its history, a true work of art on par with literature and cinema. One of their advertisements asked, "Can a Computer Game Make a Person Cry?", before answering its own question with "*King's Quest IV* did on June 4, 1988." The back of the box brags about long cutscenes and over 40 minutes of music written by film and TV composer William

Goldstein. It sure has a high opinion of itself, and goes a little too far by popping up with Roberta Williams' face whenever you die or try to quit. She's quite an attractive lady, although her portrait in game looks positively horrifying, from her misshapen jaw to her overabundance of eyeliner.



These cinematic cutscenes were a huge deal at the time.

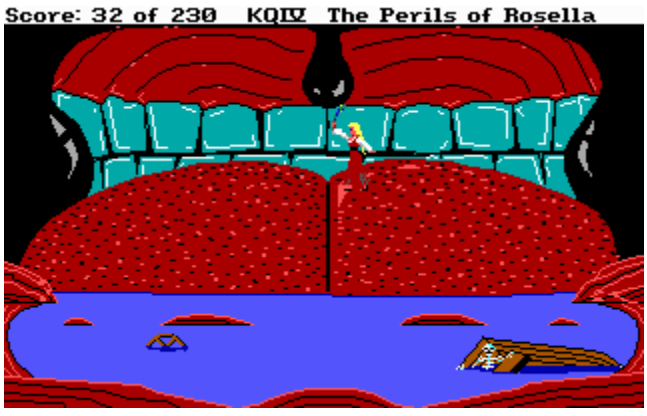
Of course, technology has marched on in the decades since, and what apparently stirred up tremendous emotions from gamers at the time is now positively quaint. What remains is, more or less, another *King's Quest* game. Once transported to the land of Tamir, Rosella is ordered to run a number of tasks for the evil Lolotte. These include capturing a unicorn, stealing a golden egg-laying hen, and uncovering Pandora's box. As before, you'll run into characters like the Seven Dwarves (with Rosella playing the part of Snow White), the giant ogre from Jack and the Beanstalk (although without either Jack or the Beanstalk, strangely enough), as well as other brief appearances by Cupid, the arrow-slinging cherub and Pan, the dancing fawn boy. Lolotte herself is very clearly modeled after the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*, complete with green skin and flying monkey bodyguards. The quest also runs on a real-time clock, as Rosella has exactly one in-game day to complete all of the tasks, forcing you to get your act in gear. It's divided into two halves – day and night – and certain puzzles can only be completed at specific times, which can naturally muck you up if you dawdle.

With Rosella being the first leading woman in adventure gaming, a few aspects play up her femininity, like having to kiss a frog to turn him into a prince. Lolotte's son Edgar also takes a liking to Rosella – despite him technically being an evil prince, in the same shade of green as his mother, he actually turns out to be a pretty alright guy, although the romance between him and Rosella is unfortunately brief.

The most infamous section is when Rosella is swallowed by a whale and needs to climb out by scaling its tongue and tickling its uvula with a feather, causing her to be sneezed out of its blowhole. It's not technically all that difficult, but it's impossible to tell what parts of the tongue are climbable and which aren't, so there's no way to do it without lots of trial and error (and save scumming). The annoyance of this section was acknowledged in *Leisure Suit Larry 3*, where the characters break out of their world and witness Rosella repeatedly trying and failing in her climb. The whole point of this is to get shot out onto a deserted island, which contains a bridle you later need when capturing the unicorn. Said bridle though isn't even a single pixel – in fact, it's entirely invisible, hidden behind an innocuous piece of wreckage.

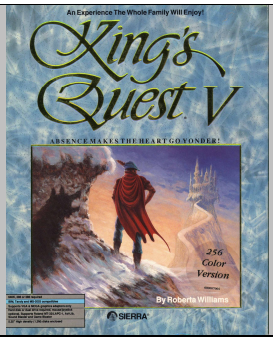
However, simply delivering all of these items only ensures safe passage back to Daventry. In order to actually save King Graham, you need to go on another subquest to find the magical fruit. This task is technically optional, but shirking this responsibility will result in Rosella returning home, only to witness her father, the first true hero of the *King's Quest* series, die

before her eyes. All of the talk of the game making one cry is definitely overdone, but this is indeed pretty rough to watch, and might actually be more interesting than the "good" ending, as cruel as that sounds, just because it's so atypically tragic. (The bad ending is not canon, of course, considering Graham returns as the hero in the next *King's Quest*.)



Rosella must make it to the top of the whale tongue to tickle its uvula and get sneezed out.

The original Sierra releases are the only versions of *King's Quest IV* available. A fan-made VGA remake has been in the works for a few years, but nothing has been released outside of some demo footage.



King's Quest V: Absence Makes the Heart Go Yonder!

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Macintosh / FM Towns / NES
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The fifth *King's Quest* proved to be a turning point in the development of Sierra adventure games. It's the first to use their newly developed SCI1 interpreter, which ditches the text input in favor of a fully icon based interface, and utilizes fully painted and scanned 256 color backgrounds. It's also the first to appear on CD, with fully voice acted dialogue. It also features more cutscenes, in an attempt to further more effective storytelling. But for all of the aesthetic improvements *King's Quest V* brings forth, it's filled to the brim with impossibly frustrating dead ends and illogical puzzles, largely nullifying any of its advancements. The subtitle is a play on the saying "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

In the introduction, a maniacal wizard appears in front of the Daventry castle and whisks it away in a whirlwind. King Graham, out for a leisurely stroll, is the only one spared and is stunned to find not only his house but his family entirely missing. A friendly owl, the familiar of an elderly wizard named Crispin, relates the tale. He then brings Graham to the kingdom of Serenia (the same land, at least in name, as in *Wizard and The Princess*) to begin his quest. Eventually Graham learns that the culprit is the evil magician Mordack, who just happens to be the brother of Manannan, the wizard who had imprisoned Alexander in his youth, and was

turned into a cat back in *King's Quest III*. Neither wizard is pleased with the situation, and seeing how Alexander can't reverse the spell, they seek vengeance on the Graham clan instead.

King's Quest V is structured a bit differently from its predecessors. The land of Serena is still relatively non-linear, featuring a town center, an enchanted forest, and a desert. There are more people to talk to and interact with, all of whom need aid in some way or another. There's a colony of ants under attack by a dog, a hive of bees under attack by a bear, a moping prince looking for his love, and a group of bandits out in the desert who open the door to their stash, predictably, with a good old fashioned "Open Sesame". Except for the frustrating desert maze, where too many steps in the wrong direction without a source of water results in death, each screen has a purpose, and there's much less aimless wandering, as the land no longer loops infinitely. Combined with its enhanced interface, it seems to have left behind some of its old school conventions in favor of something more modern.

The only path out of Serenia is guarded by a poisonous snake – perhaps a reference to the first task in *Wizard and the Princess* – so much of the first segment consists of running tasks that eventually lead to the item you need to get past. This in itself feels rather artificial – hours of exploration just to eliminate a mere reptile? – but that's really the least of the game's concerns. *King's Quest V* is absolutely filled with situations where you can get yourself impossibly stuck. These have always existed up until this point in Sierra's library, but rarely are they so unrelenting as this.



Get close to these ants and Graham will jitterbug like a fool. And shut up, Cedric.

Shortly into your quest you'll find a rat being chased by a cat. In the span of a couple of seconds, you need to toss a boot at them, thereby saving the rat from becoming a meal. This might not seem like an important event, but you'll pay for it a little while later, when you're kidnapped and stuck in a basement. If you saved the rat he'll untie your bonds, but if not... Oh well! When you enter a temple, you're only given a few seconds to get in, grab the stuff you need and get out before the door closes, trapping you inside. One item is obvious, the other is a mere pixel in size. You can only open that door once, so if you leave without grabbing it, it's gone for good. After you leave Serenia, you must climb through a series of snowy mountains and cross a small lake until you get to Mordack's castle. This section is far more linear than the first part of the game, but it also requires that you've picked up everything from earlier on. If you've missed a single one... well, after a certain point you can't go back to retrieve any of them.

Perhaps the most aggravating instance involves a pie you get from a baker. If you eat it, it's gone forever. When crossing the mountains, you're told that Graham is hungry, so eating the pie seems logical, right? Or when you find a starving eagle, the pie might seem like a good choice? The game lets you take both of these courses of action, but they both make the game unwinnable. You're meant to munch on a leg of lamb which you hopefully stole from the inn

while being kidnapped earlier on. Instead, you're supposed to save the pie in order to (get this) throw it in the face of a ferocious yeti, besting him *Three Stooges*-style. Solving this particular puzzle is rather comical, but the multiple ways the game sets you up to fail is just remarkably cruel. Walking around Mordack's castle is hair-pulling, because he can randomly transport around and kill you, without recourse. There's the usual maze sequence, made more frustrating because the viewpoint changes when Graham walks in a different direction, making it more disorienting than it needs to be.



These statues outside of Mordack's castle shoot deadly lightning from their eyes.

And then there's Cedric the owl. He accompanies you through most of the game, and was probably meant to act as a foil for Graham, providing some accompaniment or at the very least some comic relief, but he only succeeds in being both incredibly useless and astoundingly annoying. He abstains from following you into dangerous situations, excusing himself for his wussiness. He doesn't offer any useful advice, outside of warning Graham to "look out!" when it's entirely too late to prevent anything. The absolute best – or worst, attitude depending – is when you get into a boat and sail out into a lake. A short way into your journey, Cedric remarks "Watch out, there's a hole in the boat", wherein you both immediately sink and die. You were supposed to have realized there was a hole, even though the game never tells you this until you sink, and patch it up before you set off. (This might also be another reference to *Wizard and the Princess*, where you need to make a similar journey and patch up a boat with a blanket, although at least that game was kind enough to let you know beforehand!) Cedric also manages to get in trouble no less than twice, and while it's mandatory to save him the first time, you can leave him for dead the second time around. However tempting this may be, it also prevents you from winning the game, because the finale is the only – ONLY – time he does anything useful, and even then it's unintentional.

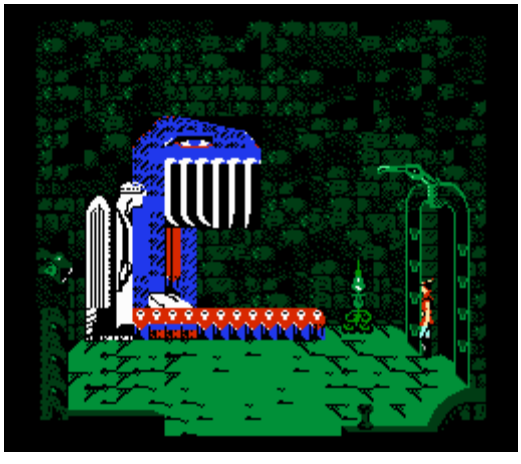
Cedric's pointless interjections aren't a huge issue in the disk version, where the text boxes can be clicked away without much thought. They are maddening in the CD version though, since Cedric's voice is spoken by a man in an extraordinarily high pitched voice with some horrifyingly unidentifiable accent. His constant scolding, meaningless warnings, perpetual whining and more-obnoxious-than-usual puns are just about enough to earn him the honor as being one of the worst characters in all of adventure gaming. But to be fair, it's not like the rest of the voice acting is much better. With all of the money Sierra sunk into the artwork and CD-ROM technology, they neglected to allocate any funds for actual voice acting, instead relying entirely on regular staff members around the office. Not all of them are terrible – writer Josh Mandel takes on the role of Graham and does an alright job – but even at their best moments most of it sounds quite amateurish. All of the recording seems to have happened in a bathroom, with each voice sample possessing a distinguishable echo, which is further exacerbated by the

extreme audio downsampling. And then there are all of the talking animal characters (Beetrice the Queen Bee, King Antony the Ant) whose voices are run through modulations, making them almost impossible to understand. There's not even an option to disable voice acting in favor of text in the CD-ROM version, forcing all of the pain on you.

You could play the disk version, but even that has issues. At various points throughout the adventure you're given copy protection quizzes, proclaiming that Graham has become weak and needs magic to be recharged. These are sudden, persistent, and annoying. Its interface is also overly busy, containing two different walk icons. The standard "Walk" action is much like the one in the older SCI games – that is, you'll walk in a straight line, but if there's anything that gets in the way, you'll stop. The "Travel" icon features actual pathfinding, so you'll walk around any obstacles to your destination, rendering the other one almost completely obsolete. The "Save" and "Quit" options are also present on the main item bar. In the CD-ROM version, the first "Walk" was removed, and all of the game management functions were condensed into a single secondary screen, which Sierra used for all of its successive SCI games. The CD version also changes some of the death quips, for some reason or another.

There's no doubt that *King's Quest V* brings a lot to the table, as the background artwork is really quite excellent, and the full screen cutscenes were leagues ahead of anything else released in 1990. The interface is substantially more user-friendly, and areas that probably would've been arcade sequences if done in the older games – navigating the mountain paths, for one – barely require any effort here, and the game's much better off for it. But, like *KQIV*, for all of the effort put into storytelling, the actual plot is only passable, and the characters only exist briefly to present puzzles, give you new items and move on. Combined with the overtly frustrating design, *King's Quest V* is a game that, despite its popularity at the time, has aged quite poorly.

King's Quest V was released for the PC, Macintosh, Amiga and FM Towns computers. The PC version supports EGA graphics, although it dithers the backgrounds so much to almost totally ruin their impact. Other than some differences in color palette, most of these versions are the same, although the CD-ROM version is only available on the PC.

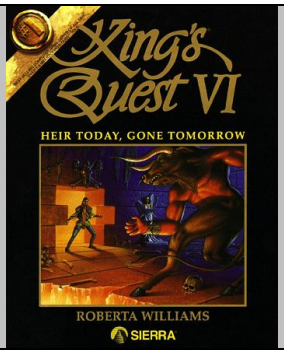


The NES version has some ruthlessly appalling graphics. Oh God, what's going on in this picture!

Beyond the computer version, it was also ported to the Nintendo Entertainment System. The development duties were handled by Novotrade, and the game was published in North America by Konami. The NES saw successful ports on a few adventure games, like LucasArts' *Maniac Mansion* and ICOM's *Shadowgate*, but those were both fairly old games at the time, and the NES could easily handle them. On the other hand, *King's Quest V* is substantially more advanced and a lot needed to be cut back, both in order to fit the system's visual limitations and its ROM

size. The disk version is nearly 9 megabytes – the NES version is almost 5% of that, with a mere 512k (or 0.5 megabytes) of space.

The size and color depth of the backgrounds were simply not going to work on the NES at all, so they were completely redrawn. They all look horrendous. Each is constructed out of several small tiles, per most 8-bit console games, rather than single bitmaps, and nearly every one looks like a terribly glitchy mess. The color choices are also poor, reducing what was previously a gorgeous game to a total artistic disaster, sometimes almost comically so. In some areas, the clouds are actually green! The full screen cinemas are gone, reduced entirely to text, rendered in the old system font that the AGI-era Sierra games used. Most of the important text remains, although some flavor text is gone, and certain parts are abridged slightly. The two movement options serve a point here – the first "Walk" icon will allow you control Graham directly, while the second will allow you to point-and-click. Looking at or interacting with items is also handled through the cursor, but it's extremely slow, and almost painful to use. There's almost no music at all either, barring some bits of incidental music. It's a painful game to play, not counting all of the other design issues it inherits from the PC version, and exists only to be mocked or feared.



King's Quest VI: Heir Today, Gone Tomorrow

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Macintosh
Designer(s): Roberta Williams, Jane Jensen
Developer: Sierra On-Line

King's Quest V is one of those games that was really only terrible in hindsight – everyone at the time marveled at its visuals and storytelling and overlooked its many, many dead ends. Still, someone at Sierra must've felt something was wrong, because *King's Quest VI* is a remarkable improvement in almost every possible manner. The subtitle is a play on the phrase "Here today, gone tomorrow".

The hero this time is Alexander once again. It hasn't been long since he and the rest of the Graham family were rescued in *King's Quest V*, but he can't forget the face of Cassima, the scullery maid and slave of Mordack. She, like him, was also was captured royalty, and is actually princess of the Land of Green Isles. After inviting Alexander to visit her one day, she returns home, never to be heard from again. As it turns out, no one in Daventry has even heard of the place. When looking into the magic mirror, Alexander sees a vision of the lovely girl crying for help. Memorizing the night sky from his vision, he uses the positioning of the stars to set sail and find her. Naturally, a storm rolls in and leaves Alexander shipwrecked... conveniently enough, right in the Land of the Green Isles. Here he learns that Cassima has been imprisoned by the Vizier Abdul Alhazred and is being forced into marriage, with Alexander being the only hope of rescue.

The Land of the Green Isles is, predictably, an assemblage of five islands in close vicinity of each other and each inspired by a different theme. Alexander lands on the Isle of the Crown, the capital, whose castle and surrounding town have a flavor similar to *Arabian Nights*. The Isle of Wonder is full of bizarre characters, vaguely similar to *Alice in Wonderland*. The Isle of the Sacred Mountain is inspired by classic Greek and Roman mythology, complete with its own labyrinth and Minotaur, as depicted on the game's cover. The Isle of the Beast is a small forest and home to a ferocious monster who desperately wishes for love, not unlike *Beauty and the Beast*. And the

Isle of the Mist, initially kept hidden, is inhabited by a cult of blood thirsty druids. The ferry running between the islands is out of commission, so Alexander warps between them with a magic map, although he needs to be at the islands' shores for it to work.



Alexander feels a strange pulling sensation as his map teleports him across the isles.

Each island is pretty small, usually consisting of no more than half a dozen screens (not including the labyrinth or the castle on the Isle of the Crown), but Alexander needs to travel between all of them constantly throughout the whole game. As in *King's Quest III*, many of the quests revolve around finding items for a small handful of magic spells which are, thankfully, much easier to cast due to the icon-based interface – just combine the items, turn to the proper page of the spell book, click the "Cast" icon, and you're set. It's also a nice modern update to the structure of the old games, as each of the islands has its own unique identity that keeps everything from blending together.

Having learned from some fairly significant mistakes, *King's Quest VI* is a far, far better designed game than its predecessor. Some puzzles have multiple solutions, depending on what previous actions you've undertaken, and there's a whole long optional subquest that involves rescuing Cassima's deceased parents from the Realm of the Dead. The back of the box claims that over half the game is optional – this is a pretty big exaggeration, but it's still a relatively significant chunk for something you don't need to do. There are two different endings, with a handful of minor variations on each, depending on whether you take on this particular quest. Skipping it does not yield a bad ending in any way, but completing it definitely rewards you with an even better one. There are still ways to get stuck in unwinnable situations, but nowhere near the level of the previous game. You can find yourself stranded in the Minotaur's labyrinth or the Realm of the Dead without the items you need, since you can't leave at will. It's also possible to forget items in places where you can't return to.

The writing is substantially stronger this time around, largely the result of Roberta Williams' collaboration with Jane Jensen, who later went on to create the *Gabriel Knight* series. The script to *KQVI* is reportedly four times the size of *KQV*, which enriches the game world in ways that are immediately evident. Jensen also wrote the "Guidebook to the Land of the Green Isles", included in the packaging, which delves further into detail about the game world, and is also required for use in some puzzles on the Cliffs of Logic.

Alexander, like his father before him, is still a bit dry, with his only real trait being his remarkable drive to chase after Cassima. The supporting characters, including a friendly pawn shop owner, and a gossipy clown, show far more range than in previous games, acting more as personalities to chat with rather than mere devices for puzzles. This most clearly shines through on the Isle of Wonder, where grammatical concepts (Oxymoron, Dangling Participle and Diphthong) are represented by cute and furry animals, and you find yourself in a middle of a

sibling rivalry between a literal stick-in-the-mud and a bump-on-a-log. Although Abdul Alhazred is the usual sneering villain of these types of stories, his underling is a rather incompetent genie who gets drunk on peppermints and stages several stupidly transparent attempts to trick Alexander into killing himself. As a cheeky reminder of *King's Quest*'s rather frustrating lineage, you can browse the pawn shop and find a number of items that would've helped in the previous games, including a bridge repair kit (*KQII*), cat cookie mix (*KQIII*), a golden bridle finder and tongue climbing gear (*KQIV*), a hull hole detector for boats (*KQV*) and stair traction pads (pretty much any AGI-era Sierra game).



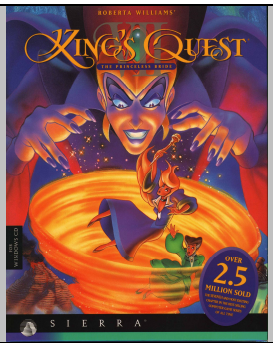
The Realm of the Dead is substantially less spooky after this scene.

Whenever Alexander gets killed, you'll see a short cinema of his ghostly apparition getting a ticket and walking into the gates of the Realm of the Dead, having failed in his quest to find his true love. It's a wholly depressing scene, largely because the design of the place is so damned creepy (although it certainly doesn't skip on the awful puns). You can revisit this section later in the game, while still alive. Rather than falling back on the fire-and-brimstone stereotype of the biblical Hell, it's a dank cavern with unnaturally brown textures and plainly disturbing architecture, in addition to all of the creatures that would gladly separate Alexander's soul from his still-living flesh. And yet, when you come across the entrance gates during this segment, the ones you've probably seen dozens of times when you've died, you can play a set of bones like a xylophone, triggering a musical number that features skeletons dancing in a chorus line while the guards totally boogie down. It completely undermines the dread of the environments in an excessively silly way, morphing an entirely dreadful moment into a strangely memorable one.

King's Quest VI also benefits from Sierra's experience as a multimedia studio. The voice acting is far, far better, having benefited from professional actors this time around. Alexander is played by Robbie Benson, best known as the Beast from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, and he brings much dignity and enthusiasm to the otherwise standard role. Both versions, disk and CD, include a rendered intro depicting Alexander's visions, his conversations with his mother, and his journey across the sea. Each version has slightly different cuts of this movie, with the CD version obviously being the longest. The disk version also uses completely different (and worse) voice actors. While Sierra made a big deal about these movies at the time, they've aged badly, suffering from ugly characters and an extremely choppy frame rate. More interesting is the vocal song, "Girl in the Tower", a love ballad duet clearly trying to ride the coattails of similar Disney songs from *Aladdin* and *Beauty and the Beast*. It's bland but tolerable, and certain CD versions have it playable as a redbook audio track. The original release had a list of phone numbers of radio stations who'd been provided a copy of the song, urging customers to call it and request it for on-air play. While it was a neat marketing ploy, the song itself obviously never caught on.

The Windows version features high res character portraits, although the rest of the visuals are the same as the other versions.

King's Quest VI is almost in an entirely different league than its predecessors or sequels. Whereas the previous games just slapped together various themes and tropes and ran with them, this installment is a far richer, and more wondrous adventure, easily one of Sierra's best.



King's Quest VII: The Princeless Bride

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Roberta Williams, Lorelei Shannon
Developer: Sierra On-Line

After *King's Quest VI*, Roberta Williams took a break from the series and attempted to push forward the gaming medium with *Phantasmagoria*, a live action full motion video horror game. It was a marked departure from her other games, being that it was frightfully gory in spots, in the name of making games "for adults". When she returned to the *King's Quest* series with the seventh game, she went in the total opposite direction of *Phantasmagoria*, instead turning her series into a Disney cartoon. It is indeed a fantastic looking game but, like *King's Quest V*, the march forward in visuals meant the actual game had to suffer.



Well, at least it looks nice. Kind of.

King's Quest VII stars the women of Daventry, with Rosella returning alongside Queen Valanice, marking her first (and only) appearance as a playable character. The animated intro depicts Rosella singing a Disney-esque ballad about how she doesn't want to get married yet, while her mother looks on sternly. The flighty princess is then distracted by a tiny flying seahorse, and both Rosella and Valanice are sucked into a pool, with both being transported to separate parts of another foreign world. The initial goal is, of course, to meet up and find their way home, but during their travels they come upon the scheme of Malacia, herself an amalgamation of various Disney villainesses, who wishes to execute a number of evil deeds. A

secondary goal is to maybe find a groom for Rosella along the way, as the title implies. (It's a reference to the cult classic fantasy adventure movie/novel *The Princess Bride*.)

The quest is divided up into six chapters, with the viewpoints alternating between Valanice and Rosella. Valanice starts off stranded in a desert and eventually ends up into the colorful town of Falderal. Rosella, in the meantime, gets turned into troll and is stuck getting betrothed to the troll king. Eventually she gets turned back into a human and ends up in Ooga Booga land, a Halloween-themed town that may well have been lifted from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, before eventually meeting up with her mother and foiling Malacia's plot. Like *Phantasmagoria*, you can start at the beginning of any of the six chapters at any time, in case you get stuck and want to see the later parts of the game.

The *King's Quest* series were always meant to be family games, but the animated stylings, along with the generally broad themes, makes it feel markedly less mature than *King's Quest VI*. In fact, it really does feel remarkably shallow, beyond just being "kiddie". It uses the same basic interface as *Phantasmagoria*, meaning it only uses a single icon for moving your character or interacting with the environment. While perhaps done to make the game easier to play for non-adventure fans, without a "Look" icon, it completely removes the details of your surroundings.

The dialogue, too, is incredibly sparse. Like the rest of the series, it features a number of strange and memorable characters, like an oddly friendly grave digger with a penchant for absurd machinery, a hilariously sexist troll, a bull who runs a china shop (a gag most kids probably wouldn't get), a snotty poodle named Archduke Fifi le YipYap, and a slightly obnoxious take on Chicken Little. Also amusing is the Mock Turtle who runs a faux shop, which can only be entered by (literally) taking a grain of salt. The finale also marks the return of Edgar, Rosella's not-quite love interest from *King's Quest IV*. Much of the backstory explaining his connection was excised from the final game, so his appearance only makes sense upon reading some external documentation. While these secondary characters are colorful, the script barely gives them more than a dozen lines to shine, and it makes them seem remarkably thin. The leading ladies are fairly unremarkable too – here Rosella is a whiny spoiled girl with a slight valley accent and Valanice scarcely has a personality beyond her motherly mannerisms.

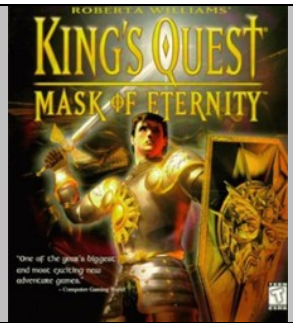
Although there are technically death sequences, you can pick up immediately before your fatal move. While this reduces some frustration, the save system has been cut down so you can only record one game at a time anyway. Instead of saving your progress in multiple spots, you simply move the "bookmark" to the new spot when you quit. It is also entirely impossible to make the game unwinnable, one of the few steps *KQVII* makes in the right direction. However, in keeping with the spirit of the older games, in certain areas it will randomly bring a dangerous character on screen, forcing you to exit quickly or be killed.

Beyond its general sparseness, *King's Quest VII* is just astoundingly dull. As per standard procedures, you spend much of your quest running back and forth across the lands, gathering new items. Both of the characters move slowly, requiring roughly twenty seconds to saunter across a single screen, and running a simple singular fetch quest can take several minutes of aimless walking, walking, walking. Nearly all of the Sierra games from the past decade implemented speed controls to give the pacing a kick in the rear, so why is this absent from *King's Quest VII*, forcing you to watch the same tortuous animations? The puzzles themselves are unimaginative at their best or stupidly convoluted at their worst. During your exploration of Falderal, the moon falls out of the sky (it's merely a piece of cheese), and into a fountain. It looks like you should be able to reach in and grab it, but you can't. Instead, you need to go through a roundabout series of events, starting with finding a wooden nickel randomly left in a bird's nest, giving it to a shopkeeper to get a book, giving the book to another character (for reasons that aren't entirely clear) to get a shepherd's crook, and then using that to drag the cheese out.

The developers at the time probably figured no one would mind, because it looks so gorgeous. Because hey! You're literally playing a cartoon! To its credit, the game does look pretty damn good. The backgrounds are gorgeous, now that the visuals support SVGA graphics,

and the paintings no longer suffer from the dithering that permeated the older SCI games. And for all of the time you spend watching people trot along, they are remarkably well animated, to the point where each action has incredibly fluid, unique frames of animation. And from a distance, the character artwork looks pretty good too – not on par with Disney, or even Don Bluth, but a fair bit better than the average Saturday morning cartoon. The few full motion video cutscenes don't fare as well, though, as they're hastily drawn, badly detailed, and suffer from both a low resolution and a dismal frame rate.

It's weird that a game meant for a younger (or at least wider) audience is so incredibly boring – its intended charms are almost all but completely lost amidst the drudgery. Unfortunately *The Princeless Bride* was also the last "true" *King's Quest* game, before ditching the adventure game framework in favor of action gaming in its next installment.



King's Quest: Mask of Eternity

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Roberta Williams, Mark Seibert
Developer: Sierra On-Line

By 1998, adventure gaming was dead, or so everyone seemed to be saying. With the shift in the computer gaming marketplace targeting faster paced action games, Sierra decided to completely revamp *King's Quest*, ditch nearly all of the adventure elements, and turn it into an action-RPG. The result is a game that's almost entirely unfamiliar. The lack of a roman numeral suggests that this eighth and final installment was meant to be spinoff rather than a true sequel, but it is known as *King's Quest VIII* in some European territories, negating that particular excuse.

The eponymous Mask of Eternity, held in the Realm of the Sun and watched over by magical beings called Archons, has shattered and brought ruin to Daventry. It has cursed all of its inhabitants and turned them all to stone except one – a young tanner named Connor Maclyrr, who finds a piece of the mask and is tasked with finding the others.

King's Quest has fully moved into 3D with this installment, with only limited success. The blocky character models have aged terribly, although they're animated fairly well for the era. But far more offensive is the drastically limited draw distance, which puts even the most fog-ridden Nintendo 64 games to total shame. The character movements are controlled with the keyboard, using the *Resident Evil*-style tank controls, with up moving forward, down moving backward, and left and right turning side to side. All actions are handled with the mouse cursor, including fighting – accomplished merely by clicking rapidly – and picking stuff up.

Nearly all of the traditional adventure elements are gone. The land is divided up into seven different territories, with the goal simply being to explore them completely, hack some enemies to gain some levels, and move onward. There are occasionally people to talk to, but interactions with them are fairly sparse. Your inventory consists entirely of weapons, potions, and other restoratives, along with a grappling hook. These items are almost never used for puzzles, which here involve the jumping or block-pushing variety.

There's barely anything here that could signify this as a *King's Quest* game – sure, the hokey intro movie refers to the king as "King Graham" and the opening level is "Daventry", bearing absolutely no resemblance to how it appeared in the first game. One of the levels, the Dimension of Death, even seems redundant after the Realm of the Dead in *King's Quest VI*. (Apparently they're different, being legends particular to each land's mythology.) There's no

trace of any fairy tales or classic mythology or even any sense of humor. About the only laughs come from how comically bloody it is, as enemies' heads will fall right off after being punched a few times, or cough up streams of blood before falling face first into the dirt. You can also walk in on a goblin farting in an outhouse. This game is not exactly a class act.



Life bars? Swordfighting? This is only barely related to the rest of the series.

It's hard to see who *Mask of Eternity* is really aimed at. Action fans will be bored by its slow pace and simple combat. RPG fans will find it too stripped down and straightforward compared to purer experiences like *Baldur's Gate*. And, as established, adventure fans will find none of the puzzle solving, storytelling, or atmosphere that they would come to expect. It's not unplayable by any means; it just barely succeeds in any real way.

Fan Game:



The Silver Lining

Initial Release Date: 2010
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): César Bittar
Developer: Phoenix Online Studios

The AGD-developed *King's Quest* games were fantastic and all, but ultimately, they were just remakes. A group of fans called Phoenix Online Studios, unhappy with the way the series ended with *Mask of Eternity*, decided to create a whole new game more in line with the series tradition. Over the course of development though, they hit numerous legal speed bumps.

The first came with Vivendi Universal, the company that had purchased Sierra's intellectual properties. While they seemingly had no problems with the fan remakes, they didn't like the concept of a brand new game, as it could potentially be seen as competing with one of their own, if they chose to make one. They had no plans to, but eventually they hashed out an agreement with Phoenix that the game could be released if it removed the *King's Quest* name. And so, *King's Quest IX: Every Cloak Has a Silver Lining* simply became *The Silver Lining*.

Development then proceeded on and off up until 2010. By this point Sierra's properties had been transferred to Activision which, in light of their exploitation of the *Guitar Hero* and *Call of Duty* franchises, had earned them a reputation of being something of a huge corporate bully. Despite Phoenix's previous agreement with Vivendi, Activision demanded that development be stopped once again, putting a total halt to the project. It wasn't until 2010 that a deal was worked out again, and *The Silver Lining* was finally able to be released. Taking a note from Telltale's episodic distribution model, *The Silver Lining* is divided into five episodes: *What is Decreed Must Be*; *Two Households*; *My Only Love Sprung from My Only Hate*; *Tis In My Memory Locked. And You Yourself Shall Hold the Key Of It*; and *A Thousand Times Goodnight*. The gap between chapter releases have varied, but all are free to download from the Phoenix Online website. (Only the first three were available at the time of this writing.)

The Silver Lining takes place some years after *Mask of Eternity*. Alexander has now wed Cassima, and together they rule the Land of the Green Isles. The entire family has joined them for Rosella and Edgar's wedding, before the twins are struck with a mysterious illness. The very fabric of the world also seems to be falling apart, with maps and scrolls simply losing information. And so, King Graham comes out of retirement to not only save his childrens' lives, but save the entire world.



Much of the joy here comes from exploring locations from KQVI in 3D.

The game is incredibly ambitious for an amateur project. The graphics are entirely in 3D, with many locations viewed from a static angle, although the camera moves in some areas to follow Graham. The graphics are outdated by modern standards, looking roughly like an early PlayStation 2 title. While there are some occasional bits of awkwardness to note, like some character models that just don't look quite right, or animations that seem a bit off, overall it looks decent, especially since most fan games stick to using the 2D AGS system. It uses an interface similar to the SCI1-era Sierra games, and Graham will even run if you double click on a location. It also features full voice acting, although the quality is mixed. Newcomer Jason Michael Victor does an excellent job as King Graham, but most of the other voices, including the narrator, don't sound quite right.

From a storytelling standpoint, *The Silver Lining* definitely feels like fan fiction, although that isn't meant pejoratively. All of the previous *King's Quest* games (save for the first two) all felt unique from each other, starring different protagonists in different lands. Here, most of the story takes place in the Land of the Green Isles, the locale of *King's Quest VI* and the most popular game in the series. On one hand it feels like you're just treading over some of the same ground, but it actually expands on the country respectfully, allowing you to visit previously inaccessible places. For example, back when you were playing as Alexander, you weren't let into

the chess kingdom on the Isle of Wonder, but Graham can sneak into the castle with the right equipment. Previously the only purpose of the Isle of Mists was to get captured by druids, but here you actually talk to them. The town square on the Village of the Crown has been greatly expanded beyond just the pawn store and book shop. There are also most of the familiar characters, like Saladin the canine guard, Jollo the clown, Shamir the genie and so forth. You can also talk to Edgar, and even though he mostly just sits around and mourns Rosella, at least he's more of an entity here than he was in *King's Quest VII*. There's actually quite a bit more conversation here than normal, even offering various topics of conversation (which few Sierra games outside of *Gabriel Knight* could claim) and most of the writing is pretty decent. Some of the new characters prove amusing too, like the black widow who uses her spider underlings to weave The Four Winds, the newsletter of the Green Isles.

The rest of the plot is equally rewarding for longtime fans of the series. Graham eventually learns of the Black Cloak Society, a collection of evil wizards who sought to resurrect a higher evil. In ages past, they were opposed by the equally mysterious Silver Cloak Society, which is where the title comes from. The Black Cloak Society serves as a convenient way to bring in villains from past games, including Hagatha (*KQII*), Manannan (*KQIII*), and Lolotte (*KQIV*). They are looking for Pandora's Box, an item Rosella found back in *KQIV*. There's even a flashback to Valanice's imprisonment, back in her younger years in *KQII*.

From a puzzle design standpoint, it's merely acceptable. Many chapters literally give you a shopping list of things, and all too often important items are just strewn about in arbitrary places. However, the puzzles themselves are rarely difficult or illogical. There are no dead ends, and while there are still sudden deaths, you can resurrect right before them.

While in many ways it feels more like *King's Quest VI Part II* rather than the true *King's Quest IX* it started out as, it does a fantastic job of expanding one of the most memorable locations in adventure gaming. While it clearly shows its amateur roots, especially in the glitch-ridden programming, it's a far more worthy successor than the seventh and eighth installments.

While Activision has all but abandoned adventure games, the license has officially changed hands to Telltale Games, who worked on several LucasArts properties. If there's anyone to trust with the property, it's them.

The King's Quest Companion / King's Quest Novels

While Sierra often published its own hint books, more interesting were the Companion books. Rather than just having standard walkthroughs, they contained novelizations of the games, allowing the reader to experience the story and events without having to play them, although it obviously gave useful hints. This was not unique amongst *King's Quest*, but this particular book is far better written than the rest. Many others told the events from the first person view of the characters, which read terribly. Here, the viewpoint is told from the third person. The author, Peter Spear, made up a character named Derek Karlavagen, a historian, and all of the stories are meant to be interviews told from the viewpoint of the hero. They're actually quite enjoyable and worth reading alongside the games.

There are also three novels based on the series, each with original stories. *The Floating Castle* stars Alexander as he reclaims the stolen soul of his father; *The Kingdom of Sorrow* stars Graham as he saves the personification of spring to prevent an endless winter; and *See No Weevil* stars Rosella, whose snootiness causes a plague of weevils to cover the land.

Space Quest

When Sierra released *King's Quest* in 1984, it took the computer gaming world by storm. Sierra the branched out by developing adventure games with other themes, including *Police Quest*, *Leisure Suit Larry*, and *Space Quest*.

Space Quest is more than just *King's Quest* with a sci-fi theme. Helmed by two Sierra employees who called themselves The Two Guys from Andromeda – Scott Murphy, the programmer, and Mark Crowe, the artist – *Space Quest* featured a slightly more off-kilter sense of humor. Instead of a great king-to-be, the hero (whom the player can name in the first game, although he was officially named Roger Wilco in later installments) is little more than a janitor, and a fairly incompetent one at that. (This premise may have been borrowed from Infocom's *Planetfall*.) At the beginning of the first game, he survives an attack on his ship only because he decided to take a nap in the closet when he should've been on duty. Most of the games involve poor Roger simply stumbling from incredulous situation to incredulous situation, somehow saving the day in spite of his general ineptitude.

Or... not. Sierra games are known to be particularly punishing to the player, especially when it comes to death scenes. *Space Quest* takes this and runs with it, with a number of amusingly sardonic ways for Roger to die. At least if you do something wrong, it tends to garner a chuckle. The narrator is often the most amusing "character", offering sarcastic commentary on Roger's every action.

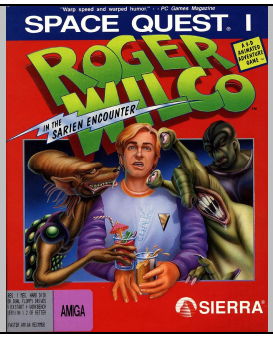


Our hero, Roger Wilco, in another embarrassing predicament.

Space Quest is also full of references to and parodies of various works of science fiction. Part of the fun is trying to pick out the most witty ones, because there are some pretty obscure entries throughout the series. Starting around *Space Quest III*, the series also became amusingly self-referential, featuring the real-life creators of the series as captives to be rescued, and goes even further with *Space Quest IV*, with Roger time traveling through his own (non-existent, sadly) sequels. It's prototypical of the style of humor found in *Futurama*.

Like most adventure games and works of science fiction, *Space Quest* also excels by creating an entertaining universe filled with unique characters and locations, some of which recur throughout the series. Some of these include Monolith Burger, the interstellar version of McDonalds; *Astro Chicken*, a series of playable arcade games made by evil software development house ScumSoft, Inc; the mega villain Sludge Vohaul, Roger's accidental arch-nemesis; and the Gippazoid novelty company, who refuse to forgive Roger for a minor incident committed in *Space Quest II*.

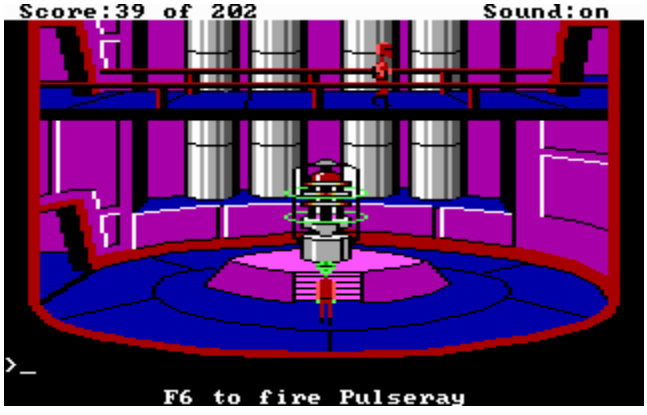
There are six games in the *Space Quest* series, as well as a VGA remake of the first game, which was typical treatment for many of the more popular Sierra franchises. Other than Mark Crowe and Scott Murphy, one of the key members included Josh Mandel, who contributed some writing and developed much of *Space Quest VI*.



Space Quest: Chapter I: The Sarien Encounter (Original Release) /
Space Quest I: Roger Wilco in The Sarien Encounter (Remake)

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Apple II / Macintosh
Designer(s): Scott Murphy, Mark Crowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The first *Space Quest* episode begins with our hero, Roger Wilco, taking a nap on the closet. This act of severe laziness ends up saving his hide, as the rest of the entire active crew of his spaceship, the *Arcada*, has been killed by the Sariens, who have invaded the ship and stolen the powerful Star Generator. After sneaking out and hijacking an escape pod, Roger ends up on the desert planet Kerona, where he must evade numerous dangerous creatures, including a spider-like robot sent by the Sariens. Upon discovering a *Wizard of Oz*-like scientist who lives under the surface, Roger takes his speeder to Ulence Flats (reverse those two words for an almost-clever gag), one of the only establishments on the planet. After winning it big at the Slots of Death (getting triple skulls results in being vaporized) and overhearing the location of the Sariens, Roger affords himself the luxury of a navigational robot and spaceship, and heads off to disable the Star Generator himself.



Roger disguises himself to infiltrate the Sarien ship. (EGA version).

Space Quest I comes in two flavors: The original EGA version, released in 1986, and the updated VGA version, released in 1991. The EGA version uses the AGI engine found in all of Sierra's early graphic adventures, which means low res 160x200, blocky, 16 color graphics, keyboard/joystick movement, full text input, and in the DOS version, PC speaker sound. The VGA version uses the SCI1 interpreter, which means 256 color graphics with painted backgrounds, a fully icon-based interface with mouse control, and support for sound cards.

The plot remains unchanged in the remake, and only a few of the puzzles have been slightly altered due to new interface. In some ways, though, more could've been done to fix it up for the re-release. Compared to the free roaming worlds of *King's Quest* and *Leisure Suit Larry*, *Space Quest* is awfully short and linear. This is actually a blessing in disguise, since there are quite a few instances where you can miss a vital item and find yourself in an unwinnable situation. Before you escape from the *Arcada*, you'd better make sure to grab the gadget by the spacesuit, which will translate the gibberish spoken by the hologram you find underground in Kerona. And whatever you do, don't accept the first offer from the spaceship salesman in Ulence Flats. You're supposed to reject the first offer, so that way he throws in a jetpack as a free bonus when he tries a second time. You obviously need this jetpack for the final sequence – it's a right old bit of Sierra-style trickery.

The graphics in the remake have the feel of a cheesy sci-fi B-movie, which suits the game perfectly. The VGA version features the usual "Walk", "Use" and "Talk" icons, but introduces the "Smell" and "Taste" icons. These don't have any real use other than provoking a few humorous responses, although they're (slightly) better utilized in *Space Quest IV*. The VGA remake includes a magnet item which helps you rig a slot machine at the bar. In the original EGA game, you needed to play your luck – a bit tough, considering that you're killed if you happen to get three skull and crossbones. The VGA version also lets you skip the arcade sequence, where you pilot a skimmer across a desert, although it chastises you for doing so.

One of the jokes has also been changed. In the EGA version, if you pushed the "Do Not Press" button in the escape pod, you end up transporting to Daventry Castle in the first *King's Quest*. In the VGA version, you end up outside of Nottingham Castle from *Conquests of the Longbow*, which was a more contemporary game at the time the remake was released.



Roger in the space bar. (VGA version).

Given that it's the first game in the series, *Space Quest* hadn't exactly found its voice yet. It's certainly funny, but other than a slightly sarcastic narrator and some mildly amusing death scenes (including one in the VGA version where the Two Guys pop up and announce an instant replay of one of Roger's particularly stupid moments), it's not really as hilarious as its sequels. The VGA version adds a lot more location and event descriptions, at least.

Most of the humor comes from references to pop culture and other sci-fi series. The bar in Ulence Flats features alien versions of the Blues Brothers and ZZ Top, although the latter was changed in the VGA version due to a complaint from the musicians themselves. The EGA version features PC speaker renditions of the Blues Brother's theme and ZZ Top's "Sharp Dressed Man", while the VGA version features different but similarly styled pieces of music. When shopping for robots in the VGA version, you'll find a number of classics, including the Robot from *Lost in Space*, Robby the Robot from *The Forbidden Planet*, and a creature that looked

like it stepped out of *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* called Hay-A-O, a reference to the film's director, Hayao Miyazaki. The arms dealer on the Sarien ship also sounds suspiciously like Marvin the Paranoid Android from Douglas Adam's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* series. The robot shop itself was named Droids R Us in the EGA version, but changed to Droids B Us in both future revisions and the VGA version due to a lawsuit from the toy retailer. Strangely, the VGA version goes one step further and features a green giraffe that looks suspiciously like Jeffrey, the Toys "R" Us mascot.



Space Quest II: Chapter II: Vohaul's Revenge

Initial Release Date: 1987
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Apple II / Macintosh
Designer(s): Scott Murphy, Mark Crowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

It seems like Roger just can't catch a break. Ever after saving the galaxy from the Sariens, he's once again reassigned to his old janitorial position on a space station. Things just get worse when he's kidnapped by Sludge Vohaul, the secret mastermind behind the Sarien attack. Sludge was none too happy to have his plans foiled, and he's at it again – his next plan consists of flooding the population of Earth with cloned insurance salesman. Of course, he doesn't want Roger mucking it up, so he sentences him to a life of slavery, working in the cruel mines of Labion. In the course of being transported, the incompetent guards end up crashing their vehicle, leaving Roger free from their grasp, but trapped in a deadly jungle.



These insurance salesmen are set to wreak havoc throughout the galaxy.

The planet of Labion is infested with all kinds of flora and fauna that would be happy to have Roger for lunch. In one aggravating section, you need to carefully navigate through the tentacles of a particularly ravenous beast. It's an extremely narrow path, and if one of your feet so much as touches one of its pixels, you'll be devoured. Just be prepared to save every few steps. Later, you need to crawl through a series of tunnels, almost completely in the dark, within a time limit, only aided by a glowing gem that illuminates your immediate area. (Assuming, of course, that you had explored the swamp enough to find that one tiny area that was deeper than the others, and had the foresight to dive underwater and find said gem.) Also, you had better

made sure that you'd searched the locker right at the beginning of the game, or else you'll miss the Rubik's Cube-like puzzle and jockstrap that are necessary in the later stages. And remember to order the Labion Terror Beast Mating Whistle in the jungle, a pivotal moment in *Space Quest* canon. (In successive games, the manufacturer of this whistle tries to hunt down Roger, since he didn't pay for it. This is particularly odd because the mail order form specifically mentions that it's free. Whether this is commentary on the entangled bureaucracy of the corporate world or simply an oversight by the developers, is up to you to decide. The Two Guys have admitted to the mistake, but the former explanation is funnier.)



You need to navigate through these tentacles precisely, or be devoured.

If you manage to do all of this properly, you'll find yourself on Vohaul's secret base inside an asteroid. The only way to beat him is by raiding all of the janitor's closets (and the bathroom) for various household items, then using them to scheme your way through Vohaul's devious traps. Along the way, you encounter an *Alien*-like creature whom you briefly make out with (against your will), essentially putting an invisible timer on the final stages of the game. (Assuming you've seen the movies, you can probably guess what happens if you take too long.)

Space Quest II really isn't much of an improvement of the original – it uses the same AGI engine, and the puzzles are just as aggravating, if not more so. It does, however, have some pretty creative death messages, which halfway excuses the huge amount of pain you'll have to put Roger through. It's a bit comforting to know that the monster that just ate you will have gastrointestinal distress for rest of the evening and make itself unpopular amongst the rest of its friends.

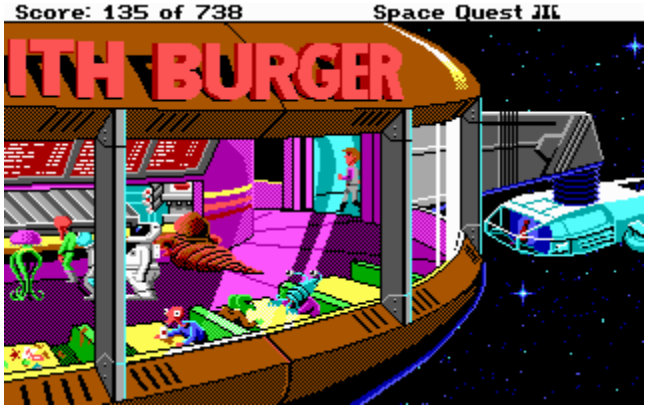


Space Quest III: The Pirates of Pestulon

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Macintosh
Designer(s): Scott Murphy, Mark Crowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Space Quest III begins right where its predecessor left off, with Roger floating around space in hypersleep. As luck would have it, he's "rescued" by a junk barge, but needs to dig himself out of the scrap heap and reactivate an old spaceship to escape. Once free, Roger is stalked by a

Terminator-esque bounty hunter, Arnoid The Annihilator, who's seeking restitution for the mating whistle that Roger "stole" back in *Space Quest II*. After adventuring to the hostile desert/tourist trap planet of Phleebut and taking care of the Arnoid, the plot kinda comes to a halt as Roger stops to enjoy a meal at Monolith Burger.



PROTIP: Don't get the Big Belcher Combo at Monolith Burger.

From here, it's not entirely apparent what to do, unless you spend your time mastering the arcade-style minigame *Astro Chicken*, which is a bit like the classic arcade title *Lunar Lander*. If you get a high score, you learn that the Two Guys from Andromeda have been kidnapped by the evil Pirates of Pestulon who are forcing them to create diabolical software. (This is the only mention of it in-game, which is technically an optional "puzzle". However, it's also plastered all over the game's packaging.) After deactivating the shield on the volcanic planet of Ortega, Roger infiltrates the Pestulon base, dressed as – surprise! – a janitor. The Pirates of Pestulon are actually software pirates, so their secret base resembles a modern cubicle farm. The enterprise, dubbed ScumSoft, is run by a diabolical fourteen year old named Elmo Pug, who challenges Roger to a real life game of *Rock'Em Sock'Em Robots* in the climactic battle.



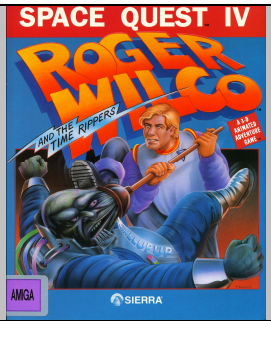
The junk freighter at the beginning has some cool scrap.

Space Quest III is the first game in the series to utilize Sierra's enhanced SCI0 engine, which features a much higher resolution, as well as mouse control for movement. (You still need to type in commands, however.) In general, there's a lot more detail to the game, both in the

writing and the visuals. The previous *Space Quest* games were kinda funny, but here, the sarcasm of the narrator is much more evident. The junkyard in the beginning is filled with a giant *Transformers* head, the pod from *2001: A Space Odyssey,* and a (bow) TIE Fighter from *Star Wars*, amongst other craft. The store on Phleebut is filled with postcards referencing *Aliens* and *Dune*. The enhanced graphics also allow for some cool cinematics, like the seedy store owner on Phleebut and the Arnoid droid. The SCI engine also allows for music from a variety of sound devices, ranging from Adlib FM to General MIDI. If you play on a Tandy or Mac, or enable SoundBlaster support, there's even a cool little sound clip of Roger saying "Where am I?" right at the beginning of the game. The soundtrack is composed by Bob Siebenberg of Supertramp, who supplies a catchy riff of the *Space Quest* theme for the opening, as well as a handful of other memorable themes, although the vast majority of the game is still played in silence.

Even though the interface is better than its predecessor, there are still some annoying problems. Some of the scenes are a bit too arcadey, especially the one where you need to kill the bounty hunter, and the parser is extremely fussy with your positioning. Near the end of the game in the ScumSoft office, you need to zap bins of trash or else you'll set off an alarm. It's extremely hard to get in just the right spot for it to work. God forbid you miss too many times or you accidentally walk too far past it, because you'll set off an alarm and end up encased in gelatin, leading to a Game Over. At least the action now pauses when you bring up a text entry window, which is handy in the few instances where you're being chased. The minigames are also both extremely clumsy.

Despite some rather difficult puzzles, the game's also ruthlessly short. Once you break out of the garbage scow and get control of your own spaceship, you get full command, requiring that you turn on your radar, set your course, zap into hyperspace, and so forth. But it's a bit disappointing that, in the whole galaxy, there are only three locations to visit (four, once you uncover Pestulon). In spite of this, it's still a clever, immensely likable game overall.



Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco and the Time Rippers

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / PC-98 / Macintosh
Designer(s): Scott Murphy, Mark Crowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Space Quest III already fudged quite a bit with the fourth wall, what with you having to rescue the Two Guys, and meeting up with Ken Williams at the end. *Space Quest IV* goes several steps further with its self awareness by sending Roger through his own sequels. The game begins with Roger taking a break at a seedy bar, where he's accosted by mysterious policemen, who are working for a seemingly resurrected Sludge Vohaul.

Before he can be executed, Roger is saved by another figure, this time friendly, who creates a rip in the space-time continuum and tells Roger to jump in. With no time to ask questions, our hero stumbles through time, ends up in a post-apocalyptic nightmare, reads the title bar at the top of the screen, and notices that he's now in *Space Quest XII: Vohaul's Revenge II*. After escaping with another time pod, Roger is teleported to yet another sequel: *Space Quest X: Latex Babes of Estros* (probably a reference to the Infocom text adventure *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*). Now in a prehistoric wasteland, he's captured by the titular babes, the leader of which had apparently been jilted by Roger at some undefined point in the future, much to his own surprise. After proving his worthiness, the girls decide to go shopping and abandon Roger at a mall, where he's chased

by the same policemen that accosted him at the beginning. Once again zipping through time, he tossed back to the EGA version of *Space Quest I*. Roger is a fully colored sprite in a blocky, 16-color world, and some of the bar denizens will actually make fun of him for being pretentious. The game finally ends back in *Space Quest XII*, as Roger meets up with his son – the one who sent him through the time portal at the beginning – and wipes Sludge Vohaul (once again) from all existence.



Roger flirts briefly (and awkwardly) with crossdressing at the mall.

Space Quest IV uses the SCI1 engine introduced with *King's Quest V*, utilizing 256 color graphics and a fully icon-based interface, including the "Smell" and "Lick" icons from the VGA remake of *SQI*. They're still mostly useless, but provide for some even more amusing commentary. The best? Try using your tongue on the ridiculous looking robot in the electronics store. ("I know you're lonely, but licking a robot's ear?")

Far and away the best aspect is the voice acting, featured in the CD-ROM release. Like *King's Quest V*, most of the voices are provided by Sierra's own untrained staff, to underwhelming results, but the narrator is played by Gary Owens, known as the announcer from the TV series *Laugh-In*, as well as the original voice of Space Ghost. The narrator in *Space Quest* has always been its strongest points, and it takes on a whole new life when even the most mundane lines are delivered with a sense of sarcastic gravitas. ("Thank you for playing *Space Quest IV*! As usual, you've been a real pantload.")

If the sequel hopping and awesome narrating weren't enough, *Space Quest IV* throws in all kinds of other self-references. There's a hidden sequence where you can teleport back to Ortega from *Space Quest III* – using exactly the same 16-color backdrop, like the *SQI* segment – although since you can't find any thermal underwear, you'll melt instantly if you leave your timepod. You also come across a futuristic software shop, filled with parodies of famous computer software titles, including *SimSim* (simulate your own simulator), *Cluck Egger's Advanced Chicken Simulator* (fly rubber chickens), and *Boom* (the description mentions no interface, no puzzles and no conflict, a pretty accurate description of *Loom*, the LucasArts game it's parodying). You'll also find an Infocom-style hint book for *Space Quest IV*, (complete with a marker to slowly reveal answers for puzzles.) It's mostly filled with red herrings and made-up puzzles that have nothing to do with the game, but in a brilliantly *Spaceballs*-esque moment, there actually is some essential info in there.

There's also a new *Astro Chicken* game, this time dubbed *Ms. Astro Chicken*, which is a typical side scrolling shooter and is thankfully less annoying than its predecessor. (This, along with the original *Astro Chicken* and the speeder scene from *SQI* were packaged together in a release called *Nick's Picks*, which also included other minigames from Sierra titles.) Near the end of the game, you stumble upon a computer interface that has icons for *King's Quest XVIII* and the mystical

LSL4 (which, as Sierra fans know, doesn't technically exist). There's also an *SQIV* icon – if you delete it, you're unceremonious kicked out of the game without warning, leaving you at the cold, hard command prompt if you're playing in DOS. It would've been even more cruelly hilarious if the game actually deleted itself, although that perhaps would've been going too far.



The VGA-era Roger Wilco in EGA-era Ulence Flats.

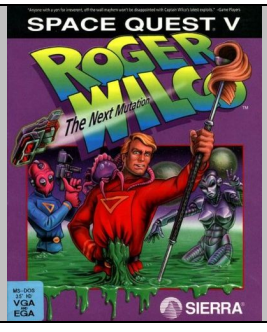
Unfortunately, despite its enhancements and even more ridiculous sense of humor, *Space Quest IV* is plagued with many of the same problems as its predecessor. There are too many action based segments, which are still clumsy and frustrating. The opening segment in *Space Quest XII* is filled with *Invasions of the Body Snatchers*-style sub-humans, which will screech and summon death robots, instantly killing you if you're unlucky. It's a completely terrible way to begin an otherwise hilarious game. The random Energizer Bunny running around for no discernable reason is pretty amusing, although trying to catch it to steal its batteries is more difficult than it should be. Another action segment, where you escape from the Time Police in the mall, is similarly aggravating, requiring that you perform a very specific set of actions, lest you get fried. The speed of your computer (or cycles in DOSBox) can also cause havoc with these areas. Sections such as these, littered with needless deaths, make it seem like the developers were once again trying to compensate for the extremely short game length. At least some of the death scenes – and their associated commentary – are still pretty funny. Earlier Sierra games always let you walk off cliffs if you're not careful, and *Space Quest IV* has some of the best lines to accommodate these accidents. ("Serious damage to important body parts pretty much screws up any future plans you had for living.")

There aren't too many skippable items, at least. The only things you need to watch out for are time codes, which control which era you'll travel to. When you come across the first time pod, the disk version uses these as copy protection, although you can randomly hit buttons in the CD version. However, it's incredibly important that you write down the time code on the panel before you press anything, since these are important for switching between locations later in the game. Naturally, the game doesn't tell you this, so if you don't take notes, you end up stranded. Thankfully the code is the same every time, so it's not too hard to temporarily save your game, replay the opening segment, and then hop back to your original game.

Space Quest IV presents an interesting dichotomy. It's frustrating and poorly designed at spots – although much better than the remake of *Space Quest I* – but at the same time, its premise is astoundingly brilliant, and still remains one of the funniest games ever made, even years after it release. The Two Guys from Andromeda have also noted in interviews that it's their favorite of the series.

In addition to the voice acting, the CD-ROM version makes a few minor graphical changes. In the mall, the electronics store was originally called Radio Shock, but after being legally

hounded by Radio Shack, the revised version changed it to Hz. So Good, a parody of another, lesser known store. The black and white bikers in *SQ I* now ride black and white bikes (correcting an inconsistency from the disk version), the huge building in the background of *Space Quest XII* looks a bit different, and there's an extra Easter egg featuring one of the game's developers shopping for pants at the mall. There's also a secret room hidden in the game's resource files, filled with references to all of the legal issues that Sierra's adventure games have run into over the years. This includes the ZZ Top members and Droids R Us sign from *Space Quest* I, the Radio Shock sign, the *Hero's Quest* logo (the series was renamed *Quest for Glory* due to legal issues) and Earl, the father from the TV series *Dinosaurs*, who made a random cameo in the VGA release of the first *Quest for Glory* game.



Space Quest V: Roger Wilco: The Next Mutation

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Mark Crowe
Developer: Dynamix

It took him a total of three games, but Roger finally found his way home to Xenon after the conclusion of *Space Quest II*. Apparently finding little purpose in being a janitor, he enrolls in the StarCon Academy, where he still spends most of his spare time napping in the closet. After attempting to take his final exam, a freak glitch in the computer grading system promotes him to Captain and awards him his own vessel. It's technically just a garbage scow, complete with a crew that more or less hates his guts, but it's a step up from mopping floors, right?



Roger tries desperately to get his crew to respect him.

The trouble begins when Roger intercepts a transmission from Commander Raemes T. Quirk and Ambassador Beatrice Wankmeister, the woman whom, according to Roger's son back in *Space Quest IV*, will eventually bear him children. Their ship has been attacked by a militant group of deformed mutants called Pukoids, who wish to inflict their own terrible fate on the rest of humanity. Naturally, it's up to Roger and crew to not only save the galaxy, but woo Miss Wankmeister and prove that he's more than just a lowly screw-up.

Like *Space Quest III*, you get to take control of the starship from the commander's chair, which makes a rude noise every time you sit on it. There's a bit more freedom here, with a slightly larger galaxy, although navigation requires referencing the faux tabloid included with the game, acting as copy protection. *Space Quest V* introduces the "Command" icon – a speech bubble with an exclamation point – used for issuing orders, although they're mostly restricted to your crewmembers and the teleporter. The "Smell" and "Taste" icons are sadly absent.

Space Quest V feels remarkably different from its predecessors, for a number of reasons. For starters, it was developed by the team known as Dynamix, who had been acquired by Sierra a few years before. They were known for other adventure games like *Heart of China*, *Rise of the Dragon*, and *The Adventures of Willy Beamish,* but it was their first (and only) title using the SCI engine. The difference is most notable in the art style, which has changed from the other VGA games. It has more of a retro comic book feel, which fits in with the cheesy sci-fi theme.

Additionally, the design rested solely on Mark Crowe. Scott Murphy and Josh Mandel also had little to do with the game, and their absence definitely makes an impact. *Space Quest V* is still funny, but it's lacking much of the biting sarcasm – and freakishly dark deaths – that made the previous games so amusing. But the biggest bummer is that *Space Quest V* was never released on CD, so there's no voice acting, outside of a few brief sound clips stolen from *The Simpsons*.

Even though it's not quite as funny, *Space Quest V* almost makes up for it in other areas. The narrative is much more focused, and it feels less like Roger is simply stumbling through various situations until the game decides to end. Speaking of which, Roger is now a much more fleshed out character. In the previous games, Roger only spoke a few lines, with much of the humor coming from the narrator, but here, our hero comes off as a clumsy, yet well meaning and likable guy. The secondary characters – sarcastic pilot Droole, man-hating Flo, and cranky engineer Cliffy, and even nemesis Captain Quirk – all have more personality than is typical of the series.

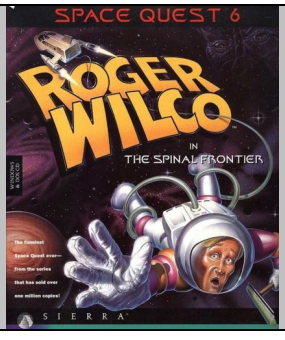


Ironically, in Space Quest V, the captain is the one that wears a red shirt.

The whole game is obviously a pretty huge *Star Trek* parody, mostly because *The Next Generation* was popular at the time. The first task is to pass the academy final exam (which Roger hasn't studied a bit for, of course) and some of the multiple choice questions are quite chuckle-worthy, even if it's not as hilarious as the bargain bin from *Space Quest IV*. If you wander through the halls of the academy long enough, you can find Obi-Wan and Darth Vader dueling in the distance. If you pay attention to various screens, you can find animated versions of classic arcade games like *Missile Command* and *Pong*. It also features some outdated references to telecommunications company Sprint, who sponsored the game. You overhear some guards talking about switching telephone plans, and all communications aboard the ship end with the Sprint logo. At one point, Roger is transformed into a fly in order to infiltrate an office, and in

another, he hops into the seat of a *2001*-style EVA pod to rescue Cliffy, who has accidentally fallen out into space.

Later still, you adopt an *Alien*-style facehugger whom Roger lovingly names Spike. There's also another run-in with the killer bounty hunters from the Gippazoid Novelty Company – they're still angry about the mating whistle from *Space Quest II*, and further infuriated by the destruction of the Arnoid from *Space Quest III*. This time, though, it's a female, unintentionally foreshadowing the third *Terminator* movie. This move is either halfway clever or creatively lazy, depending on your viewpoint, but at least defeating her is less frustrating than the similar encounter way back in the earlier game, and after being reprogrammed, she becomes part of your crew. The action segments are generally minimal, and even the minigame – an overly long game of *Battleship* against Captain Quirk – is optional. Overall, it's a much better designed game than its predecessors, and while though it's not nearly as off-the-wall as some of the others, *Space Quest V* is still another fine adventure.



Space Quest 6: Roger Wilco in The Spinal Frontier

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Josh Mandel, Scott Murphy
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Even though Roger saved the galaxy (again) at the end of *Space Quest V*, his violation of several StarCon regulations leaves him to be stripped (literally) of his rank. Furthermore, there seems to be some kind of conspiracy to kill Roger, as he's kidnapped while on shore leave. He's saved by his companion, Corpsman Stellar Santiago, who seems to have a thing for him, but Roger insists on remaining loyal to Beatrice, who doesn't actually appear in this game. Roger begins to question these feelings after Santiago sacrifices herself to save him during another attempt on his life. Eventually he discovers that she's still alive, somewhere, and sets off on an adventure to rescue her. When he finds her, he can only save her by miniaturizing himself and diving inside her body. *The Incredible Journey*-style setting of the final chapter is where the game gets its subtitle, *The Spinal Frontier*, although the working title was *Where in Corpsman Santiago is Roger Wilco?*

The sixth and final *Space Quest* game features SVGA graphics, with cleaner visuals and the occasional computer rendered animation. That being said, neither the artwork nor the animation quality compares with *King's Quest VII*. While the backgrounds are crisp, they're too sterile compared to the hand painted visuals of the previous VGA games, and while they may work as a sci-fi setting, they're a bit dreary for something that's supposed to be a comedy. Some of the character artwork is decent, but the artwork for Roger and Stellar are pretty ugly. Other than a few close-ups in key cutscenes, the portraits during dialogue are missing, which creates a disconnect between the characters and the player. The interface now takes up the bottom quarter of the screen, leaving the view a bit more cramped than usual.

There are still a bunch of amusing parodies and throwbacks to previous games. You'll find a drunken ET sleeping in a liquor store, who will happily show you his glowing finger, if you try to talk to him. (You can also pull his finger for expected results.) You'll come across a shady *Blade Runner*-style character who's too lazy to do his own job, and an *Alien*-like creature stalking a lone female spacefarer. There's a minigame called *Stooge Fighter 3*, featuring Lar Man, Coiley Joe, and Big Mo. And unlike other Sierra minigames, it realizes that it plays poorly, and the only way to win is through cheating. One of the most amusing screens is the theater marquees that

change every time you re-enter the screen, which consist of over several dozen parody titles. And "cyberspace" in the *Space Quest* universe apparently consists of little more than a variation on Windows 3.1. You'll run into a drunken Elmo Pug, the wiener kid from ScumSoft, as well as Fester Blatz the shopkeeper, both from *Space Quest III*. Roger even keeps some of his mementos from previous games in his quarters, and there are some amusing references to both that stupid owl Cedric from *King's Quest V* and the cheesy love ballad from *King's Quest VI*. Roger's commander, the anthropomorphic lion Kielbasa, may as well be a Kilrathi – albeit a friendly one – from *Wing Commander*. And your ship, the *Deepship 86*, looks like a giant flying jockstrap.



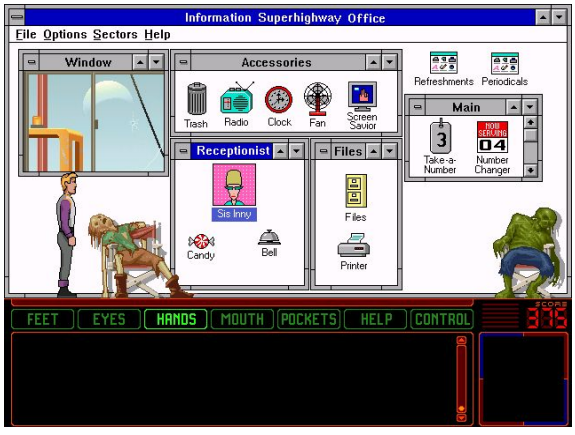
Roger's quarters is a treasure haven for the stuff he's stored since the first game.

These moments are amusing, but the plot is a bit on the dark side and more dramatic than the previous games, which never took themselves seriously. The writing style, too, while very funny, isn't nearly as biting. Gary Owens returns as the narrator, but he's not quite as condescending, so his lines just don't sparkle the way they used to. There aren't any particularly amusing death scenes, either, although you're now given the option to "Try Again" after dying.

It also doesn't help that the puzzles are some of the most convoluted of anything in the series. Many of them feature numerous tedious steps and involve picking at nearly everything in the scenery to see if you can interact with it. Some of the usable items are so small or so hidden that you can often get stumped just because you couldn't even see it. This is particularly bad at the beginning, where you're not given any real direction.

One of your first tasks is to capture an escaped android, who's hiding at the bottom of a bar. You need to freeze him with a blast of nitrogen, like the T-1000 in *Terminator 2*. You can't just go up to him and use it though. Instead, there's a tedious series of steps to run the ice blast through a series of pipes. At one point, you need to solve a puzzle by taking apart an electronic device, replacing some chips, and flipping some switches. There was supposed to be a comic book strip in-game to tell you how to do this, but it was removed from the final product. Instead, it was printed in the manual leaving many to believe it was copy protection. Furthermore, some copies of the game, including many of the compilations, don't come with the necessary documentation, requiring that you use a FAQ to complete it. And this is just in the first area of the game! The final sections in Stellar's body are just as frustratingly designed.

Space Quest VI is a decent but not outstanding game, one that probably could've used some polish. Perhaps this is due to a result of management issues – a large majority of the game was designed by Josh Mandel, who left the project before completion, leaving Scott Murphy to pick up the pieces.



Anyone else kinda miss Windows 3.1?

Before *Space Quest VI* was released, Sierra created a demo for distribution on promo CDs. Unlike most of their demos, this one is not only playable, but consists of a storyline that didn't exist in the full game. The evil Bjorn (parodies of the Borg from *Star Trek*) have invaded the *Deepship 86* and turned everyone, except Roger, into piles of sorbet.

Fan Games: Space Quest: The Lost Chapter and Space Quest: Replicated

Sierra games have inspired a whole slew of would-be game developers to try their hand at their own adventure titles, including *Space Quest: The Lost Chapter* and *Space Quest 0: Replicated*. Both run on the AGI engine. *Space Quest: The Lost Chapter* takes place between *Space Quest II* and *III*, as Roger's escape pod crashes on the surface of another jungle planet. Although some of the sprites show improvement over Sierra's games, the puzzles are absolutely infuriating, and the writing could've used some serious polishing, as it's filled with spelling errors and grammatical issues. It's an amateur effort, and it shows. On the other hand, *Space Quest 0* shows quite a bit more professionalism. It begins much like the first *Space Quest* game, with Roger being the lone survivor of a brutal invasion, and escaping with his life. In his adventures, he needs to track down the mysterious blue skinned alien chick that he sees at the beginning. The puzzles are much more logical than even Sierra's better games of the era, and the plot and locales, while hardly original, are still pretty decent.

Comic Book

Roger Wilco was briefly the star of his own comic book series, published by Adventure Comics. The three issue series is vaguely based on the first game, although the events are drastically reinterpreted. The first issue is in color, but the other two are only in black and white.

Cancelled Space Quest Games

One of the *Space Quest* compilations promised an exclusive look at *Space Quest VII*, which was intended to be a multiplayer game. Alas, according to various financial and management issues, the game was cancelled before it got very far off the ground. Years later, after Vivendi Universal bought Sierra, the new management attempted to resurrect some of their old properties. The only game that was released was *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*, which was underwhelming. Looking at this example, it's a good thing that the intended *Space Quest* game was cancelled, because it probably would've been a bastardization of the original series.



The Black Cauldron

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Apple II / Apple IIGS / Atari ST
Designer(s): Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The Black Cauldron seems to be one of the few animated films Disney wants to forget. Based on the *Chronicles of Prydain* fantasy novels by Lloyd Alexander, it told the story of a young Assistant Pig-Keeper named Taran, a typical peasant with a unique destiny. Unlike many heroes, he is not fated to save the land. Instead, that prophecy is bestowed upon one of his pigs, a cute little porker named Hen Wen. He faithfully takes up this duty and swears to protect the world from the frightening Horned King, who is seeking the Black Cauldron in order to take over the world. Taran is obviously not a born warrior and gets himself into lots of trouble, but like in most fantasy stories, he meets up with a variety of interesting characters to take on evil, including the beautiful Princess Eilonwy and a minstrel named Fflewddur. The film was a box office disappointment, during that dark time in Disney animation before it was revitalized by *The Little Mermaid*. It's not a bad film, and if it had been released in the wake of something like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, it probably would have fared better.



The Horned King's castle is suitable spooky.

At any rate, Sierra developed a computer game based on the movie, employing Al Lowe, who had previously worked on some Disney properties. It looks and feels very much like a *King's Quest* game, using the same AGI engine and even featuring a landscape which loops vertically, but it's a smaller, more focused game. The major landscape is four screens wide by four screens tall, with a handful of other locations familiar to those in the books, like the Witches' hut and the Horned King's castle. Based on the number of locations, it's about half the size of the average *King's Quest* title.

That's not exactly to its detriment, as *The Black Cauldron* is one of the few Sierra games with branching events and different endings. Taran's first task is to escort Hen Wen to a fairy village, which is hidden away roughly three screens from your starting point. The sky is filled with

monsters who will randomly attack and steal Hen Wen, but unlike the enemies of *King's Quest*, this theft does not end the game. Instead, it just means you need to go through some extra steps to rescue her when you reach the Horned King's castle.



If you recruited Gurgi, the ending plays out much like the movie.

Similarly, there's a subquest where you can befriend Gurgi, the cute little "munchies and crunchies" monster, by giving him an apple. If you become buddies, he'll sacrifice himself by jumping into the Black Cauldron at the end of the game, much like the film. If this was any other Sierra game, failing to accomplish this task would've resulted in an unwinnable situation, but instead you just have to find another solution. And at the end, when the witches offer you various rewards, you're supposed to get them to resurrect your little buddy, but you can choose one of the treasures they offer, if you're a jerk. There are a handful of variations on the end, depending on the actions you took over the course of the quest.

It's still a fairly compact quest – you need to infiltrate the castle, get the sword (and rescue Hen Wen if necessary), find some magical creatures so you can reach the witches that possess the Black Cauldron, then head back to the castle for the climactic encounter. If you know what you're doing, you can probably beat it within an hour. You'll also run into most of the other major characters, but they just hang around for a bit or give you an item, then disappear.

This simplicity was probably intentional though, because the game was obviously developed for kids. In keeping with this, it's one of the only AGI games outside of *Mixed-Up Mother Goose* and the *Manhunter* series which doesn't use text input. While it otherwise controls like *King's Quest*, the actions are handled via the function keys. F3 will bring up the inventory and allow you to equip an item, F4 will use it, and F6 acts as a general "interact" verb. It's confusing to get these memorized at first, but this bit of user-friendliness is quite uncanny for the game's era.

The only other holdover from the archaic design mentality is how you deal with your hunger and thirst. There's an in-game timer which will prompt you to eat or drink something. If you ignore the prompts, soon enough, you'll keel over dead. Water is easy enough to come by, but food is limited, unless you find the endless food wallet hidden under the bridge. It's annoying, but it's easily addressable, so it's not much of a concern.

Many adventure gamers have dismissed *The Black Cauldron* as a kid's game, but the simpler interface, slightly more structured approach, and generally lowered difficulty – even the arcade segments are pretty simple – actually make it more approachable for the modern gamer than most other games of the time. In that way, it may actually best the *King's Quest* games, even though it's not quite as groundbreaking.

Leisure Suit Larry

If you could create your own little computer people on your monitor, what would the first thing that you'd have them do? Well, probably you'd have them run around a bit. Then maybe you'd punch them around or create silly scenes of violence. And then maybe strip them of their clothes and make them do each other. (If you doubt this theory, dig up any old *Mario Paint* SNES cartridge and take a look at any saved animations, provided they haven't been long deleted.) Sierra, purveyor of the first animated graphic adventures back in the early '80s, operated mostly on the same philosophy – take a little stick figure, have them traipse around the scenery, and think of all of the funny ways to get them killed. Of course, developers mostly stayed away from the "sex" part, for fear of creating a controversy.

That was, until *Leisure Suit Larry*.

Leisure Suit Larry was born out of an earlier Sierra text-only adventure game called *Softporn Adventure*. When Ken Williams, president of the company, wanted to do a graphical remake, he put Al Lowe in charge, a programmer who had previously worked on *The Black Cauldron*, *King's Quest III*, and others. Along with Mark Crowe, one of the creators of *Space Quest*, they came up with Larry Laffer, a fat, balding, perpetually out-of-style loser who just moved out of his basement and wants to experience the womanly touch for the first time in his life. In other words, he may as well be the original 40 year old virgin. His adventures often begin with his famous theme song, which is remarkably catchy even coming from the blippy old PC speaker. Al Lowe, who also wrote the theme, is an accomplished jazz musician, and some of his works also appear in later games.

Through most of *Leisure Suit Larry*, the goal is simple – to chat up girls and hopefully convince them to sleep with you, although there's usually some humiliating circumstances that gum up the works. (Some of the games also try to introduce more stringent plots that just happen to have you hooking up with women.) Al Lowe himself has confessed that Larry is sort of a fantasy figure to live the life he never could, the kind that could try to pick up girls in the most shameless way imaginable, but at the same time, he acts as a narrator to mock his sad, sad exploits.

Of course, the series is also known for its fairly juvenile sense of humor. Like many "mature" rated games, *Leisure Suit Larry* is best experienced (a) if you put yourself in the mind of a 13-year-old, or (b) if you are, in fact, actually a 13-year-old, and the concept of seeing naked boobs still totally blows your mind.



Hot women, rendering in glorious 16 color EGA graphics.

That may sound like an inappropriate recommendation for kids considering the material, but really, outside of the basic concept, they usually aren't quite as raunchy as its reputation suggests, at least the earlier entries. In the first game, the only real nudity is a portrait of a naked woman in a bar. In the next few games, there are some pixellated boobs and other assorted body parts, but you'd really have to squint and use your imagination to fill in any details anyway. Once the series hit VGA with the fifth and sixth games, it added a few Easter eggs to get a quick glimpse of nudity, but it got taken a bit further with the seventh game, featuring more numerous and slightly more explicit secrets, and the eighth game features a mode that strips the female characters of all of their clothes, in addition to some out-and-out softcore scenes.

In general, the games are far more often about laughter than titillation. The humor occasionally goes beyond just dick and fart jokes, too. Much like other Sierra games like *Space Quest,* it has a tendency to break the fourth wall, bringing in characters from other games just for the fun of it. Ken Williams makes several appearances in the games – first, as an annoying drunk at the bar, and later, at the end of the first game, as a spokesperson for potential sequels. He also appears in the second and third installments as the leader of an island tribe. Al Lowe himself even cameos a few times. The series also tried for a politically correct angle with the introduction of Passionate Patti, a gorgeous bombshell who falls for Larry, whom players could control in the third and fifth games.

At any rate, there are technically eight *Larry* games in the series, although it completely skips over *Leisure Suit Larry 4* for reasons that may seem strange, but make sense in context. The "true" series essentially stopped after Sierra closed up their adventure game shop and fired everyone, although Vivendi kept the Larry property going awhile longer, with the non-adventure game installments *Magna Cum Laude* and *Box Office Bust*, as well as a few other mobile and promotional titles.

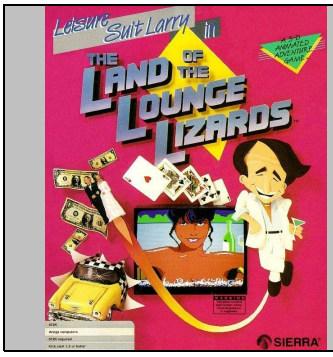


Softporn Adventure

Initial Release Date: 1981
Platforms: Atari 8-bit / Apple II / PC DOS
Designer(s): Chuck Benton
Developer: On-Line Systems

Softporn Adventure is a pioneer, in many ways, as one of the first commercially released adult themed computer games. It's also a bit of a step backward for the company – Sierra made a name for itself developing text adventures with graphics (starting with *Mystery House* and expanding out into *Wizard and the Princess*, *Time Zone*, and more) yet *Softporn Adventure* is completely text-based. This was perhaps how the game was able to be released, since there's obviously no actual nudity. (Note that Roberta Williams, one of the founders of Sierra and creator of the *King's Quest* series, posed for the cover photograph.)

Anyway, you start the game next to a bar, with only one goal in mind – to get laid. Compared to Infocom text adventures, the parser is extremely poor, and the writing is routinely awful. Both written and programmed by Chuck Benton, it's clear that he's more of a computer engineer than a steamy fiction writer. Everything's very straightforward and completely lacking in both sensuality and personality. When Al Lowe came in to convert the game to graphical format, he took the basic plot, structure, locations and puzzles, but invented the Larry character and expanded greatly on its sense of humor, which is how we got the first true game, *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*. *Softporn Adventure* is included in many of the compilations as a bit of history.



Leisure Suit Larry in The Land of the Lounge Lizards

Initial Release Date: 1987
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Apple II / Macintosh
Designer(s): Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The first *Leisure Suit Larry* begins in the city of Lost Wages, outside of a shifty bar, with only one goal in mind – to help Larry lose his virginity before the night is over. There's a clock in the game that runs in real time – if you take too long, Larry blows his brains out. Kind of dark, that!

Before you can even get started, though, you need to answer five questions to prove that you're over 18. Of course, this mostly revolves around American trivia from the '70s, so a lot of it is pretty outdated. But it's easy enough to find the answers in FAQs, or just skip the sequence totally with Alt-X.



Larry's enters Lefty's Bar, preparing for a night of debauchery.

Your adventures in Lost Wages revolve around five key areas: Lefty's Bar, the hotel casino, the chapel next door, a discotheque, and a convenience store. The only way to travel from place to place is by hailing a taxi; otherwise you'll get squashed by traffic or beaten to death by vagrants. Traveling costs money, of course, which can only be obtained by gambling at the casino. (You need vast quantities of cash for other activities, too.) One supposes that simple blackjack and slots simulators were viewed as being "value added bonuses" to the core game but it really just slows down the pace of the adventure. Thankfully, it's easy to beat these segments by saving, betting the maximum amount, and then reloading until you win.

There is technically a hooker right at the beginning, but (A) if you choose to proceed with her, Larry comes to the conclusion that it doesn't really count if you pay them, and (B) if you neglected to go to the convenience store and buy a "lubber" (condom), you'll almost immediately perish from an STD. In the original EGA version, your crotch starts to glow and then you fall over; in the VGA remake, your balls simply explode. In both versions, if you forget to take off the condom and wander outside, you'll get arrested for public indecency – by a cop who looks like Sonny Bonds from *Police Quest*, no less, at least in the EGA version.

Otherwise, the only visibly available girl to woo is a pretty young blonde named Fawn at the disco, but winning her heart (i.e. convincing her to sleep with you) requires a whole bunch of gifts, the cash for a quickie wedding, and the wine to get her in the mood. Things don't quite work out when she ties Larry to their marital bed before consummating their relationship, steals his money, and takes off.



The finale sure is steamy, if nonsensically porn-y.

This is one of the only big sticking spots. Since most of the game world can be accessed at any time, there are only a few other unwinnable situations you can find yourself in – most importantly, running out cash and getting stranded. The most awkward is forgetting to grab the ribbon that you get tied up with after hooking up with Fawn – you need it for later, and the hotel room becomes inaccessible after you leave it.

The narrative is also a bit meandering. The game never tells you this, but your ultimate goal is to somehow make it into the penthouse at the top of the hotel. To do this, you need to distract the woman guarding the entrance by giving her a bottle of Spanish fly. (Don't use it on yourself, or you'll get arrested for bestiality (!!), which is thankfully not shown on screen.) This bottle is clearly visible at the beginning of the game, but can only be obtained by using the rope you (hopefully) grabbed after your encounter with Fawn. Of course, the game also never tells you what this bottle is or why you need to get it – it just falls into the "pick up everything that isn't nailed down" philosophy that tends to permeate so many adventure games. Anyway, once you get through all of this, and have a brief, illicit tryst with a blow-up doll, you end up meeting Eve, an attractive woman in a Jacuzzi. The only way to woo her is, of course, by giving her the apple you bought from the strange naked man in the barrel outside the casino. (The game tells you that this is actually Steve Jobs. Hating on Apple was even cool back in the '80s!) At this point, Larry succeeds in his goal, and the quest is over. It's not a terribly long game, although this was common of very early Sierra graphics adventures.

Larry's journey is filled with other fairly humorous moments, some cruel, some not. There aren't quite as many random deaths as other Sierra games, as long as you don't flush the toilet in the bar anyway, which will flood the whole room. In the beginning stages, if you manage to perish, a compartment will open up beneath Larry's body and take him to Sierra's laboratory, where Sierra heroes are repaired and reassembled. (These are the invisible scenes that occur when you hit the "restart" button, the game tells you.) In the EGA version, you can find King Graham from *King's Quest* undergoing treatment, as well as a robot from *Space Quest*. In the VGA version, Larry is tossed into a blender, where his remains are carried through a tube and reformed into his body. These fourth wall gags became increasingly common throughout the series, as well as other Sierra games.

Also noteworthy is a call to a sex line, where you're asked for the name of a potential mate, as well as several related questions, which are used to populate a kinky *Mad Libs*-style scenario. When you try to buy some prophylactics from the convenience store, you're assaulted with an increasingly inane series of options (flavor: Spearmint or peppermint?) before the clerk loudly announces your order, and everyone in the store – previously hidden behind the shelves – peers out and call you a pervert. (Amusingly, when you're asked your size, in the VGA version you can only pick "Big", "Huge" and "Large". Regardless of your choice, the clerk will always announce "Small" size when he recites your order.)

In spite of the theme and language, there isn't much real nudity. Any sex acts are blocked with a big "censored" bar, and other than small bits – a reclining nude on the bar wall, some nipple outlines on some of the girls – are vaguely defined. It's clear that the game is more about making you laugh than getting you aroused, elevating itself out of porn territory.

There are two versions: The original EGA version released in 1987, based on the AGI engine, and the VGA version, released in 1990, which uses the SCI1 icon-based engine. The lack of the text parser in the VGA version does kind of hurt it. The original EGA version was thoroughly play tested, allowing the developers to see what kind of crazy things that players would try to type in, then use this data to formulate appropriate responses. Earlier Sierra games were pretty bad about this. In the first *King's Quest*, if you typed in "fuck", it would innocently say "I don't understand 'fuck'". In *Leisure Suit Larry*, not only is that a valid command, but it will actually elicit some responses, however limited. Many are just generic "Tsk, tsk." And "Yeah, you probably would, too!" remarks, but you can get some funny responses. Try "masturbate" ("Larry, the whole idea was to stop doing that!") or "look at pussy" ("Obviously, restraint is no problem for you, Larry.") It's far from encyclopedic – "suck cock" will respond with "Once you tasted it, you wouldn't want it!" while "suck penis" results in "What's a penis?"



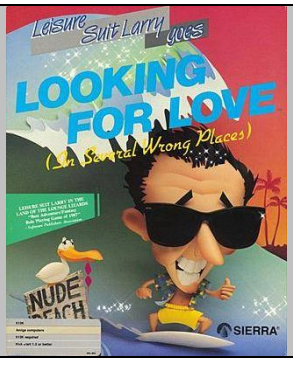
Larry runs into some marital difficulties on his honeymoon.

Ultimately, though, fooling around with the text parser grows old after a few minutes, and the icon-based interface is much easier to work with. Plus, the cartoonish, revamped graphics possess a lot of character that wasn't there in the first place. The pimp in the EGA game is simply an overweight dude in a wifebeater, but in the VGA game, he's clad in traditional pimp garb, and his eyes bug out *Looney Tunes*-style when you click on the porn channel. This attention to detail is even applied to all NPCs, and even the slightly off skew nature of the backgrounds. It's a huge change in atmosphere, and one that's definitely for the better. The only possible issue is that none of the dialogue features close-up portraits like other Sierra VGA games, other than the women, and even those have changed from their original designs. The hooker in the EGA version looks much skankier – the acne and drooping boobs definitely seals the deal – than her VGA counterpart, who by herself is pretty darn sleazy. There are other changes too – you can

no longer puke in the toilet, for example, and the hooker won't give you a blowjob. (In the VGA version, she simply refuses; in the EGA version, she bites your member off, causing you to die. This is all done out of sight, at least.

A clever addition to the original EGA version is the "boss key" function. Back in the mid-80s, not many people had home computers, and it was largely assumed that a lot of game-playing went on during office hours, when people should have been doing work. The "boss key" makes the game look like a boring, business-like graph... until you look closer and realize that it's measuring different types of condoms. Also, you need to reload or restart the game when you do this, because apparently the game panics and "forgets" every time you do this. Oops. The boss key has found its way into other Sierra games as well, in addition to later *Larry* entries. The EGA version also features useless "calculator" and "puzzle" functions as a joke.

Despite some of these hang-ups, *Leisure Suit Larry* still deserves applause for its unique approach to adventure gaming, not only due to its slightly more realistic setting, but also its cavalier attitude. You're not trying to become king, or save the world/galaxy, or solve crimes – you're just trying to get laid. Fair enough.



Leisure Suit Larry goes Looking for Love (In Several Wrong Places)

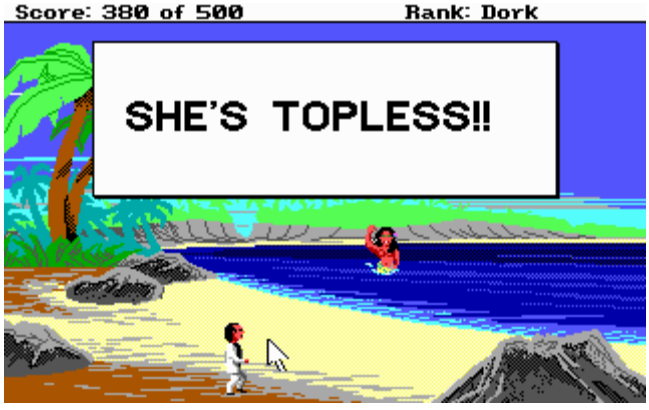
Initial Release Date: 1987
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

At the beginning of *Leisure Suit Larry goes Looking for Love (In Several Wrong Places)* (hereby known simply as *Larry 2*), we find our hero mowing the lawn of Eve, his conquest from the end of the first game, implying that the two had found their own little happily ever after. That is, until Eve pulls into the driveway with only the vaguest recollection of who this fat, balding wiener is. We learn that Larry has been a bit hung up on her, having not realized that their tryst was little more than a one night stand.

Distraught, Larry wanders off and manages to both win the lottery and a free cruise, the latter for having accidentally participated in a lousy dating show. During his trip to the boat, Larry accidentally gets involved with an international espionage incident, causing him to be trailed by KGB agents at every corner. After come crazy hijinx, Larry ends up on a tropical island, complete with a nude beach. After making his way to the airport, Larry once again runs into trouble and ends up on Nontoonyt Island, ruled by the evil Dr. Nonookee, who's enslaved the local native villagers and has generally been doing nasty things to their ecosystem. Only Larry can bungle his way into his fortress, put a stop to this madness, and win the heart of Kalalau, the beautiful daughter of the village tribe chief.

Larry 2 runs on the SCI0 engine, featuring higher resolution 16-color EGA graphics and a mouse-based interface for movement, although it still uses a text input parser for all other actions. The engine also supports FM and General MIDI music, although it's barely used outside of the extended *Larry* theme played in the opening credits, and the little jingle whenever you solve a puzzle. The original AGI-based *Larry* game was too primitive to show detailed characters, but the box artwork for these games always portrayed Larry with a cartoonish look. Here, Larry is drawn in a relatively realistic manner, and it's actually pretty scary! He'd previously been shown as being a bit of a lovable loser, but here he actually looks like a balding creep.

There's also a "trite phrase" function, which lets you type in your own personalized saying, which is then repeated several times throughout the adventure. (The default is "Have a nice day.")



Larry meets his future wife.

Compared to the first *Leisure Suit Larry*, there's a bit more actual adventuring going on, instead of just running around a single city. It's a much more ambitious game, but it's also completely littered with design issues. For starters, once you win your prizes, you have a limited amount of time to crawl around the town, shop for a few essential items, and get on the boat. If you take too long, the boat leaves and you lose. If you forget to buy a certain item, you'll find yourself stuck in the next segment. Once you get on the boat, it gets even more frustrating. What you don't know is that you're in a timer here, too – if you're not quick enough, you get raped to death by the S&M loving fat woman next door. Until you die, there's no indication of this time limit, or even how long it is, essentially requiring you to replay the whole segment, potentially multiple times.

In order to avoid this, you need to grab a lifeboat and abandon ship. During this scene, you're stranded out at sea for ten days, requiring that you use certain items to survive. For example, you need to don a wig to absorb the sun rays. The problem is, you can't actually use them when you're floating on the lifeboat – the game simply won't accept any text input, leaving our hero to simply perish helplessly. You're supposed to equip them in the short segment right after you leave the ship, but before you drift away from the cruise liner. How were you supposed to know that this is the only screen where you can use these items, much less know which items to use to begin with, without dying first? You also need to throw away the spinach dip from the restaurant, if you grabbed it. If not, Larry will automatically eat it when he gets hungry and dies of food poisoning. (You don't need to pick it up to begin with, but the whole process adds some extra points.) It's ridiculous.

Later on, you get stuck on an airplane. You're supposed to get up, get to the emergency exit, and parachute out (assuming you remembered to buy the "insurance" at the airport, which is actually a parachute – if didn't, you're out of luck.) If you stand up from your seat, two stewardesses with drink carts immediately block your exit. To get around them, you have to give a pamphlet (which you hopefully picked up from the airport) to your chatty seatmate. This triggers the disappearance of the stewardesses. How are these events even related?

Now, whenever you die, the Game Over screen gives you an option to order a hint book, giving you the number for Sierra's order hotline. Yeah, that's a bit of self-acknowledging humor, but in this case, it's a bit rude! Certainly there are those who attribute these games' difficulty to the need to sell guides, but there's a fine line between obtuse puzzles, and situations so annoyingly designed that a walkthrough is practically a necessity.

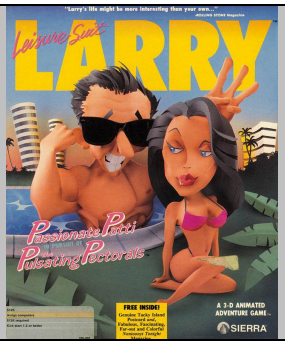


Larry's foreign language skills are not exactly adequate.

But the ultimate slap in the face is right at the end of the game. You need to make a homemade Molotov cocktail and drop it into the core of a volcano to blow up Dr. Nonookee's lair. (Hopefully you brought the barf bag from the airplane, and the bottle from the hairdresser in the airport, and the matches from the hotel... it's belaboring the point, but without any of these items, you can't win the game at all.) Anyway, if you type "PUT BAG IN BOTTLE", Larry will immediately drop it into the hole without lighting it, causing you to lose. This is due to a glitch in the game code, as it misinterprets the word "bag" as a verb. As a result, you need to play around with the text inputs to get it recognized properly. For example, you can type "PUT THE BAG IN THE BOTTLE", sticking the definite articles in there, which results in Larry holding the bottle over the hole, giving you time to light and drop it. This wasn't intentional – apparently it was introduced right before the game shipped and wasn't caught during testing – but it's a rough cap to an already brutally frustrating exercise.

When divorced from its vexing design, *Larry 2* is actually a pretty funny game. The situations Larry finds himself in are gleefully absurd, especially when you need to disguise yourself in drag (in a bikini, complete with a full body wax) to fool KGB agents. At one point, you need to monitor an x-ray at an airport, and watch some goofy stuff show up on the scanner, including a cat in a cat-shaped suitcase. The funniest moment is when Chief Kennywauwau of the native tribe issues a challenge to Larry – in order to win the hand of his daughter Kalalau, he needs to write a program, any program... in assembly language. (Since you're in the middle of a jungle, the computer is powered by a native riding a bicycle.) Sadly, this all occurs in a non-interactive cutscenes and isn't an actual puzzle. There's also a strange running gag involving Larry's failed quest to fix his baldness, and there are no less than five (identical looking) barber shops throughout the whole adventure.

Compared to the first game, this entry is significantly less raunchy, and the age verification quiz is gone. There's still some pixellated nudity, particularly on the native tribeswoman, but otherwise you're actively punished for trying to hit on girls. In addition to the fat woman on the ship, there are two separate undercover agents who, if propositioned, will fly Larry to a fortress, cut him in half with a laser, and dip his remains in boiling acid. If you romance the maid at the hotel, you'll end up shot to death by her militant brother. The only woman you DO get to cavort with is Kalalau, in an oddly sweet epilogue. You'll also note that there are no full screen close-ups of any of the women, just small portraits when you look at them. These same portraits also show up in the manual and act as copy protection. One of these girls is actually Rosella from *King's Quest IV*, in one of Sierra's many cross promotions. The ending also features a blonde woman named "Polyester Patty", who would receive a dye job and a name change to "Passionate Patty" for the next two sequels.



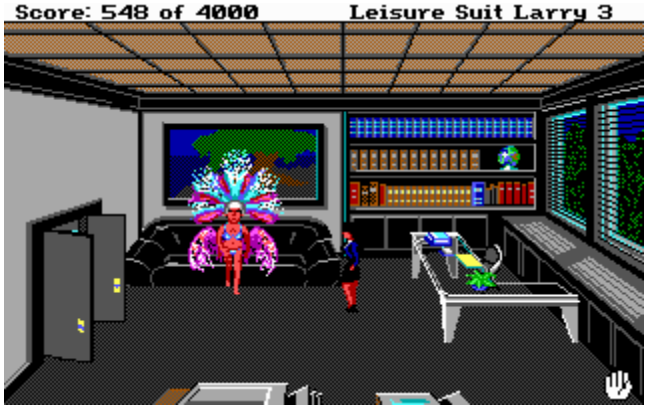
Leisure Suit Larry III: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of Pulsating Pectorals

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Leisure Suit Larry 3 starts on Nontoonyt Island, which has since turned into a yuppie tourist paradise after Larry killed off the evil Dr. Nonookee. His wedding to Kalalau hasn't exactly gone well though, with her having left him for another woman. Furthermore, since his wife was the only reason he had a job – Kalalau's daddy has since become a property mogul – Larry finds himself literally tossed out into the streets. With this news, Larry ditches his Hawaiian shirt for his classic leisure suit (complete with a Superman-style transformation in a phone booth) and sets off to conquer more babes.

You're free to explore almost the entire island at the beginning, but much like the first *Leisure Suit Larry*, each of the women must be conquered in a specific order. Faithful fans will remember that there were three girls in Larry's first quest – the hooker, who didn't count; the blond girl at the disco, who tied up Larry and took his cash; and Eve, who marked the end of the game. Here, Larry is significantly luckier with each of the women – he just gets interrupted by a variety of increasingly ludicrous situations.

As the game suggests, the ultimate goal is hooking up with Passionate Patti, a high class jazz pianist. Unfortunately, you're flabby, out of shape, and still technically married – you need to buff up and show your divorce papers in order for her to take you seriously. The only way to Patti's heart is, strangely enough, by hooking up with some of the other women around the island, which leads to the path of self-improvement.



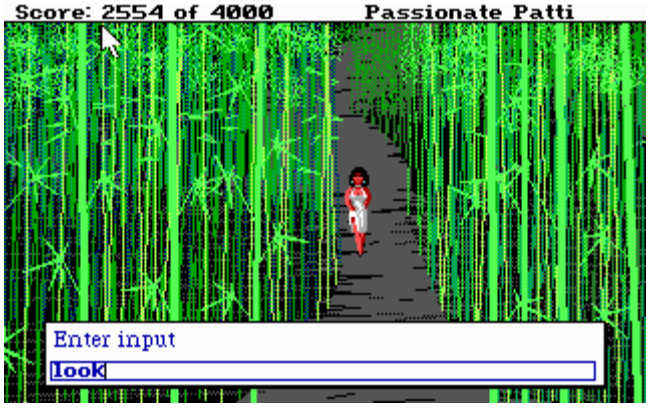
One of Larry's many humiliating predicaments.

Larry's adventure truly begins with the seduction of Tawni, a blonde babe sunbathing topless on the beach, who's a bit more interested in the touristy junk hawked by the natives than Larry's lovemaking. This setback eventually leads Larry to the dancer, Cherri Tart. Some backstage mishaps result in Larry wearing the dancer's gear and being forced to perform on

stage, which in turn accidentally gets him into the skirt of his overly friendly divorce lawyer Suzi Cheatum. After pumping some iron to impress Bambi, the local gymnast, Larry is finally able to woo Patti. They rock each other's world, and for the first time in the game, things actually don't seem to be going horribly wrong. That is, until Patti unconsciously mumbles the name of her boyfriend, whom she intends to break up with after meeting Larry. Misunderstanding the situation, Larry seeks solitude by adventuring into the island's uncharted (and terribly dangerous) bamboo forest. From here, the viewpoint changes to Patti's perspective, as she wanders off in the morning to reclaim her lost lover.

The whole scenario is also a bit silly. It makes sense that Larry would immediately fall in love with any woman that would give him the time of day, because he's more or less pathetic, but how does a woman like Patti become so infatuated with him, enough to risk her life? (Apparently it's the "pulsating pectorals" that Larry earned earlier in the game.) But that's also why it's funny, because the game is cheekily self aware, and doesn't try to pass it off as anything more than goofy fun, with maybe just a bit of heart.

The title gives the impression that the game was developed for both men and women, in hopes that they'd maybe attract some girls into the fold too. Patti isn't nearly the desperate loser that Larry is – the game heavily implies she's been around the block quite a bit, as evidenced by the many innuendos. (When picking up some coconuts, the narrator announces, "You grab a pair of the hairy brown nuts... a feeling not wholly unfamiliar to you!" which turns into a running gag.) Alas, it doesn't quite work like that – Patti isn't so much a sexy, empowered female so much as a perverted old man's version of a sexy, empowered female. Like the first game, a lot of the fun comes from using the text parser in creative ways to really slut it up. (Try giving blowjobs to random guys, for example.)



Patti wanders around the jungle, searching for her lost paramour as she slowly loses her clothes.

Patti's segment of the game is, unfortunately, much shorter than Larry's. It's also much more traditionally structured, as the only real thing to do is explore the Bamboo Forest until you find Larry. You can enter the male strip club and chat up one of the dancers, who's featured in a close-up much like Larry's potential mates, but it feels way more humorous than sexy, and you can't really go after him anyway. Unfortunately, almost all of the puzzles require that you've picked up all of the necessary items at the hotel, and if you miss even a single one... well, you can't go back once you've entered the jungle.

Most of Patti's quest revolves around using various bits of her clothing to survive (using her bra to toss coconuts, ripping her dress to use as a harness to climb across a rope, etc.) Before you can get into any of this, though, you need to navigate the bamboo maze itself. This initially seems quite aggravating, because you're also under a strict time limit, but the solution is

hidden in the manual, if you look close enough. There's also a log ride that plays as an arcade sequence, but the window is incredibly tiny, so thankfully there's an option to skip it.

Once Patti meets up with Larry, things quickly spiral out of control when they are kidnapped by lesbian cannibals. If you managed to grab the "magic" marker back from Patti's piano, you draw a *Looney Tunes*-style portal which somehow warps you to Sierra Studios, where various games are being "directed" like movies. The whole ending is similar to the fourth wall breaking ending from *Blazing Saddles*. You end up destroying the set of *Police Quest*, somehow wander into the first screen of *Space Quest II* (complete with an anti-gravity magnet which sends you flying around the screen) and walk into Roberta Williams directing the whale escape scene from *King's Quest IV*. From here, Larry is offered a job telling his life stories through computer games, and the series comes in full circle. This might seem all really odd, but this kind of self-referential humor was not entirely uncommon in Sierra games, particularly in *Space Quest III*, where the final goal is to rescue the series' real life creators from software pirates.

Leisure Suit Larry 3 runs on Sierra's SCI0 interpreter, so it looks and plays much like *Larry 2,* although there's more music this time around. Thankfully, they ditched the realistic looking Larry in favor of a cartoonier one. Although Patti gets a glamorous, realistic close-up when you first meet her, she too is portrayed in a sillier fashion during her death scenes. (There's actually an amusing anti-drug message, where you meet an untimely death if you decide to smoke some weed. Between this, the hooker from the first game, and the magic mushrooms from the *Quest for Glory* games, it's nice to see Sierra doing a public service!)



Fourth wall? What's that?

Although there are quiz questions at the beginning of the game, you can still play even if you can't answer of them. Instead, your proficiency in trivia adjusts the game's "filth level" from a scale of 1 to 5. One of the first things you can do is look through a set of binoculars and peep on a woman undressing. At the lowest filth level, she closes all of the shades. As the filth level gets higher, she closes less and less, until you can see her 16 color breasts in full glory. The sex scenes don't have the "censored" bar over them like *LSL1*, but the participants are either clothed or hidden, so it's not terribly explicit. If anything, there's a whole lot more man nudity, thanks to the section where you work out in the gym. It's funny, because it's obviously there to appease the female gamers who were lured in with the whole "Passionate Patti" thing. Equal rights are good, one supposes. But really, Mr. Lowe, did you guys need to position the camera in the shower directly in the floor, so it's pointing right up at Larry's bare crotch?

At any rate, the third *Leisure Suit Larry* game is a fine product. Larry's segment is at least as long as the first game by itself, although it feels shorter because there's less time spent gambling or traveling in the taxi. Patti's segment could've been longer, but the change in perspective is refreshing, if nothing else. As such, this is one of the most rounded entries in the series.

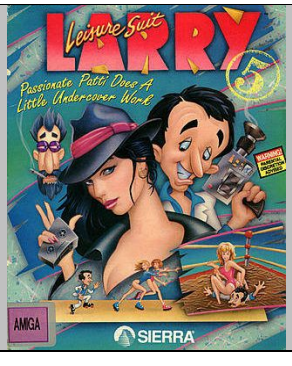
Cover Not Available	**Leisure Suit Larry 4: The Missing Floppies** Initial Release Date: Never Platforms: None Designer(s): Al Lowe? Developer: None

To get straight to the point: There is no *Leisure Suit Larry 4*. The whole thing is more or less a joke. There are two reasons:

(1) There was apparently a multiplayer *Leisure Suit Larry* games in the works, designed to be played over The Sierra Network, their burgeoning online service. It was cancelled due to technical issues.

(2) *Leisure Suit Larry 3* tied up things pretty nicely for Larry and Patti, and seemed like it was intended to end the series. Apparently, Al Lowe used to joke that there would be no *Leisure Suit Larry 4*. He followed through by going directly to *Leisure Suit Larry 5*. This was done as a unique narrative device to sort of "undo" the ending of the previous game. Both Larry and Patti start off separated, with only the vaguest memory of each other, and neither has any clue as to how they split apart. In other words, *Leisure Suit Larry 4* acts as sort of a "missing reel", where the player is left to figure out for themselves what happened to the seemingly-happy couple between the sequels.

While this bit of hilarity has caused massive amounts of confusion for newbie adventure game fans, it's actually pretty clever, if only because companies today would never, ever let their designers pull the same kind of prank today.



Leisure Suit Larry 5: Passionate Patti Does a Little Undercover Work

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / Amiga
Designer(s): Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

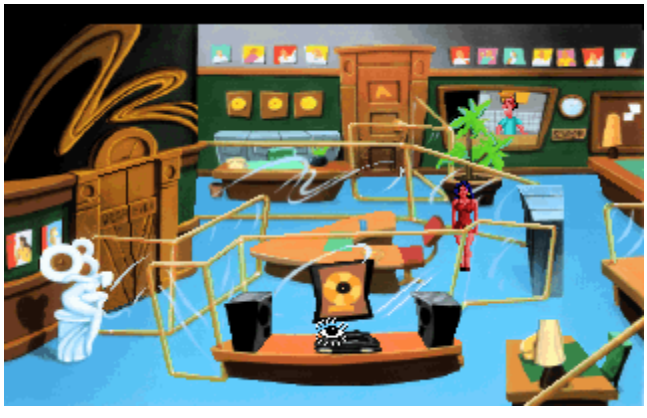
Leisure Suit Larry 5 begins with the two lovebirds apparently separated, with Larry working for a porn company, and Patti playing piano in putrid pisshole of a nightclub. Larry has been assigned to scout models for his company's upcoming release, "America's Sexiest Home Videos", because his boss figures that since Larry is so pathetic, any woman that gets with him must be the perfect candidate for their show. Meanwhile, Patti is hired by the FBI to investigate a few record producers, who have been sneaking subliminal messages into their songs.

Unlike the previous game, which was split into halves, the viewpoint switches between Larry and Patti at various points. Larry has three models to visit – Michelle Milken at a computer club in New York City, Lana Luscious at a casino in Atlantic City, and Chi Chi Lambada at a dentist's office in Miami. Meanwhile, Patti has two different offices to check out. Each character can approach their scenarios in any order, although the two storylines (and protagonists) finally converge right at the end.



Larry visits the famous Tramp Casino.

Leisure Suit Larry 5 is a bit of design experiment for Sierra, not only because of the freeform chapters, but the fact that you can't die, or even lose the game. The lack of death scenes will come as disappointing to anyone who enjoys the black humor found in other Sierra games, although it certainly does make the game less frustrating. There are plenty of missable items that are used later in the game, but if you forgot to get them, hey, no biggie – the game just proceeds as normal. If you don't have the items to seduce a woman, or forget to video tape them – which is the whole point of Larry traveling over the country to begin with – it doesn't ever matter. Larry will still score with them, and the game goes on. That's a bit of an odd approach to game design – you can never get stuck in most LucasArts games, but the items are placed in a way so that they're always accessible, at all items. *Larry 5* forgoes that, and simply makes half of the puzzles optional. Other than the point total, all it does is affect is one of the later scenes, where an omniscient voice laments on all of the things you missed.



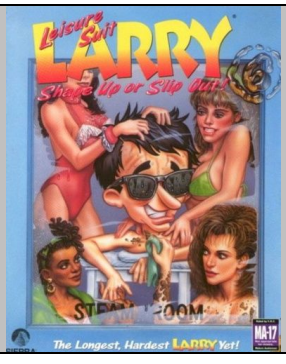
As the title suggests, Passionate Patti spends most of the game spying on record execs.

Patti's segments are a little less banal, but they're just as short. She was an amusing foil to Larry back in the third game, but by herself, all she has are the same few worn out innuendos. During one of her investigations, she accidentally breaks a copy machine and gets toner over her face. She finds a shower in the next room and disrobes, only to discover that it's actually a secret elevator, made of glass, which exposes her naked body to everyone else in the building. (None of that really makes sense, but okay.) Immediately outside of the elevator is a pair of hip hop

clothes – combined with the blackface disguise, Patti can now blend in with the other rappers. You meet a group called 2 Live 2 Screw, headed by an M.C. Hammer rip-off, but they never speak to you, or do much of anything. They're totally wasted. Patti's other chapter isn't even nearly as involved. You steal a record that has incriminating evidence, then you get the producer drunk, and that's it. At least *LSL5* can go down in history as one of the only games featuring a gynecological exam, from the first person perspective, no less.

When approached from the viewpoint as a casual adventure player, the ease of the game may not necessarily be a bad thing, but the essential steps are remarkably tedious. In Larry's adventures, you literally spend half of the game climbing out of limos, scanning your credit card, entering the copy protection code, getting in the airplane, getting off the airplane, scavenging through the airport to find spare change, looking for the ad for the local limo company, calling the local limo company, getting back into the limo, telling them your next destination, and conquering a few menial tasks. It also doesn't help that the humor is more hit or miss this time. There are some amusing moments to be sure, but the media satire isn't fully explored, and the encounters with the ladies just aren't funny. At one point, Larry gets in a mud wrestling match which gets out of control and then... he goes flaccid. Not really very creative. It's the first Larry game (not counting the remake of the first one) that uses the SCI1 engine, and features the beloved "Zipper" icon. It also introduces the bodily functions keys, which lets you burp, fart, or otherwise screw around at your leisure. And the cartoony graphics style, combined with comic book pin up artwork for the ladies, looks fantastic. But otherwise, this one is kind of a bust.

Larry 5 was initially released on floppies, but never got a talkie version. One was planned, that would incorporate a studio audience that would randomly laugh at various lines, but that never came to pass. It was later re-released on CD as part of a budget line, but it's identical to the disk release. There is no age verification present from this game going forward, although you can choose to password protect your save game.



Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Larry 6 hails back to the form and structure of the first game, just drastically updated. The only goal? Run around and try to sleep with as many girls as possible. (Patti has been ditched completely, without so much as an explanation, which is probably for the best.) This time, Larry has won yet another contest on the dating show Stallions, which has earned him an all-expenses paid trip to La Costa Lotta, a super fancy health resort. Due to Larry's status as a non-paying guest, the employees aren't exactly the friendliest of people, but there are still plenty of places to visit, including a gym, a jazz bar, a pool (and accompanying bungee jumping activities), a rather nasty salad bar, a mud bath, a sauna, and a disused liposuction clinic. In most of these areas, you'll come across one of eight women, each of whom initially wants nothing to do with you, but will eventually come around, providing you can dig up the right items.

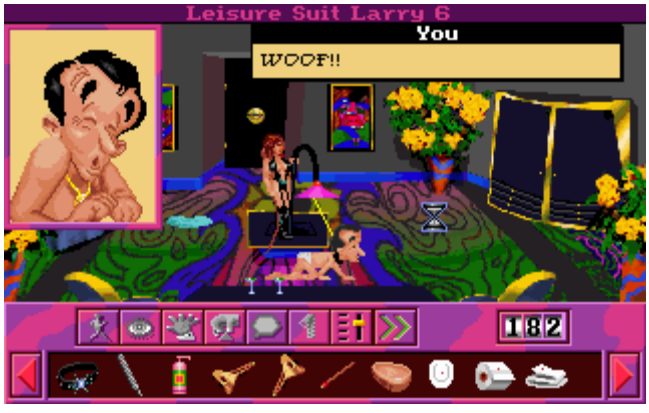
The girls this time include Gammie, the front desk clerk whose hot upper body distracts from her rather large lower body; Cavaricchi, the butch, bisexual aerobics instructor; Rose, the Spanish beauty; Merrily, a bungee jumping junkie who can only get aroused at great heights;

Thunderbird, a rather scary weightlifter; Char, who spends most of the game in a mud bath; Burgundy, the saucy jazz singer; and Shablee, the hip makeup artist. Like the first *Leisure Suit Larry,* the ultimate girl is found holed up in the penthouse – the depressed, despondent (and clothes-hating) Shamara. Of course, luck is rarely on Larry's side, and most of the girls are more intent on humiliating Larry than screwing him. (Do you know what a "High Colonic Treatment" is? Poor Larry doesn't.) However, even if Larry never quite gets what he wants, he is awarded a special item for each of the girls he "wins". Each of these items is necessary to win over Shamara, and thus the game.



This is Shamara. Winning her heart is the ultimate goal of LSL6.

The original disk VGA version's interface uses the same fonts and menus as the older SCI0 games, in a bit of a nostalgic callback. Unlike the other SCI1 titles, which hide the icon selections at the top of the screen, the lower part is taken up by the icons, with quick access to your inventory. The icons are more or less the same as *Larry 5*, but now the standard "Use" command has been divided into "Use" and "Pick Up".



Larry's plans fail... again.

The SVGA version, only included on the CD release, changes up the interface a bit by enlarging the lower section and sticking in a text box, along with the character portraits, so the dialogue and messages no longer appear on the main screen. The inventory has been moved to

the top, although the icons are rather small and a pain to see. The art style is a bit less cartoony than the previous game, but it still has a unique style.

La Costa Lotta is a garishly designed resort, with lots of clashing, loud colors, and while the SVGA graphics are noticeably cleaner, it's still an assault on the eyes. The character sprites don't seem to have been redrawn, looking like they've been upscaled with a bit of added detail, so they look a little bit off too. However, the close-up portraits of the girls look remarkably better.

This is also the first installment to feature voice acting, most of which is quite excellent. Larry is appropriately nerdy, with a nasally whine which has just the right dose of patheticness without being annoying, and the narrator is appropriately smarmy. The acting really adds a lot of personality to the girls, too, so they feel like more than just puzzles to overcome.

Larry 6 is a marked improvement over many of the past games, just because the game world is so much richer. La Costa Lotta is a relatively huge place – it's actually quite easy to get lost when you first start – but at the same time, it's smaller than most other adventure games. In general, the dialogue is better, descriptions are funnier, and the Zipper icon is put to much better use than it ever had been before, even if it's mostly used to provoke goofy responses.

Other than a few troublesome oversights, it's mostly impossible to get stuck without the proper items, and although there are death scenes, you can immediately reverse your actions, so they're mostly there just for fun. (Try unzipping yourself in front of the overtly gay towel attendant if you want to try playing for the other team, although it will prematurely end your journey.) Overall, it's definitely one of the better games in the series.



Leisure Suit Larry: Love for Sail

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

You'd have to be naive to think that Larry truly got a happy ending with Shamara at the end of *Leisure Suit Larry 6*. She ditches him, just like all of the others, and leaves him to burn in her penthouse, which has been inadvertently set ablaze. After escaping, Larry decides to forget his worries by taking a cruise on a ship called the PMS *Bouncy*, leading to more debauchery.

The opening segments don't really bode well for the game, since it steals elements from previous *Larry* games – the whole tied-up-and-abandoned theme from back in *LSL1*, and the whole cruise thing from *LSL2*. And yet, *Love for Sail* (originally named *Yank Her's Away* during development, amidst other ridiculous names) is one of the last "true" long running adventure game series that actually manages to go out with a bang, unlike other classic Sierra titles that just kinda petered out. (Not counting the later titles by Vivendi, anyway.)

Part of the reason for this is its change in art style. *Love for Sail* follows the path of *King's Quest VII: The Princeless Bride* and *The Curse of Monkey Island* by utilizing cartoony cel-style animation for all of its characters, completely dropping any pretense of reality. It's really a shame that the point-and-click genre started to die off as technology was catching up, because this is one of its best looking games. (It also came out before 3D graphics came in and screwed things up. See also: *Gabriel Knight 3* and *Escape from Monkey Island*.) Of course, compared to *KQVII*, *Love for Sail* is far more Tex Avery than Walt Disney. The voice acting is terrific, with the actors for

Larry and the narrator reprising their roles from the sixth game, and it's the only *Larry* installment to feature a fully digitally streamed soundtrack.



Larry is a lucky, lucky man, at least in this installment.

Also, much like its direct predecessor, it succeeds by sticking to its strengths – the chick macking. Technically, the goal of the game transcends merely picking up girls – this is a particular bizarre cruise liner, which runs a contest wherein men participate in a variety of competitions. The prize? A whole week spent with Captain Thygh, the ship's bombshell helmswoman. (There are also pinup posters of her hung up around the ship, as an incentive for contestants.) Some of these include competitions that rank you based on your skill at craps, horseshoes, cooking, bowling, and love making (measured by a sex machine, apparently). Nearly all of the girls have porn-esque variations of movie star names, including Drew Baringmore, the nudist author; Jamie Lee Coitus, the artist; Dewmi Moore, who just loves a man who can gamble; Wydoncha and Nailmi Jugg, the mother/daughter country-western duo; Victorian Principles, the stuck up librarian who changes her tune once you give her a copy of *The Erotic Adventures of Hercules* (one of the many gags gently borrowed from *The Simpsons*); Annette Boning, the old mistress; and, of course, Captain Thygh. Also hanging around is the rotund, foul-mouthed pirate girl Peggie, who thankfully does not have any nude scenes.



Here is a confrontation with Drew Baringmore. Note the "trunks" that Larry is wearing.

Naturally, there's no straightforward way to win any of these trials – you need to resort to creative mischief in order to beat the system. In order to win the "Best Dressed" competition, you need to get in good with Jaime Lee Coitus, the fashion designer, who will use Larry as her model, bringing leisure suits back in style, and thus (temporarily) making you the most suave dude on the block. Also, in this game, Larry's exploits with his conquests usually work out pretty well for him, as opposed to the blue balling from *LSL3* and *6* – it's just that his clothes end up getting destroyed in the process, and he always ends up in some awkward situation when trying to sneak back to his room. It's also actually possible to strike out with some of the women, like if you fail at the game of craps with Dewmi Moore, but getting with them isn't a requirement to winning the game. Keeping with the theme of the last few games, there's no way to get stuck, and no way to be killed either. Of course, it's also still pretty damn funny – what other game can you clear a crowd by eating a bunch of bean dip then ordering your onscreen avatar to fart? Truly classy.

Once again, you're given free roam of most of the ship at the beginning, and can instantly jump to any room with the help of a handy map. Your command icon is now a condom, which inflates whenever you can interact with something. The interface has been simplified to operate with a single icon – you can click anywhere on the screen to walk, but if you click on an object, a submenu pops up that allows you look at it, pick it up, use any of your inventory items on it, or otherwise interact with it. While most other games that adopted single icon systems tended to dumb down the game, *LSL7* actually uses it to its benefit, since it's much easier to use items instead of cycling through your inventory. It also brings up context sensitive actions, depending on what you've clicked on.

In an additional throwback to the older days, you can also type in a verb, if it's not listed. The dialogue segments have expanded quite a bit too, allowing you to discuss different subjects instead of just talking to them over and over. You can also type in your own subjects of conversation too. Other than the tutorial segment at the beginning of the game, you never really need to use the text parser, but it's necessary to unlock hidden scenes and other Easter eggs. (The game also has an amusingly bizarre obsession with milking beavers.)



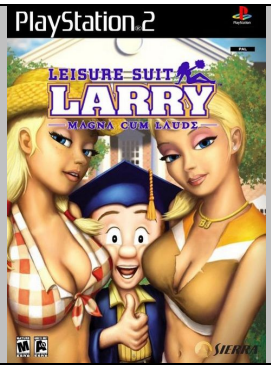
Uptight librarian Victorian Principles goes crazy on The Lovemaster 2000.

And there are a lot of secrets. Some of the previous games snuck in a quick boob flash here and there if you were persistent, but *Love for Sail* has hidden nude scenes for all of the main girls. Some of these are pretty obvious, like "push"ing a pesky branch out of the way to get an eyeful of the nudist Drew Baringmore, but some others can be a bit obtuse. As such, it's quite a bit more graphic than the previous games, although not overwhelmingly so. Winning a girl will also unlock a wallpaper for use in Windows, although they're easy enough to find on your own if you

ruffle through the game's files. There is an additional "Where's Dildo?" quest, where several striped, smiling dildos are hidden in the scenery. If you manage to find all of the Easter eggs, score the full 1000 points, and pick out all 32 dildos, you get a quick bonus movie of Larry engaged in coitus with Captain Thygh. Although it's not terribly explicit, this secret movie was officially cited as the reason why *Larry 7* did not appear on the 2006 compilation – even though it received an M rating from the ESRB originally, Vivendi felt this hidden scene would be enough to push it into AO territory.

There are also a couple of other halfway clever devices, including the ability to insert a picture of yourself in the game, which shows up as a poster. (By default, it's a pic of Al Lowe.) The retail game also includes a scratch and sniff card – at various points the "CyberSniff 2000" pops up and asks you to scratch off a certain spot, in order to fully immerse you in the experience. The disc art is actually pretty hilarious, with the spindle hole being placed in the middle of Larry's crotch, who has a rather distressed look on his face.

Love for Sail really is the epitome of the series – it looks fantastic, it's well written, it has a bunch of hidden stuff, and sidesteps any of the frustrations of most adventure games.



Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude

Initial Release Date: 2004
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation 2 / Xbox
Designer(s): Matt Entin, Edward Kuehnel
Developer: High Voltage Studios

The purchase of Sierra by Havas SA (later Vivendi Entertainment) in 1998 essentially marked the end of an era. In 1999, the original studio for Sierra was shut down, and the few old school game designers that were left were laid off. The release of *Gabriel Knight 3* in 1999 was the last adventure game published by Sierra, truly marking the end of an era. However, that didn't mean that Vivendi wasn't still interested in their IPs. In 2004, Sierra published *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*, developed by High Voltage Studios and positioned as a resurrection of the beloved series. Alas, none of the original staff, including Al Lowe, had any hand in its development.

The focus has shifted to Larry Lovage, the nephew of the infamous Larry Laffer, who makes a few cameos. The new Larry is also a huge dweeb, albeit a much younger one, who still looks up to his uncle. He's just enrolled in a community college, and has decided to join in the time honored tradition of hooking up with as many girls as possible. His ultimate goal is to make it on the hit TV dating show *Swingles*, which is shooting their latest episode on campus.

The entire game is in 3D, with fairly average polygonal models. Each of the girls looks a bit like a cross between a Barbie and a Bratz doll, with slender figures and large eyes. They actually don't look half bad, all things considered, and they're actually reasonably well animated. Larry Lovage himself closely resembles his uncle, and his hugely deformed body looks particularly bizarre next to the girls.

Since the game was primarily made for consoles, the point-and-click interface has been removed, and instead you control Larry directly. Although the basic template is present, *Magna Cum Laude* tosses out nearly all of the adventure game elements in favor of lousy minigames. Instead of solving puzzles and finding items to woo the lovely ladies, you need to lie to them, do something to impress them, and/or get them drunk, which has slightly more unpleasant undertones. All the while, you need to keep your "confidence" meter up, while imbibing enough

alcohol without getting completely drunk. Getting totally wasted allows you to go streaking, which can increase your confidence if you "win", but can also screw up your performance in some of the minigames. Throughout the game, you can also get cash by taking pictures, which can be used to purchase new outfits and other random stuff. You can also fart on pretty much anything, if you are so inclined.

The first step to get with a lady is to chat them up. Apparently the designers felt that their intended audience just wouldn't "get" dialogue trees, so instead you're presented with an interactive minigame where you need to navigate a sperm through a series of obstacles. If you manage to hit the heart icons, Larry will come up with some particularly compelling pick-up lines, but you hit the other icons, he'll say something stupid. Some of these segments are actually funny, just to hear some of the ridiculous things he comes up with, but there aren't any subtitles, and hitting some of the wrong icons will trigger burping and farting noises that tend to drown out the dialogue.



Oh, the classic "slut-up-the-innocent-girl" sequence, done here as a rhythm minigame.

From there, conquering different girls require different minigames. For some, you'll need to play a game of quarters, the classic drinking game, which here is really awkwardly implemented. Sometimes you'll need to run around the area, collecting trinkets within a certain amount time while avoiding obstacles. Some are simple "push-the-buttons" style reaction games, while you're dancing or jumping on trampolines, or putting on makeup, or engaging in weirdly kinky foreplay. There's one where you participate in wet t-shirt contest and soak girls with a water gun, as well as a rip-off of the arcade game *Tapper*. You'll usually need to play a handful of these before "winning" the girl, which gives you a quick cutscene and a token of affection. Collect enough and new areas of the campus open up, allowing you to find more girls. Of course, none of these minigames are actually any fun, and the slow, numerous loading screens just add to the aggravation. As a concession, as you proceed through the game, you can unlock new loading screens, including raunchier pictures of the main girls, or real human models dressed vaguely like the characters. (The latter seems like it was an excuse for the development team to hire a bunch of naked woman to pose in their studio.)

Compared to the previous *Larry* games, where the number of available woman tended to top out at around half a dozen, there are 16 different girls to hook up with. These include Sallie Mae, the country music loving cowgirl; Ione, the shy, bookish type who later unleashes a completely different wild side; Charlotte, the rather militant hippie-ish activist; Harriet, the crazy band camp girl; Analisa, the mob boss daughter straight out of New Jersey; Luba, the massive campus slut (who also showed up in Playboy magazine during one of their "girls of gaming" pictorials); Barbara Jo, the cheerleader; Beatrice, the smart girl scientist; Tilly, the snotty British

girl who also heads the sorority; Morgan, the nerdy computer loving, MMORPG playing chick; Bilzarbra, the African-American waitress and aspiring actress; Uma, the bitchy talk show host; and Suzi, the punk rocker girl. There are also a couple of girls, like Zanna, the hugely built Russian spy; Sweet Lou, the fat, aging convenience store worker; Koko, the mime with a hidden secret; and Zena, the stripper who you can't actually "win". Indeed, they seemed to have covered the gamut of usual stereotypes. Amidst all of the girls include a bunch of other wacky characters including The Commissar, a crazy hobo; the nefarious Dean Abrahmson, stolen from every college movie spanning from *Animal House* forward; the Porn Fairy, patterned after Ron Jeremy; and a talking, masturbating monkey.

While the actual game is completely dull, at least it's still pretty funny, even if the humor is a little bit more mean-spirited and vulgar than even the previous games, with quite a bit more profanity, since it's more aimed towards the *American Pie* crowd. There's a fountain on school grounds honoring the goddess Bukkakis, who is surrounded by four phallic spouts shooting water at her face. There's something amusing about flirting with the geek chick and suggesting that you go on a date by slaying rats in the library basement. Some of the other conversations get bizarrely surreal, especially with the aforementioned monkey, or with a sentient arcade cabinet that taunts Larry. In Larry's room, you'll even find his computer showing off screens from the mystical *Leisure Suit Larry 4: The Missing Floppies* ("the best game of its time"), which at least shows that someone of the development team was familiar with the legacy. You can also find hidden tokens which look like the "Where's Dildo?" icons from *Love for Sail.*



You can download a patch to uncensor the PC version, or use an Action Replay code for the PS2 one.

Still, it really seems lacking in certain areas, especially when you conquer the girls. When you win Sallie Mae, she sees that you're not circumcised... and then leaves, as if the very concept of a Jewish cowgirl was hilarious. When you win Analisa, you hear the radio of her mob boss father calling a hit on you, and you high tail it. When you win Luba, you inadvertently find yourself in the middle of a potential orgy and then bail out. When you win Ione, she insists that you wear a strap-on, since she's saving her virtue for a real man. (Okay, that part is kinda chuckle worthy.) Larry copes with this by strapping it on to one of her teddy bears and switching places while in the dark, which veers into the creepy side. Compared to the previous games, these just aren't funny, especially since half of them just consist of Larry getting weirded out and running away. You get "real" sex scenes with a handful of girls at the end of the game, but those really aren't funny either.

In the North American release, the game censors all lower body nudity with a little bar. It's easy to remove these with a quick hack in the PC version, or with an Action Replay for the PS2 version. (It's actually funny that this game never caused a controversy a la Hot Coffee in *Grand*

Theft Auto: San Andreas... especially considering the code is built in as a default with the Action Replay!) However, the cutscenes are still censored, since they're prerendered movie files. It was released in Europe fully uncut, and an Adults Only rated version was released worldwide via digital distribution. It's actually surprising how much detail was put in the character models, with various girls sporting different pubic hair styles to fit their personality, even if though it looks like they were just drawn on with MS Paint's "spray" function. Even scarier is the amount of detail they put into Sweet Lou, complete with hugely sagging boobs and stretch marks.



Leisure Suit Larry: Box Office Bust

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation 3 / Xbox 360
Designer(s): Paul Dunstan, Allen Covert
Developer: Team 17 Studios

Everyone thought that *Magna Cum Laude* killed the *Larry* series, but apparently Vivendi still had plans for it when they released a trailer for *Box Office Bust* in late 2007, developed by Team 17. The video parodied the Gary Jules' "Mad World" commercial for *Gears of War*, apparently showing off a new Larry that was going to be about riffing on pop culture and Hollywood films. After the merger with Activision about a year later, people assumed that *Box Office Bust* had been cancelled. And yet, in early 2009, it crept on to release lists, having apparently been rescued by Codemasters. To absolutely no one's surprise, they should've left it for dead.

Box Office Bust once again puts you in control of Larry Lovage, freshly out of college and now a tremendous loser living in a trailer. Uncle Larry Laffer, now voiced by Jeffrey Tambor, apparently has created his own movie studio, but fears that there's a mole amongst his ranks reporting business secrets to his competitor, Big Anus. Old Larry drafts Young Larry to infiltrate the ranks of his studio – first by posing as a mail boy, then later as an extra – to find the source of the leak and seal it.

Magna Cum Laude was a huge change in the formula, but with *Box Office Bust*, the apple has fallen even farther from the tree. This time around, it's an open world action-platformer, as Larry explores the studio and gets missions for different people. For the most part, these tasks involve running around to other parts of the studio, occasionally while driving a kart or under a time limit. Sometimes you'll have to scale the heights of the buildings and jump around, collecting items and such. Other times you have to get into terrible fight sequences. There are several quick time events that involve pushing the right buttons at the right times, as well as a "directing" minigame, where you choose the most appropriate shots of a scene.

While the first portion of the game takes place solely in the studio, you eventually enter three different "dream" landscapes, based on various movie tropes: "Beefcake Mountain", a typical Western; "Horror Coffin", where Larry dresses up as Michael Jackson from the "Thriller" video and fights against Dracula; and "Bytanic", with Larry taking on the role of Leo DiCaprio on the doomed boat. These provide changes in scenery, but the game's still the same – more jumping, more fighting, more racing, more fetch quests.

Pretty much every aspect of this game falls apart. The platforming is marred by slippery controls – especially when bouncing off walls – and the camera haphazardly changes angles, often sending you flying straight towards the pavement. The fighting is awkward, stilted, and

might be one of the worst implementations in any game since the PlayStation days. May God have mercy on your soul if you run out of health and need to repeat any of these missions.



Platforming? Beat-em-up sequences? What the hell is going on?

Every once in awhile, an "Employee of the Month" will become available, which means there's a girl you can try to bag. Conquering them usually requires finding a certain item and weaseling your way through a dialogue tree, after which you and your lady will disappear briefly into your trailer. This is the only moment where *Box Office Bust* even remotely channels the old games, but the whole experience is appalling for any number of reasons.

For starters? The graphics are hideous. The landscapes are okay, but the character models are routinely grotesque, with extremely malformed proportions. This is especially notable in the females, who have freakish faces and obscenely large tits. There's no nudity, but if everyone's this ugly, that's definitely for the better.



Why is this game so damned ugly?

But even worse than the appalling visuals, the awkward controls, and the boring mission designs is the extraordinarily painful writing. *Magna Cum Laude* was more vulgar than the earlier *Larry* games, but *Box Office Bust* makes that look PG-rated in comparison. Everyone tries to make jokes in every line – including Larry, who routinely talks to himself – and none of them are funny, often just relying on curse words and double entendres to get by. All of the characters

are extremely unpleasant, even though the game obviously thinks they're hilarious, like obnoxious actor Damian LeCoque (voiced by Patrick Warburton) or film executive Kip (Jay Mohr). Nikki Cox, Carmen Electra and Shannon Elizabeth also provide some voices for the girls. The "funniest" parts are the mission titles which rhyme with popular movies. How clever!

At its worst, some lines are literally just double entendres strung together with absolutely no coherence. For example:

Man: Stop playing games, girl. That move ended her career. Besides we know Sanchez is indeed involved here. Oh this Sanchez is dirty and if I have to I will smear it all over the paper.
Woman: You'll never find my Sanchez, he never leaves his mark.
Man: Oh he left his mark. I can tell you are lying. It's all over your face.

Apparently the writer, Allen Covert, works for Happy Madison Productions, but even compared against the not-quite-stellar standards of an Adam Sandler film, this is just awful.

Box Office Bust is essentially one of those subpar licensed platformers made for kids. Except, it's supposed to be aimed at adults, but the writing ensures that no one older than ten will enjoy any of the humor. It's unquestionably the worst game in the *Larry* series, supposing you even include it in the continuity. (Al Lowe was not consulted at all, and has publicly dismissed it on his web site.) It's also one of the worst games released in 2009. How shameful.

Other Larry Titles

The Laffer Utilities – PC (1994)

Around the early '90s, Sierra decided to diversify their product line to include various other types of applications. One of these was *The Laffer Utilities*, a parody of the *Norton Utilities* pack. It isn't a game at all, but rather a collection of "useful" tools featuring Larry. Some of these include a phone book, an office pool organizer, a screen saver, various forms and fax covers, and a joke generator. Since it was developed from Windows 3.1, many of its functions are very basic and the pictures are only 16 colors. It's hardly worth paying any more for it by itself – and this was true even back when it first came out – but it's packed on a few collections just for curiosity's sake.

Leisure Suit Larry's Casino – PC (1993) **/ Larry's Casino –** PC (1998)

There are actually two completely separate releases of *Larry's Casino*. The first one is part of the *Nick's Picks* budget line, and just includes standalone versions of the casino minigames from *Leisure Suit Larry 1 VGA* and *Leisure Suit Larry 6*. The second release, published on CD-ROM in 1998, is technically the last *Larry* game produced with Al Lowe's involvement. You can choose to play as one of a few characters from *Love for Sail*, in addition to Cavaricchi from *LSL6*. In addition to a quick map, you can also explore the casino with a first person view, although they're just static pictures. The game includes Blackjack, Poker, Craps and Roulette, each with several different rule sets. A bulk of the content was created for Sierra's WON (World Opponent Network) service through the internet, but that's long been shut down. There would have been options to sit down and chat with other gamers, buy them virtual drinks, give them gifts, or even hold virtual weddings in a chintzy wedding chapel.

If you run out of money in online mode, you would've needed to play party games like billiards with other people in order to rack up more dough. According to the manual, this was done to give more stakes on your virtual moolah, to increase the excitement of gambling, since you never actually use any real money. In offline mode, however, they'll simply replenish your cash when you run out. As you get more cash, you can upgrade to more expensive hotel rooms. There's also a Cyberlarry 2000 machine in your hotel room which tells jokes. Other than the

constantly-playing *Larry* theme song, there's very little of the usual humor, and not much reason to play it beyond any other simple casino sim, especially since the online functions are nerfed.

Leisure Suit Larry: Love For Sail – Mobile (2007)

Despite the name, the mobile version of *Love For Sail* isn't really related to the PC game from several years prior. It was most likely released to help promote *Magna Cum Laude*, but unlike that game, this mobile title is a graphic adventure that stays a bit closer to the series' roots. The story begins when Larry is summoned to a beach resort for a work retreat, where he meets various different girls and finds various different ways to "relax". The viewpoint is overhead with entirely sprite-based 2D graphics. The interface had to be changed to accommodate the mobile platform, so you need to move next to items or people, and then cycle through commands to interact with them. Larry also walks pretty slowly, so getting from place to place is time consuming. There are a total of seven chapters, in addition to the prologue, so beating the whole game will take at least a few hours.

When stacked up to other *Larry* titles, it obviously falls flat on its face. It feels extremely juvenile – not in the same goofy, immature manner as the other games, but it really almost seems like it's aimed towards kids. In addition to the cartoonish art style, the writing is very simplistic, almost on a grade school level, to the point where it doesn't feel like it was written in native English. The puzzles, too, are very, very easy, and the humor never really ventures beyond PG-related territory, other than some vague innuendos and promises of hooking up. And it's not really all that funny either. But at the same time, it's hard to hate it – despite its simplicity, it's a rare mobile title that doesn't suck, because it doesn't rely on any action, and its intentions are at least in the right place. It also features a few cameos by Ken and Roberta Williams, as well as Al Lowe as a "Big Guy" who constantly gets in Larry's way. A lot of the characters are references to pop culture, too, like the *Baywatch* rip-offs on the beach, or Peter Graves' character from *Airplane*.

Leisure Suit Larry: Kühle Drinks und Heiße Girls – PC (2004)

This strange title, translated as *Cool Drinks and Hot Girls*, was only released in Germany and was created by a company called Phenomedia. It's a collection of three Flash-based minigames featuring the characters from *Magna Cum Laude*. *Babewatch* puts in the role of a waiter/lifeguard on a beach, as you need to fetch drinks or ice cream for your customers. After helping them, they'll ask you to lather them with lotion, after which you'll get a "date!" increasing your score. Every once in awhile, you'll also need to rescue someone out in the water, which will also get you a date.

In *Bar Wars*, you need to serve your customers by grabbing either beer or coffee, serving it to them, cleaning out the glasses, and repeating. As they get drunker, soon they start getting rowdy and taking their tops off before collapsing. Both of these are controlled with the keyboard, although the movement takes place on an isometric plane, making it very hard to control. *Nightwatch* is actually a ripoff of an old Flash game called *Ya Ya XX*. You play in a dark room filled with woman, and as one of them peeks up from the covers, you click on them for a quick bit of lovin'. In other words, it's more or less just like Whack-a-Mole but with chicks. Hidden amongst the beautiful girls is also the fat, ugly one, which will actually deduct points from your score. As one might expect, these are all pretty bad, and it's amazing that anyone anywhere expected people would pay money for these.

Leisure Suit Larry: Bikini Beach Volleyball – Mobile (2004)

This is one is a bit more shameless. Larry is apparently coaching a team of all-female volleyball players. At the beginning, there are only two girls to choose from, but as you continue to play,

you get more cash to unlock new girls, each of whom have different skills. The art style is far more anime inspired than previous games, with big eyes, wildly colored hair, and variations of DDD-sized boobs. Strangely, all of the girls look identical during play.

The actual game is painfully simplistic. You don't control the players directly – instead, there's a tiny action bar at the bottom of the screen that pops up whenever you serve, defend, or spike. If you hit it in the middle, you'll pull off the action perfectly – if not, you'll potentially flub it. That's pretty much the whole game. Serving is very easy, but trying to defend or spike is unnecessarily hard, because you need to pay attention to when the action meter pops up. The meter randomly starts on different parts of the bar, so sometimes everything will happen too quickly to let you react.

There's also a "massage" minigame where you follow arrows on screen, which increases the "heart" meter of the girl. It's more of a groping simulator, although one supposes that the difference between this and SNK's infamous *Doki Doki Majou Shinpan* is that the girls here are on the safer side of legal. At any rate, much like the game itself, all girls look identical, except for the portrait at the top of the screen. Anyway, it's all terribly exploitive and not very fun, and Larry himself barely interacts with the game other than popping up to chide his players, or promise "rewards" to them. Ugh.

Leisure Suit Larry's Sexy Pinball – Mobile (2004)

Leisure Suit Larry's Sexy Pinball is a pretty standard pinball game for mobile phones. There's only a single table, which scrolls about two screens vertically. One of the ramps is a condom, some of the bumpers look like boobs, and racking up points will slowly strip the cartoon girl in the center of the screen. Larry Lovage only barely appears, reclining in a Speedo as seen in some of the *Magna Cum Laude* promo artwork.

Cameos

Larry pops up in several other Sierra games, of course. He appears in his *LSL2* form at the police station in *Police Quest II*, and his great-great-great-etc grandfather makes an appearance in *Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist*, another Al Lowe game. There is also a single pinball table, based off *LSL5*, included in *Take a Break Pinball,* which featured several themed tables from other Sierra titles.

Cancelled Games

Several *Larry* titles have been planned over the years, and ultimately canned. Other than the infamous *Larry 4*, there was originally a game meant to follow *Love for Sail*, dubbed *Leisure Suit Larry 8: Lust in Space*, as advertised in *Larry's Casino*. Alas, Sierra's main adventure game studio was closed before this could come to pass. There were a few other titles planned by Vivendi to coincide with the release of *Magna Cum Laude*, include a portable title tentatively named *Leisure Suit Larry: Cocoa Butter*. There was also an N-Gage game called *Leisure Suit Larry: Pocket Party*, which would have contained several minigames.

Interview with Al Lowe



Al Lowe, a high school teacher and accomplished jazz musician, began dabbling with computer programming on his Apple II. His early efforts caught the eye of the fledging Sierra On-Line, who employed him to develop a few games based on Disney properties. In addition to working as a programmer on *Police Quest I* and *King's Quest III*, he invented *Leisure Suit Larry,* creating one of the first computer games specifically for adults. His website, **http://www.allowe.com**, includes tons of documentation and trivia, in addition to lots of other funny stuff.

What are some of your other favorite adventures games? Are there any other designers or writers whose work you admire?

Obviously Roberta [Williams] and Scott Murphy and Jane [Jensen] and all those guys, all the Sierra buddies. But from other things, I was struck by *Loom*. I thought Loom was a great adventure game, partly because I'm a musician and it's a very musical game, and I was sympathetic to it. So Brian Moriarty, Steve Meretzky, who did *Spellcasting*, I was a big fan of his. And Ron Gilbert! I wrote the kind of games I'd like to play, so therefore the game I like to play are like my games! That's why they were honest. A big part of today's games is that they're produced in factories by Artist #132, you don't have a chance to see much personality. But obviously there are some great exceptions to that.

There was this widespread story that a bootlegged copy of *Leisure Suit Larry* had spread a virus around the globe, leading to its infamy – how true was that?

Well, it was commonly true of a lot of games back then that were bootlegged. Before the internet was common, it was much more difficult to spread viruses so people made them attractive by embedding them into games. But I've heard exactly that story. I've never seen a bootleg myself, but we never really traded in that material.

The reason I ask is, in *Space Quest IV*, the main bad guy, Sludge Vohaul spread himself through a virus, which happens to be called "LSL IV".

No, the first *Larry* game was the one that was commonly accused of spreading the virus. So yeah, no, nothing else.

One of the most amusing aspects of Sierra games were the death sequences. Whenever I'd describe Larry to my friends, I'd tell them that it was only game where you could die of an STD. What were some of your favorite death scenes?

Which DEATHS was I most proud of? I never looked at it as that. What I did was try to spoof the way we killed people. And thus, In *Larry 1*, I had your dead body crumple to the ground and get lowered to a subterranean factory where new characters were assembled on an assembly line. And that was the silliest thing I could do to make up for all the killing we did. I don't know if any of them were particular favorites, to me, they were always a sign that I hadn't done something right. If I had done the game properly and you had enough clues, you should be able to finish the game without dying. To me dying was more of an error message than a positive element.

So, I've never tried it, but there's a time limit in *Leisure Suit Larry*, that if you don't win the game fast enough he kills himself. That's... pretty dark!

Oh yeah! Yeah, well, he's a failure! We used to do all kinds of stuff back then. We really didn't know how to design a game, there were no classes to take, there was no major in college, there was none of that stuff. We were kinda making that shit up as we went along, nobody knew what to do! A lot of times we had to kill because we couldn't figure out anything else to do. I even made a joke out of that in the first *Larry*, if you walked off the screen as if you're going into another area... I don't have an area out there! So I just killed you, I had a mugger come out a dark area and kill you! Eventually as games progressed we learned how to design a game that didn't have dead ends or didn't make you restore.



Don't let morning come in the AGI version of Leisure Suit Larry or else...

History has looked upon old Sierra games as being sort of arcane, with lots of insta-deaths and unwinnable situations. It's been exaggerated, I feel, but beginning with *LSL5* and *6*, it felt like your games were ahead of the curve in making them more user-friendly. Was Sierra cognizant of the criticism toward these games, and were there any internal initiatives inside the company to address them?

Well, you're giving far too much credit! Lemme say it this way – I believe we had one meeting where all of the designers got into one room and talked, but that was the end of the formal exchange of knowledge. And that was right towards the end – it was very, very late. So, no, it was all just individuals working on games. I wanted to write a game that my buddies would enjoy. We would show it to our buddies, the other designers and testers and so forth, and that's all the feedback we ever got. People didn't write letters, they sure as hell didn't write e-mail. There was very little feedback other than sales, and we knew that some sold better than others. But as far as market research, we didn't even know what that meant! Once in a while I'd go to a usergroup, later on I'd sign autographs on press tours and junkets, but even then I'd only talk to people in the business, reporters and magazine editors and so forth. So we had very little contact with the people who played them.

For games that are all about sex, usually the *Larry* games weren't all that explicit. If you were going to sell an adult product, why not go all out?

Well, the dichotomy was between the marketing department and me and management. Ken Williams ran the company and we used to tease him that his organization chart was two levels

deep and about 180 people wide, because, it was like, everybody just kinda reports to Ken! So, I would talk with Ken, and he'd say, "Go ahead, make it really dirty, do whatever you want, it's fun!" And then when it would get closer to shipping, he'd say, "I don't know if we could do that!" Dammit, Ken! So, eventually I'd learned that I just wouldn't make it so dirty that it would scare him. But then it would go to John Williams, Ken's little brother, who ran the marketing department. He was just a genius back then at selling. So John would put it in a hot pink, purple box and make it out like there was this really nasty thing inside, and it really wasn't. We just didn't really do that. It was much more of marketing and sales wanting to make it more risqué.

But then we ran into trouble because back at the time Radio Shack was a third of all computer software sales. So we had to do business with them, except the head of Radio Shack was this born-again Christian who put The Fear into his staff. So when they would check out new products they were afraid to even have us ship them a *Larry* game, that someone might catch them with it, let alone play it or approve of it. So, when we went to sell the first *Larry* game, we cut off a third of our market. There were no sales from Radio Shack, no marketing and no sales money. It was all word of mouth. It was viral before that term was even known. All the sales started out really bad and grew month after month after month. I have a chart on my wall from July 18th, 1988, which was 13 months after the game shipped, and it's #3 with a bullet, that it's still rising on the chart after 53 weeks. It's just amazing to think how the marketplace has changed.



Other than some occasional boob flashes, the Larry games rarely got racier than this.

How much budget was average for these games and how many units would it take to be considered successful?

50,000 units was pretty good, about what the casual market is today, maybe even less. 50,000 units was break-even probably, 100,000 units was good stuff. I got a software publisher's award for selling 100,000 units of games, and 250,000 was considered a gold record. But nobody ever sold a million. Now the opening day sales are a million.

The budget for the first *Larry* game was almost zero. The company was really hurting for cash at that time, and Ken said, "If you don't take any advances on this, I could give you a great big percentage." "Ok," I said, "but I gotta have an artist." And so there were only three or four artists that could use the tools we had because they were proprietary. One of them was a devout Christian, and one of them was something, I don't know, so as it turned out, there were only

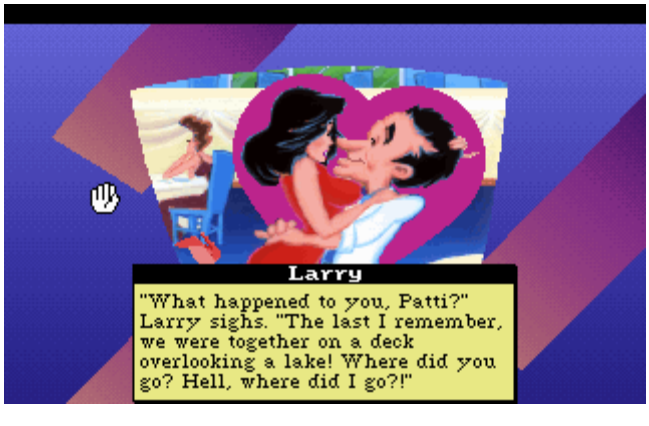
really one or two people that would be the whole staff. So they went to Mark Crowe who was working full time on *Space Quest* and said to Mark, "Look, we don't want you to stop working on *Space Quest*. But if you could do Al's games on evenings and weekends, we could give you a big percentage of the money." So both of us did it free, on speculation that it would make money for us. And of course when it shipped, it was the worst-selling game in the history of Sierra because people were scared of it. Stores were scared of it because it was so dirty and nasty and there weren't any nasty games out there. And it was set in the modern time and it wasn't a space game or swords and sandals, it was modern day with real people. So it looked like a horrible bust. But every month the sales doubled and it turned out Mark and I did real well on the project because we took all risk and we ended up getting a big chunk of the reward.

The *Larry* games can be split down to two types: The story-driven ones, and the ones that are more non-linear where Larry's goal is just to hook up with chicks. What are the pros and cons of this type of structure?

I think it's whatever people enjoy playing. I think there's a different audience for each one. You gotta know I was leaning how to do this as I went. I didn't know how to do any of this stuff. For example *Larry 2* I knew it was going to be multiple floppies so I designed each level to fit on one floppy disk, so you would go from place to place and never go back. I heard so many people complain about having to change floppies so many times to play these games. By the time *Larry 3* came out almost everyone had a hard drive. So we said, we'd make it easy on the people with hard drives and not design around what we could fit on a floppy. So it was all a learning experience for us. I didn't really feel I knew what I was going until *Larry 7*. On *Larry 7*, I felt I could make it funny and make it interesting and do things people hadn't done before.

So what actually happened to Passionate Patti?

I got bored with her! I tried it for a game, and it was interesting and fun. I didn't think it was that powerful, and sharing the protagonist didn't seem too much of a big deal. A lot of the reviewers didn't make a big deal out of it. So I figured, why am I doing this? It's a lot harder! So I figured, why not do it the old way and went back to just Larry.



LSL5 has an amusingly cartoony art style.

The design documents on your website mention a "Suicide Man" in *LSL5*. What was the deal with him?

God, I don't even remember that!

There was a little comment that said, well, we're probably never going to use it. But apparently it was a running gag that, since Larry couldn't die, there would be some guy in the background...

To commit suicide for you! That was a funny idea. We hadn't done one of those before. You have to understand, I don't know how other people do these things, but me, I would create long lists of settings and characters and plot devices and animations and music and all the things I wanted in this game. And evidently Suicide Man was on that list, but he got cut. I'm sure I must've cut at least 2/3rds of all the stuff we came up with. If you put in everything you think of, it's not gonna be a good game. So we decided to think of a lot of stuff, and eliminate 2/3rds of what wasn't so good.

The design document for *Larry 5* also mentioned a CD-ROM version. I know a few others were planned, like for *Space Quest V* and *Conquests of the Longbow*. What happened to those?

We were in a transitional period where we thought that everybody was gonna buy a CD-ROM, but they didn't take off that fast, they were still very expensive. To us, it was obvious, it was so much better. But there were all of these old computers out there that people weren't replacing, and new consumers would go, wow, $600 for a CD drive and there's nothing that runs on it? And eventually when it got down to $100, they'd be, yeah, put it on a CD. But we didn't know when that would hit. We were planning CD support but that was a little early. *Larry 6* didn't even ship on CD at first. We just didn't have the time before Christmas.



One of the missing girls from LSL6 as featured in the calendar.

Whatever happened to "Frau Milchlieb" in *LSL6*? There are a few other girls shown in the calendars on your web site that didn't appear in the game, why were they cut?

That's because we wanted to ship on time. Frau Milchlieb was a play on the German wine, Liebfraumilch. We originally intended to have more girls, there were two more. About June or July, we had a realization we weren't gonna make Christmas. That was my goal, to never miss Christmas. We had to be done by Halloween to get in stores by Black Friday. Roberta [Williams] didn't seem to mind and Jane [Jensen] always shipped late, but me, because I didn't get paid until we shipped, my goal was to get it out there in time for the prime shopping season. So, it was literally a matter of, we've got a couple more quests for these girls, we could shuffle things around, and ended up saving a couple of backgrounds and bunch of animation, and that was expensive at the time. It took days and weeks to create things, there was no Flash, and there were no animation editors. Those guys worked their butts off to get those little amounts of animations we had.

Beyond the obvious ones in *LSL7*, where there any famous women or models that inspired any characters in the other *Larry* games?

Um, no. I think the artists tended to ask me for a description of how I saw the person and asked for examples for famous people. But then they would go by characteristics from them rather than copying any particular person. Like all artists they'd use source material and things to look at as reference material. But no, not really.

There's got to be some kind of story behind the whole "milking beavers" recurring bit in *Love for Sail.*

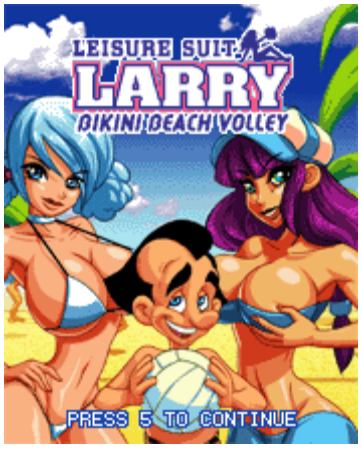
laughs I always tried put as many double entendres as I could think of. It caught me as funny!

One of the songs on the soundtrack is called "Venezuelan Beaver Milk"...

I can't remember why we called it that. It was interesting to design that kind of game and make it funny. It takes a lot of humor and a lot of stuff people don't ever see. Very few people got through and saw everything that's in those games, because you just miss stuff. I had stuff hidden everywhere I could. I was always unsure that the games were funny, I never felt confident so I would keep throwing in jokes and smartass comments, anything I thought might bring a laugh.

You've been outspoken on your dislike for *Magna Cum Laude*. Have you played *Box Office Bust*? It's completely reprehensible.

I have not played it. I'm still waiting for a complimentary copy. It got the second or third worst reviews of the year from many sites, right on the bottom of the heap. So if they're not gonna send me a copy, I'm not gonna pay $30 for it.



Vivendi has done some truly horrifying thing with Leisure Suit Larry.

How about the mobile phone pinball or beach volleyball games?

There's a beach volleyball game?!? Who did that and when did that come out?

I don't know, I don't think it was on any American carriers, I think it was in Europe or something. It's really strange, you don't actually play as Larry, but instead he's just like

a pimp, surrounded by anime girls with DDD chests. There are these minigames where you can rub sunscreen on their backs.

It's the first I've heard of it. It sounds... well, it could be funny, I guess. It's all in the execution. I can't tell you how many e-mails [which say:], I've got a great idea for a game. Ideas are nothing.

A lot of Sierra games, even up until *LSL6*, addressed players in the second person. Was that to stay close to their text adventure roots, to make the player feel they were Larry?

Absolutely. That was one of the things I was religious about. I just insisted on that. Everybody knew if I wrote something and I didn't do that, they were supposed to tell me and I'd fix it. My whole point is that you needed to feel like that character on the screen. That's why I always insisted that I referred to the play as "you", as like "you did this" and "you died", just because I felt it made the player feel more involved.

That's one thing I always liked about Sierra games, they always had narrators to the point they were basically characters in themselves.

You guys ask me a lot, "Are you Larry?" And I say, "No, I'm the narrator, Larry's the punk ass getting beaten up, I'm the smartass in the background making comments!"

Sierra was very big on making "auteurs" out of their developers, putting their names and pictures on the packages. Why don't publishers do that anymore?

Yeah, why is that?

I see it every once awhile, like a few Japanese companies. Some Americans will do it for certain games, but won't put their name on it. Like gamers know Ken Levine for *Bioshock*, but it's not actually called Ken Levine's Bioshock on the box. People know Sid Meier...

See, Sid caught on way early. I convinced Roberta to put her name on the box and on the title because I knew that if... well, first of all, she's sleeping with the president of the company, so she could get it to happen! But if she could get her name on the cover then I could get my name on the cover! I felt like it was important that there was somebody behind these things, that they were created by people. So then Sid did it and so did others. But it never caught on the way I thought it should've. Perhaps it's because there's so many committees that design games that there's no one auteur, to use your words, that does things anymore.

I always thought it helped to identify someone with a game. When people criticize adventure games, they say it feels like you're profiling the game designer, which isn't far from the truth. It was true especially with something like *Police Quest*, where it almost felt like you got to know Jim Walls by the end. I'd be scared as hell if he'd pulled me over...

And rightfully so!

You should've seen *Police Quest I* when I got onto the project. Oh my God. Ken assigned Jim to a programmer, and the programmer was a nice guy, but he was just not a real hard worker, and wasn't really into adventure games, I guess. So after 12 months on the job, they finally looked at the game and said, this sucks, this isn't working! I had finished *Larry 1*, and they said, "Can you bail out these guys?" I said sure and went over, and what I realized was that Jim had written up

this entire story, the programmer had implemented it, but without any of the things Jim didn't think of, therefore it was impossible to play! Jim knew the story and knew all the rules and what were you supposed to do, and the programmer had only put in the stuff that Jim had specified would happen. It was the most bizarre to game to play, because you'd get to a situation and say, what would I do? And Jim has this great wealth of knowledge of police work and he'd say, it's obvious! Well, it's obvious to you, because you'd been trained as a police officer! Nobody else is gonna figure that out! So the big project that summer was to go through and come up with any kind of hints, some kind of dialogue and radio commands that would enable you to figure out what the hell you were supposed to be doing.

The *Freddy Pharkas* demo, as well as *Space Quest 6*, offered a whole new scenario that wasn't in the final game. Was that created specifically for the demo or was it originally intended to be part of the game.

No, it was specifically made that way for the demo. We weren't sure how to sell games, and so we tried different things. For a long time demos were merely the first part of the game, and then would just delete all of the rest of the data so you couldn't go any farther, so you had the buy the game. But at some point we said, maybe we should make demos a more important thing. This is back at a time when people would walk into computer stores and there would be a machine running with games on it and you'd be able to see the new titles and play them a bit in the store. That's totally foreign to anyone under the age of 30. So you would cater to that kind of crowd. One of the most successful campaigns we did was to put videos and we'd put video players at one point and let a video loop around, back before we could play a video on a computer. So we tried everything we could think of to get anyone's attention.

The custom designed demo was just that. Basically the demos came around as the artists and programmers and musicians would finish their sections of the project at different times. So we would use the artist to create something for the demo. And after I had all the writing done and was in the process of putting everything together, then I would have time to work on the demo. We'd try to use a lot of characters and use animations we had already. So we tried a lot of different things.

Aspects of *Torin's Passage* always reminded me of *The Black Cauldron*, which you'd worked on the game adaptation of years before. Was this a conscious effort?

Oh, sure! Ken wanted a game series that would be able to alternate with *King's Quest*. When they got too big to do one a year, Roberta would do one every other year and he wanted a family game at Christmas. And I said, I'd do an alternative to *King's Quest*. My goal was to make it so a child and an adult could play together. So they'd laugh at different times. So it was it was influenced by *King's Quest*.

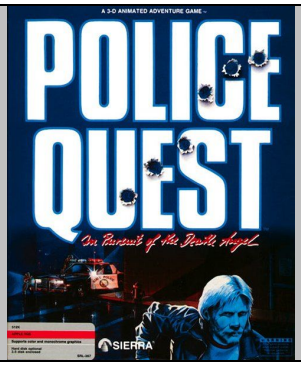
It wasn't until a long time after the game shipped, that someone said, "Do you realize that you named your character Torin and the lead character in *The Black Cauldron* was named Taran?" I didn't even remember that, but it was like 15 years earlier! I didn't remember that stuff. I get a lot of e-mail that says "I'm stuck here, I don't know what to do." You're asking me? I can't remember, it's been 20 years!

Police Quest

In 1986, Sierra founder Ken Williams met Jim Walls, a California police officer. Jim had recently retired, partially as a result of a traumatic shoot out. Ken found this exciting – he wanted to expand his line of adventure games beyond fantasy-oriented titles like *King's Quest* and *Space Quest*, so he made Jim an offer – to design a game based on his experiences in the police force, and try to make it as realistic as possible. Thus, *Police Quest* was conceived.

Police Quest is a bit different from Sierra's other series, and indeed, most adventure games in general. Since the game takes place in the real world, the "puzzle" solutions involve following proper police procedure rather than lateral thinking. As a patrolman, you chase down speeders, write tickets, and haul in drunk drivers. As a detective, you'll spend more time taking samples of evidence than MacGuyvering different items (for the most part – this rule is occasionally violated). This down-to-earth approach has given it the reputation of being a somewhat strict, droll experience, one that's more focused on following rules than doing anything fun. To an extent, that's true – there are some exciting parts, but sometimes the game takes too long to get to them. And sometimes it goes overboard with the rules, like a part in *Police Quest 2*, where you need to press the traffic signal button before crossing a street every single time or else you'll get run over by a car. But as the series progressed, it eventually drifted away from boring stuff and fell into the groove of an '80s cop movie, even if the writing was never more than adequate.

The series has had a bit of a bumpy history, though. Jim Walls left Sierra around *Police Quest 3*, with Daryl Gates, former Los Angeles police chief, replacing him as a consultant. This began a marked shift in tone for the series. The next entry focused entirely on SWAT tactics in a full motion video-based game, and then moved further away from its adventure game roots by turning it into a real time strategy game. By the time *SWAT 3* rolled around, the series had morphed into a tactical first person shooter, bearing almost no resemblance to the games that spawned it.



Police Quest: In Pursuit of the Death Angel

Initial Release Date: 1987
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Apple II / Apple IIGS / Atari ST
Designer(s): Jim Walls
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The city of Lytton, California used to be such a nice place – good people, clean streets, and safe neighborhoods. Time has not been kind to it, however, and a burgeoning criminal element has taken to the streets, increasing both violent crime and drug usage. It's under these conditions that Sonny Bonds, of the Lytton Police Department, takes up the badge and enforces the law. Though he begins as a regular patrolman, he's eventually promoted to a detective in the Narcotics department, and spearheads the investigation to take down the city's drug kingpin – Jessie Bains, AKA The Death Angel.

Police Quest is a bit different in the way it approaches its problem solving – rather than obtuse inventory puzzles, practically every obstacle can be overcome by following proper police procedure. Some of these make perfect logical sense – don't handcuff a perpetrator from the front, don't let pretty blondes try to flirt their way out of a traffic ticket, and don't bring your firearm into the prison when processing a detainee. You also have to remember to radio for

help when necessary and don't randomly shoot people without cause, unless you want to get reviewed by Internal Affairs. There are, on the other hand, some potential snags, to make sure that you're reading the manual. If you don't fully inspect your patrol car when you pull out of the station, you're asking for a flat tire, at least in the AGI version. (Which, for some reason or another, leads to a Game Over.)



This crash scene begins Sonny's pursuit of the Death Angel (AGI Version).

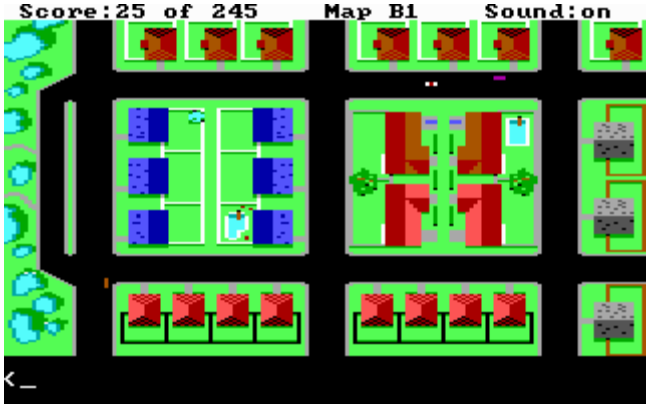
So on one hand, *Police Quest* is far more straightforward than the typical adventure game of the era. But on the other hand, it's really just kind of... boring. The first half of the game is just investigating accidents and watching for traffic violations. Referring to the manual is required for practically everything, including interpreting radio dispatch codes and booking prisoners. It gets a bit more interesting once you start interrupting drug busts and going undercover into criminal hideouts, but even then, the whole thing boils down to procedure, procedure, procedure. If there's any game that could potentially crush a kid's action hero dreams of being a policeman, it's this one.



Dealing with unruly citizens is all part of the job. (SCI version)

Like most of Sierra's earlier games, *Police Quest* comes in two flavors – the original 1987 AGI release and the updated 1991 SCI release. Fundamentally they follow the same plot, but the SCI release is obviously much nicer to look at and easier to navigate. Some minor things have changed, like the names of certain locations and characters, and some puzzles have been altered

too. For some reason, taking a shower is now mandatory in the SCI version, whereas it just gave you extra points before. When booking suspects in the AGI version, all you had to do was type in the charge, but in the SCI version you need to look up numerical violation codes in the manual. And some other puzzles have been simplified – in the AGI version you need to convince a judge to give you a no bail warrant by showing a perpetrator's file, then by showing an FBI poster and noting they have the exact same tattoo. In the SCI version, you only need to show him the file. At the end of the game, you need to go undercover and play a game of poker with the Death Angel. This is a fairly long (and annoying) minigame in the AGI version, but the SCI one lets you skip it.



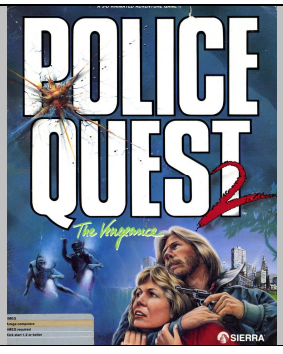
The driving scenes in the original release are incredibly unrealistic.

Each version features drastically different driving segments, too. A good chunk of *Police Quest* is spent in these birds-eye view scenes, as you cruise around the streets of Lytton in your patrol car. In the AGI version, you directly control your car, which is maybe three pixels in size. It's pretty far from realistic, considering you can immediately turn around simply by pressing the arrow keys in the opposite direction. In these scenes, you need to stay on the narrow roads and watch out for cars, as bumping into anything will cause immediate death. You also need to watch for traffic signals, because running a red light without your siren on is an offense which will immediately end your game.

The SCI version revamps this to make it much simpler. You don't directly control your car, but instead, it runs on autopilot, and you just control your blinkers to indicate when you want to turn. But even when you click on the "gas pedal" icon to speed up, your car still moves remarkably slowly, and getting from one side of the town to the other takes far, far too long. It's also possible to miss turns, and since you can't turn around on the spot, you need to run around the whole block to get to your intended destination. Occasionally, the red "stop" icon will also light up, requiring that you hit the "brake" icon before you get to an intersection. If you don't, you'll crash and a message will say, calmly, "You die." It will then politely restart you a few seconds before your crash, so you can't actually get killed in these segments at all. At least this version lets you look at the buildings and street names to get a bearing on your surroundings. The AGI version, on the other hand, requires that you refer to the map bundled in the packaging. This redesigned system acknowledges that the original version was a pain, but instead of being really frustrating, now it's just really boring.

The writing and dialogue has been greatly expanded in the SCI version, but most of it is quite clichéd and a bit silly. There's some pretty ridiculous stuff in both versions, like Sonny's high school-crush-turned-prostitute, who acts as an informant, or the hot-headed police sergeant whose office is terrorized by a chicken. And although you get a partner once you transfer to narcotics, she mostly just says "good luck!" and then saunters out of the room,

leaving you to your own devices. She shows up later to help with a bust or two, but her involvement is extremely minimal. In the end, though, the VGA version is mostly preferable. The character designs (mullets and large, frizzy hair abound!), the cheesy *Miami Vice*-style soundtrack, and the "war on drugs" alarmism all distinctly date the game as a product of the late '80s/early '90s. While unintentionally goofy, this keeps the whole experience from becoming too droll.



Police Quest 2: The Vengeance

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC / PC-98
Designer(s): Jim Walls
Developer: Sierra On-Line

It's been one year after Sonny has put Jessie Bains beyond bars. He's continued his career as a detective, and helped Marie, the hooker from the first game, turn her life around. With things going all too well, it's only natural that something will go wrong. Bains has escaped from prison and begun murdering the people that put him behind bars in the first place. That includes Sonny, of course... and also his dear Marie.



Police Quest 2 features a climactic battle in the sewers. Beware of toxic fumes!

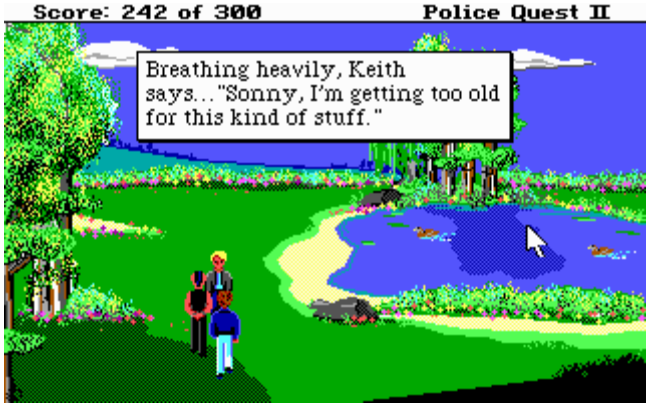
Police Quest 2 fixes both of the major snags from the first game. For starters, you're a detective at the outset, sidestepping all of the boring patrol stuff. And secondly, the driving segments are completely gone. All you need to do is enter your car, type in your destination, and you're off. Throughout the whole game, you're on the tail of Bains, looking over crime scenes for evidence, taking blood samples, running license plate numbers, and reporting in with the lab for analysis. It's quite a bit more involving – and far more interesting – than anything that happened in the first game. At one point, you even get to put on a diving suit and screen the bottom of a lake to look for clues. It also uses the more advanced SCI0 engine.

Although there are specific things you need to uncover to advance, finding all of the evidence isn't even really mandatory, and surprisingly, the game lets you proceed without any

major penalty even if you miss them, without any threat of a dead end. You'll miss out on points, obviously, and get reamed out by your superiors for not following proper procedures, but you can still beat the game. Sierra tried this approach with a few other later games, most notably *The Colonel's Bequest* and *Leisure Suit Larry 5*. It didn't quite work in either of those instances, because it was too easy to stumble through them without having any real clue of what you were supposed to be doing. With the investigative procedures outlined the manual, you have more of an idea of what you missed, at least, and replaying the game with a keener attention to detail makes it more fulfilling. It is easy to miss stuff though, especially when important details like blood splatters are nearly indistinguishable from the scenery due to the 16 color palette.

While most of the tedium from the first game has been eliminated, there are still some aggravating issues, especially when dealing with your crime scene equipment. Every time you visit a new location, you need to open the trunk, get the kit, close the trunk, use the kit, open the trunk again, drop the kit in, and close the trunk. This wouldn't be so bad if the proximity detection wasn't so sketchy, as you're repeatedly told to position yourself exactly over and over. This causes a specific problem when you need to open a door without getting killed by a bomb blast. Get too far away, try to open it, and you'll be told to move closer. Get closer, try again, and you'll get killed, at least until you find the sweet spot that the game expects.

You also need to recalibrate your gun properly. You can only do this by heading to the firing range, testing it out on targets, then fiddling with the settings and retrying until the game tells you it's fine. You need to do this twice at various points throughout, or else you'll get end up getting killed when you need it the most, one of the few times you can find yourself in unwinnable situations. It's also a slightly tedious process, although it's kinda funny to enter the firing range without wearing ear protection, causing near permanent deafness, or firing your gun without taking it out of your holster, causing you to shoot yourself in the foot.



Famous last words.

There's more of an '80s cop movie vibe going on, as Sonny is accompanied by a mustachioed partner who'll make occasional wisecracks, although he's functionally useless during investigations. These light-hearted moments are fairly sparse, though, as *Police Quest 2* is a much darker game than its predecessor. At one point you'll even need to defuse a bomb on a plane, although this is one of the game's biggest narrative flaws. During a flight, it'll get hijacked by terrorists, which are the typical turban-wearing types from the Middle East, which has absolutely nothing to do with the Bains case. It's just there as an excuse to snip different colored wires, and, of course, more scenes where you need to be quick on the trigger finger.

Police Quest is a series that's been lost in the shuffle compared to other Sierra games, but if there's any one title that deserves attention, it's this one. It's well-paced, fairly exciting, and more interesting than any of the others, and something of an overlooked classic.

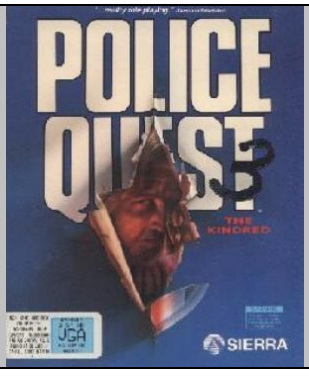


The chief in Police Quest II gets a makeover. Top: Original. Bottom: Japanese

Back in the late '80s, Ken Williams, president of Sierra On-Line, made a trip to Japan to license some of their PC games for North American release. He brought back the likes of *Zeliard*, *Sorcerian*, *Silpheed*, and *Thexder*. Around the same time, a handful of the company's adventure titles were ported to Japanese PCs, including *King's Quest V*, *Space Quest IV*, *Quest for Glory I* (the original version, not the remake), and *Police Quest II*. *King's Quest* and *Space Quest* suffered the most because they needed to be downgraded from 256 VGA graphics to the 16-color (but higher resolution) Japanese PC display. However, other than the technical issues and the translations, most of these games were identical to their American counterparts. Except *Police Quest II*, anyway.

In the usual fear that the realistic-ish graphics of the original version would be off putting to Japanese gamers, this port redraws the characters in a manga style. Sonny Bond, previously a milquetoast clean cut blond guy, now has ridiculous green hair. There aren't many close-ups, but you can plainly see the larger, rounder eyes in most of the characters, too. These are especially amusing in the mugshot profiles you find in the computer database that are used for copy protection. Jesse Bains, the villain, now has blue hair! The character sprites have been slightly altered, but not by much. Sonny has a few extra pixels of hair, and the stereotypical hardass police sergeant now has a purple afro for some reason. They even turned the pin-up girl poster

in the locker room into an anime chick. There's also a weird change to a unique Game Over screen. If you start randomly firing your pistol, you'll get a newspaper showing Sonny gone crazy. Except they didn't redraw Sonny the same way in the Japanese version, they just gave him extra kooky eyes and a Joker grin. The text parser understands English commands. You can also play the game entirely in English, with subtitled Japanese text displayed beneath it. The higher resolution of the PC-98 makes it possible to show crisp Japanese characters but doesn't affect the rest of the game at all.



Police Quest 3: The Kindred

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Jim Walls
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Police Quest 3, which uses the same SCI interpreter as the *Police Quest I* remake, is a return to form, reintegrating some of the elements from the first game that were ditched for the second. You begin the game as a Sergeant and need to spend some time patrolling the streets, and the driving segments are back. But at least they've improved them this time, as well as integrating a stronger overall plot.



The killers in this game do not screw around.

Bains is off the street, but that doesn't meant the city of Lytton is safe. A recent string of serial murders suggests the involvement of a cult known as "The Kindred", who leave their victims with a pentagram carved into their chest. Marie, now Sonny's wife, falls victim to one of their attacks, and lies in a coma while he tries to track them down. There's also a subplot involving Sonny's partner, who not only acts suspiciously, but consistently acts in a manner unbecoming of a police officer. (It should be no secret that drugs are involved – it's a variation of an optional event from *Police Quest 2*.)

The driving segments are still a pain. Instead of a bird's eye view of the city, you only get a small window showing your immediate surroundings, as well as the name of the street you're on

and the direction you're heading. Using the map included in the packaging is once again completely mandatory to figure out where you're going. While it's not as slow as the *Police Quest I* remake, it's still way too easy to miss turns unless you reduce your speed to a snail's crawl. You're also reprimanded for not fully stopping at stop signs – even if you crawl over the line at 5 MPH – and running over too many will deduct points from your score. You can also drive off the map totally and get yourself killed, although at least there aren't any other cars on the road to crash into.

While on the trail of the Kindred, you also spend some time picking up unrelated felons, some of which are a bit silly, like the half-naked conspiracy nut in the park. While separate from the main plot, they're not quite as prevalent as in the first game, and thus feel less pointless. Sometimes their appearance also happens in different orders, with different events occurring later on depending on who you've caught, which makes them feel more dynamic.



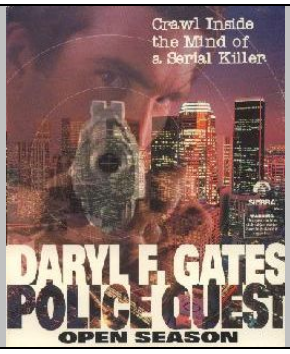
The digitized graphics make this a darker game than its predecessor.

You still use the detective kit to take evidence at crime scenes, though not as often as *Police Quest 2*. However, while previous games have allowed you to use a computer to look up case files, here you use it much more often. At one point you use facial composite software based off a witness description. In another, you mark the locations of the various murders to predict the next attack. (Surprise: They're patterned in a pentagram.)

The story takes place over the course of six in-game days, with a clock that counts forward when certain events are triggered. At the end of each day, Sonny visits Marie in the hospital. One of the "puzzles" is to read her chart, take note that her IV dosage is wrong, and tell the doctors of their mistake. After all of the crime and violence that goes on these games, it's pretty sweet to see something like this, and really gives some depth to their relationship, considering we never actually see her otherwise.

Although *Police Quest 3* runs on the same SCI engine as the *PQ1* remake, it makes more judicious use of digitized footage for close-ups, although the rest of the game looks more or less the same. Sierra got Jan Hammer, composer of *Miami Vice*, to do the music, which feels appropriate.

While the greater variety of detective work makes *Police Quest 3* feel fresher than the others, it also lacks immediacy. In the previous game, you were always heavily focused on Bains' tracks, cursing as he outwits you at every time. Here, the goals are vaguer, as you simply go from murder to murder, picking up more clues. There are still some memorable bits though, and even though it's not quite up to the standards of its predecessor, it's a reasonable entry in the series.



Police Quest: Open Season

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Daryl Gates, Tammy Dargan
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The fourth *Police Quest* game represents a marked shift in tone from the previous games. By this point, Jim Walls had left the series, and Sierra found former Los Angeles police chief Daryl F. Gates to helm the series. He's a controversial figure – he once said casual drug use was akin to treason – and it's questionable exactly how much influence he had on this game, other than putting his name in large letters on the box. Rather, the game actually seems to be designed by Tammy Dargan, who had previously worked on the television show *America's Most Wanted*. To provide a greater sense of realism, the location moved from Lytton to real-life Los Angeles, and Sonny Bonds has been replaced by homicide detective John Carey.



Nothing says evil more than swastikas hung up on your wall.

The series had been growing successively darker with each new installment, but this one almost goes overboard, as the game begins at a crime scene where you not only discover a body of a slain police officer, but a murdered 8-year-old boy in the dumpster. There's a serial killer on the loose, one who seems particularly obsessed with both police officers and the general public. The citizens are naturally horrified and outraged, as it's apparently "open season" on everyone. Carey's investigation leads him into a run-in with popular rapper Yo Money, pits him against neo-Nazis, sends him to seedy locations like strip clubs and gets him into gun-fights in crime-ridden South Central Los Angeles. You also spend a lot of time in the morgue, asking questions about the deaths and getting all of the stomach wrenching details. It's a far stretch from the days of the first game, when you'd just hang out at diners and pick up drunks.

Police Quest: Open Season (often referred to as *Police Quest 4* despite the absence of a numeral in the title) is the first Sierra title to use completely digitized graphics. It is not a full motion video title, however, as it still uses static backgrounds and sprites like the previous games. While Sierra had been using rotoscoping in the past, here the entire game consists of scanned

photographs and fully animated digitized actors. The result looks absolutely terrible. Although the game runs in SVGA, the resolution of the images is incredibly haphazard, with most locations being horribly pixellated and borderline illegible. At any given time, the screen barely looks like anything more than a mess of pixels. The animation is smooth, but whenever the characters try to act with some semblance of realism, it looks borderline creepy, especially since it's difficult to make out any type of facial expression. Even though it looks reprehensible, at least it succeeds in illustrating the gritty atmosphere that the game aims for. It's also the only title in the series to be released on CD with full voice acting.



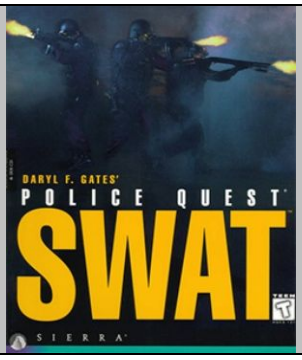
South Central Los Angeles is not a pretty place.

Most of the more tedious elements of the previous *Police Quest* games are gone – there's no more driving around or pulling people over, as you simply select locations on a map screen. You still spend a lot of time investigating crime scenes, using the homicide kit to obtain evidence, taking notes and questioning witnesses about the murders. It does get a bit silly that you need to remember to fill out paperwork every time something happens, to show the more realistic side of police work, but at least it only takes a few clicks. More onerous are the mandatory first person shooting gallery segments at the police academy, which need to be done several times throughout the investigation. There's no real point to them either – at least when they were in *Police Quest II*, they were to aid in solving a puzzle. There are also some suspicious puzzles, like when you need to distract a dog with some pretzels or take down the final enemy by making a homemade torch out of a spray can and a lighter. These are far from the most illogical puzzles seen in an adventure game, but they feel very out of place for a *Police Quest* game. The game is also divided into four days, and sometimes it's hard to find the trigger to continue. It's especially difficult when you're supposed to notice that the white blob that appeared on your desk is apparently a very important memo!

Detective Carey is also a pretty lousy character. Sonny Bonds never had much of a personality, but at least he was vaguely likable. Here, one of the first actions Carey needs to do is push a reporter out of the way instead of responding to her questions. This is the sort of thing that would've likely gotten you a "game over" in earlier *Police Quest* games for not following procedure, but here it's mandatory. The first police officer killed is apparently one of his best friends, but even when questioning his widow, you never really get that impression. The game's all shock value, no emotion. It's technically no worse than the earlier games, but they didn't have as lofty goals either. The writers tried to give some of the secondary characters some liveliness by giving them quirks – the cowboy-talking guy at the shooting gallery, the hideously flirtatious secretary, the morgue assistant who has a penchant for awful jokes – yet they all just come off as irritating and awkward. The game was also criticized when it came out for its somewhat racist

portrayals of minorities, especially the rappers, who all seem to talk in Ebonics, and the Korean convenience store owners.

Police Quest: Open Season is regarded as a black sheep amongst the series, just because it's so drastically different. It's not always terrible, but the awful visuals, stupid puzzles, and generally subpar writing make it far duller than it wants to be. It's also the last true *Police Quest* title, as the series went drastically awry from here on out.



Daryl F. Gates' Police Quest: SWAT

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Tammy Dargan
Developer: Sierra On-Line

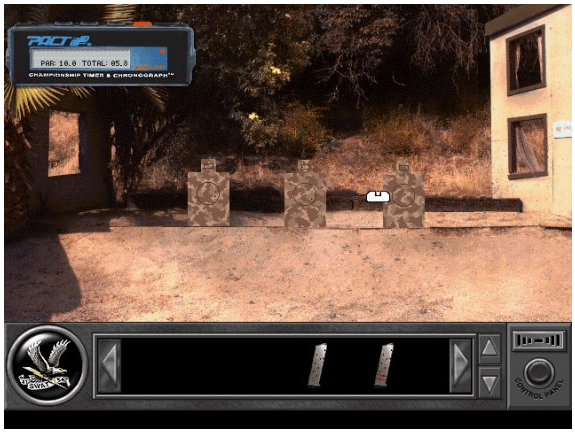
Police Quest: SWAT might actually be one of the worst video games ever made. Like *Phantasmagoria* and *The Beast Within*, it uses copious full motion video with digitized actors, but instead of keeping in the adventure game elements, it's turned into some kind of sub-game, with only the barest minimal interactions. Daryl Gates, once again championed on the cover, is credited as the father of the Special Weapons Assault Team, hence the change in direction.



In this mission, you can and will be shot by a delusional granny.

On the first of four CDs, you begin the game as a rookie in the SWAT squadron. Your first goal is to complete firearms training. You accomplish this by going to the firing range, taking out a gun, clicking on a target, and then repeat this for maybe thirty minutes or so. It's hard to say exactly how long you're supposed to do this – it just seems to go on forever until your commander lets you leave. Then you go to another firing range and do approximately the same thing, except against moving targets. Finally, if you elect to become a sniper, there's another set of training you have to go through, although this is thankfully optional, because it's much more confusing. Instead of just pointing and clicking, you need to fiddle with your gun's sights to make it work, sort of like a similar thing back in *Police Quest 2*, but more annoying. Also, make

sure not to skip any of the videos of your commanders talking to you, because they'll yell at you if you do!



These target practice sequences comprise the entire early segments of SWAT.

Once you're done with that bit of drudgery, you can start the game proper. There are three different hostage scenarios, one each on the remaining three discs. There's one with a deranged gun-wielding grandmother in a suburban neighborhood, one in a warehouse and one in an office building. Ironically, the training segments have absolutely nothing to do with the actual meat of the game. Neither do any of the video interviews with various officers regarding SWAT tactics. All you do is watch videos take place, and, at certain moments, make decisions by clicking on various parts of the screen. Click on the wrong place, or too early, or too late, and you'll either get kicked off the team or killed. It's roughly the equivalent to a slower paced *Dragon's Lair*-style FMV game. To be fair, you can be assigned different parts of the team (you can only be a sniper in one of them, if you've completed the training), and since these are randomized, they won't necessarily play out the same way every time.

The acting is on the level of a bad police television drama. Your commander tries to be a hardass, and your teammates will try acting friendly with you in order to give them some kind of personality. They're paper thin, though, and the game is not at all about story or characters or action or much of anything, really. It's mostly about watching videos of dudes in full combat gear with guns slowly walking forward, and every once in awhile, hitting a button and hope you don't get shot. In other words, it's a monumental waste of time.

The Rest of the SWAT Series

In the absolute loosest definition, you could almost quantify *Police Quest: SWAT* as an adventure game, albeit one that focused entirely on the timed action scenes that so many genre fans hate. And at least it looks somewhat similar to other Sierra FMV titles and uses a similar interface. Sierra tossed all of that to the wind as its expanded its *SWAT* series in completely different directions.

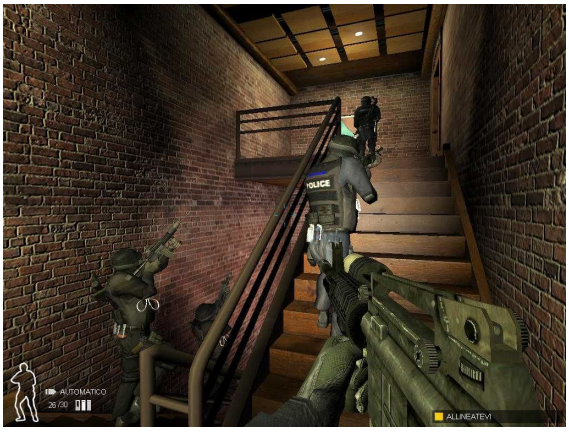
Police Quest: SWAT 2 is a real time strategy game. You can choose to play as the SWAT, or as a member of a terrorist organization, a move which probably would have never been seen in a post-9/11 world. With a 2D overhead isometric viewpoint vaguely reminiscent of Bullfrog's *Syndicate*, you control your squad to fulfill various mission objectives. For the SWAT, it's usually to quell hostage situations. For the terrorists, it's usually to cause havoc. Conceptually, there's some cool stuff – as the SWAT, you can use bullhorns to issue demands, toss in telephones to try to talk opponents down, or call in helicopters and tanks to take care of the more brutal

situations. But the action is choppy, and the messy interface is hard to deal with, often resulting in your characters getting creamed before they can even act. It's still fun planning missions though, especially since some are based on real-life situations. It's also amusing to flip through the profile pictures of the dozens of members you can choose. The terrorists look like drug-addled whack jobs straight out of a trailer park, while the SWAT are all clean cut dudes (and one or two women). Sonny Bonds is also one of the members you can choose, the only true link to the earlier *Police Quest* games beyond the title.



SWAT 2 is a cool concept, but the interface is cluttered and messy.

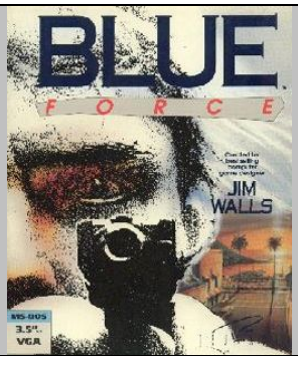
From the third game onward, the series dropped the *Police Quest* name entirely and morphed into a tactical first person shooter, similar to Ubisoft's *Rainbow Six 3*. While the first *SWAT* was reviled and the second met with middling reviews, the gaming public responded well to these sequels, so Sierra continued in this direction. *SWAT 3: Close Quarters Battle* was designed by Sierra and helmed by Tammy Dargan, the scripter of the later adventure games. Although it's missing Sonny, his wife Marie shows up as a hostage in a few missions. Further releases include *SWAT 3: Elite Edition* and *SWAT 3: Tactical Game of the Year Edition*, each of which adds extra scenarios and features. These additions were also released for free on the Sierra website.



SWAT 4 is pretty decent, but it's clear why they ended up ditching the Police Quest name.

SWAT 4 was developed by Irrational Games, who later went on to create *Bioshock*, and uses the Unreal 2.0 engine. In a nod to its lineage, the tutorial instructor is named Sonny Bonds. An expansion was released called *The Stetchkov Syndicate*, and can be found bundled together in the *SWAT 4: Gold Edition* release. *SWAT: Global Strike Team* was developed for consoles by Argonaut Software, and released for the PlayStation 2 and Xbox. Although a completely new game, it is a tactical first person shooter similar to the third and fourth *SWAT* games. *SWAT: Target Liberty* was developed for the PlayStation Portable by 3G Studios and returns to the overhead isometric perspective of *SWAT 2,* although it's focused less on strategy and more on action. *SWAT Force* and *SWAT Elite Troops* were also released for mobile phones.

Related Games:



Blue Force

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Jim Walls
Developer: Tsunami Media

It's never been officially documented how or why Jim Walls left Sierra, but someone apparently decided that his services were wanted elsewhere. And so, he went to Tsunami Media, the folks behind the *Ringworld* adventure games, to helm *Blue Force*, which may as well be an alternate version of *Police Quest 4*. It certainly feels like it, and it's much closer to the spirit of the earlier games than the one Daryl F. Gates did.



This game is so painfully Police Quest, it's a wonder Tsunami didn't get sued.

The setting this time is the small city of Jackson Beach, and the hero is Jake Ryan, a rookie on the police force. It's his first day on the job, but naturally he gets swept up into dangerous situations mere minutes into putting on his uniform, including defusing hostage situations and hunting down gun runners. Like the early *Police Quest* games, there's a bunch of random police work to be done, all of which include gathering evidence, booking suspects, and remembering

the radio codes to report incidents or call for backup. It should all seem extremely familiar, although it's odd that you never have to lock up your gun in a locker outside of the jail, something which the first three *Police Quest* games pummeled into you. There are no driving sequences, either, as you simply point-and-click on a map. The only major difference is that you ride around on a motorcycle rather than a squad car, which doesn't affect much.

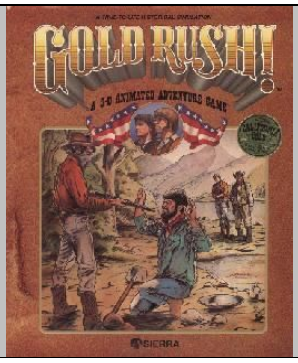
The overarching plot involves the hunt for the murderer of Ryan's parents, an unsolved mystery for eleven years that naturally the newbie cop manages to solve in a couple of days. In the meantime, he also mingles with a single mother and her son, the victims of a domestic abuse case from early in the game. It's all sorta cheesy, again, but it's likable. It's a quaint contrast to *Open Season* too – in that game, bad guys would repeatedly drop f-bombs, whereas in *Blue Force* their curses are censored, cartoon-style.



Jim Walls himself makes a cameo appearance in Blue Force.

Blue Force makes copious use of digitized actors, which is strangely handled far better than it was in *Open Season*. The backgrounds are still hand drawn, and the actors aren't nearly as pixellated. The animated looping portraits during dialogue look a little bit silly, but overall it still looks fairly cohesive. Mr. Walls himself even guest stars as a worker for the city records department. The game was released on both disk and CD-ROM, but the CD version does not contain any voice acting, and is almost identical to the disk release, other than an audio interview with Walls. All actions are selected on a command menu, which looks like a police badge and is brought up with the right mouse button. Little has changed since the Sierra days, although the Speed adjust function is sorely missed.

Blue Force was widely criticized at the time of its release – Wall's storytelling clearly hadn't improved much since the early days of *Police Quest*. The magazine Computer Gaming World once voted it one of the worst games of all time, noting that the writing was on par with the worst episode of the TV show *CHiPs*. That comparison isn't too far off base, but it's not really a bad game, just a dated one, even back when it was released. It's a must for *Police Quest* fans, although most others will find its charms elusive.



Gold Rush!

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Apple IIGS / Atari ST
Designer(s): Doug and Ken MacNeill
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Gold Rush! is one of the handful of early Sierra adventures no one remembers. It never became a series, its developers were not advertised on the cover, and the title makes it sound like an *Oregon Trail* rip-off rather than an adventure game.

This AGI-developed title takes place in Brooklyn in 1848, mere minutes before the California Gold Rush began. As newspaper reporter Jerrod Wilson, you've got an early scoop – your brother has gone west and struck it rich out in California, and wants you to join him. You have only about fourteen minutes in real time to sell your house, plan your trek and buy your equipment before the Gold Rush starts, dropping property values and causing the price of goods to skyrocket. Obviously, taking too long to do any of this will make your journey more financially taxing.



The background graphics in Brooklyn are quite detailed for an AGI game.

Gold Rush!'s most impressive, and most vaunted, feature is the ability to choose between three routes to travel to California. You can go the most direct route and simply make the 3,000 mile or so trip across America by hooking up with a wagon train. You can take a ship down to Panama and hike over the jungle, seeing as the Panama Canal had yet to be developed. Or you can take the super long route via boat all the way around Cape Horn at the bottom of South America. While this might seem awfully ambitious for such an old title, in reality, it doesn't add up to much. Most of the segments just show your progress on the map, along with several dozen messages relating your hardships on your voyage. There are only a handful of screens on each path where you can actually do anything. The Panama route consists of a few infuriating *Space Quest*-style arcade sequences, avoiding wild ants, wading through poisonous plants, and navigating through quicksand. The Cape Horn route involves hunting around the ship to assemble a fishing rod for when the boat inevitably crashes. And the land route involves,

literally, sitting and watching the grass grow, as your observations are supposed to clue you in on the weather.

These are also the most maddening segments. Like a lot of early Sierra games, you need to grab specific items from the shops in Brooklyn before you leave in order to survive your journey. But naturally, once you leave, there's no turning back. You can also die completely randomly, from, say, cholera, which is utterly infuriating. Such deaths are completely unavoidable, and the only solution is to reload an earlier save game.

Once you reach Sacramento, the three paths converge, and the quest is identical from there on out, regardless of which route you took. You hop on a carriage to Sutter's Fort and begin to make your new life. This consists of buying a pan and sitting in the river sifting for gold several hundred times (note: not an exaggeration) until you have enough cash to buy some more equipment and eventually piece together the clues to track down your brother. There are a couple of vaguely interesting segments here, like sneaking into (and out of) a hotel room with some valuable information, and a quick spelunking trek through a mine to find your brother. But otherwise, the whole "gold digging" aspect is remarkably unexciting.



As this game tells us, the Gold Rush was not only potentially deadly but incredibly tedious.

Which brings us to the main question – what's the point? The narrative is only vaguely compelling, although the period-specific slang of the narrator lends some much needed color. The journey westward hardly feels substantial, considering you spend so much time simply reading text and dying at the mercy of the computer. The rest of the time is spent doing boring activities (Quitting your job! Getting the mail! Buying a mule!) and it's not until the very late segments of the game that you feel any sense of adventure. Perhaps the game functions as edutainment, as it does a decent job of putting the Gold Rush, and the mindset of its participants, in a historical context. Plus, getting the noose for failing the copy protection quiz is a little bit funny. But the only real thing one gets out of *Gold Rush!* is the feeling that anyone who participated in it was a right old crazy bastard.

Approximately ten years after its initial release, an outfit called The Software Farm, run by the original designers, bought the rights to the game from Sierra and republished it as a collector's edition under the name *California Gold Rush*. Other than some "collectible" goodies like a wooden box and a map showing the travel routes, the actual game remains unchanged.

Manhunter



Manhunter: New York

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: PC DOS / Apple II / Atari ST / Amiga
Designer(s): Barry Murry, Dave Murry and Dee Dee Murry
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Sierra's *Manhunter* series is saddled with an unfortunately generic name – it is not related to the Hannibal Lecter novel or the comic book or any other property – that completely betrays its unique place in the field of adventure gaming. It's certainly not one of Sierra's best series, but it does exemplify one of the greatest tragedies of interactive fiction – the developers have created a thoroughly intriguing world, just one that's massively frustrating to play in.

It's the year 2002 (which must've seemed so far away back in 1988) and a mysterious alien race called The Orbs have invaded Earth. The Orbs themselves are nothing but floating eyeballs, but they can interact (i.e. kill) by commanding droids. Humans are allowed to live in the decayed remnants of their civilization, but only by wearing druid-like cloaks. Communication is also completely forbidden, under the penalty of death. In this dreary existence, you play the role of a Manhunter, a detective that works under the Orbs to track down criminals and other insurgents. Both games take place in the real world locations of New York City and San Francisco, each using replications of authentic street maps and featuring recognizable landmarks.



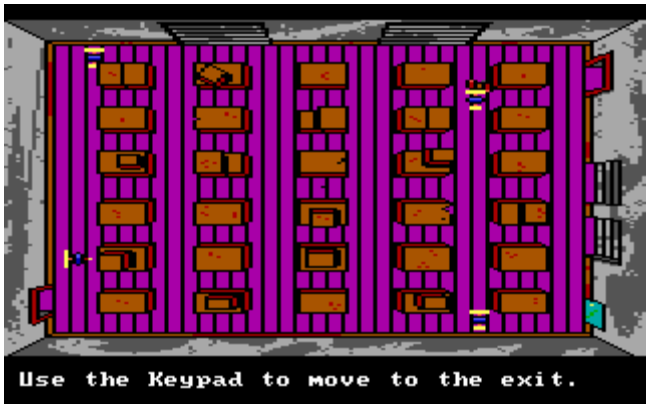
It is quite the dangerous day in Central Park. Watch out for land mines!

The first game takes place in New York City, specifically Manhattan and Brooklyn. The story is broken up into four days: Each day, you're ordered to investigate various crimes against both humans and orbs, but there's an overarching commonality amongst all of the murders. You'll investigate landmarks like Times Square, Grand Central, Coney Island, Central Park and the Museum of Natural History. The game also ends with you flying a ship over the island, destroying many of its landmarks during your pursuit of the culprit.

Manhunter differs from the typical Sierra titles in a number of ways. A majority of the game takes place from a first person viewpoint, with a third person perspective for cinemas and action sequences. The text parser is gone too, with all actions controlled by a single cursor – the inability to type commands is appropriately metafictional given humanity's inability to speak. This might seem pretty progressive, but the cursor is controlled by the keyboard or joystick, so in reality it's very slow. (Some versions of the game support mouse input, but it's awkwardly implemented.)

The traditional lock-and-key puzzles of most adventure games have mostly been replaced with actual detective work. Each day involves a new crime. Since the orbs can monitor the locations of the humans, your computer will track their exact movements, allowing you to track them down. Their transmitters tend to stop if they've either gone underground or have been snuffed out. Apparently the chips aren't particularly well designed and won't transmit their identities; hence the need for Manhunters. This same computer also holds a database of every human in the city. Half of the game revolves around investigating crime scenes, using the clues to figure out the names of the perpetrators, running searches on them, and opening up new locations.

Manhunter also has more mazes per capita than your average adventure game: The idea is, you're supposed to analyze the targets, make a map, and then follow their footsteps. This is really cool, in theory, but it doesn't always work out in practice. In *Manhunter: New York*, you need to trek through the Museum of Natural History, which is now apparently a huge maze of identical-looking corridors. It's technically pretty easy, but the challenge comes from remembering which direction you're facing, and a single wrong turn means you need to start the whole thing over. It's even worse when you need to navigate through a minefield (!!) in Central Park: Each screen technically has at least a dozen "exits", but it's never really clear what direction you'll be going in when you click on one. Even though you'll have properly analyzed your target's route, it's immensely frustrating to actually trace it in-game – you'll find yourself getting blown up a lot.



One of the many unfortunate action scenes.

Sadly, *Manhunter* thrives on the one thing all adventure gamers hate – arcade sequences. On paper there's nothing wrong with arcade sequences in these types of games, but the engines are rarely optimized for it, leading to several annoying sections with exceedingly poor control. *Manhunter* is particularly vicious and unforgiving, overflowing with poorly planned segments that do little but infuriate. In the first game, you need to fight your way, one by one, through an army of punks. You can't actually walk forward – you can only jump, duck, and punch. You need to dodge a never-ending series of knives (and eventually gunshots), creeping across the screen pixel by pixel, with a single screw-up resulting in death. And you need to do this *four times*. The only

upside is that you can save anywhere in the middle of these; otherwise, they'd be unplayable. The kicker is, once you finish with this segment, you have to find a certain person in the crowd. There's no clue regarding who's the right person – you just have to guess. If you guess wrong, you get tossed out of the club and need to fight your way through again.

At least the game's pretty progressive about its death sequences. Every time you're killed, you meet the game's developers – Barry Murry, Dave Murry and Dee Dee Murry – clad in the same cloak as everyone else, giving you some smarmy comment about how you screwed up. These get less and less clever each time you see them (as if they were even clever to begin with), but at least you restart from right before you died, so you don't need to obsessively save your game every few seconds. But it is possible to find yourself in unwinnable situations if you miss some items, so you'll still need to keep some bookmarks of your progress.

Manhunter: New York runs on the early Sierra AGI interpreter, meaning super low res 160x200 pixellated graphics with 16 colors. And yet, it's unquestionably one of the best-looking Sierra games from that era. Most games, even modern ones, define "post apocalyptic" to mean "lots of browns and grays", but not so in *Manhunter*. The sky is a permanent red, as is the coloring of its foreboding packaging. When you look at people's faces, beneath their robes, they're grey or blue or other another off-putting shade to signify some level of inhumanity. Colors are used in ways that colors shouldn't be – perhaps a result of the limited color palette, but unique all the same. Everything is either falling apart or has already collapsed upon itself.



It's hard to feel sorry for your captors, given how damn creepy they look.

The art style plays a careful balancing act between grotesque and comical: There's certainly a lot of darkly humorous gore, but you're never sure to be disgusted or amused. There's some strange humor juxtaposed with grotesque imagery: One moment, you're looking at the close-up of a bloody, maggot-infested corpse, and the next, you've flushed yourself down a public toilet to investigate a sewer system. At the beginning of each new day, an Orb takes an elevator up to your room to give your orders. Exactly why do floating beings need to use elevators, anyway?

The tone of the game world is also completely different from what you'd expect. There's almost no dialogue, and no real character interaction – you occasionally see your character, although never their face – leaving you isolated from the rest of humanity, if not its world. Altogether, it's remarkably creepy, and it foreshadows some of the elements used in far more advanced games, like the visual storytelling of *Half-Life*. It's just a real shame that the "game" part of this "adventure game" is so terribly implemented.



Manhunter 2: San Francisco

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: PC DOS / Apple II / Atari ST / Amiga / Macintosh
Designer(s): Barry Murry, Dave Murry and Dee Dee Murry
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The second installment picks up where its predecessor left off – you've commandeered an Orb aircraft and have chased your opponent, a fellow human named Phil, all of the way across the United States. Both of you crash – he gets away, while you accidentally end up killing another Manhunter. According to The Rules, you need to take up his job as a replacement, so the chase starts anew as you investigate more crimes, which once again all tie back to the original perpetrator. This time you'll see famous San Francisco landmarks like Coit Tower, Embarcadero Center, the Transamerica Pyramid and Alcatraz.

Manhunter: San Francisco doesn't really fix many of the problems of its predecessor – it plays exactly the same, just with a new scenario. The only real improvement is the difficulty select for the arcade segments, but they're still pretty obnoxious. Did we really need a sequence where we spin around the empty Vaillancourt Fountain? The game even uses the same AGI engine, which was already outdated at at the game's release in 1989, when it was competing with far better-looking (and playing) games like *King's Quest IV*, running on the vastly superior SCI0 engine.

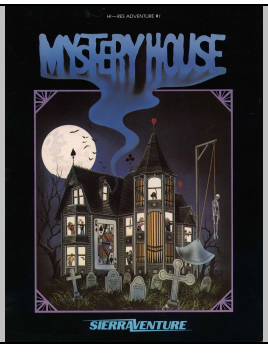


Here, the Vaillancourt Fountain makes an appearance.

The posters throughout the series imply that *Manhunter* was meant to be a trilogy, teasing a third installment called *Manhunter: London,* where you'd finally track down Phil once and for all. For whatever reasons, this never happened, and the developers moved on to their own company. It would've been cool to see where they went, at least. Most of the Sierra series really hit their stride with the SCI era games, and seeing the world fleshed out without the aggravating mazes or arcade sequences would've been great.

Laura Bow Mysteries

Envisioned by Roberta Williams, Laura Bow is the star of a short lived series that draws from classic mystery novels. Based on a healthy diet of Agatha Christie and games of *Clue,* the heroine finds herself in situations where her compatriots are all being murdered under mysterious circumstances. They rely heavily on mystery tropes, and thoroughly acknowledge this fact, giving them sort of a classic feel. Based on silent movie actress Clara Bow, at least in name and looks, Laura is meant to personify the spirit of the Roaring Twenties, much as the woman she was based on. In practice it doesn't quite work out like this – she's largely a silent protagonist in her first game, *The Colonel's Bequest*, and morphed into a polite Southern belle in her second game, *The Dagger of Amon Ra*. Laura Bow is still unlike most other computer game heroines, not only for her personality but for the setting of her adventures. Despite being a cornerstone of American history, the 1920s have rarely been explored in gaming.



Mystery House

Initial Release Date: 1980
Platforms: Apple II / PC-6001 / iOS
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: On-Line Systems

The lineage of the *Laura Bow* games can be traced way back to Sierra On-Line's very first game, *Mystery House*. Based very loosely on Agatha Christie's novel *Ten Little Indians* (also known as *And Then There Were None*), you play an unnamed character locked in a mansion with seven other guests. With a vague note telling of jewels hidden within the house walls, you soon find the other characters scattered around, all quite dead. A killer is on the loose, and you need to find the treasure, uncover the skeleton key to unlock the front door, and escape with your life.



The first screen of Mystery House is as iconic as the opening to Zork, except with actual graphics, of course.

One of the most important adventure games ever made, *Mystery House* was the first in the genre to add graphics, whereas all previous games were entirely text-based. The visuals are, of course, quite rudimentary, consisting of shakily drawn white lines against a black background.

The characters look as if they were lifted from a first grader's notebook, and even minor items like knives and shovels are crudely drawn. It's all understandable given the game's age; it had to fit in the limited RAM of the Apple II, and since there were no real drawing programs on the market, Ken and Roberta Williams had to assemble their own device, combining a graphics tablet with a mechanical arm.

While *Mystery House* was a true pioneer amongst text adventures, its puzzles, story, writing – pretty much everything, actually – are all quite amateur. There's not really much in the way of prose so much as stark descriptions. ("You are in the kitchen.") All of the characters have professions, but none have any personality, nor any real purpose beyond popping up dead. If you pay attention to their bodies you can piece together some clues that implicate the murderer – one was strangled by pantyhose so the killer is probably a girl, and another is holding a daisy, which... well, spells out the killer's name right there. You can easily kill yourself through stupid means – such as lighting a candle, tripping, setting the house on fire, and not putting it out in time – plus you can get lost in the surrounding forest. And there's a short time limit at the beginning, where you need to find a light source lest you find yourself wandering in the dark.

And this is to say nothing of the extremely simple text parser, which only understands two word sentences. Right at the beginning, once you open the door to the house, you can't just type "enter" or "go in" or even type the direction. The game only understands "go door". It gets more confusing because the visuals don't necessarily match up to the directions. For example, in one room, the door is on the right side of the screen, so it's natural to assume that it's to the east, but it's actually to the south.

At least the house has several interesting secrets. The manor itself is relatively small, but there are a number of secret passageways, hidden compartments, and underground tunnels that fulfill its promise of being a "mystery house". Still, one of the major puzzles really makes no sense – you need to figure out how to get into the trapdoor in the attic, which only magically becomes visible (and therefore accessible) after you've looked at it through a telescope, which is perched atop a tree in the middle of the forest.

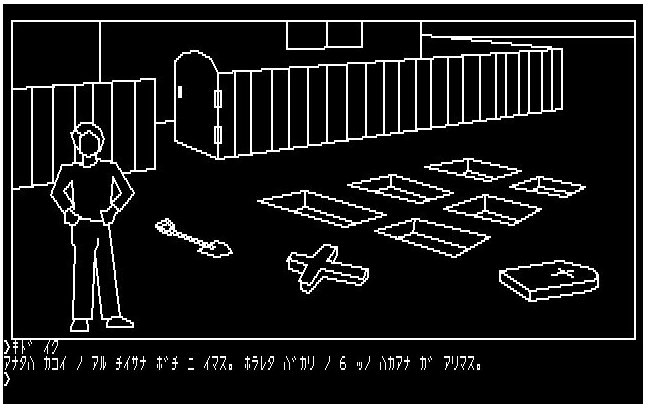


The renditions of your fellow treasure hunters are quite crude.

Most of these quirks are outlined in the instruction pages before you begin, so at least it sets down its grammar rules and inconsistencies from the beginning. But it's still a pain to play, and there's little of interest to be found here beyond its historical value. In 1987, Sierra released the game into the public domain. It can be found on the *Roberta Williams Anthology*, along with the rest of Sierra's High-Res Adventures, although they need to be run through an Apple II emulator. The game was also ported to the iOS by a company completely unrelated to Sierra.

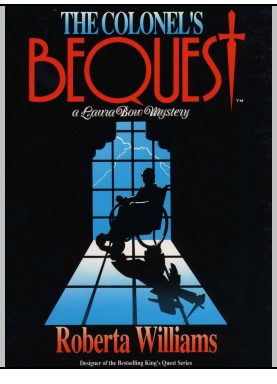
In 1983, a Japanese company called Starcraft ported *Mystery House* to Japanese computers such as the PC-6001. (There's another graphic text adventure developed by Microcabin using the same name, although it's entirely unrelated to Sierra's game. This means there were two

games on the market with the same title – one a shoddy ripoff, the other quite authentic.) While Starcraft's port is very similar to the original Apple II version, all of the graphics have been redrawn and improved. It still uses the simplistic black and white line drawings, but all of the characters now have vaguely realistic proportions, despite not having any faces, and the visuals look far less rough. Part of this may have had to do with better technology, but the Japanese PCs also ran at a higher resolution than the Apple II, allowing for more screen real estate.



The Japanese version is completely redrawn for the better. The blank faces of the characters are unsettling.

The redone visuals look really nice in comparison. The fact that everyone has blank faces looks really creepy, and the dead bodies are much more dramatically posed, with blood pouring out of them (or, rather, something that looks like blood – it's still black and white) rather than the *Looney Tunes*-style lumps in the original one. Minor details have been added to the environment, like the windows in the upstairs floor being boarded up, further establishing the fact that you can't escape. It's obviously difficult to play if you don't know Japanese, but it's cool to compare the graphics.



The Colonel's Bequest: A Laura Bow Mystery

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: IBM PC / Apple IIGS / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Sierra published several more text adventures before introducing *King's Quest* and changing the landscape of the genre forever. In the new age of graphic adventures, they occasionally found themselves revisiting and revising some of their older games. *King's Quest* was loosely inspired by *Wizard and the Princess*, Sierra's second game, while *Leisure Suit Larry* was explicitly a remake of *Softporn Adventure*. While taking a break from the *King's Quest* games, Roberta Williams decided to once again develop a mystery game. While not technically based on *Mystery House*, it borrows elements from the same Agatha Christie stories, and reuses many of the same themes, although it's obviously much more fleshed out due to the use of more advanced technology.

The heroine is Laura Bow, an old-fashioned Southern girl from Louisiana attending Tulane University in New Orleans. Her friend, Lillian Prune, invites her to spend a night at her family's mansion. The gargantuan house, on an island in the middle of the swamp, is inhabited by the aging Colonel Dijon, who has called his kin for the reading of his will. This is clearly a bad situation, as the Dijon family has a number of quarrels, not to mention all of the drama going on with the Colonel's flirtatious French maid. As to be expected, people start dying one by one, with Laura somehow being the only one noticing. She needs to survive the night, all the while exploring the old mansion in hopes of finding the true killer.



The Colonel's Bequest is introduced as if it were a stage play.

While not always the best game designer, Roberta Williams was always trying something new and unique with her games. Movies and books, by their very nature, are linear experiences which must involve the viewer/reader at all moments. Most games are developed the same way too, in that the world revolves directly around the player and their actions, but *The Colonel's Bequest* tries to shake things up a bit. There are secret meetings, arguments, fist fights and murders, all going on in the house, but Laura isn't necessarily privy to viewing most of them, unless she's at the right place at the right time. It creates a sense that there's a living world beyond the immediate gaze of the player, one which could theoretically go on even if the player wasn't involved.

There are many problems with the whole package, the least of them being that the mystery just isn't terribly interesting. The characters are all familiar archetypes, and most are named after figures from the era, like the suspicious doctor Wilbur C. Feels (W.C. Fields), the untrustworthy lawyer Clarence Sparrow (Clarence Darrow), and the stuck up actress Gloria Swansong (Gloria Swanson). The French maid is named Fifi, and the butler is named Jeeves, while Colonel Dijon is a not-so-subtle reference to Colonel Mustard from *Clue*. Despite their naming conventions, they are sparsely characterized, as they're mostly defined by their vices or conflicts, and little else. Therefore, it's hard to feel for the characters when they get killed. Laura has no real personality either, and it's almost sociopathic the way she stumbles upon body after body, acts horrified for a moment, and then completely carries on for the rest of the night as if nothing happened. Laura can, of course, get herself killed, usually by walking into some place she shouldn't. These events are easily avoidable once you know where they are, but there are a few sticking points, like the shaky railings on the second floor, where it's entirely too easy to stupidly fall to your death, or the chandelier, which will randomly fall on you if you walk underneath it. (There's also an amusing reference to *Psycho* if you decide to take a shower.)

The most frustrating issue is the way time is structured. There are eight acts, one for each hour, and each hour is further broken down into fifteen-minute quarters. The clock does not

operate in real time – instead, it advances when certain triggers are met, usually when walking in certain rooms or interacting with certain people. There's rarely any indication of how to do any of this without stumbling around, which leads to another problem – it's far too easy to propel forwards through the plot, missing important events without meaning to. You might find two people yelling at each other, and it will make absolutely no sense if you failed to view an establishing scene from earlier on. When you barge into two people chatting and they get pissed off, you were supposed to crawl into one of the many secret passages and spy on them rather than charging into the room, but how would you know that beforehand? There are only a few scenes that are required viewing, and they're mostly so Laura can happen upon the dead bodies.

The strange time-skipping also causes some severely awkward aspects that totally defy logic. Walk into a room and find a person sitting happily. Exit the room and immediately re-enter, and you'll find them dead. Yes, in that split second, someone else snuck in the room, murdered them, and left without so much as a sound. And then, once you leave the screen, the bodies will mysteriously disappear, so even if you can convince one of the other characters to check for the body, they'll simply think you're a lunatic. It's not much of a spoiler to say that the killer isn't a ghost – they're bound by the rules of reality, and turning them into a phantom so it fits into the game's narrative framework almost completely undermines the whole experience.

By its own admission, *The Colonel's Bequest* really isn't even a traditional adventure game. There are very few puzzles to solve, and most of those involve an optional treasure hunt that reveals a bit of background on the Dijon family. When you break down the components, all you do is explore and spy on the family members, which translates into wandering around and being very meticulous. The onus is put upon the player to question the other characters, discover their motives, and attempt to solve the mystery for themselves before the night is over.



The maid and the butler don't exactly go to great lengths to hide their affair.

Uncovering this backstory is supposed to be the point of the game, but one can't help that it feels superfluous by the end, where the gist of the story is spelled out for you anyway. Laura is put in the classic situation where she finds two people struggling, and needs to use what she's learned from earlier on to decide who to shoot. Your decision leads to one of two endings, but it's easy to figure out the solution just through the mandatory scenes, and one of the endings is clearly the "bad" one. Regardless of which finale you get, you're graded on your performance with a "Sleuth-O-Meter". Like other Sierra games of the time, you get points for accomplishing certain tasks, although here this is all kept hidden from the player until the very end. If you've spied on all the right people, asked the right questions, and investigated the right items, you'll get a perfect score. If not, you'll be given some clues on what you should be doing on your next playthrough. Williams must have expected that very few people would really follow the plot all

the way through, so the Sleuth-O-Meter is a way to provide some extra replayability, instead of just making the game ridiculously tough like their other titles.

In spite of some of its awkwardly implemented elements, *The Colonel's Bequest* completely nails the atmosphere. While it runs in the SCI0 engine and is limited by 16 color graphics, the artwork is consistently fantastic, easily outclassing any of Sierra's similar games at the time. The mansion decor is a combination of purple and green, clashing against the darkness throughout the house, with the only illumination provided by the moonlight, pouring through the windows. The exterior, consisting of several gardens and courtyards, and surrounded by a bayou, is about as beautiful as you can possibly make a swamp with 16 colors or less. It's one of the first Sierra games to use portraits to accompany dialogue, and includes several close-ups for important cinemas. All interaction is still handled through a text parser, though, which is a pain when interrogating the various characters about all of the other various characters. The story is presented like a stage play, complete with a cast introduction. The copy protection shows a finger print and asks you to identify it based on the included documentation. Get it right, and you'll be asked to take a seat. Get it wrong, and you're informed that the show is sold out.

Despite the narrative issues, the irritating deaths, and many, many illogical elements, it's this classiness that helps *The Colonel's Bequest* rise above mediocrity. And like most of Roberta Williams' games, it's a noble attempt at furthering what an adventure game can be, even though the programming restraints often show its limitations.



Roberta Williams' Laura Bow in: The Dagger of Amon Ra

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Bruce Balfour
Developer: Sierra On-Line

With the traumatic night at the Dijon Manor behind her, Laura finishes up college, bids farewell to Louisiana, and starts her new life as a newspaper reporter in New York City. Her first assignment is to cover the Egyptian exhibit at the Leyendecker Museum, which is slightly complicated by the fact that its centerpiece, the Dagger of Amon Ra, has mysteriously gone missing. Things get worse later that night when, during a party, the bodies start piling up, and each of the remaining characters has their own motive. Is it Ziggy, the extremely shifty speakeasy owner/stool pigeon? Pippin Carter, the snobby archaeologist who discovered the dagger, or Dr. Ptahsheptut Smith, who believes the dagger belongs to the people of Egypt? Or perhaps it's the cold and calculating Dr. Olympia Myklos, or the sultry French secretary Yvette Delacroix? Maybe it's the Colonel Klink-esque security guard Wolf Heimlech or the curator's ex-wife, the Countess Waldorf-Carlton? Going above and beyond her role as a mere reporter, it's up to Laura to solve the mystery and bring both the thief and the murderer to justice.

Despite Roberta Williams' name on the box, she had little to do with *The Dagger of Amon Ra* beyond providing the concept and lending her character to star in a new game. Instead, it was directed and designed by Bruce Balfour in his first adventure game with Sierra (he had previously worked on other titles like *Neuromancer* and *Wasteland*) with writing contributions from Sierra mainstay Josh Mandel. While *The Colonel's Bequest* was an attempt to create an interactive mystery novel, its sequel is a slightly more traditional adventure game.

Once again, the story is divided into several acts, although the scope is much larger. The first takes place as Laura explores the city, investigating some of the people that will soon

become involved in the plot. The second is, again, mostly for setup, as Laura attends the museum party and spies on the various attendees, learning of their personalities and their conflicts. Questioning people plays a huge role in these chapters, a sore point in the original due to the text input. This is something that should be easier due to the mouse-based input here, but really isn't. To ask a question, you need to click the "question mark" icon on someone, which brings up Laura's notebook. Then you need to go into a section and choose a topic, right click to change to the "exit" cursor and left-click again to actually exit. Why not just list all of the topics and have them immediately respond when you click it, like what was eventually implemented in *Gabriel Knight*? Once you reach the end of this act, the first murder takes place, and more characters begin to drop like flies as Laura explores the museum and its many hidden passages. It's here that *The Dagger of Amon Ra* most closely resembles its predecessor.

Each act usually consists of a handful of time blocks, although this time they're triggered by passing events or solving puzzles instead of simply walking into a certain room at a certain time. Still, the time blocks are not handled in any logical manner. Previously, these events were intended to identify where each of the characters was at a specific point in time, giving the impression that everyone had their own schedule. *The Dagger of Amon Ra* largely ignores this notion, because you will find the French girl seducing three different men in three completely different locations, all within the same short time span. It's somewhat disappointing that such a unique concept was mangled in this game.



Laura fruitlessly questions a frightfully unconcerned party guest.

The final chapters act as "tests", more or less. The fifth chapter is an action-packed chase scene, as the murderer tracks the defenseless Laura through the museum. These sort of timed sequences are irritating enough on their own, but they're much worse here, because your success is entirely dependent on objects gathered earlier in the game, most of which are fairly easy to miss. The sixth act consists entirely of an interrogation, as the coroner seeks to piece together the mystery of the Dagger's disappearance, as well as the murders. Unlike its predecessor, the game does not reveal the killer, so your understanding is entirely dependent on the notes you've taken, and the questions you've asked. For each of the crimes, you need to point out the perpetrator, as well as the motive, in addition to other questions. You also need to have gathered all of the required evidence to implicate the criminal. If you fail either of these requirements, then you're left with the bad ending, which is so overwhelmingly bleak that it wraps around from "depressing" to "borderline hilarious". Perhaps this over-the-top style was done to soften the blow, because it's practically impossible to get the good ending the first time through. It's also a stark contrast to *The Colonel's Bequest*, which let you get a satisfactory ending even if you had no clue what was really going on. There's a lot to pay attention to, and the mystery is quite confusing, especially if you've missed any of the vital clues.



One of the museum's guests meets a grisly but hilarious end.

The Dagger of Amon Ra uses the SCI1 engine, and while the visuals are missing the dark creepiness from the first game, they still do a good job of replicating the 1920s era. In keeping with that, the museum isn't quite as moody but it is atmospheric in its own way. On the surface it's a bit small, consisting of a main rotunda, a gift shop, and exhibits on Egyptian artifacts, medieval armor, dinosaurs, death masks, and paintings. But there are numerous hidden passages, leading to underground storage rooms, laboratories, offices, and shrines (!!), giving the whole place a sense of wonder and mystery. And while the deaths in *The Colonel's Bequest* were relatively bloodless, they're quite gory here, with the first victim found in a sarcophagus with a dagger through his heart, the next impaled by the beak of a fallen pterodactyl, and the next stabbed to death with a porcupine. Combined with the chase scene near the end of the game, there's a greater sense of danger, even though most of the deaths come from Laura doing stupid things, like falling down steps, or getting attacked by snakes, rats, and in one case, flesh-eating beetles.

While the plot itself is quite serious, the writing, particularly the narration, is fairly sarcastic. Look at one of the suits of armor and you'll be rewarded with no less than four dialogue boxes going off on a diatribe about the differences between barbutes, sallets and basinets, only to conclude that no one really cares. When you go into the alcohol preservation lab, you'll find not only the corpse of a unicorn, but the body of King Edward of Daventry, which is quite bizarre. Laura has much more of a personality this time around, with her naive exuberance clashing with the sexism she faces in being a woman doing a man's job. Once again, the remaining characters are all stock clichés, although they have much more personality. There are still some oddities; for instance, why are all of these people still hanging around the museum if there's a murderer afoot? At one point the janitor lets it slip that he lost the keys and therefore everyone is simply locked in, which is still a flimsy plot contrivance, even if it's meant to be tongue-in-cheek.

The CD-ROM version ditches the copy protection – which asks questions about Egyptian artifacts and gets Laura fired if you get them wrong – and also adds voice acting. Laura Bow's slightly overdone Southern accent is still somehow charming, and the narrator's polite British mannerisms make the sarcastic writing all the more amusing. The rest of the cast ranges from serviceable to horrendous, largely in part because the characters have a variety of accents and speech impediments, and the amateur crew just can't pull them off.

The Dagger of Amon Ra didn't quite take off, and thus spelled an end for the series. Sierra continued with mystery games with the *Gabriel Knight* series, which ditched the "uncover the mystery for yourself" parts and replaced them with a dose of supernatural fiction. In one of the posters in the first *Gabriel Knight* game, you come across a poster advertising an event with the speaker Laura Dorian, revealing that she had settled down and married the hunky stevedore from *The Dagger of Amon Ra*. She also stars in *Crazy Nick's Pick: Parlor Games with Laura Bow*, a budget release containing a few minigames.



Codename: ICEMAN

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Jim Walls
Developer: Sierra On-Line

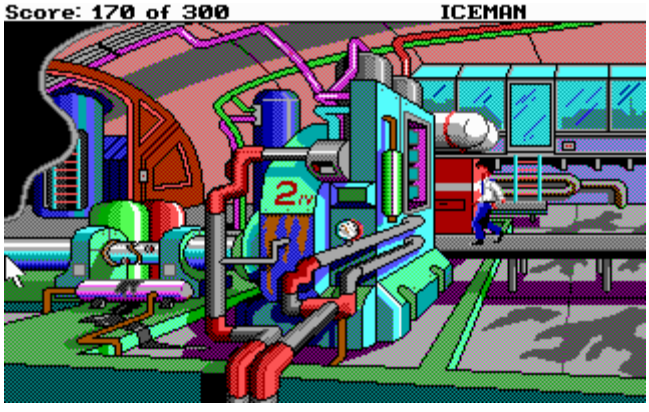
Sierra's *Police Quest* series was a curious monster. Based loosely on the real-life exploits of retired cop Jim Walls, they played against popular media by portraying police work like it really is, full of rote and boring procedures, all in the name of the law. *Codename: ICEMAN*, also designed by Jim Walls, pulls a similar maneuver – it takes the spy thriller genre, applies a dose of "reality" to it, and manages to suck most of the fun out of it.

The story opens with Lieutenant Commander John B. Westland, a military officer on leave in Tahiti. After soaking in some rays, resuscitating a girl with CPR and hooking up with some random chick, Johnny gets called into duty. Turns out that the Russians have captured an American ambassador because of a mounting energy crisis, and, due to his purported skills, Johnny is sent in to retrieve him. This is accomplished by a stealth submarine, harbored in Pearl Harbor, which must be guided through the arctic waters to the island of Tunisia, all the way on the other side of the globe.

The plot is typically generic, with its Cold War paranoia being its only rather unintentional charm. The big twist – that the chick you nail at the beginning is actually a secret agent you end up working with – is introduced before the mission even begins, thereby ruining any sense of drama. The writing is terrible. "MERCY, MERCY, you think to yourself", the game says as you learn of your hookup's secret job. You would never hear James Bond say, or think, anything like this, ever, because it would instantly make him sound an eighty year old woman on the verge of fainting from the vapors. The rest is merely boring or charmless. The game uses the SCI0 interpreter, with 16 color EGA graphics and mouse control for movement, although it still uses a text parser.

Your mission is way more complicated than simply sneaking in, shooting some dudes and sneaking out, because Johnny is also put in charge of piloting the submarine that will infiltrate enemy territory, as well as taking on a bunch of other duties. Indeed, *Codename: ICEMAN* is maybe 40% adventure game, 30% submarine simulator, and 30% reading comprehension test. The structure goes something like this: Helm the submarine, plot a course, helm the sub again, decode some secret messages, fix a piece of machinery, helm the sub again, get into a battle with an enemy warship, helm the sub again, decode another message, helm the sub, and then get in another battle. Then you're finally free to infiltrate the enemy fortress and actually do something vaguely exciting.

The opening adventure segment is remarkably mundane. The beginning area in Tahiti feels more like *Leisure Suit Larry* than anything else ("talk girl", "buy drink", "dance", and so forth), and makes you do other exciting things like calling for a dinghy service and flashing your ID card at everyone you meet. It's full of stupid little hiccups typical of early Sierra games. After your one night stand you're supposed to find her lost earring, which is – no kidding – a glimmering pixel. If you don't do this, you don't find the microfilm required for later. When you give your ID card to one of the guards, he'll initially give you back the wrong one, so if you don't check it, per the procedures outlined in the manual, you'll again get screwed a few hours later. And when your commanders tell you to memorize a specific sequence of numbers, you'd better remember them!



Playing repairman aboard the sub sure is exciting.

These are all aggravating, but it's really all of the secondary tasks that drag the entire game down. The submarine simulation segments aren't really simulations – you don't actually have to plan much of anything. In other words, it's certainly no *Silent Service*. Absolutely none of the control panels are labeled. Instead, you need study the manual – supplied as a physical copy in the game packaging, of course – and carry out all of the orders the captain gives you. If you don't turn up the throttle fast enough, or don't turn to the right bearing, or don't bark the right orders in a short enough time frame, you'll crash the sub and die. There is never any point where any of this is fun. The orders are the same every time you play too – it would've been nice if it were randomized so it would feel less static, although that may have made it too difficult. Properly executing these scenes are hard enough as it is. There are also more arcade-type sequences, like one where you need to dodge a series of icebergs, or move past another friendly submarine. These are both needlessly difficult.

The battle scenes, though, are even worse. The captain gets sick during one of these, requiring that you carry them out without guidance, so there's actually some semblance to strategy, rather than simply following orders. But there's still a very specific set of steps you need to take in order to beat them, and it's up to you to figure them out. The visuals are nothing but two submarines on a small screen with lines to indicate your torpedoes, with the details relayed to you over the intercom. There's no real action to take other than deciding when to fire your torpedoes or decoys. If your timing is off, you'll get hit, or miss your attacks, which is just as deadly considering your limited munitions. Most of this is based on luck. You just have to make use of judicious save scumming, and have a lot of patience. Even more hilarious is during the first battle, when your weapons malfunction. As is turns out, you were supposed to tell a tech to repair one of the cylinders beforehand.

But worse still is the one part where you need to play game of Boss Dice with a fellow crewman in order to get a few items – a bottle of alcohol and a magnetic device. Again, it's dictated mostly by luck – but you're not even allowed to save and reload multiple times, lest you get accused of cheating. Why won't your stupid jerk crewmate just give you the magnetic device you need for the end of the game? Doesn't he know that he's potentially dooming the whole mission simply because he's a jackass? It's not absolutely essential to beat the game in case you can't win, but those items do make one of the later segments much easier.

Some of the other activities are slightly more interesting. When you must plot a route for your journey, you need to dig out the map, also supplied in the packaging, to look for the noted bodies of water and supply the coordinates into the sub's navigation computer. But it's so remarkably exacting that it won't accept anything less than near precision. Even if you do it well you'll be told how far off you are from an "optimal course". If the computer already knows the best route, why do they make you calculate it?

But the most pressing question is, why are you doing any of this? Why are you acting as a pilot? Doesn't the sub already have one of those? How about plotting courses? People go to school specifically for that. Why do you have to fix the machinery when it breaks? You're a super spy, not a technician. Apparently everyone on the goddamned submarine is useless except for you. And if you dawdle around the sub for too long, the mission will actually get called off and you'll lose. Really? If you're going to go to such absurd lengths to provide such detail, why does such monumentally ridiculous stuff like this even happen?

Of course, nearly all of these tasks require the use of the documentation included with the game. This was not uncommon in Sierra games, and was quite prevalent in *Conquests of Camelot*, released in the same year, the idea being you would be learning about actual historical events while playing the game. In *Codename: ICEMAN*, it's supposed to involve you further, by unfolding maps and drawing lines, and studying judiciously to master the submarine controls perfectly. But with such a huge portion of the game revolving around it – you need to administer CPR to a choking victim precisely as listed, or otherwise you'll lose for being too "heartless" – it rarely feels like you're doing much of anything yourself so much as being quizzed about your legitimate ownership.



Get used to seeing this screen. A lot. Over and over.

At least things are slightly redeemed in the final segment, where you don your wetsuit, blow up some oil rigs, find a disguise, execute an ill-conceived plan to masquerade as a group of caterers, and smuggle the ambassador to safety. Like many of these sequences, there's a very meticulous set of actions which need to be undertaken, under a set time limit. It's all too easy to screw up, but at least there's some intensity here, which the entire rest of the game is lacking. And the music, while limited, is actually quite good. Of course, the very final section is a lousy arcade sequence where you need to drive the catering van up a very steep, very windy mountain, but if you've managed to suffer this far, you might as well suck it up to finish the damn thing off. (Or, you can skip it thankfully, unlike the rest of the game.)

Conceptually, *Codename: ICEMAN* was not a bad experiment – to Sierra's credit, they were trying to combine genres to create a more rounded experience than their usual fare. But in order for that to work, each of the individual segments needs to be, you know, not terrible. Most gamers of the time were not pleased, and as a result, the game bombed, and its planned sequel, tentatively named *Codename: PHOENIX*, never came to be. Which, judging how this one turned out, was probably for the better.

Conquests of Camelot / Longbow

Sierra's short--lived *Conquests* series – written and designed by Christy Marx, with artwork provided by her husband Peter Ledger – is fairly unique amongst its field. As compared to other adventure games, like Sierra's own *King's Quest*, which is basically a mish-mash of medieval lore, mythology and fairy tales, the *Conquests* series strives for more faithful, scholarly retellings of these stories. The back of the box for *Conquests of Camelot* tells it pretty well:

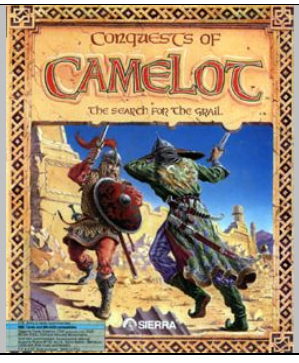
"Sadly, in the last half of the century, the Arthur legend has been recast as a cartoon and children's story. The mystic rituals and dark passions that colored the original Arthurian legends have been watered down to the soft and toothless fairy tales most commonly seen today."

That actually sounds a little bitter. You can picture the developers scribbling that with rage as they curse of existence of Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* or *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.*

At any rate, the legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood are just that – legends. It's impossible to be completely historically accurate, because most, if not all, of their exploits are regarded as fictional, and often have several different variations anyway. However, it does try its hardest to accurately portray the era of the legend, featuring realistic geography and an entirely believable background. For instance, in the era of *Conquests of Camelot*, Christianity is portrayed as something of a competing religion against other deities, like the old Greek gods. That's not really something that's brought up in most modern mainstream Grail Legend literature.

It obviously doesn't go back far enough to use actual Olde English, but its writing is a bit more eloquent than usual, utilizing a medieval style of early modern English without getting silly like the old *Dragon Warrior* NES translations, which simply replaced "I" and "You", with "Thy" and "Thou". Sometimes they use old-style spellings of the names – like Gwenhyver instead of Guinevere, or Launcelot instead of Lancelot.

There are only two games in the *Conquests* series, each starring a different British folk hero: *Conquests of Camelot*, focusing on King Arthur and his search for the Holy Grail; and *Conquests of the Longbow*, focusing on Robin Hood and his bandits' war with Prince John and the Sheriff of Nottingham. Perhaps not coincidentally, both were released roughly around the time as major motion pictures dealing with similar themes: *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* in 1989, which also focused on the search for the grail, and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* in 1991.



Conquests of Camelot: The Search for the Grail

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Christy Marx
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Conquests of Camelot is one of the last games to use Sierra's SCI0 interpreter. It utilizes 16 color EGA graphics and supports sound cards, and uses a text parser. You can also control your character with a mouse, and can look at any item by right clicking it. The story begins with the kingdom of Britain in peril. The knight Launcelot is madly in love with Queen Gwenhyver, who in turn is loved by King Arthur. This tragic love triangle has brought a pestilence to the land, and the populace is suffering. The solution, says Merlin the Wizard (who also acts as the game's narrator) is to find the Holy Grail. A few of the knights – Gawain, Launcelot and Galahad – take off to find it, and fail to return, so King Arthur sets off himself to do the task right.



Anger this witch and your adventure will be over in short order.

During the course of your adventures, you'll find three of your missing knights. It's up to you if you want to save them, and the game will progress if you decide to leave them to die. Of course, you'll lose points, and the grail will actually kill you once you find it, since you've been judged unworthy by its holy grace. You're actually scored in three different areas – Skill (for fighting), Wisdom (for solving puzzles), and Soul (for helping people out).

Conquests of Camelot isn't quite focused on puzzles, at least in the traditional sense. Most of the game is spent figuring out riddles or fighting through arcade sequences, and any time where you actually need to find and use an item to proceed, it's usually pretty clear. In the end, though, this makes the adventure way more frustrating.

Once you leave Camelot (which you can strangely never re-enter), you're presented with a map of Ye Olde England and a dozen or so locations. This is mostly a sham, though, because most of them just pop up with messages basically saying "The grail sure isn't here!" The first place you need to visit is Glastonbury Tor, where a mad monk is supposedly hiding it. Your first encounter is against a pack of boars, before challenging the Black Knight to a jousting duel. Neither is technically very difficult, but both require that you learn a single trick to beat them, which can usually take several tries. When facing off against the boars, you just need to time your spear thrusts correctly, but there's no consistency and you'll often find yourself getting killed for seemingly no reason.

Once you rescue Gawain, you'll end up having to solve a series of riddles posed by a group of stones. These are quite difficult, if these types of riddles aren't your thing. (Q: "If you break me I do not stop working, If you touch me I may be snared, If you lose me Nothing will matter. What am I?" A: "Heart".) Upon conquering these, you'll have to draw your sword for a battle with the mad monk, and it's pretty clear the SCI engine was never made for action sequences.

After learning that the mad monk was indeed mad and obviously doesn't have the grail, you'll travel to snow-laden Ot Moor. Here, you need to cross a frozen lake, with the help of a magical heart you found at Glastonbury Tor. This is one of those many obnoxious sequences where you need to move step-by-step through what amounts to an invisible maze. Wander a few pixels off the path, and the ice will begin to crack. Move a few more pixels, and you'll fall to a frozen death. There's very little room for error, and it goes on for a few screens, officially making it even worse than the tentacle monster maze from *Space Quest II*. Once you reach the center of the lake, you'll find Launcelot frozen captive by an ice queen. To save him, you need to answer a series of questions involving flowers, which is easily solved via the documentation in the manual.

You eventually learn that the grail is actually in Gaza, so you set sail to the Middle East. Once in Jerusalem, you need to walk around the bazaar, talk to the people, and solve their problems to continue, which is very straightforward. Before you find the grail and explore the

underground catacombs, you'll need to answer some more questions, which, again, are easily solved by reading the manual. And since most of the questions amount to reading comprehension, you end up learning quite a bit about Greeks gods and goddesses in the process, even if you didn't mean to.



Half the game is basically a wild goose chase, since the real Grail is located in Jerusalem.

It's a pretty fascinating, well-written adventure, and while some segments are extremely aggravating, they're towards the beginning of the game, and the later half is a bit easier. Still, if there's any major issue, is that it's all a bit too dry. It's one thing to tell stories from a historical angle, but all too often, it ventures into textbook territory, and is missing a lot of the personality that makes adventure games so fun. The only humor comes from the traditional Sierra-style death sequences, which almost feel hilariously out of place. If you try to leave Camelot and forget to pray to the gods (and give them cash), the castle gate will come crashing on top of you, killing you before your adventure can even begin. And, when you finally find the grail, a thief steals it. If you stand still and let him get away, Merlin chides you and sarcastically suggests that you may as well fall on your sword. Arthur then takes his sword and proceeds to commit suicide. That's... really over the top, there.

In spite of its problems – and there are a lot of them – *Conquests of Camelot* still somehow ends up succeeding in spite of itself. You just need the patience of the gods to enjoy it properly.



The Legend of Robin Hood: Conquests of the Longbow

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Christy Marx
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Some parts of the first game referred to it as "*Conquests of Camelot I*", implying that a sequel would focus again on King Arthur, or at least the Knights of the Round. Instead, Marx and company went a different route and jumped several centuries forward from Arthurian times, basing their second (and final) game on Robin Hood.

Most people are familiar with the basics of Robin Hood – while King Richard is off fighting the crusaders, the corrupt Prince John and his notorious right-hand man, the Sheriff of Nottingham, are unfairly ruling over the people the England. The outlaw by the name of Robin Hood, along with his faithful band of Merry Men, are devoted to robbing the rich, giving to the poor, and working in favor of the general populace while fighting against a cruel government. Here, King Richard has been captured during his adventures and held hostage by King Leopold of Austria. The Queen is working to pay this ransom, but naturally, Prince John is diverting the funds for his own uses, so it's up to Robin, with the aid of his gang and the lovely Maid Marian, to ensure the king's safe return.

The adventure consists of thirteen "days", which all focus around Sherwood Forest and the city of Nottingham. You must complete certain quests during each day in order to proceed, although a vast majority of them are fairly brief, and just involve accosting various travelers and finding new disguises. The rest of the time is spent infiltrating the towns, castles and abbeys for vital information. Although you can technically walk through the forest screen by screen, it's much easier to just bring up the map to travel. The game uses the SCI1 interpreter, featuring hand drawn 256 color backgrounds, improved sound, and an icon-based interface. In addition to the standard "Walk", "Talk" and "Use" icons, there's also a "Bow & Arrow" icon, the use of which should be obvious, although you aren't granted too many opportunities to use it.



Robin can walk around freely in town, but only while wearing a disguise.

Conquests of Camelot gave some vague pretensions of choice by letting you decide whether to rescue each of your knights. *Conquests of the Longbow* takes this a few steps further and gives you more opportunities to choose your path through the game. In most cases, this is the difference between convincing people to aid you – either through bribery or persistence – or merely threatening them. Obviously, it's better to avoid violence where you can, but you can choose to be a jerk, if you wish. There aren't any immediate consequences up until the end of the game, where your actions will ultimately decide Robin's fate. If you acted like a thoughtless rogue, you'll be hanged. If you acted decently, and earned enough points, you may even possibly wed Maid Marian herself.

There are a few cases where you'll need to plan an attack – you'll listen to suggestions from your compatriots and decide which to act on. These are unfortunately a bit arbitrary – choose correctly and you'll complete the sequence with minimal causalities, but pick a wrong one and you'll lose some of your team. This only really affects your point total, as well as the number of outlaws, as tallied at the top of the screen. You can also find ways to increase your treasury, and thus work towards the king's ransom. It also has an effect on the ending, but otherwise still doesn't quite feel like it serves much of a purpose.

There are also a couple of instances where you can "fail" an event, by letting Maid Marian get killed, messing up when trying to save some hostages, or losing the archery contest. The game will still progress as normal (most of the time), but you'll be setting yourself up for a crappy ending, guaranteed. These alternate scenes allow for some extra replay value, as you can play the game a few times, intentionally screwing up just to see what transpires.

Although the adventure isn't quite as epic as *Conquests of Camelot* – you never leave Sherwood Forest – it does have quite a bit more personality. Robin's merry men add a bit more of a light-hearted tone to the adventure, as they taunt and tease Robin (or each other) about their misadventures or romantic transpirings. Most of the death sequences also have unique sequences where your band laments your death and basically talk about what an idiot you were to get yourself killed. It also contains more fantasy elements than the traditional Robin Hood story, as you find magic rings and cavort with tree spirits during the course of your quest.

Longbow takes the same general approach to puzzles as *Camelot* – there isn't much of the usual lock-and-key type stuff, but there are lots of riddles, arcade sequences, and other minigames. Literally, for the first few chapters, all you need to do is stumble upon the event trigger, and you're set. As you get further, you'll need to fight in staff duels and enter archery tournaments, most of which are skippable if you turn down the Arcade difficulty setting. The only time you need to play a minigame is with Nine Men's Morris, which is an ancient strategy game that's kind of a mixture of tic-tac-toe and chess. Despite its initial difficulty curve – the CPU is not forgiving – it's a pretty cool game, and the packaging even includes a board for you to play in real life.

There are also plenty of word riddles to solve, and again, most of them come from reading the manual. Since there's no text entry, the game makes you spell out certain solutions through the use of druid hand language, where you click on various parts of your hand to signify different letters. This is something that's vital to write down when you first learn it, of course.



Robin and Maid Marian share a tender moment together. Try not to get her killed!

The developers wisely learned from the mistakes of its predecessor, so there aren't nearly as many annoying situations. There are two aggravating occasions where you're being chased through the woods by the Sheriff's men, requiring that you stumble from screen to screen until you find a safe place to use a magic spell. In the vein of those annoying chase sequences from *Space Quest IV*, you'll usually need to some trial and error to figure out which way to go. But it's nowhere near as bad as the frozen lake sequence from *Camelot*, at least.

Though it's one of the most obscure of Sierra's point-and-click adventures – it never received a CD release, even though they released a brief demo with some voicework, and didn't make it on any compilations – *Conquests of the Longbow* definitely deserves better, especially considering how much it improves over its predecessor.

Quest for Glory

The *Quest for Glory* series, designed by the husband and wife team of Lori and Corey Cole and initially published in 1990, is a bit of an oddball amongst Sierra's adventure titles. Although similar in appearance, they're less like point-and-click adventures and more like RPGs that happen to be dressed in adventure game clothing.

The main concept of *Quest for Glory* is evident through the subtitle of the first game: *So You Want to be a Hero?* In each of the five games you play a character whose job is to travel the world of Gloriana, saving the inhabitants from evil. Each of the five games takes place in a different part of the world: the first takes place in the Germanic land of Spielburg, with a bit of a traditional medieval flavor; the second is in the Middle Eastern land of Shapeir, with an Arabic flair; the third takes place in the Africa-like land of Tarna; the fourth in the Transylvania-esque land of Mordavia; and the fifth and final is in Silmaria, heavily resembling Ancient Greece. It's clear that the Coles had a vague overarching plan for the series from the get-go, which strengthens the ties between installments. It's amazing that they were actually able to finish their plans, given how many other gaming series get cut short.



The combat system changes from game to game, but fighting is always one-on-one.

There were originally four games planned – *So You Want to Be a Hero*, *Trial by Fire*, *Shadows of Darkness*, and *Dragon Fire*. However, after the second game, the Coles deviated from their initial plan to create another title, *Wages of War*. The series then continued as planned, and ended with the release of *Dragon Fire* in 1998. Each game was to represent one of the four cardinal directions, one of the four elements, and one of the four seasons, although this was somewhat thrown off with *Wages of War*. Each also has a unique setting, complete with interesting characters to meet, good and bad. Many real life folk tales and myths are also woven into the story. The main plots rarely go beyond the usual "find and conquer an evil demon", but what makes them so interesting are the unique plights of the townspeople, and how you save them.

This epic feel, complemented with the fantastically designed game world, is largely what makes the *Quest for Glory* series so interesting. In the first game, you stay at an inn run by a group of cat people called Katta. In the second game you travel with them to their homeland of Shapeir. So whenever you see any of the Katta in the rest of the series, you can say, hey, I've seen where these guys come from! Many other elements remain consistent throughout all of the games too – nearly all of the lands have an Adventurer's Guild, which acts as a starting point for each quest, and provides a place for training, as well as a logbook to sign. Each country you visit also has a different form of currency, so the first thing you need to do (at least in the first few games) is to hunt down a money exchanger so you can actually purchase some goods. One

particularly important recurring theme is the presence of the great hero Erana, an elf who traveled the world many years before, and seems to have completely disappeared. In almost all of the games you'll find an area blessed by her powers, which act as a safe haven for your hero to rest. All of these elements converge in *Dragon Fire*, where characters and events from the previous installments come together to form a rewarding finale.

Quest for Glory also has a distinctive sense of humor. Though not quite as off the wall as, say, *Space Quest*, the developers clearly have an affinity for goofy puns, pop culture references, and British humour, particularly *Monty Python* and Douglas Adams. Like most Sierra games, plenty of the death scenes have some pretty funny messages and are usually worth seeing, just for the chuckle. If you're a Thief, you can type "pick nose" or use a lock pick – if you're Lock Picking skill is high enough, you'll actually gain some skill points (and clear your nasal passages), but if it's too low, you'll end up getting a brain hemorrhage and killing yourself. Oops.

The only consistent downside to the series is that they've often been very buggy. They're much more complicated than the average Sierra adventure, featuring random elements and non-linear play, so some were released before being properly tested. You can find patches for all of the titles, some fan made, although they don't necessarily fix all of the issues. Just save often!



QFGII squeezes in a Casablanca and a Monty Python reference in the same screen.

The open worlds are reminiscent of the early *King's Quest* games, with one main town center and a fairly large, non-linear world to explore. Your specific goals usually aren't apparent when you first begin, but you'll soon learn after talking to the townspeople, or checking out the local Adventurer's Guild for people in need. Most of the main storylines involve conquering a number of trials before moving on to the final segment of the game. There are usually also additional subquests that can improve your stats, give you extra items or money, or even change the ending.

The biggest influence on how you play is determined by your character class. As a Fighter, you are more well suited to combat, and can simply choose brute force methods to conquer many of the puzzles. As a Thief, you're a bit slyer, preferring a stealthy approach. As a Magician, you can just use your magic spells, provided you've learned the appropriate one. Starting with the third game, there's also the "hidden" Paladin class, which is much like a Fighter but with extra abilities, and some additional subquests to conquer. You can also choose your character's name, although his official title, per the authorized strategy guide, is Devon Aidendale.

Each problem usually has multiple solutions. If you need gold, as a Fighter, you might simply wander through the land and destroy enemies to take their cash. As a Thief, it might be better to just wait until night and break into some houses, or take on some jobs for the local Thieves Guild. As a Fighter, if you're strong enough, you can break down doors. As a Thief, you can pick the lock. As a Magician, you can just cast an Open spell. The puzzles in *Quest for Glory*

are quite different from other adventure games, because they're usually pretty direct and logical. The most difficult element is hunting down or finding the items you'll need, and you might not even need them, depending on your character's skills. Additionally, while there are still death scenes, they aren't as random and frustrating as other games. They're usually because you died in combat or did something particularly stupid. There are also very few cases where the games can become unwinnable if you forget to grab a certain object (except for one easy-to-miss thing in *Quest for Glory II*).

It's also possible to create hybrid characters. At the beginning of each game you can allocate a number of skill points to various statistics, including Strength (which determines your attacking power), Vitality (stamina), and Magic, as well as other skills like Climbing, Lock Picking, and Stealth. Normally you can increase these skills in five point increments, but you can also spend fifteen points to give your character a skill they might not normally have. This way, you can create a Fighter that can pick locks, or a Thief with magic skills. Some of the games still have specific paths for each character (for instance, you may not be able to use certain spells unless you're a Magician, even if you've granted Magic skills to another character class), but it does allow you to diversify a bit. Once you've learned a skill, you can increase it simply by performing the action over and over. There aren't technically any experience levels, but you gain Strength, Vitality, and Weapon Use stats by fighting in combat. You can also repeatedly throw stones to build up your Throwing stat, or repeatedly try to climb something to build up your Climbing skill. It's a bit silly that you might need to stop for a few moments and repeat a single action over and over just so you can proceed, but it's much less tedious than the level grinding found in other RPGs.

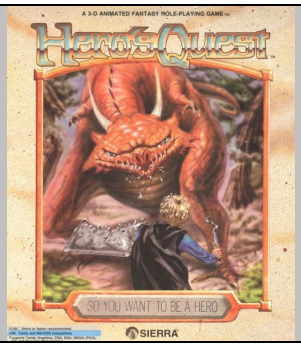


Each Quest for Glory game has a central town location. Pictured is Mordavia from the fourth game.

Each game has battle scenes, although you can mostly avoid them, depending on your character. Although the specific battle system changes from game to game, they're usually one-on-one scenes fought in real time. They're all pretty sloppy, and their outcome is more based on your statistics than mouse-clicking skills, but there's rarely any situation where things get too difficult and you can't just run off, to then gain some higher stats.

Once you finish any of the games, you can save your character and import them directly into any of the sequels, keeping all of their statistics. You can change their class if you wish, too. With each game, the default stats for the hero go up. In the first game, when you're a newbie, the levels for most skills are pretty low, with about 10 or 20 points in each skill. By the time the fifth and final game rolls around, you average is around 300. If you play the entire series from scratch, in order, you see your hero start out as a rookie, slowly save land after land, gain a reputation, and become far more powerful than when you started.

The series was originally known as *Hero's Quest*. However, once it was published, Sierra ran into some problems with Milton Bradley, who had already created a board game of the same name. Sierra then changed it to "*Quest for Glory*" and rereleased it. All subsequent games used the *Quest for Glory* moniker.



Hero's Quest: So You Want to be a Hero (Original release) /
Quest for Glory: So You Want to be a Hero (Rerelease / remake)

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Macintosh / PC-98
Designer(s): Lori and Corey Cole
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The first *Quest for Glory* begins in the land of Spielburg, a Germanic village in the middle of a lush forest. The town's not in the best of shapes, given that their princess has been missing for years. Furthermore, the local brigands are causing trouble for travelers. And if those woes weren't enough, the area is cursed by the vicious ogress Baba Yaga. Only you, a young hero fresh from the Famous Adventures Correspondence School, can save the day.



These curious-looking flowers spit rocks back and forth. Try to catch it!

The town of Spielburg is fairly small, but it does have a castle, and a large maze-like forest to explore. The Thief is a particularly good class for rummaging through the shops, most of which are otherwise inaccessible. Ghouls and thieves wander the land, but there are kindly creatures too, like the weird little hermit who lives by the waterfall. One of the most important characters to meet is the addle-brained wizard Erasmus and his wise familiar (or is that the other way around?), a rat named Fenris. If you're a Magician and you've found the right spells, you can challenge him in a minigame. You'll also come across the mysterious Antwerp, a goofy, bouncing blob creature that seems harmless, but can cause quite the trouble if you bother it too much – it'll launch itself into the sky and come plummeting down on top of you, killing you instantly. Also amusing is the mushroom garden, where taking too many will result in some nasty drug trips. Once you infiltrate the brigand hideout, you'll find a few that suspiciously resemble The Three Stooges.

Like the first entries in many other Sierra series, *Quest for Glory* comes in two flavors: the original EGA version, released in 1990 using SCI0, or the enhanced VGA remake, released in 1992 using SCI1. Unlike *Space Quest* or *Leisure Suit Larry*, where the remakes looked vastly superior to the AGI originals, the gap between these two versions isn't quite as big. SCI0 only supports 16 colors, but it uses the full 320x200 resolution, and still manages to look pretty decent given the hardware limitations. The mouse-based movement is a bit fussy, but this is one of the later revisions of the engine, which allows you to examine any object by pointing at it and right clicking, much better than typing "look at ____" then trying to figure out whatever noun the game has in mind.

The VGA version features hand drawn backgrounds, which are generally quite faithful to the originals. Sometimes some effects are missing, like the fancy fireworks outside the magic store in the EGA version, but on the flip side, areas like the hedge garden are vastly more detailed in the VGA version. The VGA version also uses claymation for the combat sequences. While the animation is a bit jerky, they don't look too bad. The same can't be said about the character portraits, which look almost universally ugly. The music is slightly enhanced, although it's largely the same, but the addition of digitized sound effects adds a bit to the remake, especially during combat. The VGA version does have an odd Easter egg where you'll find a character from the early '80s TV show *Dinosaurs* wandering through the forest. The EGA version features a cameo by the submarine from *Codename: Iceman*, another Sierra game released around the same time.

There are also different curios from various Sierra games in Erasmus' castle. In particular, you'll find a sarcophagus – in the EGA version, it has a carving of Rosella from *King's Quest IV*, but it's tied with the *Laura Bow* series in the VGA version, a reference to one of Roberta Williams' other games. The design of the Antwerp is also different between the games. In the EGA version, it has four eyes and a beard. In the VGA version, it only has two eyes and no beard, but you can kinda see its digestive system through its gooey flesh. The hero's design changed between games too, with the EGA hero wearing blue armor, purple pants and a black cape, with the VGA hero wearing a brown and white shirt, with green pants and a red cape.



Quest for Glory is not above vague Star Wars references.

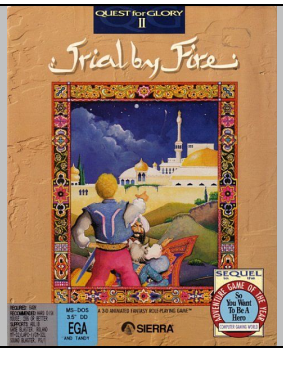
The VGA version features the usual "Walk", "Use", and "Talk" icons, but there's also a "Magic" icon, and a miscellaneous function that will open up a submenu, allowing you to view your character sheet, check the time of day, rest, or run. However, the EGA version has funny little messages if you click on random items that don't have any description written for them, like, "We're sorry, but the pixel you clicked on is not in service at this time. Please check your mouse and click again." Unfortunately, these are mostly removed from the VGA version – you'll just get generic descriptions. On the other hand, there are some other silly messages you'll

get for clicking on things in the VGA version, particularly random trees. Although some may lament the lack of freedom due to the mouse parser, some of the multiple choice questions in the VGA version are pretty amusing. Before you enter Erasmus' house, you need to answer three questions posed by the gargoyle guard, which should seem familiar to *Monty Python* fans. They're randomly generated, but in the "WHAT IS YOUR QUEST?" part, you can answer "I want to be a pirate!", the words spoken by the gleefully naive hero Guybrush Threepwood in LucasArts' *The Secret of Monkey Island*.

The two major other revisions with the VGA version are with the conversation and battle systems. In the text parser driven EGA version, you need to "ask about" a variety of different topics, and keep guessing at different ones to see if you can dig any useful information out of whomever you're questioning. The VGA remake simply presents you with a predetermined selection, making things much easier. On the combat side, the EGA version sticks the camera right above the hero's head, giving a pseudo first-person look at the action. While immersive, the combat is extremely slow and clumsy. It seems like you're constantly swiping at air, and damage seems to be randomly generated by your stats rather than your actions. As a result, it's all too easy to get decimated by any random encounter in the early portions of the game. Furthermore, if you keep the game speed on high in order to quickly explore the land, you need to be quick and set it to default (with the = key) when you engage in combat or else you'll end up fighting in fast forward.

The VGA version fixes things up a bit. The camera has been switched to an over-the-shoulder angle, giving you a slightly better view of the action. A shield in the lower right corner shows all of the commands, including two types of sword attacks, as well as parries and dodges. You can also simply click the center to run away, or switch to the spell menu. While the combat is still based largely on your stats rather than your twitch skills, at least it's far less difficult. One major snag is that if you run out of stamina when fighting, you'll die immediately, which doesn't happen in most other *Quest for Glory* titles.

The music in both versions is excellent, but the VGA version offers full sound and adds a lot of extra music. This game introduces two songs used in later games – the "Hero's Theme", as played in the intro, and rearranged as the town theme, and the "Battle Theme". One of the best songs in the game is "Erana's Peace", played in her garden, which was later used in *Quest for Glory IV*. All three songs are featured in both versions.



Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Lori and Corey Cole
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Quest for Glory II, using the SCI0 engine, begins with our hero riding a magic carpet to the land of Shapeir, a desert country straight out of the *Arabian Nights*. All seems well for a few days, until the city comes under attack by a variety of troublesome elementals, who are based on earth, fire, wind and water, per RPG standards. After taking care of them, the hero will ride off to the crime ridden Raseir, Shapeir's evil doppelganger city, which appears to be permanently devoid of light. Here, he must foil the plans of Ad Avis, who wishes to call the usual evil demons to rule the world.

The atmosphere in Shapeir is completely different from its predecessor. When you first get to the city you change into an appropriate outfit, ditching your old suit and cape. The music is appropriately Arabic flavored, although like many earlier adventure games it's silent for a majority of the time. It's also structured quite a bit differently. Rather than having a small town and a huge world to explore, *Quest for Glory II* flips that around, by having one gigantic town and a fairly small exterior world. Shapeir is an enormous city, filled with a labyrinth of streets that connect each of its five plazas. Whenever you enter one, the viewpoint switches behind the back of your hero, which can get extremely disorienting when you change directions. It also doesn't help that your hero will keep walking forward until you hit a button to stop, making it difficult to walk through side doors. This is pretty standard for Sierra titles, but it definitely works against the game's favor here. Using the mouse doesn't really help much either.

One of your first tasks is to find the money changer so you can purchase some items. Of course, said money changer is also hidden in the depths of these winding roads. The idea is that you're supposed to look at the map that comes bundled with the software, read the names of the streets, and carefully navigate to your destination. This is, naturally, pretty difficult, and it wouldn't be surprising if many less devoted gamers simply gave up right here. Thankfully, once you get your cash, you can buy both a map and a compass from one of the vendors, which allows you to instantly warp to any previously visited location. Once you've found all of the major centers, there are only a couple of times you'll ever need to break out the physical map and wade through the tunnels again.

The city itself is full of interesting characters. Two of the merchants bear suspicious resemblance to the Marx Brothers. The resident magician is a wacky little floating gnome, with a penchant for terrible puns and a room full of weird objects, including a Rosella doll, a Cookie Monster puppet, a squid with wings on it (narrator's description: "You don't want to know") and an object so baffling that the game's only description is a single question mark. Most of the residents include the cat-like Katta, and you spend much of your time at the inn run by your friend Shameen. On certain nights, you can even watch his wife seductively dance, which is a bit discomforting, given these are anthropomorphic cats. You can also find a helpful but ill-tempered fortuneteller in the depths of the city, who is vital to your quest but will have no problems tossing you out on your behind if you insult her.



The country of Shapeir is worlds apart from Spielburg.

Each class also has a unique optional quest to accomplish during the game. The Fighter can join the Eternal Order of Fighters, and the Magician can join the Wizard Institute of Technology (WIT), both accomplished by surviving through harsh tests. The Thief can hunt down the local guild and run specific quests for even more cash. Also new to *Quest for Glory II* are the Paladin quests, and alongside, the Honor statistic. If you act in accordance with the laws

of the Paladin (which mostly amount to "don't be a jerk"), you can eventually be promoted to this powerful class. However, this doesn't happen until the end of the game, so you don't actually get to use any of their skills. The idea is that you can import these into *Quest for Glory III* as a Paladin, but as it turns out, that game lets you choose to become a Paladin regardless of the deeds you accomplish here. Also new, and available to all character classes, is the Communication stat, which can be used to bargain with merchants. It's all too easy to just continue to negotiate until your skill is high enough to convince them, so it is slightly broken.

Outside of the walls of Shapeir lies a vast desert. It stretches infinitely to the east and west, but there are only about five screens that separate the north and south borders of the game world. Compared to the Forest of Spielburg in the first *Quest for Glory*, you won't spend nearly as much time navigating the desert – there are only a few locations to visit, and once you memorize the exact directions, they're never more than a few screens away. In addition to food, you'll also need a good supply to water to survive in the blistering heat, so make sure you fill your waterskins at every possible chance.

There are plenty of enemies roaming the desert, of course, although not nearly as many as the first game. The combat has changed to an isometric viewpoint, similar to what was used in the *Quest for Glory I* remake. However, there are many more combat options. While the rest of the games only give you two attack options – slash and thrust – there are numerous types of high, mid and low level attacks, in addition to parrying and dodging maneuvers. All of this is controlled by the numeric keypad. (Just make sure to turn Num Lock off!) While this should add depth to the fighting, it's still based too heavily on your statistics, as attacks rarely seem to connect when they should, and it's really just easier either to button mash or run away.



To beat the final battle, you need to use a classic Monty Python tactic – run away!

The biggest change from the previous game is that all of the events run on a very tight schedule. After the first days in town, one of the elementals will appear – if you don't kill it within a couple of days, it'll destroy the city. Once all four are defeated, you'll automatically be taken to the city of Raseir, where time ceases to be much of an issue as the rest of the game plays out. Given how much freedom you have in all of the other *Quest for Glory* titles, it's all aggravatingly linear.

There are more clever bits of humor too, including a cinematic sequence that begins with a homage to *Lawrence of Arabia*, which switches to an intermission (complete with popcorn and soda graphics) as you come under attack. The ensuing battle takes place off screen, and you somehow end up victorious over a pile of fallen bodies. The Blue Parrot Inn in Raseir is one huge tribute to *Casablanca*, cheekily borrowing Sydney Greenstreet's Signor Ferrari and Peter Lorre's Ugarte characters. In another slightly amusing Easter egg, you can buy a pair of X-Ray Glasses from the magician's shop. These may seem useless, but you can use them to spy on one

of the female characters when they're changing clothes. It's not particularly detailed, even compared to, say, *Leisure Suit Larry III*, but hey! Stuff like this is awesome when you're thirteen. There's even a cryptic "Silly Clowns" option in the menu bar, which causes some rather goofy stuff to happen through the game, like finding a Harpo Marx look-a-like running through the streets of Shapeir, or a doomed golfer permanently stuck in the desert sands.

Quite tragic is the story of Julanar, a woman who defied societal norms to become a healer. After being kidnapped by bandits, she escaped into the desert but found herself in a perilous situation. Upon hearing her cries for help, a genie "saves" her by turning her into a tree, which still bears some vague feminine features. You can aid her by giving her water, but only "true love" can set her free, which unfortunately the hero cannot provide. If you want to be a jerk, though, you can chuck a stone at her. In a brilliant fourth wall shattering move, it'll bounce off and "crack" your computer monitor, complete with an electric hum and a Game Over message lamenting the fact that you'll need to buy a new one.

Just one word of warning – the *Quest for Glory* games are usually pretty good about not sticking you in unwinnable situations. But after you beat all of the elementals, make sure to talk to all of the citizens, because one of them will give you a vital item. If you forget to get it – and it's something very easy to overlook – then you'll be completely stuck once you get to Raseir.

Despite a few of the aggravations, which you'll mostly learn to avoid through multiple playthroughs, *Quest for Glory II* is a damn fine game. Although Sierra never released a VGA upgrade for *Quest for Glory II*, an awesome software development studio named AGD Interactive released their own remake in 2008 for Windows. The interface is pretty much the same one as *Quest for Glory III*, even using the same font. All of the writing is intact, all of the locations are beautifully duplicated with 256 color backgrounds, and all of the major (and most of the minor) characters have portraits when speaking. Although a majority of the interface is mouse driven, you have the option to enter text during the dialogue screens, in addition to choosing from multiple selections. The streets of Shapeir are now much brighter and less dingy, with street names helpfully popping up as you highlight them. There's even an option to simplify the layout, which is still confusing, but much easier to navigate than the numerous twists and turns of the original game. All of the music has been redone too.

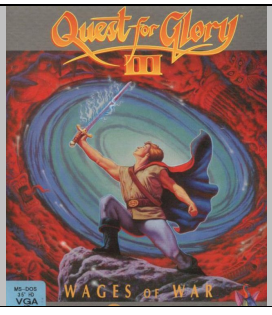


The unofficial remake is stunningly professional in practically every aspect.

The developers at AGD also took the opportunity to expand the dialogue, including some notes from the Coles of things that had been left on the cutting room floor, and several additional Easter eggs. It also ties in together with the later games, allowing you to ask Rakeesh more about his life in Tarna from *Quest for Glory III*, or talk about Mordavia from *Quest for Glory IV*. There are a couple of new enemies, too – in *Quest for Glory IV*, the mad scientist talks about

a hidden fifth "pizza" element. In this remake, there's actually a hidden fifth pizza elemental you can fight, if you go through the right steps.

The battle system has been tweaked a bit as well. The screen no longer fades to a black screen during combat. You can now advance or retreat around the screen, allowing for a greater range of movement. You also regain a bit of stamina as long as you're not attacking. If you want to forego most of this, there's an auto-battle option too, which you can manually tweak. It's still a bit hard to deal with, and fights tend to take longer than normal, but it's also a huge improvement over the original. Since the remake was released as freeware with permission from Vivendi Universal (who held the rights to Sierra's licenses at the time), it's definitely worth downloading, and might even be preferable to the original, as long as you don't have any nostalgic attachment to it.



Quest for Glory III: Wages of War

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Lori and Corey Cole
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The developers originally intended to continue the *Quest for Glory* series with *Shadows of Darkness*, which would've taken place in the Translyvania-esque land of Mordavia. They put these plans on hold though, with the release of *Wages of War*. (Apparently the Coles had planned to rerelease the game under the subtitle *Seekers of the Lost City*.) This time, our hero visits the land of Tarna, the homeland of Uhura and Rakeesh, the residents of the Adventurer's Guild in *Quest for Glory II*. Fricana is much like Africa, although it is ruled primarily by lion-like creatures called Liontaurs. The Liontaurs rule the nation, which is also the name of their capital city. As you and Rakeesh return, you learn of a mounting war between the human Simbani tribe and the apparently evil Leopardman. Obviously, things aren't as they seem, and it's up to you, as the hero, to find a way to avoid a bloody and unnecessary conflict.



The hero spends much of the time interacting with the residents of the Simbani tribe.

Quest for Glory III uses the same SCI1 interface as the *Quest for Glory I* remake, with mostly identical commands, although the graphics are a bit better. However, it feels much smaller than

either of the previous games. The bargaining interface is now a bit more advanced, allowing you to give specific offers to merchants, and you can now click the mouth icon on yourself for more dialogue options, including greeting characters and telling them about your adventures. There's also a handy autosave, too.

Outside the city of Tarna lies a huge savannah and a jungle, making up the land of Fricana. Travel is accomplished via an overhead map, complete with *Indiana Jones*-style dotted lines that trace your hero's steps. The game world is only four screens long and time passes quickly as you travel. You can now camp anywhere in the savannah, as long as you have a source of fire (either the lame dart spell for magicians, or a tinderbox for any other class). Outside of the first couple of days, the game does not run under any schedule a la *Trial by Fire*, so you're free to take your time on your quest. The music takes on a tribal African feel. It works some of the time, but it's usually just pretty grating, particularly because the prevalent use of percussion just doesn't sound right on most MIDI outputs. There are a variety of combat themes, but none of them are particularly good.

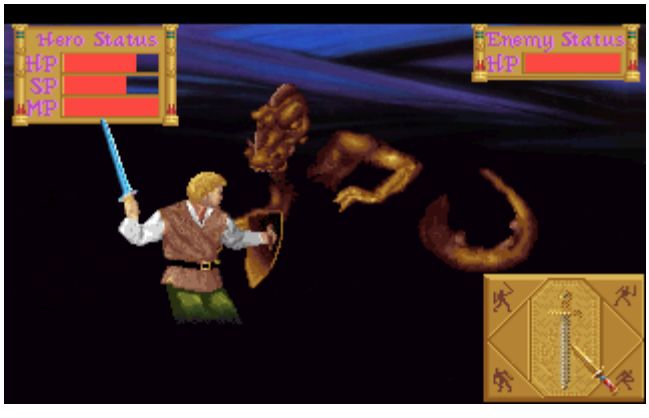
Battles still occur randomly on the world map, but you're given the opportunity to run away before conflict. The fighting is pretty terrible too, arguably the worst since the original EGA *Hero's Quest*. The viewpoint is similar to battle scenes from the *Quest for Glory I* remake, but the camera has been positioned at waist level behind the hero, giving a more dramatic perspective on the action. But neither you nor your enemies seem to react whenever they get hit, and there aren't any sound effects to indicate damage, it makes you both look like you're flailing randomly at air, all while the HP and stamina meters are mysteriously dropping. Like most of the other games, you can still win just by spamming the attack commands, and at least you regain a bit of stamina if you hold off attacking.

For a good portion of the game your quest feels pretty aimless. Most of the adventure revolves around simple fetch quests, none of which require any effort or ingenuity. You also can't advance any events until the Simbani capture a Leopardman. The problem is, this event is triggered by completely unrelated tasks, leaving you to stumble around until the game finally decides you can move on. But once that happens you're basically entering the second half. *Quest for Glory III* is fairly short, and the resolution of the plot isn't particularly interesting either. It doesn't help that there doesn't seem like there's a whole lot to do. There's a ritual initiation for the Fighter, and a staff building quest for the Magician, but there's almost nothing for the Thief. In fact, there's no Thieves Guild, no houses to break into, and only a few cases where your skills are of any use.

If you've imported a character from a previous game, you can also choose to be a Paladin from the outset. The Paladin is more or less the same as the Fighter, but there are a few extra quests that grant additional abilities, like a flaming sword to deal extra damage, or healing magic to cure wounds. You also need to act properly in order to increase your Honor and Paladin statistics, and run various subquests. Some of these are interesting – at the beginning of the game you help catch a thief, whose "honor" is stripped away as a punishment. In Tarna, however, this basically means that a person is more or less nonexistent, so the thief can no longer talk to anyone, much less find food. You can offer to help him, which in turn breaks the rules of the land, but this is required to fulfill the duties of a Paladin. Others, however, are somewhat lamer. There's a Simbani tribesman that you repeatedly need to challenge in a dull minigame. After doing this for days on end, you can eventually become his "friend" and gain another skill. It's a bit disappointing that after all of the hype that went into building up the Paladin class in *Quest for Glory II*, that it really just amounts to a few skills and minor story segments – further moral quandaries like the honorless thief would've worked much better. Apart from all of the Paladin subquests, this is the first *Quest for Glory* where your hero can get a love interest, although sadly the relationship doesn't last for long.

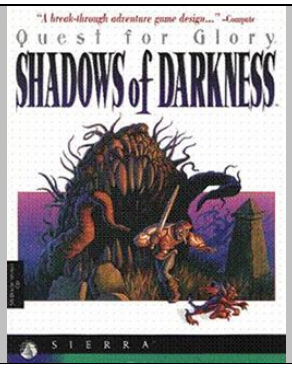
In general the game feels kind of empty. There are a couple of interesting characters – most notably, the *Sanford and Son*-esque duo in the Tarna bazaar, and the super hippie at the Apothecary – and there are a few amusing scenes, like the fake death message you get if you fail

to put out a campfire, or the Awful Waffle Walker, a strange, edible being you'll find wandering through the jungle, but only if you're nearing starvation. If you're lucky, you'll also happen upon Laurel and Hardy (dressed as French Legion soldiers) and a weird creature called Andy the Aardvark (who dishes out useful hints). But touches like these are uncommon, and neither the plot, nor the characters, nor the writing is as engaging as any of the other titles. So while the setting is unique amongst adventure games, *Quest for Glory III* just feels lacking in too many areas.



The fighting scenes in this game are, sadly, reprehensible.

Also, it's a minor point of contention, but from this game onward, the hero just wears a generic brown and white outfit, instead of donning some of the local garb, a la the Arabian outfit from *Quest for Glory II*. Oh well.



Quest for Glory: Shadows of Darkness

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Lori and Corey Cole
Developer: Sierra On-Line

After dallying in Tarna, the hero is mysteriously zapped to the land of Mordavia to take on the shadows of darkness, as promised back in the ending of *Quest for Glory II*. Mordavia is a Slavic land that bears more than a passing resemblance to Transylvania. It has a bit of a spooky horror atmosphere to it, complete with undead creatures and monster movie mainstays. There's a mad scientist character named Dr. Cranium who essentially acts as an apothecary, dealing out potions and pills. There's a grave digger named Igor, and a spooky castle, guarded by a Boris Karloff look-a-like. Of course, vampires play pretty heavily into all of this, although they're usually portrayed in a rather sympathetic manner. After all, one of your first friends is Katrina, a mysterious cloaked woman who only comes out at night, which is none too subtle. The real evil is Ad Avis, who somehow survived your attack in *Quest for Glory II* and is now back for revenge.

In some ways, *Quest for Glory IV* (the unofficial name, seeing how the numeral is missing from the title) is a throwback to the first game. There's a single town, along with an expansive labyrinthine forest to explore. Your primary task, as you eventually learn, is to hunt down seven rituals, contained in seven scrolls across the land. During your adventures you'll also encounter Baba Yaga, who has since fled from the land of Spielburg, and work to reunite a young vampire child with her family. Erana also features more heavily into the plot too – if you sleep in any of her gardens, you'll have nightmares that clue you in to her fate. You'll also come across the mysterious (and wacky) Antwerps again, which haven't truly been seen since the first game. The quests for each of the classes are much more fleshed out than in the previous game too. At one point you'll meet the Rusalka, a beautiful naked woman in the middle of the lake. Of course, like any Siren-type creature, if you run into her arms she'll drown you. If you give her some flowers, you can become friends with her and chat about her woes. The scenario is all quite touching – how often can you befriend a dangerous creature? – but only the Paladin can undertake the quest to free her. There's also a fairly expansive subquest regarding the ghost of the Paladin Piotyr, who seeks to restore his unrightfully sullied name. In addition there's a new skill, measured by the Acrobatics stat, plus a new Jump command to go along with it.



The young vampire child is guarded by a monstrous but friendly creature.

Perhaps in order to capitalize on the popularity of *Street Fighter II* and other similar arcade games at the time, the battle perspective has switched to a side viewpoint, complete with gigantic sprites. Despite the graphics, however, it plays nothing like any typical fighting game. Using the mouse, you can click around the area to advance, retreat, jump or swipe your melee weapons. This system is much more advantageous for Magicians and Thieves, since they can use ranged spells or daggers without putting themselves directly in the line of combat. Ultimately though, it still tends to devolve into button mashing, although it's not nearly as sloppy as the original games. There are actual sound effects when taking damage, and you can visibly see the enemies dodging your blows, instead of your sword simply passing through them. If you're too aggravated by these segments, you can also set it to auto-battle, and adjust the levels of aggression used by the AI.

There are a lot more logic puzzles too. Some are simple color matching exercises, used when disarming traps as the Thief, but others require a bit of thinking, mostly requiring that you spell out a name in the correct order, using either letters or colors. Perhaps the most maddening are the colored bells, requiring you to play a game of Simon before you're allowed to pass. Each time you enter, it just gets longer and longer and longer.

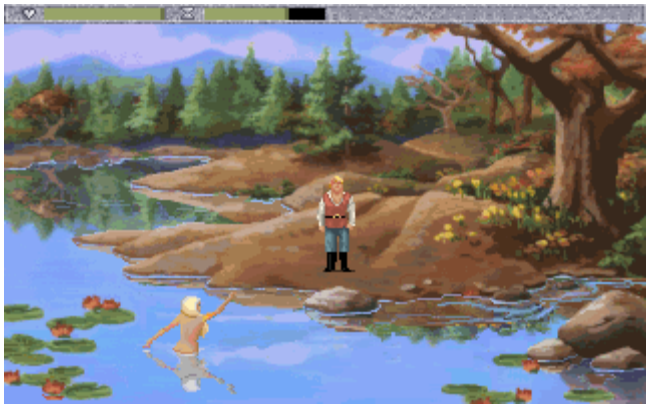
There's more of the usual *Quest for Glory* humor too, including *Monty Python*-style killer rabbits that inhabit the forest. Dr. Cranium, the mad scientist based off of the Dr. Brain character in Sierra's edutainment series, requests that you give him formulas for various potions.

(This is the game's method of copy protection. Unlike many other games, it was not removed for the CD version, so you'll still need a manual.) In addition to the usual earth, fire, wind and water elements, he insists that there's a fifth element based on pizza. Much of the humor shines through the voice acting in the CD version. Several characters are parodies of famous actors – other than the Boris Karloff clone, the leader of the thieves guild looks like Peter Lorre, and some of the townspeople have voices and speech patterns based on Rodney Dangerfield and Jack Nicholson. Also now all of the major characters have full screen portraits as you talk to them. Their dialogue isn't lip synched like some other Sierra games, but it still lends a ton of personality to the inhabitants of Mordavia. The narrator's voice is provided by John Rhys Davis – famous for his role as Sallah in the *Indiana Jones* movies, and Ghimli in the *Lord of the Rings* films – and while he has some fun with certain lines, it's a bit on the dry side.



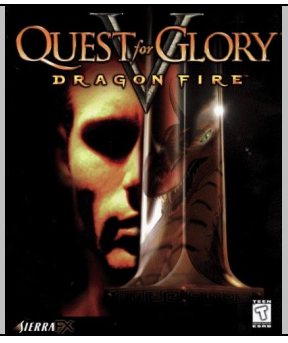
The side-view combat seems to have taken a note from Street Fighter II.

The music in the *Quest for Glory* games has usually been pretty decent, but there's been little outside of the title themes or battle songs that really stood out. In contrast, *Shadow of Darkness'* soundtrack is spectacular, especially with its many battle themes and beautiful rock ballads. Although it could've benefitted from real guitar instrumentation, the MIDI music, even with the weak Adlib synth, is pretty damn good. The graphics have seen some subtle improvements too. The trees in the forest actually cast shadows over your character as he walks beneath them, which is pretty cool.



The Rusalka's plight in the lake is a tragic one.

Quest for Glory IV is undoubtedly one of the best games in the series, having taken the template of the first game, and improved on practically every aspect, while keeping down some of the aggravating issues from its other sequels. Lori Cole even admitted in interviews that it's one of her favorites. The only real bummer is how buggy it is. The *Quest for Glory* games have always had QA issues, but it's particularly bad here, especially in the original disk release. Even with the fan made patches, some areas can become impossible to conquer, or require strange workarounds in order to advance.



Quest for Glory V: Dragon Fire

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: Windows / Macintosh
Designer(s): Lori Cole
Developer: Sierra On-Line

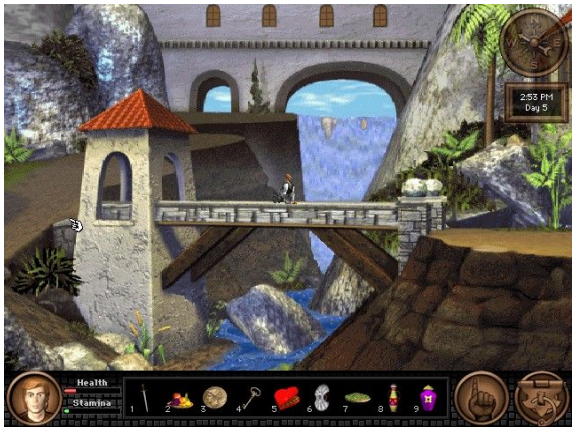
The four prior *Quest for Glory* games were released between 1990 and 1993, essentially giving gamers a new one every year. Unfortunately, by the mid '80s, the adventure gaming market was starting to dry up, causing Sierra and other companies to scale back. It wasn't until 1998, five years after *Shadows of Darkness*, that the hero was finally able to travel to Silmaria for the fifth and final *Quest for Glory* title. Although the Coles had since left the company, Lori Cole was hired back to bring everything to a proper close.

The land of Silmaria is essentially much like ancient Greece, and the land consists of an expansive piece of land (with a gigantic crater in the middle) and several smaller islands. They're in the middle of a rather dire crisis, with their king having been recently assassinated. You, along with several other contestants, must take part in seven trials to determine who will become the next ruler of the country. Things get even more complicated when several of your opponents are murdered, and longtime pals Rakeesh and Erasmus end up poisoned at the hands of the wicked assailant.

The interface has been simplified quite a bit, with the usual icons removed. There's the standard pointer, which allows your hero to move, use, talk, or otherwise interact with the world. If you right click you'll change into "look" mode, allowing you to examine the scenery. Conversing works much the same as before, but the character portraits have been shrunk to postage stamp size windows on the right side of the screen, a huge step down from *Quest for Glory IV*. They're computer rendered and look a bit on the ugly side, although at least the voice acting is still quality. For some reason the narrator isn't voiced at all, with all of the usual descriptions reduced to a text window at the top of the screen. There's also a new Swimming skill, since there are a few portions that take place underwater.

The graphics are a mixture of bitmap backgrounds and polygonal modeled characters. The scenery pans around as you move left or right, giving them a panoramic feel, and the camera slightly zooms in and out on the hero in certain areas. While this causes some distortion on the backgrounds, it does lend a bit of extra depth to the graphics. Still, the high res, computer generated bitmaps don't quite have the quaint appeal of the pixel art or the hand drawn artwork of the previous games. The polygonal characters don't fare so well either, but it's hard to notice their boxiness most of the time, since the camera is usually pretty zoomed out. This is the only game in the series where your equipment actually affects how your character looks, which is a nice touch. Overall the visuals haven't aged quite as well as the older games, but it's not bad considering the usual standard for prerendered graphics in the mid-to-late '80s. It's still a lot

better than the third *Gabriel Knight* game, which used both 3D characters and environments, with rather disastrous results.



The panoramic scrolling is awkward, but the views are not unpleasant.

Much like *Quest for Glory III*, exploration is handled via an overhead map, although important locations are marked with little emblems. Through your adventures, you'll find the usual mythical creatures, and be charged with raiding a Pegasus nest, fighting the three headed Hydra, exploring the city of Atlantis, and entering the underworld of Hades. At one point, you get to reconstruct a set of Icarus wings to fly over the landscape, but that obviously doesn't last too long. Later on you can build yourself an airship, which makes traveling a bit less of a hassle.

There's more emphasis on combat in *Quest for Glory V*, with the battle system being completely changed up. There are no longer any combat transitions, and all fighting happens on the same screen. It's pretty simple – all you need to do is click on an enemy to fight. You can also use the keyboard to execute other types of attacks, or to defend, but it's a pretty clunky way of handling things. Additionally, you'll often need to fight several foes at once, and trying to target a specific opponent can get confusing, often resulting in your hero being assailed from all sides. You can run past most encounters, but make sure to stock up on tons of healing and stamina potions. There are also more weapons and armor to equip, making trading a slightly more important part of the game. You can also use healing items at any time, whereas previous games required you to run away before rejuvenating yourself. The autosave is gone, but there's now a Restore option which will automatically restart you at the beginning of the screen.

The other major annoyance is with the pacing. In the older *Quest for Glory* games, you could simply ramp up the speed to the highest setting and dash all over the land, even on really old computers. Not here – the hero casually saunters from place to place. For instance, you could explore the entirety of Mordavia in less than a minute. Here, it takes significantly longer to make the rounds in Silmaria. You can double click to run, which makes things a bit faster, but in turn, drains your stamina. This isn't a big deal when you're just exploring the town, when you can just rest any time you want, but it does make combat pretty frustrating. Given how much you'll need to fight, level up, trade in weapons, rest, and buy more stuff, it ends up feeling more tedious than the other games. Thankfully, there is an item that will transport you directly back to your bedroom at the inn, which reduces some travel time.

If nothing else, *Quest for Glory V* pays out huge amounts of fan service, collecting a number of major and minor characters from the previous games. You finally visit the Famous Adventurer's Correspondence School, our hero's alma mater, where you meet the mysterious F.E., the author of the magazines included with each copy of the previous games. Erasmus, Fenris, and Rakeesh all appear in the early stages of the game, having recommended our hero

for the contest in Silmaria. Bruno, the nasty informant from the first game, also plays a pivotal role. Signor Ferrari and his informant Ugarte have somehow escaped from Raseir in *Quest for Glory II* and have set up a new Blue Parrot Inn. Salim, the hippie pharmacist from *Quest for Glory III*, ended up marrying Julanar, the tree lady from *Quest for Glory II*, and moved to Silmaria to set up an apothecary.



Here, all of the major heroes gather.

One of the contestants is none other than Elsa von Spielburg, the princess from the first game. What's more, you can choose to marry her, if you'd like. There are a total of four potential brides, including Nawar, one of the harem girls from *Quest for Glory II*, that you only met if you were a thief; Katrina, your vampiric friend from *Quest for Glory IV*; and the famed elf heroine Erana. It's a really cool idea to bring forth all of the major female characters from the series, but there's not much of a payoff. There's no real wedding scene and it only slightly affects the ending.

The music is very cinematic, using high quality orchestral style music that changes with the action on screen. It's a big change from other Sierra games, and it's sad that it doesn't reuse any of the classic themes, but it also greatly adds to the sense of drama and adventure.

Quest for Glory V ends up focusing a bit too much on the tedious RPG elements, and not quite enough on the adventuring. Still, there are plenty of cool sights to see, and most of the humor is still intact. (One exception: death scenes just don't feel like death scenes when there's no music or goofy animation to accompany them.) Bringing all of the old characters together is a brilliant reward for longtime fans who have followed it throughout the decade, although it won't quite mean as much if you haven't played all of the previous games.

Like many of the other *Quest for Glory* games, *Dragon Fire* is a bit on the buggy side. You need to install one of the patches in order to complete parts of the game, and an additional fan made patch is required if you want to play in Windows XP. Before it was released, Sierra promised that the game would include multiplayer functionality (they even put out a demo with this) and the ability to play as two of the other contestants, Elsa von Spielburg and Magnum Opus. Alas, these features, along with the ability to use a bow and arrow (you can still pick up arrows, but only to sell) were cut from the game. Rumors initially spread that another patch would enable some of these, but the entire staff at Yosemite Entertainment, the branch that developed this title, was laid off shortly after it was published, so these plans never came into fruition. Thankfully, at least the *Quest for Glory* series got a decent send off, which is better than most other Sierra series.

Interview with Corey Cole



Sierra's *Quest for Glory* series was designed and programmed by the husband and wife team of Corey and Lori Cole. As avid fans of role-playing games, they melded these mechanics with Sierra adventures with uncannily excellent results. They can be found running The School of Heroes at **http://www.theschoolforheroes.com**.

How did you both get started at Sierra? Were you fans of adventure games before you'd gotten hired?

I had enjoyed the original (FORTRAN!) *Colossal Cave* and *Zork* years before we went to Sierra. I had not played any Sierra games except for a few minutes each with one of the *King's Quest* games and *Leisure Suit Larry 1*. However, Lori and I were (and are) avid paper-and-pencil role-playing gamers. We ran and played in *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns. We also liked some computer RPG's including *Rogue* and *Wizardry*.

The *Quest for Glory* games are far more advanced than most of Sierra's titles, given their relatively freeform design and how many alternate routes and scenarios can be found. How difficult were they to debug?

We didn't think of them as "far more" advanced. I was an experienced system programmer before I came to Sierra, so once Lori and I settled on the technical design of the role-playing system, it only took me a few weeks to program it. Since all skill and spell actions went through that layer, I only had to debug it once.

The biggest complexity came from having four character classes with different abilities. That meant we had to test every possible skill and spell in every situation, so it was a burden on the QA department as well as on our programmers. We had some sequencing problems in *Quest for Glory 3* with new Paladins because two rooms were looking for different conditions in what should have been the same sequence of events.

Quest for Glory 4 turned into a debugging nightmare, but it wasn't so much because of the game complexity. The system programming department gave us a new version of SCI shortly before we were supposed to ship the game, and it had quite a few problems with pathfinding and simultaneous events. We went from a pretty solid game to a completely broken one, and Sierra ended up shipping it before it was really ready.

In hindsight, we should have missed Christmas and delayed shipment by several months to fix all the problems, but that didn't happen. Besides being very expensive for the company, the development team was pretty burned out from overtime "crunch mode" by then. They were ready to move on to other projects. Sierra actually devoted a programmer full-time for the next year to prepare the voice version and fix known bugs. The CD version still has some problems, but it's far cleaner than the floppy disk release. And the voices – especially John Rhys-Davies as the narrator – were awesome! In a perfect world, the second release would have been the only one.

We added more complexity to each of the later games in the series. A typical "room description" might list 5 or 10 "events", with unique handling for each event. In addition, Sierra programmers developed tools that let us write game text and dialogue without having to modify the source code. I'm sure that prevented a lot of debugging nightmares. We also built a "secret

debug mode" into each of the games that allowed testers to set the game state and individual flags so that they could try out each of the events without having to do a full play-through to that point. It was not unusual to get a stack of problem reports six inches thick from the QA/test department.

Each of the *QfG* games has a very unique feeling – the setting, the characters, the battle system, the music. What do you feel are the strengths of each of the individual games?

QfG1: So You Want to Be a Hero introduced the concept of a hybrid role-playing / adventure game to the industry, so that was certainly unique. Story-wise it was a traditional (in fantasy fiction terms) story about a naive young man coming of age and becoming a Hero. The Germanic setting worked well to give the game a unique flavor. We originally wanted to allow the player to be male or female, and have a choice of character race (including as a Centaur). We were quickly disabused of the notion – the art and animation costs, not to mention the amount of disk space needed for the artwork, would have gone through the roof.

The biggest innovation of the whole *QfG* series was to combine role-playing game character development and combat with the puzzles and story typical of adventure games. We saw *Quest for* Glory as our attempt at running a D&D game by computer.



The hero watches the sun in this beautiful cinematic segment.

QfG2: Trial By Fire was probably the strongest game in terms of puzzles and tension. The street maze and nearly endless desert were by far the most complex parts to develop. Kenn Nishiuye did a fantastic job as lead artist, and Jerry Moore created the graphical overlays that let us make a few backgrounds look like many different parts of the desert. I would never design the alleyways the way we did it then – far too frustrating for players – but we succeeded in our goal of making the cities and the desert feel huge.

The Arabian Nights setting for *Trial By Fire* was a big departure from the traditional medieval European setting that most RPG's used prior to that time. We spent many hours reading the Arabian Nights and crafting interlocking stories and puzzles in that style. *QfG2* is also a "message" game in that we pushed the philosophy of the importance of the individual and the need to take a stand when the rules and laws of the society are unjust.

QfG3: Wages of War (later retitled to *Seekers of the Lost City*, but I'm not sure it was ever actually shipped that way) was one of the strongest games in terms of story and narrative. It has another unique setting – East Africa – and once again contains a message about our philosophy. *QfG3*

takes a stand against prejudice and racial stereotyping. That makes it a bit ironic, in that we received some complaints about the black people in the game having accents. We were one of the first to include diverse characters including strong female and non-White role models in the game, so we were pretty shocked by that reaction.



The hero makes a detour to the city of Tarna.

QfG4: Shadows of Darkness was the most difficult game (up to that point) to play and to develop. Like *QfG2*, it is heavily puzzle-oriented, and like *QfG3*, we put a strong emphasis on the plot line. As the game progresses, the player learns more about the setting, and the attitudes of the people change towards the player character. We had a unique combat system loosely based on *Street Fighter*, but with a fuzzy logic system to allow non-arcade players to set their fighting style and let their character abilities rather than their twitch skill determine the outcome. Despite the large number of bugs in the initial release, I think *QfG4* is my personal favorite of the series or a close second behind *QfG2*.

QfG5: Dragon Fire was a development nightmare. With the three year lapse since the release of *QfG4*, we knew that we couldn't keep using the old technology. As a result, the game engine was redesigned from the ground up to use Voxel graphics (later replaced by traditional 3D graphics) with the rooms programmed in C++ rather than SCI. The design script was about 1,000 pages of detailed explanations for the states and events to be handled in each room. The story and characters were far more complex than in any of the previous games.

Due to the many stylistic changes, some fans of the previous games did not like the look and feel of *QfG5*. However, I think we also brought in a new audience and stayed true to the narrative and character-centric feel of the rest of the series. We also brought the series to a conclusion rather than leaving it hanging as at the end of most of the previous games.

***QfG* has some of the best soundtracks of the Sierra games. What kind of themes did you pick to go with them, particularly the awesome rock music from the fourth game?**

For all the games except *Dragon Fire*, the music was created very late in the game development process. As a result, the composer had a chance to look at the game and create a soundtrack that worked well with it. Mark Seibert did the music for *QfG1* pretty much on his own. We had approval rights, but the ideas were his. Mark had worked at Sierra for several years and helped create some of the drivers and sound tools, so he had a great feel for what would work in a game.

Chris Braymen did some of the *QfG2* music. Chris's wife did Middle Eastern folk dancing, so Chris was able to incorporate traditional themes into his music and enhance the Arabic flavor of the game. Like Mark, Chris has a technical bent as well as being a talented composer and musician.

Aubrey Hodges came in to compose the music for *QfG4* and did a fantastic job of incorporating Slavic themes and at building tension through his musical themes. Lori worked more closely with Aubrey than with the previous composers to make sure he understood what we wanted the game and the music to accomplish.

Finally, Chance Thomas composed and directed the *QfG5* music. Sierra brought Chance in much earlier in the process than they did with the previous games. Between that and the many game delays – *QfG5* took almost 4 years to develop, versus the original 18 month schedule – Chance was able to hone and polish the game music to a high degree. Lori met frequently with Chance so that he knew every detail of the game scenes as he created the music for them. This process also allowed the team to listen to the music as they polished each scene, so the artists, programmers, and Chance all influenced each other during development.

Since the *Quest for Glory* games were mostly planned out in advance, how closely did the final product adhere to your original vision, particularly in the case of the fifth game, since it came out so much later? Is there anything you could change about them?

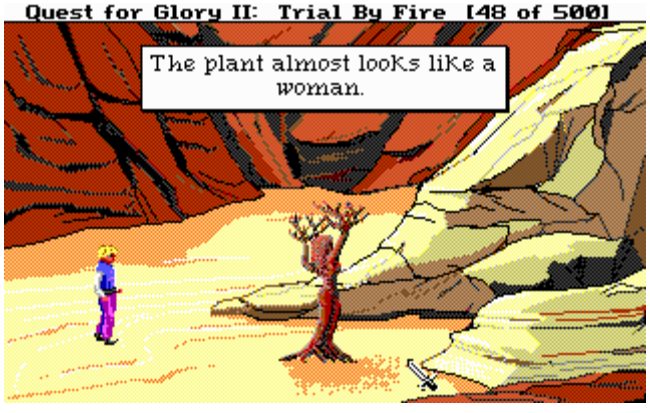
"Mostly planned out in advance" would be an exaggeration. We created a "road map" of the games that laid out the basic themes and settings, and described the general character arc. But it is a very long journey from a game concept to a detailed game design, and finally to a finished, polished game. The original proposal for the *Quest for Glory* series was about five pages long with lots of illustrations and big bullet points. The final set of design documents for all five games runs to thousands of pages and still doesn't cover all the details of art, programming, text, and character dialogue in the games.

Lori and I believe that it is impossible to create a great game design up front. The best games come from an iterative development process in which puzzles and story ideas are prototyped and tested. Then the weak ones are discarded and the stronger ones expanded. "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy." – Helmuth von Moltke the Elder. Many people – particular game company management – hate this idea. They want to know, before game production begins, what the game will involve, how much it will cost to develop, and how many people they need to assign to the project.

But game development is a chaotic process, and needs to be. Many of the best ideas in our games came from someone on the team looking at a prototype and coming up with a crazy idea. Many of those crazy ideas had to be discarded because of cost or because they didn't fit into the theme of the game, but others became crucial parts of the design. While I have always been known as an incorrigible punster ("Do not incorrige!"), I wasn't the one who first set the punny tone of the *QfG* series. That was Bob Fischbach, who prototyped the first *QfG* scenes and wrote stand-in object descriptions for them. Lori and I liked the feel of Bob's puns with the cartoony art style of the first game, and we decided to make that a hallmark of the series.

On a related note, one of the most gratifying aspects of the series is how different sub-characters grow, like how Julanar from *QfG2* and the apothecary from *QfG3* end up married together in *QfG5*. How far in advance were these crafted? Were there any that were planned but ended up getting cut?

Lori came up with most of the characters and wrote the lion's share of their dialogue. She came up with a fantasy story explaining Julanar's background. When we later created Salim, the anachronistic hippy apothecary, it seemed natural that he would be fascinated by Julanar's story and attracted to her. Lori worked out that romance "off camera", and later incorporated it into *Quest for Glory 5*.



The story of Julanar, the tree woman, is one of the most touching in the series.

When we designed each of the later games in the series, we talked about characters from the previous games and whether they would fit in. We generally had an idea of what we wanted to put into the next game in the series, so we could foreshadow it with characters and events in the current game. Occasionally we planned farther ahead – for example, when the hero defeats Baba Yaga in *QfG1*, we knew that she would return in *Shadows of Darkness* (originally planned as game 3).

Quest for Glory 3 actually took us by surprise. Ellen Guon (now Ellen Beeman), another designer at Sierra, pointed out that Rakeesh was one of the most interesting characters in *QfG2*. Ellen suggested that the player should visit his homeland and interact with Rakeesh's backstory involving a demonic invasion. Since we were concerned that *QfG4* would be too dark and difficult a game to follow directly after *QfG2*, we took her suggestion and developed the land of Tarna in East Africa for *QfG3* before taking the player to Mordavia for *QfG4*.

***Quest for Glory* is very atypical of most computer RPGs of the time, in that it was heavily focused on narrative. What were some of your inspirations that carried you away from something like *Ultima*?**

We were influenced more by paper-and-pencil roleplaying than by computer games. The first computer RPG's (such as *Temple of Apshai*) came with booklets containing the game text. As you entered each room, the game gave you a key number. The booklet gave you a complete description of the room when you looked up the key. That was their way of trying to create a live RPG experience on a computer, and of course was very primitive.

We had a lot more memory to play with, so were able to incorporate the text into the actual game. I think we arrived at exactly the right time in the industry to make the *Quest for Glory* games. Computers and the SCI game engine had enough power to let us tell stories, but the cost of graphics was still low enough to let us tell them instead of spending the entire game budget on 3D art.

We played a few of the *Ultima*, *Wizardry*, *The Bard's Tale*, and similar games prior to starting *Quest for Glory*. While we enjoyed them (especially *Wizardry*), we felt they were missing the narration that was an essential part of "live" roleplaying. Our goal with *Quest for Glory* was to make the player feel that they were playing a character in a good live RPG.

Are you familiar with any Japanese console RPGs like *Dragon Warrior/Quest* or *Final Fantasy*? Their narrative style, particularly *Dragon Quest*, is similar to *Quest for Glory*, especially in how the individual quests have a lot of emotional resonance, which is a big part in making the player feel like a "hero".

We played some of the *Phantasy Star* and *Final Fantasy* games, although that was after we developed the first two games. As a result of pulling many late nights getting *QfG*2 out the door, the team got a lot of meals from Burger King and The Pizza Factory. We won a Sega Genesis in a Burger King contest, had a drawing to see who would get it, and I won. Otherwise we might never have played a console game. ☺

What are some of your other favorite adventures games? Are there any other designers or writers whose work you admire?

That would be *The Secret of Monkey Island* and Ron Gilbert. We met Ron at a couple of Computer Game Developer Conferences; he's a great guy. Ron admitted that *Monkey Island* was influenced by *Quest for Glory,* and his work in turn influenced our later games. He has a fine design and narrative sense; *Monkey Island* is just plain fun. Other than that, Lori and I played very few adventure games; we generally find the puzzles too difficult and arbitrary. We enjoyed *The 7th Guest* as a great use of the limited technology of the time to project a mood, as well as having some interesting puzzles.

We generally enjoy role-playing games more than adventure games. I've already mentioned *Wizardry*. We spent many late nights playing *Rogue* on mainframes and the Atari ST. The original *Dungeon Master* was a brilliant game. Currently we both spend far too many hours playing *World of Warcraft*. We think of it as the game *Quest for Glory* might have become if we'd been able to make a massively-multiplayer version with an infinite budget.

***QfG 1*, *2* and *4* all let you explore the land on a screen-by-screen basis, but *QfG3* solely used an overworld map. Why the shift?**

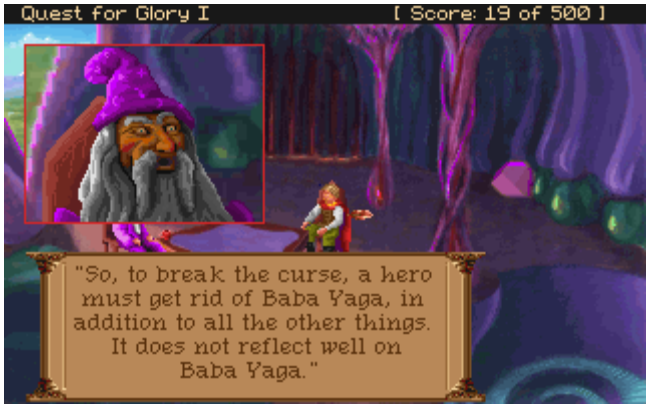
Each game was an experiment. We wanted the East African environment of *QfG3* to feel gigantic. The map was our way of showing the player that he was exploring very small parts of a huge jungle and veldt. We used a similar technique in *Shannara* to try to give the player a feel for the epic scope of Terry Brooks's world.

There's a lot of great comedy to be found all of the games. What are some of your favorite jokes and/or death scenes?

We had some fun cameos in *QfG2* – the Marx Brothers, the "Persian Golfer" reference to the first Gulf War, and so on. *QfG3* continued the trend with the Awful Waffle Walker and Arne the Aardvark (a strangely twisted reference to *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and the *Cerebus* graphic novels). I thought the interactions between Fenris and Erasmus were fun. We also had lots of throw-away pop culture references to Monty Python, and other Sierra games.

We tried not to emphasize the death scenes; we didn't want the player to die very often. But we had fun with some of them, such as the Rusalka in *QfG4*, getting killed by the Antwerp in *QfG1*,

and a few others. Incidentally, the name "Antwerp" came from a very ticklish friend of ours who used Antwerp as a "safe word" to mean, "This is no longer fun." We remembered that and thought that Antwerp is a silly-sounding name in English, so we used it for the silly bouncing creatures in *QfG1*.



The slightly draft wizard Erasmus and his talking rat Fenris provide much amusement.

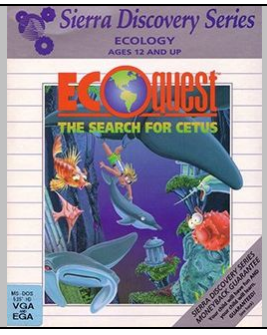
How did you get involved in working with Legend Entertainment on *Shannara*?

We met Bob Bates, President of Legend, each year at the CGDC (Computer Game Developers Conference). We had heard each other talk about game design, and had a lot of mutual respect. When Sierra broke our contract after *QfG4* shipped, Bob suggested that we make a game for Legend. As is usual on such deals, he asked us for ten game ideas, then ended up assigning us to *Shannara* when Legend got the license to use it in a game. We read through the first few books, came up with a game concept, then met with Terry Brooks and Random House to get their approval. We tried to create a unique story within the world of *Shannara*, while not doing anything that would interfere with the events of the later books.

Do you have any future plans for *Quest for Glory*, or other similar types of role playing games or stories?

Activision, Sierra's parent company, owns all rights to *Quest for Glory* and appears to have no interest in developing more games in the series. Lori and I have done some initial design for a text adventure game with very limited graphics based on our School for Heroes, but we've stalled several times on the actual development. We would like to do that game at some point, but haven't yet pushed ourselves to do it. Our main focus these days is **http://www.theschoolforheroes.com**, where we help students develop their own "inner Hero" using fantasy gaming concepts. I write a blog (**http://www.theschoolforheroes.com/questlog**) on topics related to heroism, personal achievement, and occasionally game design. I may move the blog to a new site that will include some simple games to help people plan and improve their lives. Lori has her own site and art blog, **http://www.farstudio.net/gallery**, to which she posts her photographic art and commentary.

EcoQuest



EcoQuest: The Search for Cetus

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Jane Jensen, Gano Haine
Developer: Sierra On-Line

EcoQuest is the first entry in Sierra's short-lived series, itself part of a brief foray into edutainment under the Sierra Discovery label. You play as Adam Green, the exuberant 10 year old son of an important ecologist. When playing with a dolphin, the mammal reveals that he can talk, identifies himself as Delphineus and invites Adam on an adventure beneath the ocean to search for Cetus, the whale king of the marine realm. During their underwater adventure, they come across all of the unfortunate consequences of man's pollution of the ocean, and discuss the matter with the other aquatic inhabitants.



Delphineus is kinda fat, for a dolphin.

Running on the same SCI1 engine as most early '90s Sierra games, *EcoQuest* is much simpler than the usual fare, offering extremely easy puzzles, a short play length, and no way to die. In addition to the standard command icons, there's also a recycling bag to pick up certain kinds of junk. The fantasy aspect is strong enough that most kids are unlikely to tune it out the same way they do most things that try to teach, but calling it "educational" is a stretch. There are very few lessons in marine biology, and the overall message rarely stretches beyond "don't pollute". As far as environmentalism goes, it's far better than, say, an episode of *Captain Planet* – you won't be embarrassed to play it with your kids, although it's also not nearly as ironically hilarious. A couple of moments are overplayed, like when a kid on a cruise liner lets his balloons into the sky, causing Delphineus to lament dramatically. Of course, later on this causes one of Adam's aquatic friends to choke. Overall, it's got some fun bits, and it's decent enough for the target audience.



EcoQuest II: Lost Secret of the Rainforest

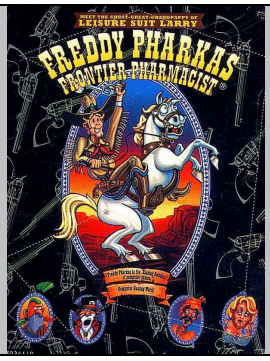
Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Gano Haine
Developer: Sierra On-Line

In the second *EcoQuest*, Adam is a bit older and joins his father on a journey to the rain forest. During a mishap regarding some stolen luggage, Adam is kidnapped by a group of animals, who give him an amulet and tell him to seek out Forest Heart. As the reigning tree of the kingdom, Forest Heart is dying, and Adam is selected to seek out the mystical City of Gold to find a seedling to act as its heir.



Adam ends up playing fix-it man for numerous jungle inhabitants, both human and animal.

A number of improvements have been made to *EcoQuest 2*, most notably the addition of the Ecorder, which can be used to scan various flora and fauna to obtain some facts about them. However, these are only accessible through a database in the inventory menu, which is a little cumbersome. There's also a "bat" icon which will give a largely random fact about the rain forest. Both of these act to make the game a little more educational. It's also a slightly longer and more difficult game than before, although it's nothing too harrowing. Still, even though it's generally improved, something feels missing. While there are many animals to talk to, you don't get a constant companion like Delphineus until near the end, when you're joined by a rare bat named Paquita. Also, while the only true enemy of the first game was humanity's wasteful nature – a nebulous, unconquerable villain – here evil is personified by the cartoonishly nefarious Maxim Slaughter, who wishes to exploit the rain forest for his own means. The writing is generally rather dry too, making for an experience that comes up slightly short. Unlike the first game, there's no CD-ROM edition either, although certain lines are still voiced.



Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / Mac
Designer(s): Al Lowe, Josh Mandel
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Going through the list of Sierra adventure games is like walking down the genre fiction aisle of your local bookstore. *King's Quest* is Fantasy, *Space Quest* is Sci-Fi, *Laura Bow* is Mystery and *Police Quest* is True Crime. Fittingly enough, *Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist* is their stab at the Western genre, although unlike most of its fellows, it never progressed beyond a single entry. Designed by Josh Mandel and Al Lowe, it's a sillier game that fits in with their previous work on *Space Quest* and *Leisure Suit Larry*, so it's much more *Blazing Saddles* than *The Magnificent Seven*.

Freddy Pharkas used to be a lawman, one of the best shots in the West, until an unfortunate scrape with a villain (who, in Sierra fashion, looks more than a bit like company president Ken Williams) leaves him with a wounded ear and a crippled sense of pride. Vowing to give up his violent ways, Freddy enrolls in school, then moves out to the town of Coarsegold and begins his new life as a pharmacist. No one here knows his past, least of all Penelope Prim, the dashingly proper schoolmarm and object of Freddy's affections.

The game covers four acts in total. The first just involves Freddy filling prescriptions for the various townsfolk, while the second has Freddy running some detective works to cure the horse population's extraordinary flatulence problem, stop a herd of stampeding snails, and resolve the town's diarrhea epidemic. About halfway through, Freddy learns of a conspiracy to scare the folk out of town, so he digs out his old uniform and polishes off his pistols to rid the land of the scheming varmints.

It's a pretty short game, all in all. The entirety of the events takes place in Coarsegold, which, including interiors, comprises about twenty screens total. Most of the puzzles in the early sections involve filling prescriptions, which requires digging out the included booklet dubbed "The Modern Day Book of Health and Hygiene". It's a hilarious little book, as the 50 page pamphlet details a number of maladies, each with preposterous cures that parodies the knowledge (or lack thereof) of 19th century medicine. (A good one – "Pregnancy: A temporary, usually non-fatal condition involving a parasitic embryo, a host female, and a disinterested third party (usually a father)... Fortunately, we now know that pregnancy is entirely preventable simply by staying home on Friday and Saturday nights.") Like the tabloids that came bundled with the *Space Quest* games, some of the funniest material is found herein... except you'll be digging it out constantly to deal with all of the tedious pharmacological work. To quote one of the walkthroughs on GameFAQs:

"Add 40 grams Sodium Bicarbonate to the balance. Add 15 ml of Furachlordone to the graduated cylinder. Add the balance contents to the beaker. Add the graduated cylinder contents to the beaker. Add 45 ml of water to the graduated cylinder. Add the contents of the graduated cylinder to the beaker. Add 5 gm of Magnesium Sulfate to the balance. Add the balance contents to the beaker."

What a bummer, this all is. It really drags down the comedic momentum when you have to do what amounts to chemistry homework for a few minutes. There are no less than five

occasions where you need to do this, where a single one really would've sufficed. These aren't particularly hard either, so much as just annoying. The rest of the puzzles aren't really that difficult either, although there's the usual issue of difficult-to-see hotspots. Most of the game is refreshingly free of insta-deaths, although they pop up here and there. There's an invisible timer for a couple of the events in Act II, so you have to act quickly unless you want to die from horse gas. There are also a handful of timed sequences and (literally) shooting galleries in the final chapter, when Coarsegold is overrun by outlaws. But generally, most of the deaths are caused by your own stupidity, like taking your customer's medications or eating animal plop. Upon meeting your demise, the storyteller, Whittlin' Willy, will lament whatever damn fool thing you did to get yourself killed.



This is Freddy's Pharmacy, where you spend much time conquering the copy protection.

It's really all about the comedy, though. The box cover for the CD-ROM version beckons you to "Meet the Great-Great-Grandpappy of *Leisure Suit Larry*", due to Al Lowe's involvement, but in reality, it's not nearly as ribald as those games. (It's not a complete lie though – Larry's forefather makes a small cameo late in the tale.) It's still juvenile, sure, what with the colorful fart sounds and all, but it mostly treads safely in PG-13 territory, with the most offensive elements being the ladies of the 'Orehouse and a handful of innuendos.

The rest of the humor comes from the spoofs of Western genre clichés, along with a generous helping of random goofiness. The denizens of Coarsegold are a colorful bunch, with a few possessing terribly punny or silly names, like the cafe proprietor Helen Back and her Chinese cook Hop Singh. Freddy employs real Indians (er, Native Americans) instead of the traditional cigar store Indians statues in front of his shop, who are all too mindful of the crimes perpetrated by the White Man. Freddy is also joined by Srini, an actual Indian, from, you know, India. It's winkingly stereotypical, playing with well known tropes of days past. The ending credits have a number of faux outtakes, with the character's "actors" flubbing lines and generally acting like spoiled Hollywood stars, long before this practice was popularized by Pixar. The sliders on the Options screen consist of fellows on hangmen's nooses. There is also a recurring (and curious) fetishization of sheep, just for good measure.

The upside of having such a small game world is that the designers were able to fill the game with all kinds of jokes just for screwing around with everything in sight. Try picking up everything and anything, or prodding the random folk that mosey through town. It's fun! Beyond the Ken Williams and *Leisure Suit Larry* cameos, there are at least a few nods to the *King's Quest* series, what with a bridge that threatens to collapse every time you cross it (which may bring back horrible memories of *King's Quest II*) and the presence of Cedric the Owl, the intensely annoying avian sidekick from *King's Quest V*. The vultures on the screen eye him deliciously, as some folks at Sierra recognized that pretty much everyone hated that little thing.

One of the best gags is right in the beginning, when taking the key out of your pocket and unlocking the door to the pharmacy, which will immediately award you 500 (out of 999) points, remarking that you've already gotten halfway through the game. It's a nice little wink-wink-nudge-nudge at the somewhat arbitrary scoring system that Sierra games continued to possess, a holdover from old text adventures that most of its competitors had dropped.

The background graphics are typical Sierra, hand drawn and scanned in 256-colors. The characters are more developed and stylized than the usual fare, lending to the cartoonish atmosphere. The CD-ROM version has some fantastic voice acting, with famed voice artist Cam Clarke filling in the role of Freddy. It also features fully vocalized versions of the two themes – "The Ballad of Freddy Pharkas", and "The Ballad of the End of the Game of Freddy Pharkas" – both of which are typically folksy and quite catchy to boot. The only downside is that a few gags were removed from the CD-ROM version, since voiceovers weren't recorded for them. The disk version gives a number of weird jokes if you try inappropriately combining inventory items, but in the CD version, you just get a red X and a sound effect. Typical of most Sierra CD games, you can't enable voice and text at the same time either, a mildly annoying constraint.



Just a bit of ribald humor has been carried over from the Larry games.

There are two demos released by Sierra. The CD demo has speech and contains the section where you have to save Srini from ants, while the disk version contains an original scenario that didn't make it into the final game. Here, a bandit has holed himself up in a cave, and it's up to Freddy's knowledge of explosives to trap him. The town here consists of only a few screens, with many exits reminding the player that this is only a demo, but there are a lot of unique jokes, dialogues, and assorted stuff that makes it worth playing. It also provides you for something to do in the swamp, which is a mostly useless area in the full game.

Freddy Pharkas really could've used another sequel – the game really only contains a handful of vignettes, and the townsfolk are amusing enough that it would've been great to revisit them with another story. As a standalone, it's still a fantastic title, and definitely a noteworthy comedy classic.

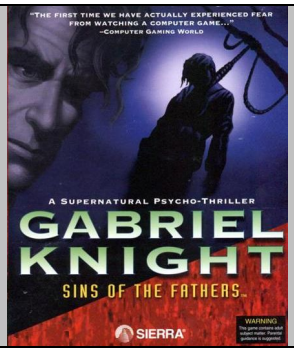
Gabriel Knight

As computer gaming ages, there's a growing call for the medium to mature, to tell more adult stories beyond the pulp fantasies of a vast majority of games. Many graphic adventure games from the likes of Sierra or LucasArts, while enjoyable, erred more on the cartoonish side, telling light and humorous stories. For a long time, Sierra's sole "mature" series was *Police Quest*, although that was of little interest to anyone who didn't care for crime drama, and it frequently fell into goofiness anyway, despite its best efforts. In 1994, Sierra introduced *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*, in an attempt to take adventure gaming to a new level.

Gabriel Knight is the creation of Jane Jensen, an aspiring author who eventually became an actual author after the death of golden age Sierra (officially bookended with the release of *Gabriel Knight 3* in 1999). Working her way through the ranks, she eventually assisted Roberta Williams with the story in *King's Quest VI*, which is largely regarded as the reason why that entry is so remarkably better than the rest of the series. Given the chance to write and direct her own game, she created one of the deepest and most adult computer games ever developed.

Gabriel Knight is the titular star of the series, an American author turned demon hunter. It neatly straddles the line somewhere between mystery and horror genres – its closest literary comparison would probably be Stephen King, but even that arguably sells the games short. He and his partner, Grace Nakamura, investigate a series of crimes, each heavily entwining historical fact with mythological fiction.

There are three games in the series, each radically different from a technological standpoint. The first game is like most Sierra games – 2D, VGA graphics, with an icon-based parser – and covers Gabriel's investigations into several voodoo-related murders in New Orleans, as well as his own family's secret past. The second game heavily utilizes digitized photography and full motion video using live actors, and takes place in Germany, as Gabriel hunts down an apparent herd of werewolves. The third game is entirely 3D using polygonal graphics, and takes place in a small chateau in France, where Gabriel solves a mystery regarding vampires and the Holy Grail.



Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Jane Jensen
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Gabriel Knight, our hero, is a New Orleans native. He's smart and handsome, but also a bit of an arrogant jerk, and a huge slacker to boot. His few novels have failed, and he resorts to living in the backroom of his New Orleans book store, St. George's, which also isn't exactly raking in the dough. His assistant is the lovely Grace Nakamura, the sole employee of his sad little book store. She's repelled by his chauvinistic mannerisms – the word she uses to describe him is "lout" – but she finds herself subtly attracted to him nonetheless.

Sins of the Fathers begins with a nightmare – images of spilled blood on a ritual dagger, and a woman burnt at the stake, culminating in a foreboding image of Gabriel's own limp body hung on a tree. This dream, actually a vision of his distant ancestor, is explained further in the included graphic novel. Waking up in a cold sweat, Gabriel stumbles up out of bed to face the world. Upon reading the newspaper, he learns of a series of "voodoo murders", ritualistic

killings that appear to have an association with the voodoo religion. The experts dismiss this as crockery, but Gabriel sees it as opportunity to get some inspiration for his next novel and sets off to investigate. He just happens to have an in – Detective Mosely, his old childhood buddy, has been assigned to the case, and allows Gabriel access to the crime scene in exchange for a place in his book. What begins as a casual curiosity soon explodes into not only an expose on the underground voodoo cults of Louisiana, but also an exploration of Gabriel's long forgotten – and cursed – family history. He soon becomes involved with Malia Gedde, a wealthy socialite with deep ties of the history of New Orleans, an affair which brings him closer to both his past and the mystery. He is also pestered by the constant messages from a German who identifies himself as Wolfgang Ritter. Gabriel eventually flies to Europe to meet him, where he learns that he's the last in a long line of Schattenjägers, demon hunters from the days of yore. From there, Gabriel must not only solve the murders, but meet his ancient destiny, and stop the nightmares that have plagued his family for generations.



Gabriel spends much time in New Orleans researching the history of voodoo.

The game is divided into ten "days", each day beginning with Gabriel getting a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper, keeping up on current events. From there, you can access a map to ride around New Orleans including the famous French Quarter and Jackson Square, and the surrounding areas, including Tulane University and Bayou St. John.

The interface utilizes more icons than the standard Sierra game – in addition to "walk" and "look", the standard "use" icon has been broken down to "push" and "operate". You can also choose to "talk" to people for brief dialogues, or "interrogate" for more in depth questioning. In some ways, the extra verbs make it feel like an earlier LucasArts game, but all it really does is overcomplicate things. The screen view is letterboxed, with the icon bar appearing at the top of the screen, and the dialogue on the bottom. Not only does this lend to the movie-like feel, but it also prevents the text from blocking the visuals.

The writing is almost uniformly excellent – with the occasional slightly silly line – bolstered by some excellent voice work found in the CD-ROM version. Tim Curry provides the voice of Gabriel, which is a love-it-or-hate-it ordeal – it's distinct, to be certain, but there's still something off about a British actor trying to do an American Southern accent. Leah Remini plays Grace with an appropriate amount of sarcasm that makes her amusing without coming off as caustic, and Mark Hamill does a less overdone Southern accent as the voice of Mosely. The narrator is played by Virginia Capers, an elderly African-American woman with a very thick New Orleans drawl. She adds plenty of color, but she also talks really slowly, to the point where it's better to enable text and click through the descriptions.

There are a number of reasons why *Gabriel Knight* stands out amongst its peers. For starters, its approach to storytelling is much more mature than practically any other game out there,

adventure or otherwise. It's more than just violence, sex and profanity – there's plenty of that, although it's rarely too explicit. Simply, *Gabriel Knight*'s writing and characterizations are head and shoulders above most other adventure games. In most Sierra games, you just click the "talk" icon on someone and exchange a bit of dialogue. In *Gabriel Knight*, these are far more fleshed out. They take place on an entirely different screen, on a black background, with portraits lip-synched with the spoken dialogue. You can ask any of these people about any of the important topics regarding your investigation. Most of them are in some way relevant to the mystery, but the last option with any character is simply to ask them about themselves. Assuming you're talking to someone who's willing to open up, here they will go into huge detail about their background, their likes and dislikes, and other tidbits about their personality. It makes every other character in every other adventure game look like nothing more than a cardboard cutout.

Gabriel, too, is given a far deeper background than your average protagonist. In this game, you can visit your aging grandmother, and have lengthy discussions about your family history, how your grandparents (and parents) met and fell in love, their immigration into America, their life ambitions. You can talk to Mosely, who's gone from Gabriel's childhood buddy to a detective with the New Orleans police, and either chat about the case or simply reminisce about old times. You can even exchange playful insults, if you want, which highlights the boyish nature of their relationship. You rarely see depths plumbed this deeply in any kind of interactive narrative.

It also highlights some of the contrasts between video game narratives and literary narratives. During the course of the game's ten days, you spend about seven of them simply wandering around New Orleans, interrogating people, following up on leads, conducting research, and generally just uncovering background info. It's not until the seventh day – roughly 3/4 through the game – that you actually leave New Orleans for a quick jaunt through Gabriel's ancestral home in Germany, before leaving for a tomb in Africa, and then finally returning home for the final encounter. In other words, it takes a sizable chunk the game in order for the "adventure" to truly begin. As the story progresses, it also introduces more supernatural elements, although like *Indiana Jones*, they're saved for the climatic scenes. It might feel a bit slow paced at first, but all of this backstory is necessary for the final stages of the game, and make the payoff all the more satisfying.



St. George's Books, Gabriel's store, is slightly pathetic.

Where the characterizations really pay off is right at the very end, where you're presented with a very clear "good ending/bad ending" choice. Suffice to say, the bad ending is... pretty bad, where the surviving characters mourn the departed ones. During the course of the game, death scenes are rare, but when they do happen, they're really gory – a quick run-in with a mummy results in Gabriel's heart being torn from his chest. It's shocking, but perhaps required

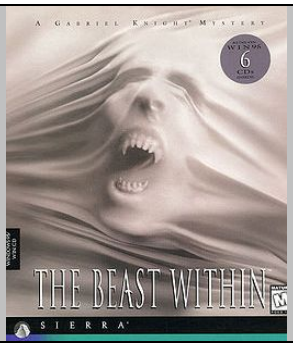
by something that would call itself a "horror" game. So many adventure games, especially Sierra's, have prided themselves on haphazardly killing the player characters, for the sake of humor or frustration. Here, it's legitimately emotional, and even a bit heartbreaking. And that's when you know that Jensen has done a damn good job.

It's also clear that Jensen is pretty astounded behind the history of voodoo, particularly the brand that originated in Louisiana. New Orleans voodoo is a mixture of African traditions and Catholicism, which sprung up due to the slave trade in the South in the 1800s. Much time is spent exploring the history of voodoo, its misconceptions, and most importantly, how real voodoo has nothing to do with the ritualistic murders being committed in game. It's pretty educational, and this depth of knowledge largely characterizes the *Gabriel Knight* series.

The structure does lead to some irritating problems when it comes to progression. Each day will end once certain events are accomplished, and oftentimes you find yourself running around in circles until you stumble upon the trigger that allows the game to continue. Compared to some other Sierra games, though, *Gabriel Knight* is much friendlier. While the puzzles can be difficult, they're rarely too illogical. Some of them are typical adventure scenarios, like distracting police offers with a doughnut cart. Others involve interpreting drum codes (which is pretty easy) and translating a symbolic language (which isn't). Since the game won't progress unless you solve all the necessary puzzles, there's really no way to get stuck, not counting a few instances if you save in a stupid place at the end of the game. In other words, it's pretty progressive, as far as adventure games go.

The soundtrack was provided by Robert Holmes, and it's one of the best heard in a Sierra title. The song most often heard is Gabriel's theme, done as a dramatic orchestration on the title theme, and as a lighter, piano theme in St. George's Books. Much of the music does an excellent job of bolstering the atmosphere.

The CD version can also be run in SVGA mode – optional for DOS, but mandatory for Windows. In truth, it's pretty cheap – the icons and character portraits have all been redrawn in the higher resolution, but the backgrounds and sprites have just been resized, so there's little actual benefit. The Windows version also improperly scales the font, making it look jaggy and ugly. The game is also notoriously buggy, and was hard to get to run on modern PCs for a long time, but thankfully there are some fan made patches and installers available now.



The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Jane Jensen
Developer: Sierra On-Line

The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery picks up roughly a year after the end of the first game. Gabriel has moved to his family castle in Germany, and is living off his first successful book: *The Voodoo Murders*, starring one "Blake Backlash", which is very transparently Gabriel himself. His family reputation as demon hunters is soon revealed, and the local townspeople beg him to investigate a series of mutilations. They appear to have been caused by animals, so naturally the blame is placed on a pack of wolves that escaped from the local zoo. Further investigations, however, reveal the entanglement of a local hunting club, a secret animal smuggling ring and, most intriguingly, werewolf lore. It's here that Gabriel meets Friedrich Von Glower, a wealthy baron who runs the club. He sees much promise in Gabriel and they share many of the same

interests – wine and woman, in particular. His role sort of mirrors that of Malia Gedde in the first game and while their relationship is not overtly romantic in nature, there are some vague homoerotic undertones.



Gabriel, on the right, hangs out with his new best bro Baron Von Glower.

Meanwhile, Grace decides that she's wasting her time back in America and flies off to Germany, only to find that Gabriel has left his castle for Munich. Frustrated, she sets off on her own research, slowly uncovering the mystery of Ludwig II, the "last true king of Bavaria", as the locals call him. Ludwig II was a bit of an eccentric, often dismissing foreign matters in favor of living a lavish fantasy life, and constructing castle after gorgeous castle. The government tried to declare him insane and remove him from power, but shortly thereafter, Ludwig was found mysteriously drowned in a nearby lake. Whether it was murder or suicide, nobody quite knows, but it's a long standing national mystery in Germany. Grace is determined to prove that werewolves were somehow involved with Ludwig II, and ends up discovering a long lost opera composed by Richard Wagner, a longtime friend of Ludwig.

The first chapter begins with the player controlling Gabriel, then the view alternates between Grace and him for the next few chapters, until their stories and paths meet in the sixth chapter at the end. The game is spread over six CDs, generally one chapter per CD, but there is some disc switching for certain scenes. Apparently the original design documentation called for eight chapters, with at least one of them putting the player in control of Ludwig II, but unfortunately that was cut out in the planning stages due to budgetary constraints.

The Beast Within runs on the same engine as *Phantasmagoria* and uses many of the same techniques. Every interaction is shown with full motion video, which accounts for the number of discs. By default, the video is interlaced and looks rather ugly, but a fan made patch can disable it. There are still some compression artifacts, but in general the video quality is actually pretty good. The less said about the CGI werewolves, though, the better.

In most of the scenes, you don't directly control Gabriel or Grace, although they're present on the screen. Instead, you simply click on an area to investigate it or walk to a different screen. The backgrounds are all high resolution photographs, which look fantastically gorgeous – it may as well be a promotional device for the German tourist industry, because like the New Orleans feel of the first game, *The Beast Within* completely nails the modern German atmosphere. However, in spite of its visual splendor, it still feels like there's a strange disconnect between the characters and the scenery. There isn't nearly as much to interact with or comment on as in the first game, leaving each screen feeling hauntingly beautiful yet depressingly empty.

Of course, the deciding factor of any full motion video game is the acting, and this is where *The Beast Within* hits some shaky ground. Dean Erickson certainly looks the part of Gabriel, and

while he's significantly less boorish, he's also a bit duller. Joan Takahashi plays Grace, and while she's too cold and unlikable in the early chapters, acting openly hostile to Gabriel's live-in maid, she eventually warms up as the story progresses. They both do a decent job, but their personalities just aren't as lively as they were in the original. Still, in an era where most FMV games barely surpassed high school drama level, *The Beast Within* is a shining beacon.



The castles that Grace visits are completely stunning.

More problematic is the issue of direction and pacing, because some scenes just go on way too long. There's a reason why exposition scenes in TV and movie are brief – it's because watching talking heads discuss various issues for five minutes straight just isn't all that engaging, especially when there's no music. When using live action, you need **some** kind of dramatic tension, especially when there's so much video, and it just isn't here.

Like the first game, you spend a lot of time interrogating various people. There aren't quite as many topics to dig into, because that would simply require far too much video. When you're just reading text and listening to voice acting, you can click through the dialogue to speed things up. You can't do that with video – you either watch the whole scene or skip it entirely. (Thankfully, this is one of the boons of the game – there's an FMV scene with almost every action, but they can be easily bypassed with a single click.) There are no subtitles either, although another fan made patch has added them, at least in the Windows version. All conversations are recorded for later playback, so you can review them if you've lost track of something.

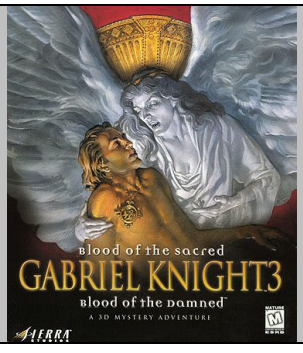
Even more annoying is that large parts of the game are simply hunt n' click fests. There's one whole chapter where you play as Grace, simply walking around museums and looking at things. That's fine, but the area layouts are quite confusing, making it extremely easy to miss one of the many, many triggers. If you miss even one, you can't proceed, which is liable to drive anyone nuts. You're then forced to comb and re-comb the same areas over and over, trying to find the one semi-visible part you missed, and then interrogating the same people over and over in hopes that new conversation topics have popped up. There's a vague hint system which lets you know which locations still have tasks to be accomplished before you can move on to the next chapter, but it's still easy to feel frustrated and aimless.

While some of the puzzles can be pretty difficult throughout, the most annoying ones are right in the first chapter. Early on, Gabriel needs to impersonate someone by splicing together bits of a previously recorded conversation. Of course, there are numerous lines of dialogue to comb through, so the hint function is really the only way to get the precise wording that the game demands. This one at least makes sense – near the end, you need to infiltrate a sporting club by distracting the maitre d' by buying a cuckoo clock and hiding it behind a plant.

The final chapters are far more dramatic, and include a wolf hunt through a darkened forest – which, despite its tension, is little more than a "choose the right path or die" sequence – and a rather bizarre real-time puzzle/strategy segment where you morph into a werewolf and need to hunt down your opponent in an enclosed space. It's actually pretty cool, as the whole segment takes place from the first person perspective, complete with off-colored visuals.

Robert Holmes returns to supply the score, along with some additional helpers. Many of the themes will sound familiar to fans of the first game, but they've been arranged for orchestral quality, and all sound fantastic. The highlight is the "lost" Wagnerian opera, which is certainly an accomplishment. Despite its high quality, a huge majority of the game is played in silence, with only sound effects and character voices. Indeed, the most impressive is the opera scene, which tries to mimic Wagner's style. It's only one act of it, so it's obviously pretty short compared to a real opera, but it's impressive to see the lengths that Sierra went to make this feel authentic.

In spite of its pacing issues and sparse environments, *The Beast Within* still manages to be engaging. Jensen once again is clearly enamored with the subject material – German castles and the conspiracies surrounding them, long lost operas, werewolves – and does a fantastic job in sharing them with the player.



Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned

Initial Release Date: 1999
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Jane Jensen
Developer: Sierra On-Line

In the late '90s, the adventure game genre was dying. LucasArts' fantastic *Grim Fandango* had more or less flopped, Sierra's latest entries in the *King's Quest* and *Quest for Glory* series were practically in different genres, and titles from competing developers were few. And yet, those few faithful heralded the coming of the third *Gabriel Knight* game. After all, the previous two titles were critically acclaimed hits that sold extremely well, plus it would be fully in 3D. Surely this would be the game that saved the genre!

That didn't quite happen.

Instead, the third *Gabriel Knight* game, subtitled *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, is jokingly referred to as the title that nailed adventure gaming's coffin shut. This is a somewhat unfair assessment of the situation, because it's really not a terrible game at all, but the fact is that it was also the last true adventure title published by Sierra – the offices were essentially shut down after its release.

As with the first game, the prologue is told via a comic book enclosed in the packaging. Gabriel and Grace have been invited to the house of Prince James, the exiled monarch of Scotland. During their visit, Prince James' youngest son, a mere baby, is swept away during the night. Gabriel hops on the train and follows them to the small French village of Rennes-le-Chateau. Although it may seem like a tiny little place out in the middle of nowhere, Rennes-le-Chateau has strong connections to the Holy Grail legend, which in turn is intertwined with the history of Jesus Christ. As luck would have it, a tour group is in town, with each participant coming from a different part of the globe to hunt for the village's treasure. Included in this group is, oddly enough, Detective Mosely, who claims to simply be vacationing, but whose motives aren't entirely clear. Once Grace shows up on the next day, the action picks up as two

of Prince James' men are found murdered, completely drained of blood. Naturally, Gabriel expects the supernatural and begins to investigate the possibility of vampires.



Gabriel and Mosely find a body out in the countryside.

In conducting research for this game, Jensen integrated elements from Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's controversial book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which examined the possibility of Jesus having children with Mary Magdalene. It also suggests that the Holy Grail may simply be a metaphor for the bloodline of Jesus Christ, and that his descendents mingled with the nobles of Southern France to spawn the Merovingian dynasty. The story also involves the legendary Knights Templar and the Priory of Sion, both involved with the mystery behind Christ's lineage, as well as the tale of the Wandering Jew, who was doomed to near immortality after taunting Christ on the crucifix.

The plot also treads over some of the same ground as Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*, although it can hardly be faulted for that, since *Gabriel Knight 3* was released years prior to the book's publication – Brown and Jensen just simply happened to read the same book. There's also some vague crossover with Revolution Software's *Broken Sword*, although they're still both quite different stories. What can't be excused is the game's final chapter, where Gabriel must pass a series of tests that are just a little too close to the trials from the end of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. And compared to the tight integration of voodoo mythology and werewolf lore in the previous games, the vampires barely play a part in the story at all – they just kinda show up right at the end.

All things told, it is fascinating stuff, but the story doesn't really pick up until the third chapter, and just meanders up until then. The previous games have been a bit slow, too, but they still managed to be somewhat engrossing. The writing, too, isn't quite up to par – it's fun to see Gabriel, Grace and Mosely interact with each other, even though it's odd that Mosely now apparently has a crush on Grace, but the secondary cast is largely made up of ill-defined nitwits. That may be the point, that anyone who would come on vacation to a small town to search for a mystical treasure may very well be loony, but it doesn't make for interesting storytelling.

Like *The Beast Within*, the player alternately controls both Gabriel and Grace. The story takes place over the course of three days, which are in turn subdivided into "time blocks", although it ultimately works the same way as the previous games – walk around and investigate stuff until you find the triggers for the next time block.

Gabriel spends most of his time hunting for clues about the missing baby, as well as the treasure, while Grace spends her time researching the history of Rennes-le-Chateau and its connection with the Grail legend. For Gabriel, this largely involves stalking people, breaking into their rooms to shuffle through their stuff, and taking fingerprints, which are then scanned

into SIDNEY, the helpful computer database. Most of this is preparation for the denouement near the end, where Gabriel must accuse some of the guests for a series of crimes. Although successful completion of this scene isn't required, it does greatly elucidate the plot.

Grace, on the other hand, spends much of her time trying to solve the riddles of a thirteen verse poem known as "Le Serpent Rouge" by analyzing maps, symbols, and other various items found throughout the adventure. You then use these clues to draw points on a map through the computer system. All of this lies somewhere between intriguing and tedious, depending on how much you like rote detective work, but it's a fair bit better than all of the click-happy chapters from *The Beast Within*.

Of course, the most infamous puzzle in the game is the one where Gabriel needs to impersonate Mosely in order to rent a moped. The first step is to steal his passport, which is done by placing a piece of candy in the hallway and snagging it from his pants while he's busy unwrapping the treat. This in itself is weird, but not the oddest part of the puzzle. Anyway, Gabriel and Mosely look nothing alike. The logical step would be to find something to take a photo of Gabriel and then replace in the passport, but no, that would be too easy. (Strangely, you actually get a computer that makes fake IDs, but that doesn't happen until later.) So, the first step is to steal his yellow jacket. Next, you need to hide the fact that Gabriel isn't bald, so you need to find a hat. Then you grab a magic marker and draw a mustache on the passport photo to obscure the face. Now, Gabriel himself doesn't have a mustache either, so you need to find a local alley cat, stick a piece of masking tape on a hole in a door, spray the cat with a water bottle in order to make it run through said hole, pick up the cat hair stuck to the tape, and then apply it to Gabriel's face using a packet of syrup found in the dining room.



Contender for the Worst Puzzle Ever? Could be.

This kind of crazy, backwards hyper-logic might fly in a cartoonish game like *Day of the Tentacle*, but in *Gabriel Knight*, which is vaguely based in reality (supernatural elements notwithstanding), it comes off as completely absurd. Furthermore, this puzzle is right near the beginning – undoubtedly most of the people playing this game just gave up right here. Members of the development team have even proclaimed that they hated the puzzle, but they just didn't have time to rework it. A wiser staff would've just cut it out entirely.

It's more than just the puzzle design that's suspect – the technical aspects just aren't up to par either. *Gabriel Knight* has now gone full 3D, with the gamer controlling both the cursor and the camera. You move the camera around the environments, either by the keyboard or by holding down the mouse button and moving it around. When you want Gabriel or Grace to interact with something, you point to it and click on it, bringing up a handful of context sensitive icons. Although you can technically click around the screen to make your character

walk, it's not really needed – if they're off-screen, they'll warp to the camera's location anyway, and you can make them instantly jump from place to place with the Escape key. In other words, it's much closer to the *Tex Murphy* games like *Under a Killing Moon* than it is to other 3D adventure games like *Grim Fandango*.

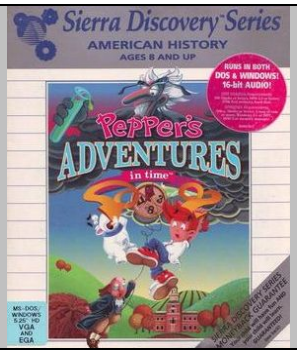
It's filled with its own issues though. Indoor navigation isn't much of a problem, but when wandering around outside, you'll often hit invisible walls to signify that you need to make your character walk to the next area. The camera itself moves too quickly, and you need to utilize the Control and Shift keys in order to tilt the camera, strafe, or change elevation. The visuals haven't exactly aged well, either. The textures are relatively decent, at least in the indoor sections, but they're stunningly nasty in the many outdoor scenes, as the geometry is very angular and unrealistic. The characters come off far worse. The animations are stilted and robotic, and only the lip-synching looks anything even approaching natural. One could simply write it off as being a product of its era – after all, this was only released a year or two after the original *Half Life* and *Unreal* – but those were action games that didn't necessary focus on drama or dialogue. No matter the way you look at it, the technology used here just wasn't good enough for this type of adventure game.

Even the voice acting isn't quite up to the series' high standards. Tim Curry returns as Gabriel Knight, but his acting seems off even compared to the first game, with his accent even more overdone than usual. New actors take on the role of Grace and Mosely, and as sound-a-likes, they do a pretty decent job. The rest of the cast is filled with a variety of accents, and waver from excellent to awful. Overall, the acting's just not nearly as consistent as the first game. The soundtrack is supplied once again by Robert Holmes, but he is joined by David Henry. The music is a bit sparse, and a few songs are reused over and over to the point where they become incredibly repetitive, but there are still some outstanding pieces, particularly the underused title theme, featuring a piano melody backed by an acoustic guitar.

So it's a bit rough to say that *Gabriel Knight 3* killed the adventure game genre, but everything – from its structure to its writing to its puzzles – is sufficiently lacking compared to the other games, and its troubled development (the title was delayed for over a year) obviously didn't help the final product. The resolution makes the story pretty worthwhile overall, but it's hardly one of Sierra's most shining moments. Too bad, too – although the plot finishes on a high note, the final scene ends on a cliffhanger, with the future of Gabriel and Grace's relationship in question, which, due to the death of the studio, was never explored further.

Compilations and Novels

Sins of the Fathers and *The Beast Within* were compiled into a single collector's set, dubbed *Gabriel Knight Mysteries*. It includes copies of the graphic novels found in *Sins of the Fathers* and *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, along with a soundtrack CD containing the music from the second game, along with a few themes from the first. It also includes a demo of the third game. The first two games were rewritten as novels by Jane Jensen and published by Roc. The first is a fairly faithful adaptation, but the second deviates greatly from the game. The first is also easily available through second hand retailers, while the second has some degree of rarity.



Pepper's Adventures in Time

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Gano Haine, Jane Jensen, Josh Mandel, Lorelei Shannon
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Sierra's edutainment line of products never got much attention from adventure game fans, for mostly good reasons. *EcoQuest* was an alright way to teach kids about the environment and *Mixed-Up Mother Goose* was cute for tots, but not exactly engaging for the over-5 crowd. And yet here's *Pepper's Adventures in Time*, largely ignored for its association with these titles, but nonetheless one of Sierra's most creative games. It is educational, technically, but it's also written and designed at a level where practically anyone can enjoy the heck out of it.

The heroine of this story is a young redheaded girl named Pepper, accompanied by her faithful dog Lockjaw. Her crazy Uncle Fred has created a time travel machine and concocted a ridiculous plan to screw up American history by turning Benjamin Franklin into a dirty, lazy hippie and thus ensure Britain's rule over the colonies. Pepper and Lockjaw are inadvertently sucked back in time to pre-Revolution America and tasked with setting history right.



Pepper quickly finds herself surrounded with bizarre folk from this alternate history.

From the outset, things are clearly amiss. The Liberty Bell is seen being carried by Hare Krishnas. A man named Poor Richard is kept locked in the stockades. A tyrannical redcoat general named Pugh is illegally collecting money due to a misappropriated Stamp Tax. And Mr. Franklin himself has ditched his list of Thirteen Virtues in favor of his Doctrine of Personal Mellowness, instead promoting the values of love and peace, all while spending his days in a hot tub. After finding a disguise, Pepper begins investigating the local town and talking with the villagers. Lockjaw has also been puppy-napped by the spoiled daughter of General Pugh, and the perspective switches between the Pepper and Lockjaw as they help each other out.

There is admittedly some shared ground with LucasArts' *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle,* but in that case the colonial section was only part of the game, and it played fast and loose when it came to history lessons. Since *Pepper's Adventures in Time* purports to actually teach you

something, there's a greater emphasis in separating historical fact with creative license. In addition to the standard Sierra icons, there's also a "Truth" icon, which will explain what belongs and what doesn't. It's fairly obvious that Hare Krishnas have no place in an English colony, and anyone who's read a history book knows that Poor Richard was just a pseudonym for the almanac Franklin published and not an actual person. Similarly, General Pugh and his Laurel-and-Hardy-esque redcoats definitely did not exist. But the "Truth" icon can also be used on any bits of scenery, and it discloses that, yes, women did occasionally run bakeries, and that Philadelphia did indeed consist of largely untouched farmland way back in the 18th century. It also notes that weird things like cabbage cookies didn't exist back then, and in all rightfulness, probably shouldn't exist now. There's a bit of cheekiness to everything, which is part of what makes the game equally lively for adults as it is for kids.



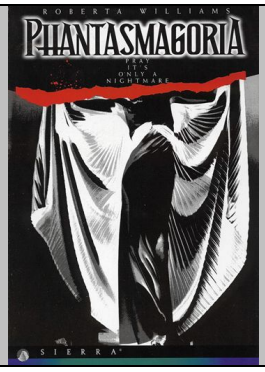
One of the first tasks is to get Ben out of his hot tub and push him into political action.

The story is divided up into six chapters, each of which has a serious and a goofy title, like *Rocky and Bullwinkle*. At the beginning of each chapter you're told the goals, along with specific things to use the Truth icon on. At the end of each chapter is a brief quiz about what you've learned, which affects your overall score. It feels like an unfortunate trip to a schoolroom for a game that feels much smarter than such tactics, but at least they're easy, and you can be proud that, at the end of the day, you've learned about gout and Mr. Franklin's affliction with it. Tough vocabulary words are also highlighted in red, allowing you to ask for a definition.

It's also a fantastic looking title. Most Sierra games aimed for some level of realism, featuring rotoscoped actors and such, but *Pepper's Adventures in Time* is much more stylized. It looks like one of the better Nickelodeon cartoons, with most characters having drastically misshapen proportions or other quirks. It's also one of the few SCI-era titles that, artistically, could stand up next to a LucasArts game, which were known for their creative aesthetics.

Being that the game's technically aimed at kids, *Pepper's Adventures in Time* isn't terribly difficult, although there are still a few Sierra-style leaps in logic, like using a tomato to self-inflict a fake injury. Lockjaw's segments are brief but enjoyable, if mostly because there are separate icons to "smell" and "bite" stuff, and the fleas in his inventory are a cute touch. The quest is quite short, as the town of Philadelphia is only a couple of screens, along with two relatively large mansions, but it's never unsatisfying. The only quibble lies in the title – the plural "Adventures" suggests trips through multiple time periods, while it really only focuses on one. There are a few trips back to Franklin's past as a child, and to the near future during the Constitutional Convention, but that's about the extent of it. Like many of Sierra's titles, it was set to be a franchise that just never took off. There was no CD release, and the disk release is quite obscure, leaving it a sadly overlooked little gem.

Phantasmagoria



Phantasmagoria

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Saturn
Designer(s): Roberta Williams
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Would it be too harsh to criticize Roberta Williams? She was undoubtedly a pioneer of the adventure gaming scene, but years and years of genre evolution have revealed that maybe she wasn't the best game designer. Still, while *Mystery House* and *King's Quest* remain important landmarks – the former for introducing graphics to text adventures, the latter for implementing full visuals and character controls – *Phantasmagoria* doesn't command nearly the same respect. It's certainly revolutionary in combining full motion video of live actors with the framework of an adventure game. History eventually confirmed that FMV-based games were an evolutionary dead end, however, marking *Phantasmagoria* as a call-to-arms for a war that never happened.

It didn't help that, by most accounts, the game was pretty bad.

By the mid '80s, Roberta Williams was still mostly known for her fairy tale style *King's Quest*, with a few dalliances in murder mysteries with the *Laura Bow* games. *Phantasmagoria* was to be something different, a truly adult horror story. If *King's Quest IV* dared to make gamers cry, *Phantasmagoria* dared to give gamers nightmares. It's an admirable attempt, but like practically every FMV-based game, it falls victim to two things: terrible production values and incredibly sparse gameplay.

The story of *Phantasmagoria* is cribbed almost directly from Stephen King's *The Shining*. Donald Gordon and Adrienne Delaney, a young married couple from Boston, find an astonishing deal on a gorgeous mansion out in the boonies. It is, of course, haunted – as if the room full of weaponry and the functioning electric chair weren't some kind of tipoff. As Adrienne begins to explore around the mansion and discover all of its secrets, Don gets possessed by an evil spirit and begins acting psychotically abusive. Furthermore, Adrienne's sleep is disturbed by gruesome nightmares. As Adrienne eventually discovers, the mansion was previously owned by a magician named Zoltan Carnovasch, who had more wives than Henry VIII. (The "Phantasmagoria" is the name of an escape trick wherein he's tied to a chair and must escape before his head is sliced by a swinging blade.) Each of his ladies died under tragic circumstances – it should be no shock that he was possessed by a demon and murdered them. It should also be no shock that the same demon that inhabited Zoltan has inhabited Don, whom Adrienne must outwit in the climactic chase sequence of the final chapter.

As any horror fan can tell you, suspense is all in the buildup. The plot is so easily telegraphed that you can figure it all out within the first five minutes of play, but there are seven whole CDs to be filled. A good chunk of it involves Adrienne wandering around the mansion, unlocking previously locked doors and conversing with the sparse townsfolk. It feels like time ill spent – there is literally one whole chapter (and one whole CD) solely devoted to Adrienne visiting town and buying drain cleaner. As such, it feels more like you're just clicking hotspots until the next video sequence plays.

Phantasmagoria arrived a few years after *Myst*, and its design seems to be trying to capitalize on the casual audience that made Cyan's game such an enormous success. It was also released during a time when clicking around and looking at the pretty pictures was considered an acceptable game mechanic. To be fair, in *Myst* there were at least some puzzles so it justified itself as more than just a slideshow. *Phantasmagoria* has puzzles in a vague sense, inasmuch as there's an inventory, and occasionally you'll need to use items in other places to move on. These are never actually difficult, but most of the trouble lies in figuring out exactly where the items are. Your directions are rarely clarified in the narrative, requiring you to hit the red skull button on the bottom of the screen, which gives you not-so-subtle clues to your current goal. The game also realizes that maybe players could get stuck – in which case you can immediately start at any of the seven chapters, although you usually miss some introductory videos. Up until the late stages of the game, there's no way to die, either. The final gameplay segment is the type where you need to click on very specific items in a short period of time or else you'll be killed. It's intense, yes, but not much fun when you have to do it over and over.



Phantasmagoria's mid-90s era CGI has aged surprisingly well.

In spite of how large and detailed the mansion is, there's not much to interact with. *Phantasmagoria* eschews the multi-icon interface of Sierra's earlier games in favor of a single cursor to move around and interact with stuff. You don't directly control Adrienne, but rather, she stands faithfully, arms at her side, staring off into nothingness. That is, until you click on a hotspot, after which she'll take a few steps towards it and the scene will transition. There's no "look" command, and very few hotspots. The SVGA backgrounds are quite pretty – they were rendered in that time in the '90s when computer generated graphics were very artificial but still attractive, and the mansion and its grounds are still appealing, even today. The fact that it's so devoid of other characters lends to the sense of isolation, and it does feel rather creepy.

Despite all of this, there's still some incongruity in the visuals. Although there are some video cutscenes, which play at a lower resolution and are a bit blocky, most of the action consists of the live-action characters walking over the CG backgrounds. The visual quality of the actors varies, but they always look out of place against the backdrop. It doesn't help that there are still some traces of ghosting around their edges, a remnant of early blue screen technology. The main musical theme is a standard Gregorian chant – clichéd, but effective. The rest of the music is MIDI, and while it's pretty decent, its tinniness on an FM synth card does it no favors.

Beyond the vapid game design and mixed visuals lies the video sequences themselves. Let's be honest – the production values are awful. Adrienne, played by Victoria Morsell, isn't too bad. Although you never see much of her personality, she plays the role well, and her acting is rarely

cringe worthy. Don, played by David Homb, is far too over-the-top to be taken seriously. But even they are better than the embarrassing supporting cast.



Don and Adrienne in one of their many uncomfortable quarrels.

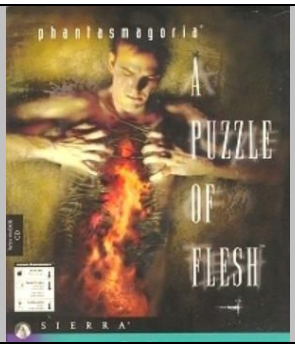
There are numerous scenes that are meant to be disturbing that instead come off as ridiculous. Many of these involve Harriet, a homeless lady living in the mansion's yard, and her mentally challenged son Cyrus. There is a scene where Cyrus is up against a wall, doing something nasty to Adrienne's cat. The way the scene plays out, Adrienne walks up behind him and basically says, please, stop beating my cat. He looks confused, puts the cat down, and then walks away. It's all extremely awkward. Perhaps Williams had shades of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in mind, but it doesn't play out that way at all. What's even weirder is that the guy who played Cyrus, Steven W. Bailey, is the only cast member to graduate into a successful acting career, eventually landing a prominent role on the ABC medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*.

Although the game is filled with weird moments like this, by far the worst is the much vaunted rape scene, which seems to have been inserted solely to prove how "adult" *Phantasmagoria* was. It worked – it garnered tremendous PR, it was mentioned in every preview in every magazine, computer gaming or otherwise, and it even got into a bit of trouble with retailers, especially considering there was no ESRB back in 1995. But it's still really badly done. It's actually not too graphic and starts off relatively tastefully – as tasteful as a rape scene can be, anyway – as Don seduces Adrienne gently but quickly grows violent. As Adrienne falls to the floor, weeping, Don looks off into the distance, furrows his brow in befuddlement, wipes the hair out of his face, and then sorta just wanders off the set. The gravity of the scene is totally ruined. The whole production is just as bad as any of the Z-grade movies that have been parodied in *Mystery Science Theater 3000* over the years, but even most of those never held the deluded self-importance that seems to permeate *Phantasmagoria*.

About the only time that the game ever becomes truly enjoyable is during the climax, when Adrienne stumbles upon the ghosts of Zoltan and his dead wives. These poor girls each had a hobby/vice, which Zoltan then used to kill them in ironic manners. Naturally, these scenes are quite gory. Later, when Don really gets violent and sticks Adrienne in Zoltan's torture device, it also gets fairly bloody. When a cheap-looking CG demon pops out of Don and tears Adrienne's face off, it's even absurdly gruesome. All of these death scenes manage to be squeamishly horrifying and grippingly intense, so at least that's one promise that the game fulfills. At the same time, they're also amusingly silly, something which was a bit of a trademark of early Sierra games. Like the rape scene, these were probably meant to be taken completely seriously, and they sort of veer off the mark

So *Phantasmagoria* is really just a bad game – it's something that would struggle to qualify as a direct-to-cable movie, and only barely earns the "graphic adventure" moniker. It's actually surprising that Roberta Williams herself picked this game as the one being most representative of her career – it probably should've been the one that she would want forgotten.

Phantasmagoria was developed for PCs, with DOS and Windows versions shipping on the same discs. However, it was also ported to the Sega Saturn, although that version was only released in Japan by Outrigger and renamed *Phantasm*. It's stretched out to eight CDs, and comes in a slipcase that holds two double size CD cases, making it the largest game available on the system. Due to its contents, it was also given a "yellow" age warning, suggesting it's only for gamers 18 and older without being offensive enough to get a "red" rating, which marked softcore porn. The port is faithful, although everything is dubbed in Japanese. The FMV quality is a bit worse than the PC version, seeing as the Saturn didn't have great video compression (without the MPEG card, anyway, which this game does not support), but it's passable. The visuals do suffer during the gameplay segments due to the drop in resolution. The graphical interface framing the main window is gone, though, leaving only black borders.



Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Lorelei Shannon
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Despite its mixed reviews, *Phantasmagoria* sold extremely well. Sierra continued its line of FMV adventure games with *The Beast Within*, the second in their *Gabriel Knight* series. While it still had some issues, it was a substantially improved product, with better acting, better writing, and some actual puzzle elements. After this, they released their third FMV/adventure title: *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh*. Despite the name, it has very little to do with its predecessor from a storyline standpoint – it's a psychological thriller as opposed to a story about a haunted house, and other than one minor reference to Adrienne Delaney, there's no storyline connection at all. Roberta Williams also stepped aside as the designer, leaving the task to Lorelei Shannon, who previously worked with Williams on *King's Quest VII: The Princeless Bride*.

Although only released two years after the first *Phantasmagoria*, *A Puzzle of Flesh* is a huge technical improvement. The graphics utilize 16-bit color, and the video compression, though not up to DVD quality, is still substantially better. It also ditches the computer rendered backgrounds (for the most part) and uses real locations. While it does lack the attractively rendered visuals of its predecessor, the visual style is also much more consistent, which makes the whole production look substantially less cheap. The music is remarkably tense, and despite some occasionally cheesy synth instrumentation, is quite excellent. Overall, it's still not fantastic, but at least it's been upgraded to the level of a Sci-Fi Channel original movie.

The story focuses on a young man named Curtis Craig, who we are introduced to as a resident of an insane asylum, strapped to a gurney and being treated with electroshock therapy. It jumps forward a bit, and we find Curtis back in the real world, seemingly well-adjusted with a standard office job. But then he starts having numerous eerie visions, which at first creep him out a bit. But then one of his co-workers – a fellow he didn't particularly care for – is brutally murdered. He begins to doubt his sanity even further, which also attracts the attention of the police. Soon, more of his co-workers end up dead, his visions become crazier, and he begins to

dig up all kinds of sordid memories regarding his childhood. All of this, he gathers, is somehow related to the pharmaceutical company he works for, which is seemingly conducting all kinds of nasty experiments. The executives are also presumed to have murdered his father. Furthermore, he's caught between two women – his adoring sweetheart girlfriend Jocelyn, and the aggressive S&M queen Therese, whom he's attracted to for reasons he can't quite understand.



Curtis spends much of time with his arms at his sides, clearly disinterested in his surroundings.

Like its predecessor, *A Puzzle of Flesh* tries to approach the themes of psychology and sexuality with more maturity than most video games. It does a better job of it, partially because the writing's better, and partially because the acting isn't nearly as abysmal. There's a lot of exploration of Curtis' childhood, told through counseling sessions with his psychologist, that deal with his attraction to not only sadomasochism, but also to his buddy Trevor. While Trevor has some stereotypically gay mannerisms and acts mostly to lighten the mood, it's never forced or flamboyant. He's undoubtedly the most likable character in the whole game, and perfectly fulfills the role of a concerned friend without devolving into a negative caricature.

The treatment of all of this is interesting – in 1996, it was rare to have such a prominent gay character (and is still rare today) and Curtis might perhaps be the first bisexual game character ever. For the most part, it's all handled well, even though some of the S&M scenes provide some unintentional hilarity. (While Curtis is suspended from series of chains, he looks around nervously at the leather-clad Therese and remarks, "I don't think this is such a good idea.") But the story doesn't tie any of these themes together in any meaningful way, as if it's just trying to be controversial for the sake of it, something which the first *Phantasmagoria* was also quite guilty of. The packaging proudly wears its RSAC rating (the predecessor to the ESRB), promising "provocative frontal nudity" and "blood and gore". It's definitely no worse than an R rated film, but it was enough to get it pulled from certain retail stores and banned in Australia.

The impact of these adult subjects is also undermined by the final segments, which go completely off the deep end. At this point, the game stops being about Curtis' inner struggle with his sanity and more about aliens from Dimension X. Wait, what? Yup, it's a completely jarring transition from psychological horror to science fiction, and while it's an interesting twist, certainly much more compelling than the story of the first *Phantasmagoria*, it never feels like it fits. It's not like it's played off to be ambiguous either – one could potentially make the claim that this final chapter represents Curtis' final descent into madness, but there's nothing that supports this beyond mere conjecture.

Despite its occasional bouts of lunacy, the movie segments are still an improvement over the first game's, but *A Puzzle of Flesh* ultimately commits the same gameplay sins. There's very little to interact with, and roughly 90% of the game involves clicking on everything possible to find all of the triggers to progress. Wake up, talk to your rat, go to work, talk to your co-

workers, talk to your psychologist, go to a restaurant/bar, and then repeat in the next chapter. The puzzles are extraordinarily sparse – most simply involve figuring out passwords, which is never hard to do – and other solutions are lying around scribbled on Post-It notes.

The few other puzzles are terribly integrated. Right at the beginning, Curtis discovers that his wallet is missing, and upon some searching, finds it under the couch. The solution is not to move the couch, but rather, to get your rat, send it to retrieve your wallet, and then lure it out with a granola bar. How absurd. For a standard adventure game, this isn't that crazy of a puzzle, but when you've removed the layer of abstraction that replaces live actors with cartoon characters, you'd expect the puzzles to work in a vaguely rational manner. And then, just like the plot, the whole design veers off course in the final chapter, where you're expected to solve a puzzle involving an alien circuit board without any instructions whatsoever, as if the developers felt like they needed to make up for the simplicity of the rest of the game. There's also another series of timed "click the right spot or you die" events, and they're just as annoying as before, although you still get the nice, gory death scenes when you fail.



Horrifying or hilarious? Nobody can quite be sure.

The folks at Sierra were fully cognizant of how barebones their game was, so they added in a secret Easter egg hunt. Hidden stuff is nothing new to adventure games, but there are literally dozens upon dozens to find, along with a scoring system. They're practically impossible to uncover without using a guide, but they give some incentive to play through the game once you've already seen it. Most of them are silly sound effects (including a few from *The Simpsons*) but there are also a few wacky outtake clips, including one where one of the directors walks into the scene dressed as Batman.

The biggest question, though, is why exactly is *A Puzzle of Flesh* a computer game and not a movie? Electronic games are a perfectly valid medium for storytelling because it makes the player an active participant rather than a passive observer, potentially allowing for closer emotional resonance. For as insubstantial as *Phantasmagoria* was, at least there was a sense of isolation and exploration as you made your way through the manor, making it easier to empathize with Adrienne. There's nothing like that in *A Puzzle of Flesh*, at all – the game world is too small to get involved with, and it never feels like you're truly involved in Curtis' life. At least there are a few nice touches – you can read through your e-mails, and amongst idle banter and corporate memos, you'll find (imaginary?) e-mails from Curtis to his co-workers outing himself as a lunatic, or job offers straight from Satan himself.

A Puzzle of Flesh is also quite short – there are technically about four hours of video spread over five CDs. That's okay, though, because while it's still heavily flawed, its ambitions are a bit more fully realized, and despite the near total lack of interaction, it's still strangely engrossing.



Torin's Passage

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Torin's Passage, a cartoonish fantasy adventure released late in Sierra's adventure gaming life, was conceived as a counterpart to the *King's Quest* series. Due to the increased time and effort to create cinematic CD-ROM games, Sierra realized they couldn't keep churning out *King's Quest* titles at a yearly rate. Their solution was to create a similar series and release each on alternating years. But *Torin's Passage* is not merely a stopgap title – it's quite an excellent game that has the tragedy of being somewhat overlooked, or at least misunderstood by the gaming community.

The packaging has Al Lowe's name on the cover, but it's not quite what you'd expect. In a departure from his usual adult-oriented games like *Leisure Suit Larry* and (to a lesser extent) *Freddy Pharkas*, *Torin's Passage* was developed to be a game that Lowe could play with his daughter, and thus a title that the whole family could enjoy. It's not entirely without precedent – Lowe began his game development career working on Disney titles, including *The Black Cauldron* for Sierra, and in many ways he's simply to returning to his roots.



Boogle interrupts a moment between Torin and the beautiful princess Leenah.

The story focuses on a young farm boy named Torin, who lives on the world of Strata. His life is tossed into disarray when his caring parents are whisked away by the evil sorceress Lycentia, causing him to set off on an adventure to find them. Torin's unique world consists of several realms nested within the planet's crust – he lives on the surface, known as "The Lands Above". As you go further underground you venture through new realms, each with its own theme, and its own group of strange denizens. Each trip brings him closer to Lycentia, who has

been banished to the core of the planet in a place known as the Null Void. Torin is joined by Boogle, the requisite goofy sidekick. As is typical of these types, he walks the thin line between "cute" and "obnoxious". He can't talk, but instead can shapeshift into various items that he comes across.

What Torin doesn't know is that he's actually the son of the King and Queen, who were murdered when he was just a baby. Purportedly, their deaths took place at the hands of Lycentia, who was their nanny, and her banishment to the planet's core was a result of these misdeeds. However, Lycentia isn't quite as evil as her initial appearance may suggest. Her story is told through flashbacks in-between the chapters, which reveal she actually rescued Torin from being killed as well, and she was simply used as a scapegoat for the death of the royal family. She is a rarity even amongst Disney films – a sympathetic villain.

While *Torin's Passage* uses the same basic interface and style as *King's Quest VII*, it's substantially improved in a number of ways. Most welcome is the return of the speed control function, absent from *KQVII*. Players of that game will remember how painful it was to watch the characters slowly slog across screen after screen, but Torin happily dashes along, and can even be instantly teleported to spots via the right mouse button. The subtitles have returned too. Alas, some of the more unfortunate elements of *King's Quest* also remain. *Torin's Passage* still uses the single icon cursor, and you can only interact with essential items. There isn't any narration either, robbing the experience of much of the flavor text that characterizes Sierra's better games.

Still, at least the game looks fantastic. The painted backgrounds are gorgeous, and the character designs capture the look and feel of the best animated flicks without relying on too many standard Disney tropes. While the adventure sequences look like standard Sierra games in high res, there are numerous close-up cinematics during the dramatic scenes. They're rendered in-game, so they don't suffer from the compression artifacts of full motion video, and they're well animated too. While Torin is a fairly generic blond fantasy hero, the rest of the characters are appropriately exaggerated, with the most amusing being Dreep, Lycentia's hulking goon. He's technically quite dangerous, in that he can eat Torin in a single bite, but he's so damned goofy looking, with his large blue face and gigantic red nose. It's like something that crawled out of the imagination of Jim Henson, making it hard to find him threatening.



Dreep, Lycentia's minion, isn't terribly smart.

In general, *Torin's Passage* has a lot of energy. The first world has a tree which Torin will leap across, complete with showy acrobatics. The various worlds are far less derivative than what you'd see in a typical *King's Quest* title, and the writing is better too. Roberta Williams' sense of

humor was always kind of genial – if it made you laugh, it probably made you groan at the same time. *Torin's Passage* is much more creative and inspired, and much sillier to boot.

The gateways between the realms are known as phenocrysts. While many of the puzzles are typical Sierra inventory types, these gateway areas contain logic conundrums, closer to *The 7th Guest*. However, they are quite a bit simpler. The command bar also comes with a built-in hint function. You can set how often you'd like hints to be available, or just turn them always on, but using them will also deduct a few points from your score. Sometimes they'll outright tell you the solution, but for the phenocryst puzzles, they usually just give vague suggestions.

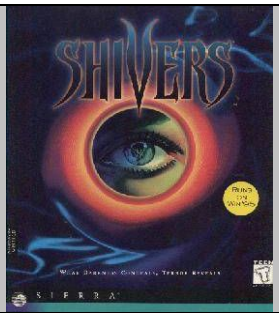
The world design is quite well done. The adventure gets off to a good start taking place in The Lands Above, which seems stuck in a perpetual twilight but is no less gorgeous because of it. Escarpa seems to take inspiration from American Indians, as the residents have their homes built in the side of a gigantic canyon. Alas, things stumble somewhat during the mid-game – Pergola is a forest where Torin is captured, *Gulliver's Travels*-style, by a race of tiny creatures, while Asthenia is a standard volcano world. Both feature consistently excellent artwork, but Pergola focuses entirely on solving stupid little puzzles by moving around the miniature cretins, with little to explore, while Asthenia has no character interaction whatsoever. Thankfully, the story picks up in the final chapter in the core world of Tenebrous. For all of the talk in-game of how depressing this world is, it's not all that dark. Half of it takes place in a bright pleasant forest – the other half takes place in the backstage of a theater, where you get to interact with more of the land's bizarre residents.

Anyone expecting a comedy adventure in the style of Lowe's other games will probably be a bit disappointed. The humor is less about verbal wit and more about plain silliness – after all, it is mostly aimed at kids. That doesn't mean there aren't any swell bits though. Out of all of the strange folks you run into, the weirdest are the Bittermans, a family of odd creatures who appear to live inside of a '50s sitcom. Their entire existence is black and white, their actions are introduced by a cheesy narrator, and every stupid "wife loudly nagging the helpless husband" joke or cheeky retort from the bratty kid is greeted with canned applause. In Asthenia, if you fall into the molten rock, Torin will sink while giving a thumbs-up, a reference to the finale of *Terminator 2*.

There are some funny fourth wall breaking gags too. Upon entering Tenebrous, Torin is knocked unconscious, and the player is put in control of Boogle. Upon transforming himself into a sexy nurse, he reaches right into the inventory window and picks up the ammonia to revive Torin. And after crawling through a series of vents, Torin accidentally bumps into the command bar at the top of the screen, which he kindly asks that you take care of. When stuck in the gravity-less Null Void, Torin propels himself through space with a set of bagpipes. And the final "puzzle" of the game involves using a specific item on Lycentia in her room. The solution is more than obvious, but you can also use the bagpipes to alert her to your presence and get yourself killed. It's such a monstrously stupid thing to do that the voice of Al Lowe himself congratulates you for being such a moron.

While there's a lot to like about *Torin's Passage*, it feels like something's missing. Not in the same way as *King's Quest VII*, which was clearly unfinished, but *Torin's Passage* was obviously meant to be the first part in a larger series that never transpired. There's not much of a plot beyond "Torin goes on adventure, discovers secret heritage." A love interest, the strikingly beautiful Princess Leenah, is introduced halfway through the game, and other than some not-so-subtle moments of lustful tension, there's absolutely nothing done with the couple. She doesn't even appear in the ending. As a prelude to the greater adventures of Torin, it would have been excellent. As a standalone title, it's still quite good, but it's not quite fulfilling either.

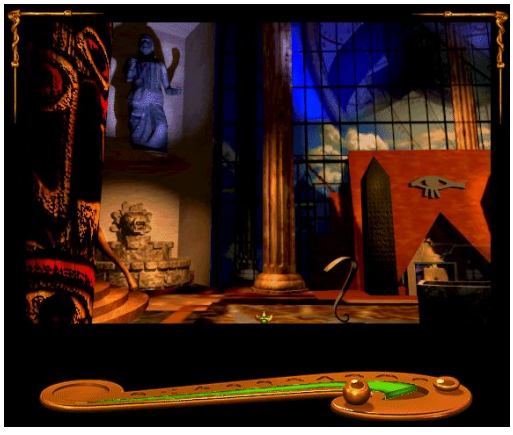
Shivers



Shivers

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Marcia Bales
Developer: Sierra On-Line

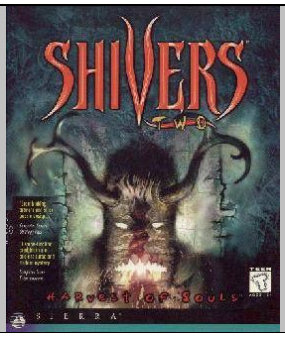
Shivers is the first attempt by Sierra to mimic the success of *Myst*, and they actually didn't do too badly. You play as a kid who's been dared by his friends to spend the night in a purportedly haunted museum. Full of Egyptian artifacts and other mythical curiosities from around the globe, it was supposed to open 15 years ago, until its founder, Professor Windlenot, mysteriously died. When not solving the usual assortment of sliding tile and item manipulation conundrums – these have more in common with *The 7th Guest* than *Myst* – you'll be reading journals, and uncovering the mystery behind the museum.



Windlenot's Museum of the Strange and Unusual is home to some fantastic artifacts.

Your overall goal is to hunt down and capture a number of demons known as Ixupi. It's a change of pace from other similar games, not only because they can hurt you (a life bar is present at the bottom of the screen), but both their locations and the items used to capture them are randomized. The fact that the creatures can come at you if you click in the wrong spot is supposed to contribute to the "horror" aspect of *Shivers*, although the creatures themselves look quite cartoony. While innovative, tracking the items down is quite tedious, especially considering you can only carry a single one of them at a time. It's also relatively nonlinear, since once you find your way inside the museum, you can solve most of the puzzles in any order.

While not a particularly outstanding game from a design standpoint (though it is more playable than *Phantasmagoria*, Sierra's other horror offering at the time), *Shivers* has some absolutely fantastic artwork. The use of colors is brilliant, contrasting the dark shadows with bright reds, greens and blues. Very few games of this style have aged well, but *Shivers* definitely distinguishes itself.



Shivers Two: Harvest of Souls

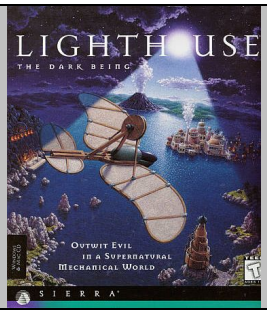
Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Marcia Bales
Developer: Sierra On-Line

In *Shivers Two*, you are a member of the alternative rock group Trip Cyclone. During a trip to Cyclone, Arizona, the roadblock traps you, and your fellow musicians have all but disappeared. Like the first game, the goal is to track down a number of MacGuffins. Instead of monsters, though, you hunt for Bahos, which are mystical ceremonial sticks. Finding these is a bit less tedious than hunting down the Ixupi, as they are rewarded after solving certain puzzles. However, they must each be placed at a special spot in the Devil's Mouth canyon. Carrying a Bahos will slowly drain your life, plus the canyon is quite dangerous, so unless you find where you're supposed to put it and solve its puzzle quickly, you'll be killed. You are also constantly harassed by the antagonistic spirit Darkcloud, and given some (rather annoying) aid by the ghost of Norah Wharton. The Egyptian mythology from the first game has been replaced with Native American mysticism, and the numerous brief (and extremely trippy) music videos that give you subtle clues to certain puzzles help round out the game's unique personality.



Cyclone, Arizona, just doesn't have the same appeal as the museum in the first Shivers.

The city of Cyclone has a cool look to it – the canyon is blood red, and the largely deserted town is cast in a disturbing green hue – but it just isn't quite as compelling as the museum from the first *Shivers*. The rest of the puzzles haven't changed much – and even includes a clichéd chess puzzle – so overall it can't help but feel a bit lacking. Still, *Shivers Two* still has a handful of improvements. Rather than static screens each node rotates 360 degrees, like in *Zork: Nemesis*, and the map lets you quickly jump to any previously visited location. There's also an "internet" button, which was meant to allow you to communicate with other gamers over Sierra's network, and even create and share puzzles, although this aspect has since been disabled.



Lighthouse: The Dark Being

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Jon Bock, Susan Frischer
Developer: Sierra On-Line

Sierra's second attempt at emulating *Myst*, *Lighthouse* is significantly less inspired than *Shivers*. You play as an author who's escaped to the boonies to concentrate on his book. You find a place on the shore, right down the road from a spooky lighthouse. As it happens, the owner, a crazy scientist named Dr. Jeremiah Krick, is running all kinds of experiments, one of which opens a portal to another dimension. He gets stuck, of course, leaving behind his baby daughter Amanda. Upon receiving a call to check out the situation, you find that a curious humanoid known as the Dark Being has entered this dimension and swiped the child. Your job, of course, is to enter this alternate world and find both Dr. Krick and Amanda. The ultimate goal is to find seven pieces of an ion cannon, which can be used to destroy the Dark Being.



The mechanical bird can make your journey quite troublesome.

All of this – the setup, the CG rendered environments, the fantasy world powered by unique technology, the confusing mechanical puzzles – are all extremely typical of the numerous *Myst* clones which flooded the market in the mid-1990s. You do have an inventory, at least, although most of the puzzles are still of the "fiddle with machinery until it works" type. The graphics are average, although some designs of the alternate world are inspired. Particularly, you are constantly stalked by a large, mechanical birdman, although unlike *Shivers* there's no real danger. The only interesting thing *Lighthouse* brings to the table is branching paths, which slightly change your course through the adventure. For example, you can immediately follow the Dark Being into the portal after he swipes Amanda, or you can elect to find some other way to enter the other dimension (for some reason, the former leads to a much harder route than the latter, even though this seems like the obvious decision). Otherwise, there is little to distinguish *Lighthouse* from its brethren, although from the standpoint of similar games, it is perfectly adequate.

Interview with Josh Mandel



Josh Mandel began his gaming career at Sierra as a producer, and eventually ended up becoming a jack-of-all-trades, providing voice acting (including the voice of King Graham in *King's Quest V*), writing documentation (including the fake medical guide in *Freddy Pharkas*), and acting as a digitized model (appearing in *Police Quest 3*). He also provided writing and design work for *Freddy Pharkas*, *King's Quest I* (remake), *Space Quest IV* and *6*, *The Dagger of Amon Ra*, *Pepper's Adventures in Time*, and numerous others. After leaving Sierra, he designed *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon* for Legend, and provided writing for *Jagged Alliance 2*, *Sonic Adventure* and *Insecticide*. He has contributed his voice to several *King's Quest* fan games as well.

Before you got started at Sierra, were you a fan of the adventure game genre?

I was a major fan of the genre, and of Sierra in particular. I was the kind of guy who'd stand outside Babbage's waiting for it to open on the day that a new Sierra game was due to hit the shelves.

Outside of Sierra, what are some of your other favorite adventures games? Are there any other designers or writers whose work you admire?

Steve Meretzky and Brian Moriarty are my two favorite designers. Look at the Infocom games these guys did (Steve's *Planetfall* and Brian's *Trinity* are standouts for me) – they built the genre out of nothing, and they did it without multimedia, without graphics or music or FMV. They were the pioneers who turned bits and bytes into laughter, pathos, and horror, and, so far, I don't know any other designers who've been as revolutionary.

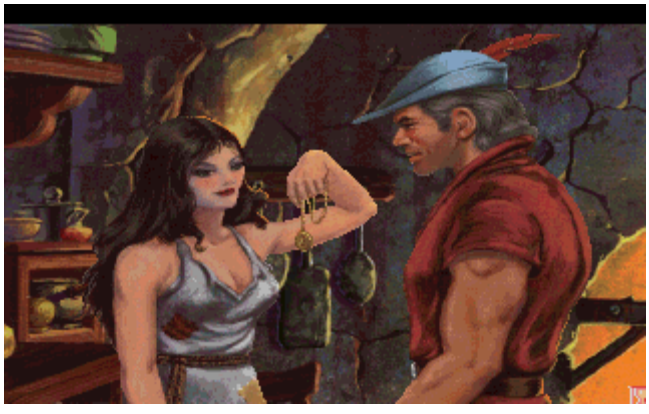
That's not to discount Dave Lebling, Marc Blank, and the other Infocom designers, all of whom shaped the genre. I also have the highest possible regard for Bob Bates, Glen Dahlgren, and Jane Jensen, and I wouldn't hesitate to play anything they produce. They all have exceptional design sensibilities, a discipline you rarely encounter.

In general, what are some of your favorite behind-the-scenes stories?

Unfortunately, the more memorable they are, the less repeatable they are.

I remember something that happened my very first day at Sierra, and it was so macabre and funny, it set the stage beautifully for everything that was to come. I was sitting in Guruka Singh Khalsa's cubicle. Guruka was the Senior Producer and had single-handedly produced dozens of Sierra games. He was briefing me on my first project (the *KQ1*-AGI remake, which had languished for some time). Mark Hood stopped into the cubicle and mentioned that he'd seen a dead cow by the side of 41 right as it passes through Coarsegold. Corey Cole – who was my next-door neighbor at the time – instantly perked up. "Was the head intact?" he asked Mark. Mark chuckled and shrugged and said, "Yeah, I think so." Corey immediately dialed Lori, who worked at home much of the time. "Mark says there's a dead cow by the side of 41 right as you come into Coarsegold... yes, he says the head is intact... okay, you know what to do, right?... okay, bye." He hung up. And that was the last we ever heard of it, but to this day, I wonder what Lori knew to do with that dead cow.

Some of the screw-ups were unwittingly hilarious. The best, I think, occurred when we wanted to clear the rights to use the Energizer Bunny in *Space Quest IV*. The legal department wrote to Duracell to get an okay, and yes, Duracell gave us the okay... and must've been snickering, because the Energizer Bunny isn't Duracell, it's Eveready. We did hear from Eveready, and we had to buy them off so that we wouldn't have to yank the game off the shelves (the way we'd had to do with *Hero's Quest* and, preemptively, *Keeping Up With Jones*, (ed note: which became *Jones in the Fast Lane*) which had been packaged and which was ready to ship when we found out we didn't have clear right to the name.



Josh played the voice of King Graham in King's Quest V.

What are some of the jokes or puzzles you're the most proud of? I read somewhere you were the one responsible for fixing that backwards Rumpelstiltskin bit in the *King's Quest I* remake – I think hundreds of gamers owe you a debt of gratitude for that one.

Well, the Rumpelstiltskin puzzle seriously needed adjustment. I get why Roberta did it the way it was originally done. But to her credit, she took no convincing at all to let me change that.

It's rare for me to remember the jokes that I wrote back then; I play some of the games I worked on and I'm often surprised – sometimes positively, often not – to see what I wrote. It was always fun for me to write song lyrics, and I was pretty proud of the little group of songs I ended up creating during my time there (the Pharkas ballads, *SQ6*'s Mr. Soylent jingle, and Cell Block Love from *LSL6*). And there are a few lines from the *Freddy Pharkas* manual I came up with that I still think of today (such as defining pregnancy as a form of parasitic infection). And I think one of my favorite off-hand remarks in a game was something I wrote for *Laura Bow 2*, in the Egyptian exhibit. If you touch the empty glass case where the Dagger of Amon Ra used to be, it falls over and breaks, and there's a message like, "Congratulations! You've cracked the case of the missing Dagger of Amon Ra!" That makes me smile. It's the same kind of thing I did at the beginning of *Freddy*, with half the points being awarded up front just for opening the Pharmacy front door.

You're credited in something like at least a dozen Sierra games in all kinds of different roles. You seemed to be a jack-of-all-trades being the scenes, doing producing, documentation and voicework. Can you talk about some of these?

Well, I started at Sierra On-Line as a junior producer, with my sights set firmly on designing. So a lot of the early credits are for producing... things like *Zeliard*, *KQ1*, and *Thexder II*. *Zeliard* and *Thexder II* were real learning experiences in that I had to interface with Game Arts in Japan, and

I had no background in that aspect of production. Guruka and Srini Vasan (yes, Srini in *FPFP* was named for Srini Vasan, who I think was in the business office) were instrumental in guiding me through that.

From the first day, I guessed that the key to advancing to a designer position would be in demonstrating that I could be useful in as many roles as possible (including top roles). *KQ1*-AGI was an immediate opportunity to write (Roberta gave me permission to rewrite every word of the original, which was very sparse) and even show that maybe I had a sensibility for design. The Two Guys were happy to let me do some writing for *SQIV*, and there was writing to do on some of the other games I was producing (like *Jones in the Fast Lane*). Not long after I started, Bill Davis, Sr., our Emmy-winning Creative Director, decided to form an in-house group of designers. That group initially consisted of Bruce Balfour, Jane Jensen, Marti McKenna, and me, and was headed up by Michael Feinberg. One of the first projects that Michael wanted me to try was a spin-off of Leisure Suit Larry called "*Little Larry's Guide to Life*". I have no idea whose brainchild this was, but it was going to be an adventure in which a much younger Larry Laffer would lead kids through various topical situations like divorce, relationships, school, and so on. At Michael's direction, I expanded on this in a design (even though Ken, Roberta, and Bill Davis wanted Bruce Balfour to work on that), while, again at Michael's direction, Bruce expanded on the *Laura Bow 2* story brief I'd written... even though Ken, Roberta, and Bill had wanted me to follow that through). I think that Michael made the right call, as comedy was more my forte and detective stuff was Bruce's forte. But since Michael had gone behind the backs of everyone who'd hired him, Michael was out, and I was put in charge. "Little Larry" was quietly and happily retired before anyone else wasted time on it. And suddenly there were opportunities everywhere.

What actually helped the most is when Ken saw my partner Karen McVeigh and I perform our comedy act at the Christmas Party. That's when he basically said, "If you can be that entertaining in person, you can design adventure games." Not long after, they started looking for a project for me to co-design with one of the star designers.

I had always loved doing voiceover work. Back in Chicago, while Karen and I were doing comedy, we were also part of a group of professional voiceover artists, Rolls Voice. Acting was my first love, so this was a chance to act in computer games. I auditioned for *KQ5* for Roberta and Mark, and ended up as Graham and a few of the other characters, and was asked to do voices for a lot of games down the line. All that time I'd racked up onstage and behind the microphone in my past lives as an actor and comedian really came into play, not necessarily in my performance in *KQ5* (which was precisely how I was directed), but in later work such as *LB2*.

The move from SCI0 EGA games to SCI1 VGA games also marked an evolution in storytelling for Sierra games, usually in fleshing out the personality of protagonist rather than making them a blank slate. Since you were the main writer on *The Dagger of Amon Ra*, what steps did you take to really create character of Laura Bow over her original appearance in *The Colonel's Bequest*?

Well, Bruce Balfour was absolutely the main writer and Designer on *Amon Ra*, and all credit for taking Laura's development to the next level, and the development of all of the characters, goes to him. Bruce has a very dark and dry sense of humor, and the characters in the game really reflect that.

While you'd have to ask him how he approached the character of Laura Bow, my observation was that he was essentially following Roberta's lead, because this was Roberta's character and

the one that she was primarily invested in. Which is to say: keep the hero simple and uncomplicated. Roberta did not like her protagonists to be complex. If I remember correctly, she felt strongly that players must be able to identify with the onscreen ego, and that adding complexity would reduce that identification. So Laura and Graham and Rosella were pretty blank slates, with the subsidiary characters adding the color.

If you're at liberty to divulge, who was responsible for making that final quiz in *Amon Ra* so ridiculously difficult? After the fairly straightforward end of the first game, that one really knocked it out of the park!

I don't know. It wasn't me, I didn't keep track of all that stuff! But I think Bruce was trying to appeal to the diehard mystery fans who WOULD keep track of all the details, really use the notebook, and so on. You have to remember that this wasn't all that long after the parser-based adventure game days, which really demanded more of the player. Point-and-click made gamers lazier – allowed them to make progress without really knowing how they were going to do that. There were those of us who missed the challenge that those text adventures and parser-based graphic adventures provided, and we sometimes wrote to that audience.

As another example, look at the *SQ6* Datacorder puzzle. Ignoring the fact that the clues were left out of the game itself, and put in the documentation instead, a lot of players threw fits about the Datacorder, insisting that it was much too hard and required you sit down with a pencil and paper and figure it out. But just a few years earlier, if that same puzzle had appeared in a text-based or parser-based graphic adventure, it would not have been considered tough at all.

Bruce and I often bemoaned the dumbing-down of adventure games that seemed to be occurring on our watch, and while I think we knew it was inevitable, I don't think we wanted to be on the forefront.

That may nor may not have had anything to do directly with the difficulty of final quiz in *LB2*, but I know it was something we talked about a lot in those days.

The *Freddy Pharkas* demo offered a whole new scenario that wasn't in the final game. This suited the episodic nature of the game pretty well – were there any other scenarios planned that were scripted or otherwise didn't make the cut?

I'm always fond of demos that don't give away any gameplay. A few non-Sierra games had done this, and I couldn't see any reason why Sierra couldn't, too. So my games, *FPFP* and *SQ6*, ended up being the only adventure games with these "standalone" demos.

The very first design for *FPFP*, which Al wrote (and which isn't the one at his website), had some sequences in a Chinatown neighborhood of Coarsegold. When Al shared the design with me, he admitted that he wasn't certain if the whole Chinatown concept would be acceptable from a cultural standpoint, and I agreed that it would probably create more negativity than it was worth, and would opt for it to go. I think Al was almost happy to get rid of it. That's the only significant element I can think of that didn't make it.

Even though it was advertised as being related to *Leisure Suit Larry*, *Freddy Pharkas* was comparatively clean. Was there ever any pressure to make dirtier due to that relation? Or was it a conscious attempt to do something different?

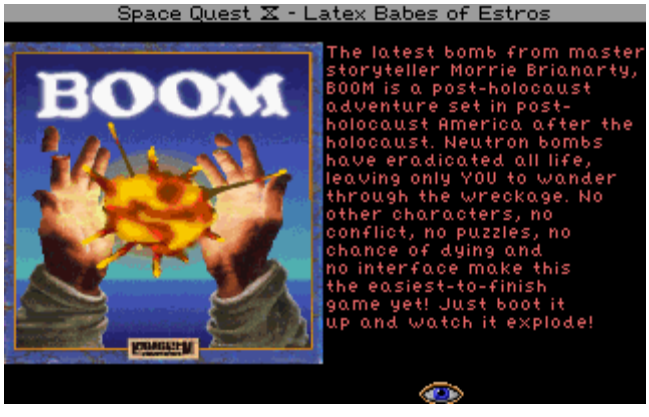
Al and I crossed swords about this (but always in a civil way). Knowing that this would be marketed as an Al Lowe game, I thought that a new series meant an opportunity to show that

his games need not be heavy on toilet and sex humor (not that there's anything wrong with those, but they can quickly get monotonous). I especially wanted *FPFP* to be cleaner after some people felt Al had gone too far in *LSL5*, which had had a particularly controversial scene in which you saw a gynecologist disappear down between Patti's spread legs. I thought Al would be well-served by coming across as able to be funny without being lowbrow in EVERY series. So I lobbied for losing the diarrhea and flatulence sequences, but Al had the last word and wanted them in. If there was any pressure to make the game dirtier, sexier, or more toilet-oriented, it would've been from Al to me, not from Ken or anyone else to Al! And Al cleaned up his act anyway for *Torin's Passage*.

You worked a bit on *Space Quest IV*, and are mostly recognized as scripting this brilliant game parodies in the computer store. To what extent to work on the rest of the game? And how did you get involved with the sixth one?

I did a lot of other look/touch/taste messages that weren't on the critical path, especially on Xenon and in the Galleria, and the Monochrome Boys dialogue, although I think Mark did some revisions on that since I may not have gotten what he was after. I might've done other areas, too, but those are the ones I remember.

After *SQIV*, I had hopes that I'd have a bigger writing role on *SQ5*, but then Mark went to Dynamix and the whole future of the series was thrown into question. Bruce Balfour and I wrote some plot concepts for *SQ5*, which I had hoped would be allowed to continue, possibly with Scott and me. But eventually Ken decided he wanted Dynamix to work with SCI and produce the game there with Mark. Much later, when they started talking about doing *SQ6* and doing it in Oakhurst, I revised my plot concepts and resubmitted them. They took the one I'd called "Where in Corpsman Santiago is Roger Wilco?"



The "Boom" parody box from Space Quest IV.

What happened with the *Pepper's Adventure's in Time* series? I hadn't paid it much mind in the past until I read something on Adventure Gamers praising it, so I decided to give it a go and was pleasantly surprised. I guess it wasn't very successful?

Pepper's Adventures in Time was not particularly successful – but I don't think it was significantly more or less successful than the others in Sierra's fledgling educational line (*Pepper's*, the *EcoQuest* and *Dr. Brain* games, *Turbo Science*, etc.) But *Pepper* was a wonderfully inventive game in which, I think, Lorelei [Shannon] very deftly negotiated the line between adventure and education.

After it became clear than the company just couldn't keep churning out KQs, PQs, SQs, and LSLs, Ken was always hoping to find the Next Big Thing. For awhile, it was the VGA remakes, then it was the educational games, then it was the *Myst*-killers (like *Lighthouse*) and the strategy games (*Outpost*, *SWAT* and *SWAT II*, etc.). This was around the time I left, since it seemed like the company was losing its focus, abandoning its history, and just trying to morph into another EA or something. Sierra wanted to make some inroads into that [educational] market – which was curious, since Ken had previously taken pains not to venture into the same waters as his friend Doug Carlston, who co-founded Brøderbund. (In fact, his friendship with Doug was cited to us as the reason that *SQ6* wasn't subtitled "Where in Corpsman Santiago is Roger Wilco?")

***Space Quest VI* had a troubled development, and reportedly a bunch of stuff was cut from the retail version. We know how the Datacorder puzzle got screwed up and was accidentally misinterpreted as a copy protection puzzle. How did the final product compare with what you had planned?**

A lot of it was very close to what I'd envisioned, and I liked most of those elements. I could see puzzles I'd have wanted to either tweak or redesign, and of course there was the Datacorder debacle, but the story was there and the environments were there and some of the locations were rich with humor and feedback. What disappointed me most – aside from the Datacorder info (which was to come in the form of a comic book that I'd written, "Star Trek Babies") – was what happened once Roger was inside Stellar. The organs were supposed to be virtual planets, and I envisioned a lot of exploration and a lot of opportunity for humor. But I hadn't gotten any of that done by the time I left, and I think that section of writing must've fallen through the cracks. The latter third of the game, inside Stellar, needed comedy to take advantage of those unusual and interesting environments, and it needed hints that could be extracted from that comedy. That third of the game didn't get it.

And it needed to end with a bang. I do understand why Scott didn't want to use the one I'd written for it, and I figured he wouldn't... but I don't think they found something with the entertainment value to replace it.

What happened with the *Space Quest 7* fan game? It seems like the website is gone...

Part of the reason *SQ7* went away is my doing. I was happy to do everything I could for the *SQ* fan community, and I wrote the story for, and designed much of the game for, *SQ7*... with the understanding that it would belong to the fans. Eventually, Vivendi offered to allow the *SQ7* project to continue under the stipulation that it would own the copyright to the game. And while I was more than willing to pitch in and produce something great for fans by fans, I was not willing to design a game for free for a major publisher. I don't know if I was the only member of the team who felt that way. In any event, nothing could be worked out to satisfy everyone, so the work stopped. Maybe someday it will see the light of day. That would certainly be nice.

How did you get involved in working with Legend, and what were some of your best experiences there?

I had always loved the Infocom games, and had beta-tested a little for the company. Legend is where the remnants of Infocom ended up, so I followed Legend very closely. I had even tested *Sherlock: The Riddle of the Crown Jewels* for Bob Bates (Legend's cofounder) back when he was at Infocom, but he didn't remember me from that. But Bob and I had talked at CGDC and I think

he was familiar with my work at Sierra. Legend was the only place I could really see myself going after Sierra, the only place where adventure games got the treatment they deserved. So when it became clear to me that I didn't want to go in the direction Sierra was going, I called Bob first.

Legend was a model of design discipline and working there was invaluable to me. I wish I'd been invaluable to them, but I was probably more like a pain in their backsides. One of the best things about Legend is that there were regular meetings in which the designers would take one designer's current work and analyze it. It was a difficult process, especially coming from Sierra where there was no such "putting your heads together" among designers and probably wouldn't have been well-tolerated, especially by the star designers. The Legend process ensured a greater degree of integrity and fairness in the final product. You had a roomful of extraordinarily dedicated and focused individuals, and it could be an ego-wrenching experience, but terribly worthwhile.

How did you get around to helming *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*? Were you familiar with the books beforehand? They haven't been in print for awhile, which is sad, because they're quite good.

Legend did a lot of games based on literary properties. At first, they asked me to generate a game proposal based on David Eddings's *Belgariad* series, so I did that. And what they told me – if it was true or if they were just sparing my feelings – was that Eddings had barely looked at it, and said, "I don't want some @)$(*% teenagers running around my @()*@%) universe shooting things up!" Well, of course, that didn't exactly describe the thoughtful adventure I was proposing, but Eddings was really only familiar with Nintendo-style electronic entertainment, and the publisher didn't want to push the issue, so we moved on. Bob and Mike (Verdu, co-founder) said, "Pick two sci-fi authors whose work you'd like to adapt," and I mentioned Dean Koontz and Spider Robinson. I'd been reading the *Callahan's* books for years at that point. And I'm endlessly grateful that that's the one that happened!



Callahan's Crosstime Saloon consists of numerous mini-scenarios based on characters from the book series.

What did you like most about the *Callahan* series, and how did you translate that into the game itself? The very theme of the game seemed loosely based on the first story, where they had to convince an otherworldly being that the world is worth saving due to the kindness of humanity, which seems like it worked perfectly for a game.

I think the humor of the *Callahan's* series was its single most appealing feature to me, but that's not to discount Spider's ability to capture voice, or his optimism, or his characters or the casual format or the contemporary setting. Every one of those aspects appealed to me about the books, and every one of them seemed very well-suited for an adventure game. I sensed that an adventure game based on those stories would be a very different, niche kind of game, but I never really bothered to mention that to anyone. Adventure games are niche to begin with, and sales expectations are low enough already without saying, "Now, this is a niche of a niche... "

Did you ever actually live in Long Island? Some of those town name puns in *Callahan* were just too good/awful.

Yes, I grew up in Huntington, Long Island, in Suffolk County, and occasionally hung out on Jericho Turnpike, which is the thoroughfare upon which *Callahan's* is supposedly located. I was in an airport bookshop in Madison, Wisconsin the first time I picked a *Callahan's* book, and on the first page of this (clearly) lighthearted sci-fi book, they were talking about a bar in Suffolk County. I bought the book immediately, read it on the plane, loved it, and it all came down from that.

Legend excelled in creating games based off various literary properties. Were there any other series you would've liked to have worked on?

There weren't a lot of series that grabbed me in those days. I had more devotion to authors than to their series. I would've joyfully adapted Heinlein or Bradbury. In a more twisted, less sci-fi vein, I would've loved to adapt Roald Dahl, John Collier, or Stanley Ellin, the guys whose work became the stuff of *Twilight Zone* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

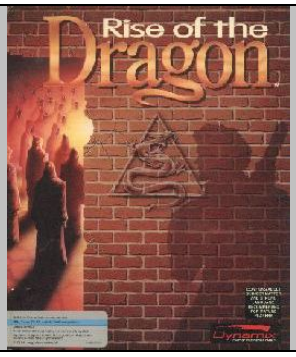
Can you talk about the final days of Legend at all? They always seemed like such a trooper, sticking to love of interactive fiction for such a long time, before getting stuck making first person shooters and eventually getting closed down. It seemed like such a waste of fantastic talent.

I left years before Legend shut its doors, and *Blackstone Chronicles*, their final adventure, was still in mid-development about the time I left. But as long as I knew them, Legend was always facing an uphill battle. The graphics were usually a generation or more behind the times and the quality of the games was of less interest to publishers than the prospective sales. It was, indeed, a waste of fantastic talent.

How did you get involved with *Insecticide*? I never realized it was worked on by so many adventure game veterans until I looked at the credits!

I'd become acquainted with Mike Levine through a *Trivial Pursuit* DVD project I worked on with Hasbro. He and Larry Ahern called me early in *Insecticide*'s development, but I was busy at the time and *Insecticide* was going to be a very ambitious project. Later on, they checked back with me, and I was free to work on it at that point. I didn't realize, either, what a great lineup of (mostly ex-Lucas) talent worked on it, either, 'til I started on it. I got to do the bulk of the design and writing for the adventure sequences, but I didn't see the action sequences until after the game had already shipped.

It was a pleasure to work on it with those all great pros. Between Legend and Sierra and Sega and a few others, I've been fortunate to have worked side-by-side with the best minds in the business.



Rise of the Dragon

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Macintosh / Sega CD
Designer(s): Jeff Tunnell
Developer: Dynamix

Rise of the Dragon is one of the three adventure games, along with *The Adventures of Willy Beamish* and *Heart of China* developed by Dynamix. This dark cyberpunk detective story takes place in futuristic Los Angeles, as you take on the role of detective William "Blade" Hunter to save the city from an underground Chinese drug ring/cult.

The intro, told in comic book-style panels, focuses on a young woman taking a hit of a new street drug in a night club. Rather than delivering her a good time as expected, the drugs end up mangling her body into some kind of inhuman creature, leaving the abomination dead on the floor. As it happens, this young woman is actually the daughter of the mayor. Seeking some good old-fashioned under-the-table justice, the mayor hires Blade to uncover the secret behind his daughters' death. In the process, he ends up stumbling onto a plot to not only poison Los Angeles' water supply with these gene-altering drugs, but also to unleash a 5,000 year old dragon named Bahumat into the world. Meanwhile, Blade struggles with his prophesized role as the "chosen one" – administered by a seemingly crazy old Chinese man in an abandoned warehouse – who will save both the city and world. It's a combination of *Blade Runner*'s aesthetics with some of *Big Trouble in Little China*'s sillier elements of Chinese mythology, though largely without any of its intentionally cheesy B-movie undertones.

Rise of the Dragon is played entirely with a first person perspective, using gritty hand drawn artwork for its backgrounds and portraits, along with a handful of few black and white digitized images. Stylistically, it looks pretty good, although the scanned drawings suffer some dithering due to the 256 color limit. Navigation is quick and easy, although it takes awhile to adjust to the game's attention to realism. For example, it's entirely possible to forget your card key in your computer and leave, effectively locking yourself out of your apartment. (There is a way to get back in, although it's a bit obscure – you need to hit the steam valve in the apartment hallway, but there's no hotspot to indicate that you can interact with it.) Taken even further, you can also forget to put on your clothes and end up getting arrested for public indecency. The first few "puzzles" seem to revolve around not forgetting to pick up certain items, in ways that aren't always logical. (Who leaves a key in a lock after opening a door, honestly?) Otherwise, the game pulls off this attention to realism quite admirably. Certain locations have different inhabitants or even change music every time you visit them, which go a long way towards making the Los Angeles of the future feel more alive.

Beyond some of the initial "gotcha" moments, *Rise of the Dragon* isn't terribly hard nor terribly long. Most of the puzzles are straightforward, and a number of them simply involve navigating through dialogue trees without pissing off whomever you're talking too. Unfortunately, the "right" answer isn't always apparent – sometimes you need to play the wiseass, sometimes you don't – and getting it wrong means that they'll stop talking to you completely, forcing a reload. You also need to keep in the good graces of your girlfriend, Karyn, who also happens to work in the city's Bureau of Records, making her an important source of information. If you manage to find yourself in the doghouse, via saying something stupid, forgetting a date with her, or picking up a prostitute, you are, once again, up the creek.

Per usual adventure game protocol of the late '80s/early '90s, there are a handful of action sequences. One is a fairly painless shooting gallery, wherein you use your mouse cursor to shoot enemies, but two others are side-scrolling shooter segments. Both are abysmal, with stiff and lumbering controls, aggravating insta-kill obstacles, and enemy shots that are impossible to dodge. At least the computer versions let you skip these after failing them five times. Beyond these, there's a truly aggravating puzzle involves wire tapping into an electric box – the clues you're given are quite vague, and you're under a strict time limit.

Dynamix adventure games are also fairly freeform in their design. Although the basic plot is linear, you can take on the early tasks in any order, and there are a couple of alternate branches that can potentially make things easier. When your informant runs into trouble, you can try to save him, which triggers an extra action scene and allows you a different way to enter Bahumat's HQ. At one point you can try to bribe the mayor – nothing you need to do (unless you lost your handgun earlier on) but you're rewarded with a better weapon, which is handy for making those action scenes suck a little less.



The dystopic future design may be derivative, but the artwork is still pretty good.

The whole game runs in real time, as Blade wakes up every "morning" at noon and shuffles to bed at 1 AM. Switching between locations also takes a set amount of time, so it's possible to run down the clock if you keep randomly running about. There is a time limit to adhere to – you're given a couple days to take down Bahumat's factory, and then another day or so to actually stop him – but despite the pressure, it's actually quite easy to accomplish everything you need to well before schedule, unless you specialize in screwing around. It's also quite short – if you know what you're doing, you can plow through the whole game in well under two hours.

The plot really isn't anything special nor is the design particularly inspired, and other than things like hovering cars and videophones, it never really takes advantage of its cyberpunk setting – it may as well be standard detective story that just happens to be set in the future. There are occasional bits of humor peppered throughout – other than a few goofy lines of dialogue, and the aforementioned ability to get arrested for indecent exposure, you can fling Blade off the edge of his apartment building (apparently still under construction) – but beyond these, most of the death sequences are fairly serious.

While Blade's relationship with Karyn isn't really much of an issue beyond the opening steps of the game, she ends up being captured by Bahumat's group, and found strapped to an operating chair, as a timer counts down to inject drugs into her system. If you screw up, she'll morph into a horrific, bulge-eyed reptilian monstrosity before your very eyes and die in Blade's arms as he swears revenge. It's pretty rough to watch. The ending changes depending on whether or not you save her, although keeping with film noir sensibilities, even the good ending isn't particularly upbeat.

Rise of the Dragon was met with numerous accolades when it was released, but it's definitely a product of its time. Arguably, it's aged worse than either of the other two Dynamix adventure games – it lacks the slapdash cheesiness of *Heart of China*, and the subversive cartoon attitude of *Willy Beamish*, leaving only its slightly bleak atmosphere and plot branching to distinguish itself. Several other similar cyberpunk games, including Konami's *Snatcher* (released a few months after for the Sega CD), Creative Reality's *DreamWeb*, and Westwood's *Blade Runner* (which admittedly came eight years later) are all similar to *Rise of the Dragon*, and are all better games. It's not bad though – think of it as a disposable if enjoyable pulp detective novel and it's good for a quick, enjoyable playthrough.

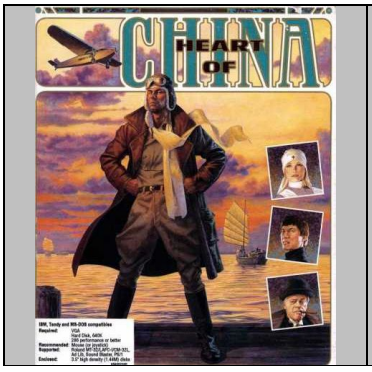


It's strange that a huge chunk of the game is based around not angering your lady friend.

In addition to the initial releases for the PC, Macintosh, and Amiga on floppy disk – which are all largely similar other than slight differences in color palette and sound quality – *Rise of the Dragon* was one of the few Dynamix games ported to the Sega CD. The subtitle "*A Blade Hunter Mystery*" is added to the title screen, implying that it would be part of a larger series, although that never happened. It's a quality production, with fully voiced dialogue and substantially enhanced sound. While there are some cheesy lines, especially with the Chinese accents, the voice acting adds quite a bit to the atmosphere, and enhances the otherwise average writing. It stars several well known voiceover artists, including the ubiquitous Cam Clarke as Blade. However, the character portraits still aren't animated, and all of the subtitle text is gone.

The music has also been improved, taking advantage of the Sega CD's PCM channel to add some classy percussion to the songs from the computer versions. The visuals do suffer due to the limited color palette. However, instead of further dithering them, the whole game has a severe green tint. It looks strange if you're familiar with the PC version, but it's easy to adjust to.

Some animated background elements were removed, and the date with Karyn is cut short, since it implied some sex. All of the disturbingly violent deaths are intact (complete with hysteric shrieking), so even though there isn't any nudity, apparently this type of scene was just too much for a console in spite of its MA-17 rating. Despite the censorship, at least unlike other adventure game ports, the load times are relatively speedy, so it's not nearly as painful as the Sega CD versions of *Willy Beamish* or *Monkey Island*. The other major snag is that the action sequences are now unskippable, probably because the developers figured console gamers would be able to handle them. If it weren't for these mandatory scenes, and the downgraded graphics, this would be the definitive version.



Heart of China

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Macintosh
Designer(s): Jeff Tunnell
Developer: Dynamix

Heart of China, sandwiched between *Rise of the Dragon* and *The Adventures of Willy Beamish*, is Dynamix's most obscure title. Inspired by the globetrotting adventures of Indiana Jones, the game stars former Great War ace pilot "Lucky" Jake Masters. Lucky's out of work and mostly broke, with nothing left to his name but his wits and his plane. He's a stereotypically arrogant American, often approaching situations in a rather brutish if somewhat humorous manner, and it's easy to envision his lines read in a deadpan manner by Harrison Ford. Nonetheless, he's hired by the wealthy businessman E. A. Lomax to rescue his daughter Kate, who's been kidnapped by a Chinese warlord. The basic plot is suspiciously similar to Tom Selleck's lesser known 1983 adventure flick *High Road to China*.



The background artwork, even when portraying dingy streets, is uniformly excellent.

As the game begins, you arrive on the Chinese mainland to follow some leads. To ensure Lucky gets the job done quickly, Lomax makes a deal: $200,000 will be awarded to Lucky for the safe return of his daughter, but $20,000 will be deducted for every day that passes, denoted with a silly animation of dollar bills literally flying across the screen. This leaves Lucky with no room for mistakes – and no method of transportation as a hired goon lobs a grenade into his boat right at the outset.

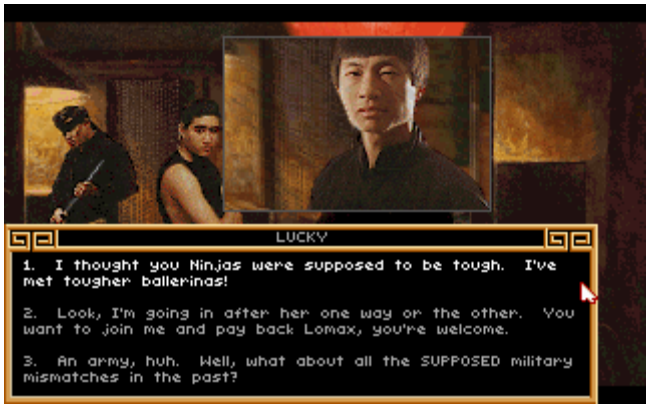
As to be expected, *Heart of China* plays out an awful lot like an *Indiana Jones* movie – the American protagonist, the ethnic sidekick, the love interest that isn't actually interested, at least in the beginning. The title is also a bit of a misnomer, because only the first quarter of the story actually takes place in China. Once you've rescued Kate, she is poisoned, so you need to travel the globe – from Kathmandu to Paris to Istanbul – to find a cure. However, Dynamix does some unique things that set it apart from other adventure games. For starters, the game has numerous plot branches that, while their events seem similar, might end up making the game

even harder. For example, the first task is to find a man named Zhao Chi, a Chinese ninja, and get him to join you on your mission. However, he's incredibly scared of your "arrow-plane" and requires a bit of convincing. You don't technically have to do this, though – the game lets you proceed without Zhao, although good luck trying to sneak into the fortress in China without him. Sometimes it's possible to get yourself screwed over if you're not careful, but it does lend to some replay value if you want to see every alternate approach to various situations.

Once you've recruited Zhao (and eventually Kate), you can switch between these characters, each having different skills. For certain areas, you need to equip Zhao's ninja mask, lest you get caught by the enemy. Other times you'll need Lucky's gun to shoot your way through bad guys. You can switch between them at any time, although they only affect certain puzzles. Many tasks are slightly silly – the first one involves hunting down seagull poop. Dynamix's style of adventure game hinges on trial and error, especially when it comes to dialogue. Oftentimes you're presented with multiple aggressive responses and you need to pick the one that's the least offensive. (Usually the funniest one is the wrong one, as to be expected.)

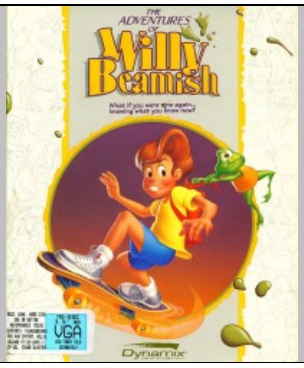
Beneath its unique structure lies an interesting visual style. All the characters are digitized images of real actors. Most of the graphics are comprised of comic book-style panels, with bits of animation on occasion. While most of the environments are hand-drawn and share the same style as *Rise of the Dragon*, they are done in a style that blends very well with the digitized actors. The photographs are occasionally a little grainy, but given the 256 color hardware limitations, they're better looking than most DOS games of the time, especially Access' titles like *Martian Memorandum*, which tried to pull off something similar. Sadly, the game was never released on CD, so there is no voice acting present.

Finally, true to Dynamix's style of interactive movie-style storytelling, there are a few arcade sequences. One is a tank simulator using the 3D simulator engine used in other Dynamix games. The tank chase is a neat idea, and is pretty intense the first couple of times, but it's really hard, especially if your computer is too fast, as there is no game speed cap. The other is a side-scrolling action segment, not too unlike *Rise of the Dragon*. Thankfully, the developers opted to show mercy, allowing you to skip these sequences completely if you fail enough times.



Lucky's mouth can get him in quite a bit of trouble.

Despite some harebrained puzzles, their strange solutions, the completely innocuous ways you can find yourself losing, and the aggravating dead ends, *Heart of China* is still pretty fun. The inherent silliness to the whole affair shows that Dynamix clearly loved the story they worked so hard for, and it's apparent in the writing, the artwork, the expressions of the digitized actors, just about everything. In other words, it works as a nearly perfect B-movie parody.



The Adventures of Willy Beamish

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Sega CD
Designer(s): Jeff Tunnell
Developer: Dynamix

Since the dawn of video gaming, man has asked, how can we create a truly interactive movie? The first attempts were laserdisc titles like *Dragon's Lair*, which eventually evolved into the terrible full motion video games that permeated the CD-ROM platforms in the early-to-mid '90s. Most of these were action-based titles, but at the time, the most cinematic genre was the graphic adventure. *The Adventures of Willy Beamish*, the third and final adventure game developed under the Dynamix team before they were drafted to develop *Space Quest V*, aspires to be a fully interactive Saturday morning cartoon, albeit one with a more adult sense of humor. Its bright, painted cel-style graphics and animated cutscenes put it above anything else at the time.

The story of Willy Beamish, a typically mischievous twelve year old, begins on the last day of the school year, when his pet frog escapes and steals his principal's toupee. After getting stuck in detention, he starts his summer vacation in earnest. Willy thinks of only one thing – getting enough money to enter the Nintari World Championship. While this seems like it would make for a similar plot to the movie-cum-Nintendo-ad *The Wizard*, this thread lies low for the most of the game, while the actual story concentrates on an artificial sweetener magnate trying to take over the city of Frumpton by flooding it with sludge. Somehow, both the lives of Willy's frog and Willy's father are at stake, putting considerable weights on the shoulders of our hero.

Willy's family consist of the typical middle class family clichés – his stern, exhausted mother Sheila, his newly unemployed father, his bratty little sister Brianna and equally bratty valley girl-esque sister Tiffany. Most of their interactions take place at the dinner table, with occasional interludes from TV news, an interesting plot development mechanic which feels quite natural in the context of the story. There's also substantial effort put into the environment descriptions, which tend to deliver more chuckles than the rest of the game. Nearly every object in Willy's home has some kind of humorous story behind it, or a comment that satirizes American middle class consumerism by remarking about the uselessness of such pricey crap.

While the art style recalls something along the lines of Warner Bros. or Disney, the sense of humor is closer to *The Simpsons*. In contrast, the dialogue is rarely witty or funny, but the situations Willy finds himself in are just as consistently bizarre. Talking Austrian super frogs? Vampire baby sitters? Snap happy Japanese tourists who also happen to be ninjas? In the long-standing tradition of American animation, several supporting characters are patterned after real life personalities, including news anchor Stan Lather (Dan Rather), British chef Julia Childish (Julia Child), and the villain, Leona Humpford (evil real estate investor Leona Helmsley).

The interface is similar to Dynamix's previous games. While those both use a first person perspective, *Willy Beamish* uses third person. There are only two icons – a general purpose "interact" icon, as well as a magnifying class to look at stuff. Unlike most other adventures, you can't directly command Willy's movements – instead, he only moves when interacting with something or walking to a different screen. On the flip side, this makes it feel more like a cartoon and less like a game, because each screen has a unique perspective and equally unique sprites. The animation is far from smooth, but for a piece of software made in 1991 and initially developed for space conscious floppy disks, it still looks mighty impressive.



Willy's room is quite typical for a spoiled kid his age, full of crazy memories and awesome stuff.

Dynamix adventure games have a reputation for being more... well, dynamic that the standard, linear experience of most other titles. Right at the beginning, when Willy is stuck at detention, you can choose to sneak out, although if you fail, you get sent to the principal's office. On the other hand, you can also wait it out, which is a much safer, easier option. But then the issue of Willy's report card comes up – if you snuck out early, you could steal it to conceal it from your parents, but if you stayed in detention, your family gets to it first. And if they do see your report card, then you have to deal with stealing back the key to your game system. And this all occurs in the first chapter.

The story takes place over the courses of four days. The game runs in real time and it's possible for a day to end without having accomplished all of the necessary tasks, if you take too long. While the first and last days are substantially longer than the rest, there are more than a few alternate paths, depending on the actions you've taken earlier on. Of course, not all of the options are correct – Willy has a "trouble meter", which shows how close he is to getting sent away to military school. Make too many wrong choices, and your adventure will end prematurely. Naturally, the most fun ones are the ones that get you in hot water. The ghost of Willy's grandfather will occasionally pop in and act as his conscience, which can clue you into the proper response.

But that's not always consistent. The dialogue trees are poorly constructed, where a wrong answer can immediately end the game, or at least increase your trouble meter. It would seem like refusing to give your dog food at the dinner table is the proper way to behave, but instead you get scolded for it. Heck, even walking in the wrong room at the wrong time has the same effect. The puzzles are generally of the obnoxious trial and error type. In one area when you're supposed to be sneaking around, you can mess with a suit of armor, which will, unpredictably, fall apart and cause you to be captured by the villains. The way to solve this is by cushioning the armor with a tablecloth, but how are you supposed to know this without dying first? Certain Sierra games like *Space Quest* or *Leisure Suit Larry* could get away with these because the death scenes were funny. But having a twelve year old kid tied up and drowned? Not so hilarious.

The replayability helps make up for the fact that the game's on the short side, but there are also more than a few moments where you can totally screw yourself over. The worst happens early on, when you cut yourself with a knife. If you don't medicate it and stick a bandage on it, the consequences won't pop up until the Nintari championship right at the end, when you'll be too injured to play properly. The game gives fair warning for this one, but if you forget to practice playing Nintari – you need to play the system at least twice, which is an easy thing to overlook – then you'll also suffer a similar fate, and need to reload at a much earlier point.

The Adventures of Willy Beamish was initially released on disk format for the PC, Macintosh and Amiga. The Amiga version lacks the hard disk install, naturally, leading to load times and

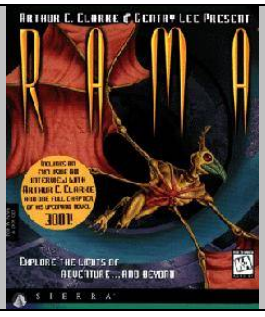
disk swaps, and is restricted to 32 colors. The Macintosh and PC versions both support 256 colors. A CD version was also released for the PC, with full voice acting for all characters. It's all very good, especially the slightly coy, sarcastic narrator, who occasionally switches up accents on various descriptions for extra bits of flavor. The disk version uses static portraits in dialogue, which change depending on their mood. The CD version animates and lip synchs the text with the voices, but most of the alternate portraits are gone, leaving the same expression for every line of dialogue. Some cinemas are different, too, The opening in the disk version features the credits written on a chalkboard. The PC CD version shows the sun dawning over the neighborhood, as Willy gets ready for the day and skateboards to school. The Tootsweet commercial near the beginning features a MC Hammer wannabe in the disk version, but was changed to a beer commercial in the CD version, complete with scantily clad chicks in bikinis.

Willy Beamish was also one of the two Dynamix titles (the other being *Rise of the Dragon*) that was ported to the Sega CD. Though it suffers from the 64 color palette limit, it still looks pretty decent. The loading times are completely horrendous though, as it takes several seconds for Willy to respond to anything. By pressing the Start button, you can bring up a display of floating balls, which is supposed to keep you occupied during the load times. It features full speech, naturally, but the option for subtitles is gone. There's a new intro again, this time showing different black and white pictures of Willy's shenanigans, all of which are only found in this version. The intro music has been rearranged to feature a live electric guitar, which sounds excellent. The rest of the music, though, is only slightly improved over the Adlib FM synth in the PC versions. The intro segment with Willy and the principal is also slightly expanded. A few minor graphics have been added or changed – you can see "Sega Rules" carved into Willy's school desk, and his portable game system is redrawn to look more like a Game Gear.



Willy stages a daring attempt to rescue his frog Horny.

In the computer versions, whenever you play the Nintari, it just shows a cutscene of some fictional game called *Monster Squad*. The Sega CD version takes these characters and puts them in their own playable minigame called *Super Space K'noidtrix*. You control a ship on the bottom of the screen, as two monsters chuck clusters of rocks from the top. When these rocks hit the bottom, they'll stick to the ground and hamper the movement of your ship. You take damage from getting hit, but if the rocks get stacked to the top of the screen, it'll immediately end the game. Your ship can fire in three directions – straight up, or to the left or right, which helps clear out the rocks from all angles. As more rocks fall, the game eventually speeds up until you're eventually overwhelmed. It's interesting, although not particularly great.



Rama

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Gentry Lee
Developer: Dynamix

The second game based on Arthur C. Clarke's *Rama* series (the first was a text adventure in the mid-1980s), Sierra and Dynamix's take on the sci-fi novel is yet another *Myst*-a-like. Using characters from the *Rama II* trilogy (and designed by Gentry Lee, the co-author of those books), you play a scientist who is sent up to explore Rama, a mysterious alien spaceship that has appeared outside of Earth's orbit. While there are nearly a dozen other scientists who greet you with video e-mails, the plot isn't exactly a driving factor and, predictably, most of the game is spent solving puzzles. You are, however, joined by a tiny robot named Puck, who is dressed in Shakespearean garb for some reason.



The surface fields of Rama look cool, the first time you see them, at least.

However, while there are still the usual logic/mechanical puzzles that typify these types of games, *Rama* also focuses heavily on mathematical problems. At least a few of them involve octal and hexadecimal systems (and other numerical bases), which will definitely excite math geeks but also put off the casual audience these games tend to attract. The first disc doesn't even have much exploration, as you mostly just point at places on a map. Taking place on the "surface", it's impressive to see the interior of an O'Neill cylinder for the first time, but otherwise graphically it's a little dull. On the other hand the second disc, where you explore a city, proves slightly more engaging, as the stark skyscrapers are contrasted against brightly alien colors. It also gets more interesting when you start interacting with the denizens of Rama, like the bird-like avians. Unfortunately, the thin narrative does almost nothing to capture the hard sci-fi essence or the social commentary of the novels. Fans may like parts of it, at least – Arthur C. Clarke himself shows up to talk whenever you die, and the third disc is entirely devoted to interviews with him and the other developers. Aficionados of sci-fi puzzlers should note that a similar game was made based on Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, published by Byron Preiss Multimedia. While the graphics are superior to *Rama*, otherwise it is an inferior game.

Gobliiins

The *Gobliiins* series, developed by eccentric French studio Coktel Vision, is a noticeable departure from most point-and-click adventure titles. By stripping down the exploration and narrative, the games all focus almost entirely on puzzle solving. And yet, they are not merely "puzzles games", in the way that *The 7th Guest* simply used the narrative as a framework for logic conundrums. They are essentially a series of adventure game puzzles, removed from the standard trappings of adventure games. They can also be classified as part of the "escape the room" subgenre of graphic adventures, which became substantially more popular years after the *Gobliiins* series thanks to numerous web browser-based games. This style of design proves frustrating to many traditional adventure game fans, who enjoy plotlines and merely view the puzzles as means to an end. The games can get monstrously obtuse in their puzzle designs. But the small inventory, pruned every so often, and the contained environments, which are limited to a handful of screens at a time, lessen the pain of the whole trial-and-error method of puzzle solving.



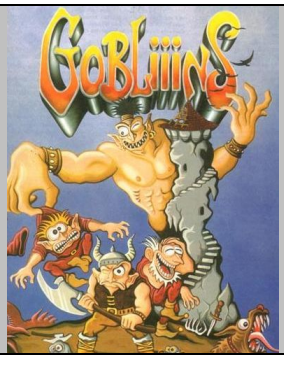
The mummy in the upper left corner of the screen proves to be frightfully dangerous.

While the puzzles are definitely the focus, that's not to say the games are devoid of story – it's just that the plot is delivered in small doses between certain levels. And despite the sparse presence (and sometimes complete absence) of dialogue, they're certainly not lacking in personality. The humor is not verbal, but instead relies entirely on slapstick. Watching cartoon characters getting beaten up repeatedly is only fun for so long, but Coktel was cognizant of the reason why *Road Runner* cartoons are still amusing decades after being produced – that is, the facial expressions. Just as Wile E. Coyote glares pathetically at the audience after each failed scheme, the *Gobliiins* heroes grin, frown and laugh at their misfortunes. They're astoundingly well characterized and animated considering everything is running at a standard 320x200 resolution. The unique character designs straddle the fine line between the comical and the grotesque, as almost everyone in the universe is a malformed beast with sharp, pointy teeth and ferociously frightening hair. Yet there's an adorable quality to them, one that endears them to the player without being off-putting. There are a lot of weird little quirks about the games, too – the series likes to give wacky names to even the most useless of creatures, which lends a bit of personality to someone (or something) which may not ever speak a word. Or an intelligible word, anyway. The characters in the *Gobliiins* universe speak gibberish, except in the English-dubbed CD versions of the second and third games, which feel like they're missing the point.

Gobliiins and its sequels are distinctly European games, an aspect which was slightly lost on Sierra. They tried to shoehorn them into the rest of their adventure game line, forcing the third

game to be dubbed *Goblins Quest 3*. The only thing in common with the likes of *King's Quest* or *Space Quest* is the basic point-and-click interface – the visual style, the structure, the scripting engine, and basically everything else, has little to do with any of Sierra's other games.

During its original run, there were three *Goblins* games. The number of "i"s in the title denote how many goblins the player control – three in the first game, *Gobliiins*, two for the second, *Gobliins 2*, and one for the third, *Goblins Quest 3*. The fourth game was released in 2009, over fifteen years after the third game, after the rights were released from the Sierra/Activision conglomerate and restored to the hands of Pierre Gilhodes, one of the series' original creators.



Gobliiins

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Pierre Gilhodes, Muriel Tramis
Developer: Coktel Vision

The king has gone mad! Apparently, anyway. The truth is that there's a sinister menace from beyond the shadows that's created a voodoo doll of the monarch to create the appearance of lunacy. Three of his subjects are sent into the fray to track down the perpetrator and put an end to the terror.



This giant looks flat out bizarre, and this is pretty restrained for the series.

Gobliiins puts you in control of three characters, each with a unique skill. (Their names were changed for the North American release and are listed in parenthesis.) Oups (Dwayne) is a technician and the brains, the only one who can pick up and manipulate items. Asgard (Bobo) is the brawn, who can punch stuff and climb up to areas where the others can't reach. And Ignatius (Hooter) is a magician, whose spells have a number of bizarre effects. Each and every screen requires that the three work together to accomplish their goal, essentially making it the prototype to the classic puzzle-platformer *The Lost Vikings*. The events are contained to a single screen at a time, as you are unable to leave until it's completed. However, you will occasionally revisit old areas, usually to solve new puzzles. There are a total of twenty-two screens.

For example, here's an early puzzle. There's a monster at the bottom of a cliff which needs to be bypassed. There's a coffin at the top which, when activated with a magic spell, will unleash a terrifying mummy. The mummy can be used to scare the monster, but during his traipse down the mountain, he'll also scare your goblins to death, so you need to find some way to keep your guys safe. To solve this, you send Asgard down to the bottom and climb up next to face carved into the rock, since he's the only one with those skills. Punching its ear will raise and lower its tongue – don't ask why, this is just something you need to accept in the *Gobliins* universe. So, you need to awaken the mummy, have both Oups and Ignatius stand on the lowered tongue, and then have Asgard punch it to lift them to safety while the mummy passes by harmlessly, scaring the monster and allowing you to proceed.

Practically every element is obnoxiously rough around the edges. Oups, for example, can only carry a single item at a time, so there's a lot of unnecessary item juggling. The results of Igantius' magic spells seem almost entirely random – sometimes they'll give a spark of electricity, and sometimes they'll transmute a useless object into a useful one, usually without any rhyme or reason. You won't know until you try.

Because of this, the general philosophy is one of simply messing around with everything until you understand how it all works, but this is made completely annoying thanks to the inclusion of a life bar. While some incorrect actions are harmless, others are outright dangerous, causing the shared vitality meter to drop. Sometimes actions are so severe that they cause you to lose the screen outright. There's never any more penalty other than having to start the level over, but it's time wasting and counterintuitive to the puzzle design.

Other issues frustrate as well. You can wander too close to dangerous characters, causing your goblin to enter a screaming fit and lose some life. They're also slow to respond, making it difficult to escape. Hotspots are hard to find, and you can only control a single goblin at once. In other words, you can't tell one character to take an action then switch to another – you'll need to wait for the first to complete their task, or else you'll interrupt them. The interface itself feels unresponsive. It also adheres by the weird Coktel philosophy of ignoring save games in favor of console-style passwords, although this does allow you to cheat and pass over screens if you're stuck. These issues all add to a game that's hard to play and even harder to enjoy.



Gobliins 2: The Prince Buffoon

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC
Designer(s): Pierre Gilhodes, Muriel Tramis
Developer: Coktel Vision

Gobliins 2 acknowledges many of the downfalls of its predecessor, and fixes many of them. The trio of playable characters has been whittled down to a duo, and are now more easily distinguishable – Fingus looks like a standard goblin, while Winkle is more like a blue pterodactyl. Both can pick up and use objects, and have a shared inventory in which to store items, but each approaches items in different ways. Fingus is the smart one, able to use machinery, but is wise enough to avoid danger. On the other hand, Winkle is pretty dim, unable to understand the simplest of concepts but can be used as a punching bag to solve certain obstacles. Right on the first screen, there's a sausage hanging by an old man. Fingus is bright

enough to refuse to touch it, but Winkle will happily try to grab it, only for its owner to beat him with it and hurl him across the screen.



This is one of a handful of really trippy dream-like sequences.

While it's easier to work the game, the differences between the two characters are still somewhat ill-defined and arbitrary. Sometimes Fingus will refuse to do something for no justifiable reason. Sometimes they'll use items differently, or press different buttons on the same console, with no real logic behind it. You're just supposed to try everything, which is essentially the mantra of the series. At least the game got rid of that God-forsaken life bar. You can never die or fail screens, and while it's possible to waste items on invalid solutions, you can always get more of them, however tedious that might occasionally be.

Both goblins can now be moved independently, which means there are plenty of timed puzzles where you need to wait for one character to fulfill his actions while executing another. While the interface is definitely improved, it still doesn't feel as responsive as it should, and the timing windows are often vague, requiring lots of repetition until you get it right.

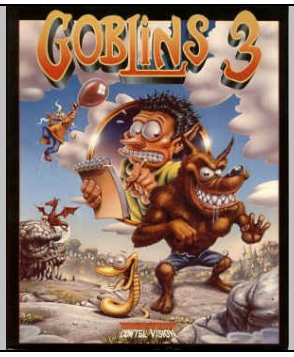
You are no longer confined to a single room, but instead, each section is usually comprised of a handful of screens you can travel between. It makes it more difficult to narrow down the solutions, but at the same time it's also less restrictive and linear. There's also a proper save game function in place.

The puzzles are still ridiculous, of course, if not quite as tedious. That sausage from the beginning, for instance? You need it in order to beat up a chicken, which will cause it to lay eggs necessary for another task. One area involves infiltrating a castle, which is filled to the brim with guards. They're all asleep, though, and they're too lazy to actually attack you, but you need to use items in crazy ways to manipulate them into hurting each other, or otherwise unintentionally aiding you in your goals.

Many puzzles involve tricking an NPC to propel one of your characters to an otherwise unreachable portion of the screen, usually in unconventional ways. In one area, there's a top shelf out of reach. Just below the shelf is the alchemist Vivalzart, who is friendly enough, and next to him is a garbage can – the kind you open by stepping on a pedal. The chain of events is as follows – you need to steal a piece of meat from the vulture at the top of the screen (a completely different puzzle), and put it in the piranha bowl, leaving you with only a bone. Then, you need to take Fingus and have him stand on the garbage lid. Have Winkle give the bone to Vivalzart, who will think it's garbage and chuck it in the trash. In the process, he'll step on the pedal, propelling Fingus into the air (physics doesn't work like that, but this is a cartoon after all) and up to the top shelf. And this is probably one of the easier ones. At least there's a hint function, which takes the form of limited use items called Jokers. And no, you can't just save the

game, use a Joker, and then reload – the game's a bit more clever than that, so unless you do some mucking with your computer's files, you'd better use these conservatively.

Visually the game is about the same as its predecessor, although it's not afraid to get even weirder. A few screens take place in psychedelic dreamscapes, and your journey takes you underwater to mingle with mermaids and other bits of weirdness. The plot is still sparse, as the quest involves rescuing the Prince Buffoon, who's been kidnapped by an evil demon. The graphics are still good at representing your characters' personalities – Winkle has a crooked, dim grin most of the time, while Fingus is comparatively stoic. There are more characters to interact with, and although they still don't speak much, there are occasional instances of wacky nonsensical one-liners. ("Lie down, you fake ninja turtle!") So while it still has some confusing aspects, it's definitely better than the first.



Goblins 3 / Goblins Quest 3

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: Amiga / IBM PC
Designer(s): Pierre Gilhodes, Muriel Tramis
Developer: Coktel Vision

Legend has it that whoever can conquer the dreaded Labyrinth of Foliandre will bring peace and prosperity to the land. For several millennia, two kingdoms, ruled by Queen Xina and King Bodd, have competed in this struggle, but none have emerged victorious. However, the guardian of the Labyrinth has recently passed away, and his daughter Wynonna has mysteriously gone missing. All of this drama makes for fantastic reading, and so an intrepid reporter named Blount takes off to the skies to interview the two monarchs, find (and fall in love with) the missing lady, and maybe solve the mystery of the Labyrinth himself.

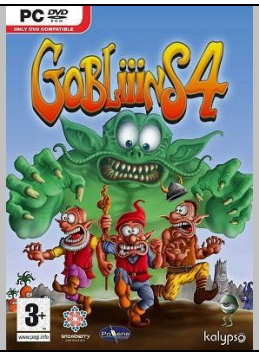


This chessboard puzzle is as infuriating as it looks.

Goblins Quest 3 is quite similar to the second game, although various elements have been refined even further. For starters, while you still control two characters at once, one of them is designated the "main" character, while the other is the "secondary". Only the main character

can use items, which more clearly delineates the roles between the two, and thus makes the puzzle solving a little less haphazard. Throughout most of the game, the hero is Blount, although the view occasionally shifts to other characters like the gorgeous (for a goblin) Wynonna. The secondary characters also alternate throughout the game – these include a boss-eyed parrot named Chump, a magician named Ooya and a snake named Fulbert. At one point, Blount is bitten by a werewolf, which gives him the power to transform whenever the full moon comes out. In many screens there's also a huge size differential between Blount and the kingdom's denizens, so often you'll need to change sizes to more properly navigate your surroundings. Like *Gobliins 2*, the puzzles can occasionally span multiple areas, although now they've expanded to larger areas which scroll horizontally. The Joker hint function has returned, as well as a "Point of Screen" option, which will spell out the goal without giving any explicit hints. There's also a "Newspaper" column screen, which will summarize the events of the plot so far. Although storytelling still isn't the game's focus, this does manage to make the game slightly more engrossing, and the rotating cast of characters keeps things fresh. So fundamentally *Goblins Quest 3* isn't a whole lot different from its predecessor – the puzzles are similar, and are just as difficult – but these fixes remove most of the more annoying factors of the previous games, making it easily the most playable of the series.

In a neat little touch, characters still converse in a gibberish language, but the actual speech isn't translated like in the other games. Instead, after talking, Blount simply faces the screen and delivers a quick recap of what was just discussed. It's a cool way to integrate the player into the narrative, making them feel lost by not understanding what's going on, and having the protagonist explain it to them.



Gobliiins 4

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Pierre Gilhodes
Developer: Société Pollene

After *Goblins Quest 3*, Coktel Vision went on to make *The Bizarre Adventures of Woodruff and the Schnibble*, and while the artwork looks very similar – obviously still the work of Pierre Gilhodes – it's more of a traditional adventure game. Coktel ended up getting shuttered not long after, leaving Gilhodes to work on comics and other projects. It wasn't until 2009 that he got together with French developer Société Pollene and Russian producer Snowberry Connection to create the latest installment in the series.

As the three "i"s in the title suggests, *Gobliiins 4* puts you control of three characters at once, each with the same abilities as the first game – Tchoup is the item handler, Perluis is the magician, and Stucco is the brawn. Their goal is to save the king's anteater, Riri, who has mysteriously gone missing.

The whole thing is a throwback in more ways than one, as it once again focuses the action on a single screen, and the plot is relegated solely to inter-level briefings. It even brings back the passwords, although at least it keeps a saved profile that lets you automatically access the most recent level. It's a bit odd, seeing that most of the changes that went into the second and third game were undoubtedly for the better, making this initially feel like a step back. But the interface

has been much improved, allowing multiple goblins to move at once. And most importantly, the life bar is gone, removing the absolute biggest stumbling block of the original.

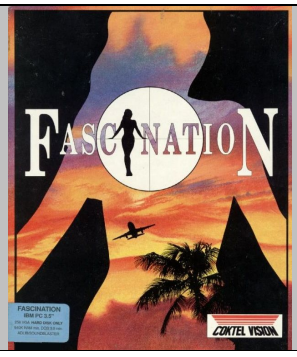
The style of puzzles is more or less the same as before, of course. The solutions are not always difficult but are still absurd. Right on the first screen, Tchoup refuses to leave his house until you feed his plant, which happens to be a vegetarian. Simply feeding him pickles from the pickle jar isn't enough – you need to look at the portrait on the wall to learn that Tchoup's cousin is a carrot farmer, then write a letter to him to have a carrot delivered to your room, allowing you to properly feed your plant and move on. It's all pretty easy to figure out, given what you're told, but the developers still haven't realized that this kind of bizarre adventure game logic actually frustrates the player more than actually making them laugh, which was probably the intention.



The computer rendered visuals are easily as wacky as the earlier games.

The fifteen year gap between the third and fourth game obviously saw drastic improvement in technology, so *Gobliiins 4* is much more advanced graphically. The goblins themselves are now 3D models, while the backgrounds are computer rendered 2D bitmaps. It's certainly nothing fancy – it rather looks like something that could've been made ten years earlier – and the huge bulging googly eyes of the goblins may elicit too many bad memories of Nintendo 64-era Rare games like *Banjo-Kazooie*. But it's held together by its excellent character animations, one of the hallmarks of the older games, which always managed to elicit smiles in spite of their freakishness. The added depth of the backgrounds makes for some more interesting level designs, playing with perspective in the ways the original games couldn't. They've always been a bit trippy, but *Gobliiins 4* goes even more overboard – Riri's room is a hyper colorful asylum that seems sprung from a clown's nightmare, one of the shrines has a gigantic leg springing out of the top (with several smaller legs surrounding the entrance) and the final stage sends the heroes rocketing into space to fight against a terrifying alien. There's also a running subquest to find a set of golden teeth, of which one is hidden in every stage. Properly discovering all of them will unlock a secret level where the goblins escape from the computer screen and out into the real world to have a chat with their creator. There are sixteen screens total, including the secret one.

Gobliiins 4 is something of a weird beast. It ignores most of the advances introduced in the second and third games, and so in that way it feels less progressive, but at the same time improves on the formula with better, more focused puzzle design. Still, it's definitely made for fans nostalgic for the first entry, leaving everyone else just as confused and baffled as before.



Fascination

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Muriel Tramis
Developer: Coktel Vision

Coktel Vision was founded in 1987, and created quite a diverse series of games. They dabbled with adult "erotic" point-and-click games, including *Emmanuelle* and *Geisha*, and finally ended up with *Fascination*. This third game uses the same GOB engine used in many of Coktel's other games in the early-to-mid '90s, including *Gobliiins*, *Inca*, *Ween: The Prophecy*, and *Lost in Time*. Like many of their other adventure games (excluding *Gobliiins* and *Bargon Attack*, anyway), it uses a first person perspective with a fairly straightforward interface.

You play as Doralice, the sexiest female pilot to ever fly the friendly skies. During a Paris-to-Miami flight, a business man dies aboard your plane. In his waning breaths, he hands you a vial and asks that you deliver it to the correct authorities. These drugs, apparently, greatly increase one's sex drive, and various forces can (and will) kill to get their hands on it. And so begins Doralice's detective work to uncover the mystery of the drug and the conspiracy that surrounds it.



Classy!

Like most purportedly "adult" games, *Fascination* is largely fixated on cheap thrills and ridiculously juvenile humor. While it's always nice to see female protagonists, Doralice seems to exist mostly so you can see her in the shower, illustrated with fully nude, digitized (albeit low color) photographs. Scattered around are books about erectile dysfunction and other such topics, which would technically qualify as innuendo, if they weren't so blatant. At one point you find a medical skeleton with an additional... member. (Whoever designed that must have brutally failed anatomy.) Its hotspot is labeled "dick", and you can play with it, if you want. In another room, a light switch is hidden on the nipple of a tasteless lamp. Some rooms are viewed through an outline of a woman in a sultry pose.

There is something slightly appealing about all of the sleaziness – it's sort of like a full game played from the perspective of Passionate Patti from the *Leisure Suit Larry* games. But for all the hubbub of this being an "adult" game, most of the sexuality is confined to the jokes and to nude posters on the walls – Doralice comes close to getting some action, but it never actually happens. Furthermore, Coktel doesn't quite possess the same humor as Al Lowe, and some of it comes off as really uncomfortable. Sure, hiding a secret laboratory underneath a lingerie shop is kind of goofy. And when another character not-so-subtly suggests that you smuggle something in your feminine area and advises not to get close to any men, it's earned itself a completely embarrassing smirk. But when Doralice's beau accidentally ingests the vials and ends up becoming a serial rapist, as explained in the numerous newspapers lying around, that's... not funny. Also, whenever you lose, you're greeted by an intensely muscular man with a creepy grin. It's never explained who he is, but the implications are unfortunate.



Surely lingerie shops don't really allow patrons to try stuff on.

Fascination is quite linear and, like many of Coktel's other games, you usually can't wander more than a screen or two away from a given puzzle. It is entirely possible (and quite easy) to miss items from earlier in the game and be unable to retrieve them, a transgression only slightly forgivable because the quest is so short. It's ultimately worth the experience, just to see the incredibly insane "it was all a fake out" finale.

After being released on disk format, *Fascination* was later treated to a CD-ROM rerelease. This release includes full voice acting – much of which is knowingly cheesy and therefore enjoyable – and brief bits of redbook audio music. It is also, unfortunately, censored. In the disk version you come across a porn magazine, and Doralice wonders if it's true that Americans like ample breasts. In the CD-ROM version it's a car magazine, and instead she wonders if Americans like nice bumpers. The shower scene at the beginning is completely gone, and many (but not all) of the nude posters are covered up.



Bargon Attack

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Claude Marc, Serge Marc
Developer: Coktel Vision

In *Bargon Attack* the entire globe is fascinated with a new computer game, also called *Bargon Attack*. In the meantime, people have started to go missing, and a strange church filled with mask-wearing preachers is rising in popularity. This is actually a stealth plan by a real alien race, also known as the Bargons, to destroy the Earth. Only a nerdy glasses-and-baseball-cap wearing computer programmer can save the day.



Be careful, or the Bargon on the lower level will take you out.

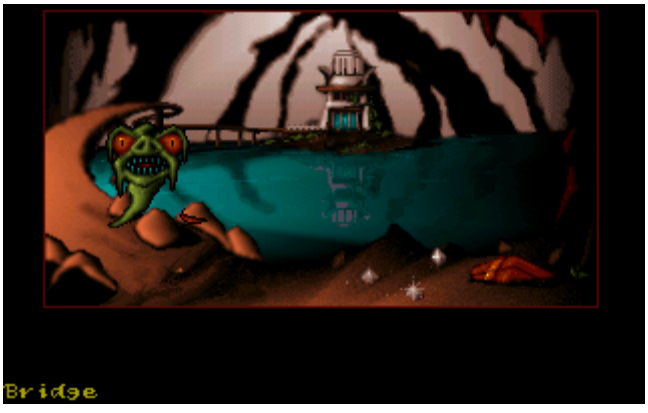
Based on a French comic, *Bargon Attack* is a fairly typical Coktel game. It's similar in structure and function to *Fascination*, *Ween: The Prophecy*, and so forth, but unlike these, it utilizes a third person perspective. Much of the game is spent tracking the aliens through the streets of Paris, down through their secret underground lairs, and finally to their home planet. Contrary to Coktel's other games, most of which were quite weird (or at least avant-garde), *Bargon Attack* is pretty straightforward through most of the adventure. It's filled with tiny, nearly invisible objects which need to be found, insta-death situations, a few timed sequences, numerous lock-and-key bits, and logic puzzles which aren't quite logical. (To fix the broken tire of your motorbike, you simply need to re-inflate it with a pump, never minding that it's not technically fixing anything.) The plot actually does get somewhat interesting by the end, which culminates in an info dump about the rather dark political situation on Bargon and their reasons for attacking Earth. There are some amusing meta-references (there is a game within this game after all) and everything evokes B-level sci-fi movies. But there isn't a single line of dialogue that makes any real sense in the English version – common in Coktel games, but particularly bad here – which makes the whole experience more obtusely perplexing than it already is.



Ween: The Prophecy

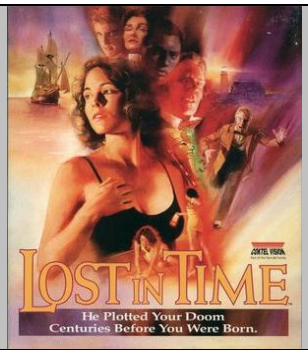
Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC, Amiga, Atari ST
Designer(s): Joseph Kluytmans, Corinne Perrot
Developer: Coktel Vision

Coktel Vision's follow-up to *Fascination* leaves behind the slutty beaches of Miami for a pruder swords and sorcery affair with *Ween: The Prophecy*. Technically a loose follow-up to the obscure 1989 release *Legend of Djel*, it tells the story of a young man named Ween (a name so goofy that it was dropped from the title of its North American release) who is tasked with transporting three magical grains of sand across the country. It's much the same as Coktel's other first person adventures, but the whole experience is a bit on the dry side – their previous titles were quite bizarre, but *The Prophecy* is relatively restrained. The dialogue is still strangely translated, but the exposition scenes are dull and lifeless. The artwork is occasionally decent, with particularly amusing creature designs. The straightforward adventuring feels heavily reminiscent of ICOM's *Shadowgate* – when you're not mixing potions to defeat beasties, you're playing around with switches or other contraptions to open doors. But without the constant threat of death – there's no way to perish until the end – it lacks the same madcap stressfulness.



The creative monsters you find are somewhat noteworthy.

The only things propping it up are the puzzles, which feature the same pixel hunting and strange item combination tasks as Coktel's previous games. You're accompanied by a vampire bat named Urm, who will help you providing you can find some fruit, as well as two hideous dancing dwarf things named Uki and Orbi who are mostly pointless. You also have a magic copper ball that can morph into three forms when combined with other items, requiring many pointless clicks on the inventory menu to transmute it back and forth. The PC version benefits from a 256 color palette as well a couple of branching paths not available in the Amiga and Atari ST versions. It also features brief looping full motion clips of some of the sub-characters, which look incredibly silly, but give it a bit of the extra Coktel-kitchiniess that the game sorely needs.



Lost in Time

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Muriel Tramis
Developer: Coktel Vision

Lost in Time is sort of like a bizarro French version of *Back to the Future*. The heroine, Doralice, finds herself mysteriously transported to a Spanish galleon circa 1840. The only thing she can remember is her inheritance of a gorgeous French estate, which just happens to have the same Spanish galleon sunk in her backyard. Through flashbacks, she recalls the events that caused her to slip through time, and eventually discovers a scheme by a time bandit named Jarlath, who is not only smuggling a variety of secrets, but seeks to kill Doralice's ancestor, thereby voiding her existence.

Despite the dramatic science fiction pretense, *Lost in Time* is a silly game. Most of the exposition is delivered by characters that are so conveniently placed that it seems unbelievable – like the Time Cop that just happens to be available in the ship's hold to discuss Doralice's situation – and Jarlath acts and talks with the grace of a Saturday morning cartoon villain.

But a large part of the goofiness arises because it was developed by Coktel Vision. They were on the forefront of the multimedia revolution in the early '80s, making judicious use of 3D computer rendering and digitized actors, and releasing these titles on floppy disk format before CD-ROMs began to catch on. Every time you take an action, there's a small picture-in-picture video showing the result, which was mighty impressive for something back in 1992. It uses the same first-person perspective, and same interpreter, as *Ween: The Prophecy*, as well as the *Inca* games.



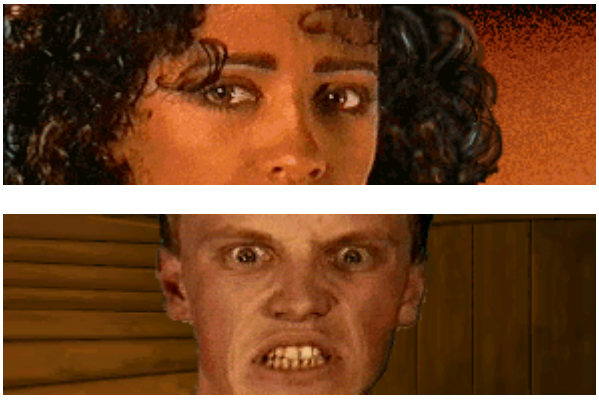
A third of the game is digitized photographs, another third is CG rendered, and the last third is painted.

Of course, these productions were silly and low-budget, and suffered from some extremely awkward French-to-English translations. In *Lost in Time*, the three major locations are all rendered in completely different art styles. The galleon is computer-rendered, the French mansion consists of digitized photography, and the island of St. Cristobald has painted

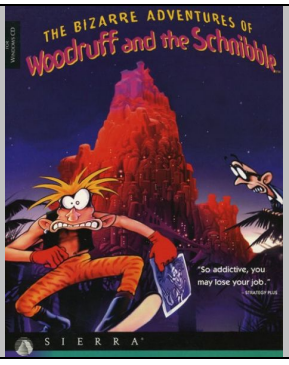
backgrounds. All of the characters are digitized actors in all three segments, and everything clashes immensely. There's very little full motion video during dialogue, so most of the characters are just still photos with flapping lips. The exception is Doralice, as the camera seems to only focus on her eyes. It might try to sell itself as a serious adventure, but it's all too haphazard to be taken at face value. Coktel Vision followers may also recognize Doralice as the protagonist of their earlier game, *Fascination*, but *Lost in Time* shares none of that title's "adult" qualities, and is mostly suitable for all audiences.

While the concept, story, and execution are laudably cheesy, you spend most of the game wandering around the mostly abandoned locations – the ship and the estate – stumbling upon roadblocks and MacGuyvering items where necessary. This being a Coktel game, the puzzles are largely insane. At one point, you're in a basement, and there's an item you can't reach. You can knock it down by popping a cork off a bottle, which is a fair solution. But you need to retrieve that cork for a later puzzle, which is accomplished by flooding the whole basement (another whole multi-step puzzle), causing it to float up in a nearby well. That all seems somewhat excessive. Many puzzles involve some fairly questionable science, as it feels suspect that vinegar is considered an appropriate substitute for battery acid. And despite what the game seems to think, fiberglass isn't bendable, although that particular item's description may just have been mistranslated. All of these mindboggling tasks tend to bog down what would otherwise be an ironically amusing adventure.

Lost in Time was released in two parts when it was initially released on floppy disks in Europe. Both games were bundled together in North America, where it was published by Sierra, and the CD-ROM version includes both games as well. They flow seamlessly into each other and were probably only split up in the first place due to disk space concerns. The CD-ROM version also includes voiced dialogue for the major cutscenes, as well as CD audio music and some slightly smoother video.



Most of the digitized actors look extremely silly, but that's what makes the game what it is.



The Bizarre Adventures of Woodruff and the Schnibble (US) /
Woodruff and the Schnibble of Azimuth (Europe)

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Muriel Tramis, Stéphane Fournier, Pierre Gilhodes
Developer: Coktel Vision

The Bizarre Adventures of Woodruff and the Schnibble is often lumped in together with Coktel's *Gobliiins* series, although it's actually an entirely different game. It's easy to make the mistake – the distinctive artwork in both was done by Pierre Gilhodes – but while *Gobliiins* deemphasized narrative and exploration in favor of pure puzzle solving, *Woodruff* is more of a traditional adventure game, with a fairly large, open-ended world, and quite a bit of dialogue. It is not Coktel's only adventure game of this type, but most of these were viewed from the first person perspective (*Fascination*, *Lost in Time*, *Ween: The Prophecy*) while *Woodruff* is third person.

The story begins on a post-apocalyptic Earth where the human race has been forced deep into the planet's crust to hide from the nuclear fallout. After several centuries they emerge to discover a new race of mutants called Boozooks (also spelled "Bouzouks" in the subtitles). While friendly, humanity's first instinct is to wage war on them, and thus completely destroy most of their civilization. They are enslaved and forced to build an enormous city called Vlurxtrznbnaxl. The ruling human class lives closest to the sky, while the subjugated Boozooks are forced to dwell in the ghettos closest to the ground.



The art style is quite similar to Gobliiins, although it's rendered at a higher resolution.

The story begins in the laboratory of Professor Azimuth, a human sympathizer for the Boozook cause. He is sought out and captured by Bigwig, the advisor to the human president, leaving behind the professor's young son Woodruff. Through one of the professor's strange devices, Woodruff instantaneously grows into adulthood and attempts to not only track down his father, but discover the mystical Christ-like entity known as the Schnibble, who is prophesized to not only save the oppressed Boozooks but also bring peace and harmony to the two civilizations.

That's pretty heavy stuff, and indeed *Woodruff and the Schnibble* seems remarkably dark at the outset. But at heart, it's still closely related to the *Gobliiins* series in style. They're both extremely silly, although in different ways – while *Gobliiins* found most of its humor with cartoony slapstick, Woodruff surpasses all of that and falls chaotically into Dadaist absurdity.

There's a curious tendency to use made-up words without ever explaining what they actually mean. When Woodruff solves a simple puzzle and finds something called a tobozon, it cuts away to a human, presumably one of the game's artists, who muses "What's a tobozon?" (It's a fancy videophone, you quickly learn.) One minor character (J. F. Sebastian) is inexplicably named after a character from *Blade Runner*. The man at the betting house delivers every line like a Catholic sermon. Rather than betting on typical fights or horse races, you bet on a pair of colored monsters who compete in exceptionally expedient games of chess. The intro features a prolonged scene where Bigwig sadistically riddles Woodruff's poor teddy bear with bullets. The title screen is its own in-game room – part of its logo even breaks off and becomes a usable item. The man on the weather channel is constantly cracking up despite not saying anything at all funny. Bigwig (perhaps unintentionally) looks like a cross between the Terminator and Richard Nixon. When a tabloid indicates that Bigwig is dating the gorgeous Coh-Cutt, whom Woodruff had developed a crush on not moments before, he collapses on a nearby bench, dejected, and refuses to move until you can show him the right items to cheer him up. Most conversations are brief, and there are large chunks of dialogue which lack context and don't seem to make a whole lot of sense. Some of this may have to do with translation issues, although the quality of the English voice acting is surprisingly decent, as the actors can somehow sell each and every perplexing line.

The puzzles in Coktel games were often absurd, but since they were also pretty linear, most could eventually be figured out by trial and error. *Woodruff and the Schnibble*, on the other hand, is far more open-ended, and there's no real direction in the beginning. There are well over forty locations, which take a long time to traverse until you get the transporter. There are also dozens of inventory items, some of which spawn their own sub inventories. The puzzles are technically a bit easier than anything found in *Gobliiins*, mostly because you only control a single character, but there are still plenty of opportunities to get incredibly stuck. It doesn't help that Woodruff never actually explains why your actions won't work – he just makes goofy expressions that indicate that you've failed. This is a trademark of Coktel's work, but rarely has it been this frustrating.

A good chunk of the adventure is spent reuniting the Boozook council, who have devolved into brain-addled fools and lazy do-nothings. (The King seems content to sit around all day, watching TV and drinking beer.) In the process you'll discover numerous holy "syllables", which are then used to cast a variety of magic spells. You'll also need to track down the hidden location of the Master, who teaches Woodruff a variety of necessary skills involving his ears, nose and other body parts.

The Adventures of Woodruff and the Schnibble is difficult to play, and even more difficult to comprehend. The humor is much different from any of Sierra's or LucasArts' games, and the flagrant silliness contrasted with the grim overtones of the story make for a very interesting experience, to say the least.

Introduction to LucasArts

LucasArts Entertainment was born as the computer entertainment division of Lucasfilm. While initially it did not follow any of George Lucas' movies, it did follow his passion for the growth of technology. Their first games – *Koronis Rift*, *BallBlazer* and *Rescue on Fractalus*, developed for computers like the Commodore 64 and the Atari 8-bit line – were popular action-simulator type games. Its first adventure game was actually based on the movie *Labyrinth*, and was not terribly well received, but the company shot to popularity with *Maniac Mansion*, a weird little horror comedy. While not the first adventure game to use a completely point-and-click interface, it was certainly one of the most popular, and set the standard for years to come. The game was developed using a scripting program called SCUMM, which stands for, suitably enough: "Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion".



Maniac Mansion, the first game to use SCUMM.

Nearly all LucasArts games used SCUMM through the years, each improving on it slightly. The earliest version featured in *Maniac Mansion* and *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders* had 15 verbs. The verbs and inventory were located on the bottom 1/3rd of the screen, while the action inhabited the top portion. The number of commands was later pared down to 12 for *The Secret of Monkey Island*, and further reduced to nine for *Monkey Island 2*. By the time *Sam & Max Hit the Road* rolled around, it dropped the command window in favor of a simple icon-based parser which included only the most basic commands, similar to Sierra games of the time. *Full Throttle* and *The Curse of Monkey Island* mixed things up further by utilizing only a single cursor, which revealed a small command menu whenever a hotspot was clicked. A few titles, like *Loom* and *The Dig*, didn't even bother with any verbs and just went completely with a context sensitive single icon cursor.

All of these games were 2D, and when LucasArts shifted into 3D development, they changed to a new utility. Dubbed "GrimE", it removed mouse functionality completely in favor of using more direct control. The main characters are controlled with the keyboard (or joypad), and moving next to a hotspot brings up a variety of context sensitive commands. There were only two games utilizing this engine – *Grim Fandango*, which it was named after, and *The Escape from Monkey Island*.

LucasArts' most popular series was undoubtedly *Monkey Island*, featuring an oddly named wannabe pirate named Guybrush Threepwood, which gained numerous fans through its goofy premise and witty dialogue. As such, LucasArts developed a reputation for screwball comedies, a genre in which they rarely disappointed, thanks to some extraordinarily talented writers and artists. Their other games are not as well known, but are still well regarded – *Loom,* for example,

is an extremely brief but poignant experience in a brilliantly realized fantasy universe, and *The Dig* weaves a beautiful alien landscape.

LucasArts games have also aged much better than most of the competition, much of which has to do with their design philosophy. Starting with *Loom*, they decreed that players could never get themselves killed, nor find themselves in unwinnable situations. Adventure game veterans scoffed at the idea – finding ways to get yourself killed was practically a hallmark of the adventure game, and running into dead ends provided an extra layer of challenge and added longevity. Time has shown that these were genre conventions that deserved to wither way, which highlights how far ahead of the curve the company was. When removing the threat of death, their games often become much lighter and more cartoonish, though still not really aimed at kids.

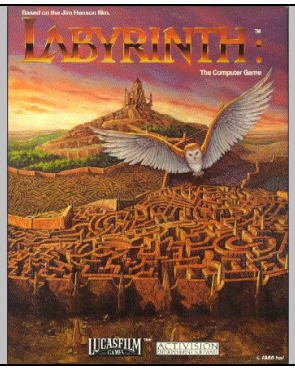
While LucasArts games were easier to play, that certainly didn't mean they were easy. The harder puzzles can border on maddeningly illogical, and most can only be forgiven because their solutions are often comical. Most of the time the games were structured to be relatively freeform, offering a wide area to explore and multiple puzzles to work on, in case the player got stumped and wanted to work on something else. This approach eventually disappeared with some of the later games like *Full Throttle* and *The Dig*, which aimed to be cinematic and were stiflingly linear in comparison.

LucasArts were known for producing more than just adventures games though. In the late '80s and early '80s, they developed a number of flight-sims such as *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*. Following a logical progression, they eventually took on the *Star Wars* moniker and evolved into *X-Wing*, *TIE Fighter*, *X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter* and *X-Wing Alliance*. Strangely, there were no *Star Wars* adventure games, which seems to have stemmed from the fact that the creative types simply had no interest in them. There were also a number of non-adventure games based on *Indiana Jones*, although many were made by different companies, and the quality ranges from acceptable (*Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb*) to utterly abysmal (practically everything else).

By the mid-1990s or so, LucasArts shifted more into producing licensed games, a direction which sped up with the release of the *Star Wars* prequels. In tandem with the decline of the adventure game genre, which was cemented by the underperformance of *Grim Fandango* in 1998, LucasArts more or less gave up, scuttling the fourth *Monkey Island* game out the door, and eventually cancelling sequels to *Sam & Max* and *Full Throttle*.

Afterwards, most of their talent spread in different directions. Tim Schafer went to found Double Fine, which developed the comedic platformer *Psychonauts*, heavy-metal action-RTS *Brütal Legend*, and the adventure reminiscent matryoshka game *Stacking*. Ron Gilbert, whose name has been forever connected with the *Monkey Island* series, left the company earlier on in the '80s to make children's games, many featuring a cartoonish anthropomorphic car named *Putt-Putt*. David Grossman left for Telltale Games, a company formed in 2005 and is the closest the gaming industry has to a modern-day LucasArts adventure game studio.

It's only been relatively recently that LucasArts has even acknowledged their adventure game past, by remaking the earlier *Monkey Island* games, granting the license to Telltale, and re-releasing some of their older games via digital distribution. These have proven relatively popular, although it seems as if LucasArts will forever be a *Star Wars* factory, with a return to their former glory unlikely.



Labyrinth: The Computer Game

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: Commodore 64 / Apple II / MSX
Designer(s): Douglas Adams, Christopher Cerf, Noah Falstein, Stephen Arnold, Brenda Laurel
Developer: Lucasfilm Games

The first Lucasfilm Games production to be based on a Lucasfilm movie, *Labyrinth: The Computer Game* is officially the first adventure title developed by the company, despite having little in common with *Maniac Mansion* and its other successors. It is a frustrating game, perhaps even more so than Sierra's competing titles at the time, but it's also got some of the clever humor that went on to typify the company's output.

The movie *Labyrinth* was not a financial success, although it has since achieved cult classic status as a highly imaginative fantasy film. Starring a young Jennifer Connelly as a girl sucked into a mysterious world – the titular Labyrinth, of course – she is tasked with finding Jareth, the Goblin King, who has kidnapped her little brother. She must overcome numerous bizarre situations and meet up with many weird characters, friend and foe alike. The movie is most well known for David Bowie's role as Jareth, whose glam rock hair and enormous armadillo-stuffed crotch went on to sexually confuse a whole generation of children. Despite being a king, he apparently has little better to do than lounge around his castle and sing '80s rock songs to his legion of Muppet followers, so he's not exactly a threatening character, but his is nonetheless an iconic visage of this particular cinematic era.



These goblins are slow, but will chuck you in the dungeon if they catch you.

In *Labyrinth: The Computer Game*, you do not control Jennifer Connelly, but rather, you play as yourself, with the ability to choose male or female avatars. It starts off in the "real world", as a text adventure, where you're tasked with going off to the movie theater and seeing the hottest new movie. Of course, once you get in, David Bowie's pixellated visage pulls you into the screen and places you in the Labyrinth. It's where the game truly begins, as the perspective switches to the third person, and the full-text parser gives way to the game's "slot machine" interface. The large character graphics typified early Lucasfilm adventure games – you can see how it evolved

into the style used in *Maniac Mansion*, and similar visuals can be found in the company's early online game *Habitat*.

Although your character is controlled by the joystick, all interaction is handled by the two columns of words at the bottom of the screen. On the left are verbs, on the right are nouns. Both can be cycled through with the arrow keys, although you can also begin typing and the game will automatically picks the closest word. It is slightly more convenient than the text entry in Sierra AGI games, because you never actually need to type full sentences, and you technically never need to guess a word, because they're all listed.



Even in low-res 16-color graphics, David Bowie will rock your world.

But from a design standpoint, *Labyrinth* otherwise lags behind its peers. Rather than the fully explorable world of Sierra's games, most areas of the maze consist of long, horizontally scrolling hallways. Each area usually consists of a few such hallways, linked together by a variety of doors. The overall goal is simply to find your way to the next area, but there are usually items to find, and most of the time, they are lying out in the open for you to grab. Even though each area is pretty small, it's easy to get confused, at least until you get a grasp on how the doors link together. The excessive loading times between areas just make things more irritating. You'll also find crystal balls lying around, of which you'll need at least one to beat the game, as they are essential for the final battle against Jareth.

Your journey is mostly identical to the one in the movie, so you start out in the brick hallways, before graduating to the hedge maze, the Bog of Eternal Stench (you can fall in and stink for the rest of the game, unless you got the perfume from a vending machine earlier on), and the Goblin Village. You'll meet most of the characters too, like the guards Alph and Ralph. One of them always lies and one of them always tells the truth, but it's impossible to tell which is which. You'll meet the Wise Man, who challenges you with riddles. There's also an appearance by Sir Didymus, who mostly just acts as a roadblock until you manage to rescue Ludo, a hulking but adorable hairy beast thing. There are only a handful of puzzles in the traditional adventure game sense, and most can be solved simply by watching the movie. To get past the door knockers, for instance, simply get one of them to start talking, and then shove a bracelet in its mouth, allowing you to enter. When you fall into the Wall of Hands, a creepy shaft filled with disembodied arms, just listen to how underappreciated they are and congratulate them for a job well done, and they'll be happy to help out.

There's a strong emphasis on arcade elements, which, as expected, are terribly implemented. Your character is extremely clumsy and slow to move. It's not hard to outrun goblins in the maze hallways, since you're faster than they are, but a few scenes where you need to outwit them – by luring them into traps, or hiding in various houses in their village – end up being painful. The worst, by far, is one where you need to chuck rocks at goblins in front of a castle, and it's nearly impossible to time your throws correctly.

There is a certain "point of no return" after flipping the disk, so if you missed any essential items, you're out of luck. But otherwise the only real way to lose is to run out of time. You've got a total thirteen hours to reach the end, which is way more than enough to beat it. However, getting caught by any enemy will get you tossed into a dungeon. There are half a dozen ways to escape these little holding cells, most of them quite silly. You can "adumbrate elephant" and then "call elephant" to create a mammoth sized hole in the wall to allow you to escape. ("Adumbrate" is an extraordinarily obscure word meaning "to foreshadow".) You can call the nerd from the movie theater at the beginning, who eventually annoys you so much that you end up climbing up the wall, allowing you to escape. Sometimes a trapdoor will open and transport you out, and other times a coin slot will let you escape, provided you have some change. You can also chant magic words or eat a peach, if you've found any, but these sacrifice an hour of in-game time. With the exception of these last two, the other techniques only work randomly. Indeed, much of the structure is also random, with locations appearing in a different order every time you play.

There are definitely some funny bits, which can probably be credited to the involvement of famed comedy/sci-fi writer Douglas Adams, who contributed to the design. Various other aspects of development were handled by David Fox, Gary Winnick and Noah Falstein, who went to work on other Lucasfilm titles like *Zak McKracken* and both *Indiana Jones* graphic adventures. Christopher Cerf, the writer/director of the film, was also involved in the game's creation. It's authentic in the way it follows the movie without resorting to banal platforming action or some such, and does so by involving the player in a unique way, but ultimately it has aged poorly, as the extremely slow character movement and tedious exploration make it nearly unbearable without using the speed-up function of an emulator.



Despite playing as "yourself", you'll follow in the footsteps of Sarah, Jennifer Connelly's character.

Labyrinth: The Computer Game was technically published by Activision, and initially released for the Apple II and Commodore 64. These versions are largely identical, but the game was also ported to the MSX in Japan by Pack-in Video. This version has completely redone visuals with much smaller characters, but the higher overall resolution allows for less pixellated graphics. Pack-in Video also created a *Labyrinth* game for the Famicom, which is entirely unrelated to the computer version. Rather, it's an overhead action-RPG vaguely similar to *The Legend of Zelda*, although far more obtuse and way more confusing. Despite being based on an American film, this version was never officially translated into English, and as an import cartridge, remains a curiosity for fans of the film.

Maniac Mansion

The graphic adventure genre was born from text adventures – *Colossal Cave* begat Infocom's *Zork* which begat Sierra's *Mystery House*. Sierra was constantly pushing forward, eventually inventing *King's Quest*, developing a fully visual world with a controllable avatar. Despite its advancements, the character was still controlled by the keyboard, and interaction was accomplished solely through typing. The next step was to implement a fully cursor based interface, allowing the player to point-and-click to move and interact. Although the first popular game to successfully implement this was ICOM's *Déjà Vu*, the most famous was Lucasfilm's *Maniac Mansion*. It was largely directed, written and programmed by Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick, both of whom also worked on *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade: The Graphic Adventure,* as well as both *Monkey Island* games.



Maniac Mansion

Initial Release Date: 1987
Platforms: Commodore 64 / Apple II / PC DOS / Amiga / Atari ST / NES
Designer(s): Ron Gilbert, Gary Winnick
Developer: Lucasfilm Games

Maniac Mansion begins with a meteor crash landing in the backyard of a large, rickety house. The story fast forwards twenty years, as Dr. Fred Edison, owner of the mansion, kidnaps Sandy, a local teenage girl, to conduct a number of mad, brain sucking experiments. These two events are not coincidental – the Meteor is sentient, and has taken control of the not-so-good doctor. Sandy's boyfriend Dave is none too pleased by this, so he assembles a group of his friends to stage an impromptu infiltration and rescue her from the Edison's basement laboratory. Dr. Fred lives in weird company, with his crazy wife Nurse Edna and military nut son Weird Ed. Even though neither of them takes too kindly to intruders, they're equally as concerned for Dr. Fred's deteriorating mental health, and your troupe can attempt to befriend them to provide aid for the greater good. Also inhabiting the house are two sentient tentacles – the green one, who looks fearsome but mostly just lounges around and dreams of being a rock star; and the purple one, who is actively evil and aids Dr. Fred with his schemes. There's also Dead Cousin Ted, the mummified remains of a long deceased family member who nevertheless seems to maintain a fairly decorated living quarters.

Before Dave begins his trip into the mansion, you must pick two of his friends to join him. Although Dave has no special talents, the rest of his pals are defined by their various skills, which allow for different solutions to many of the game's puzzles. Bernard is a tech nerd who can fix anything; Razor is a punk rock musician who can help Green Tentacle with his singing career; Wendy is an aspiring writer who can turn the Meteor's memoirs into a work of literary genius; and Michael knows his way around a photo lab and can develop pictures to help out Weird Ed. The two other cast members are largely redundant – Syd is a new age musician who's functionally the same as Razor, and Jeff is a wasted surfer dude who is essentially useless, since his only skill is being able to fix telephones, which Bernard can also do. You only control a single kid at a time, and each explores the mansion independently, although you can switch to any other member via the "New Kid" command. There are a total of three "good" endings (with a number of variations) based on who you bring with you. It's a very freeform approach to

design that most successive adventure games – further LucasArts games included – tended to leave by the wayside for a more focused experience. It allows for tons of replayability, because you need to play through the whole game at least twice to see all of the possible endings, much less find the multiple solutions to the puzzles.



Though it features larger characters, Maniac Mansion looks similar to Sierra AGI games.

It's just as well, since *Maniac Mansion* isn't a terribly long game. Although the mansion is quite large, there are really only a few major obstacles to overcome – open the two locks to get into the secret lab, find some way to distract the Purple Tentacle, and get rid of the Meteor. But while LucasArts games had a tendency to be very player friendly (at least compared to Sierra games), this design philosophy didn't kick in until *Loom*. In *Maniac Mansion*, it is entirely possible to find yourself in a dead end, requiring that you reload an earlier save, or possibly even restart. You can also get your characters killed, although most of these require some conscious effort on the player's part. Some of them are almost Easter eggs unto themselves – try stealing Ed's hamster, sticking it in the microwave and giving him the charred remains, or playing the record of Tentacle Mating Calls in the presence of the Green Tentacle, both rather silly ways to bump off the kids. Sending one of them to their grave doesn't necessarily mean you've lost, but if their skill was vital to solve a puzzle, you're basically out of luck. There are also a few ways to blow up the entire mansion, usually by senselessly mucking with the Edison's nuclear reactor, which will obviously bring the entire game to an end.

The action also flows in real time, with scripted events occurring at specific points. Sometimes this simply triggers cutscenes (often documented as the first time they were implemented in an electronic game) as the Edisons talk to each other, while at other times it will send one of the members wandering around the mansion. You'll learn this quickly if you enter the kitchen at the beginning and find Nurse Edna rummaging through the refrigerator. You can choose to either wait a few moments until she leaves, or simply run away from her – due to a programming glitch (present in all versions) she'll simply disappear if you leave the room. Alternatively, getting caught means you'll get tossed in the dungeon, which is very easy to escape from. Unless you're using a walkthrough, the initial playthrough might be a wash unless you have an idea of when these events occur and how to react to them. (Make sure to steal that package before Weird Ed can get to it, because it makes the game a lot easier.) The puzzles themselves aren't really very difficult, as most simply revolve around finding specific items and knowing where to use them, and none of their uses are too obscure.

Given that *Maniac Mansion* was one of the first completely cursor driven adventure games, there are a lot of quirks which might seem odd in retrospect. For example, the game will not indicate hotspots when you highlight them – you need to click it first, or use the "What Is" command, which will allow you to comb the screen for stuff you can interact with. There is no

"Look" command – about the closest you can do is "Read" certain items. As a result of the genre's roots in text adventures, there are a number of verbs that feel extraneous, like "Turn On/Off", "Fix", "Lock/Unlock" and such, as later adventure games simply replaced them with an all purpose "Use" command. There is also no way to "Talk" to anyone, as all character interactions are initiated by the mansion inhabitants. The inventory is listed as text beneath the commands, although only a small number are available at a single time and need to be scrolled through. There are a lot of unnecessary items too, even though you can carry an unlimited amount of stuff. The inventory is not shared between the characters, so they'll need to be in the same room to give items to one another. There are no dialogue trees either, so the kids are mostly just defined by their looks and their skills – otherwise, they don't have much personality. They all look a bit weird, with thin, stick figure bodies and large heads with very, very silly grins.

Still, even though its functionality is fairly rudimentary, the game possesses a really weird faux horror vibe that's easy to find engrossing, even years after its publication. It's not nearly as a macabre as the blood-splattered logo might suggest, but there's an inherent silliness in the premise, as well as many of the puzzle solutions. Some of it is intentionally baffling – there's a staircase that simply reads "Out of Order", which can't be climbed (nor fixed) no matter what you do. And then there's Chuck the Plant, a household plant who serves no great significance other than somehow having its own name. This little bit of greenery has since become a running joke in many future games, LucasArts or otherwise. So while *Maniac Mansion* is often overshadowed by its sequel, these elements, combined with its less linear design, still make for a perfectly playable experience.



Green Tentacle is a whiny loser, but he's far from useless.

Maniac Mansion was originally developed for the Commodore 64 and Apple II in 1987, and ported to the IBM PC in 1988. These versions are essentially identical, featuring blocky low-res 16 color graphics. It's not a pretty sight. The only real difference between these versions are due to the sound capabilities of each computer, with the Apple II and PC speaker sounds losing out to the SID chip of the Commodore 64. There's barely any music or sound effects though, so it's not a big deal.

An enhanced version was also released later in 1988 for the Commodore Amiga, Atari ST, and again for the IBM PC. It features greatly improved graphics, with double the resolution and far more detail in both the characters and backgrounds, even though it still sticks to a 16 color limit. Although the Edisons were originally flesh colored, this version turns them all blue, for some reason or another. The PC version is still stuck with lousy PC speaker sound though. Functionally, these enhanced versions are the same as the original release, except the *Star Wars* poster in the arcade is replaced with a *Zak McKracken* poster. If you try to read it, your character will muse how they could never find a use for the gas can on Mars. This is a reference to the

chainsaw found in the kitchen in *Maniac Mansion*, which is useless because there's no gas anywhere. Both PC versions, as well as the Amiga and Atari ST versions, utilize a copy protection scheme, which requires that you look in the manual to open up the blast door on the second floor. In all of the other versions, it's unlocked and stays open.



The NES port would be the definitive version, if it weren't for the censorship.

Maniac Mansion was also ported to 8-bit Nintendo systems, but the Japanese Famicom and American/European NES versions are completely different. The NES version was developed by Realtime Associates (who also ported LucasArts' *Loom* to the Turbografx-16) and published by Jaleco. The graphics are totally different – better than the first computer release but not quite as good as the enhanced version – but it controls smoothly and quickly. The characters are actually a bit better proportioned in this version, even though they're animated somewhat awkwardly. The Edisons are still blue, and Weird Ed now wears a garish purple beret, and looks a bit less freaky. Some of the rooms have been condensed into a single screen, but the puzzles and layout are faithful. Using the controller isn't as handy as using a mouse, although it's more than suitable. Some of the extraneous verbs are removed, like Fix and Unlock, and you can cycle through the three most used verbs with the Select button. But most importantly, it will automatically identify items when you place a cursor over it, eliminating the need for the "What Is" command. In all of the other versions, you can also need to click the mouse button a second time to confirm your action, whereas that is no longer needed here. It features a battery backup save, although since there's only one slot, it is perfectly possible to screw yourself over. The best feature, though, is the soundtrack. Each character has their own specific theme (which can be turned on and off via the CD player in their inventory), and all of them are excellent, because they add a lot of personality to what are otherwise blank slates. Dave's theme is upbeat rock, Wendy's is classical, Michael's is funky, and Razor's about as close as you can get to heavy metal on the NES. The music was all supplied by George Sanger and his studio, Team Fat, who provided soundtracks for many computer games of the era, including *Wing Commander* and *The 7th Guest*.

The NES port would be the definitive version, if it weren't for the censorship. With Nintendo of America gravely concerned about its family friendly image, it demanded the removal of several elements. Dr. Fred's speeches were toned down, removing any mentions of "sucking pretty little brains", and Nurse Edna's sexual innuendoes were gone entirely – lines were changed from "How silly of me! I should've tied you to my bed, cutie!" (if you're a male character) or "You're lucky you're not a boy, or you'd be in BIG trouble right now!" (if you're female) to "Just wait until I talk to your mother." or "You'll be safe here until the police come."



Pictured is the prototype of the NES version. The reclining nude had to be removed in the final game.

The note scribbled on Ted's wall was changed from "For a good time call Edna" to simply "Call Edna". The reclining nude statue in the hallway, and the suggestive mummy picture and Playboy calendar in Dead Cousin Ted's room, are all gone. The skeleton is the dungeon is missing too – apparently Nintendo thought it somehow implied that Dr. Fred was a cannibal. The arcade game *Thrill Kill* was renamed to *Tuna Diver*, tying in with the amusing G-rated insult "tuna head" (reportedly coined because the developers were unable to use "shit head", even in the original computer releases). In the retail version, you can still microwave Ed's hamster, but Nintendo later found out about this after the game hit the market, so it was removed from the European version. What's particularly odd about all of these changes is that the uncensored version was exhaustively featured in an issue of Nintendo Power, so many players were exposed to some of these elements anyway. It's possible to disassemble the NES ROM and import it into ScummVM, which adds mouse control and a better save system, although as of present the color palette is a little screwed up.

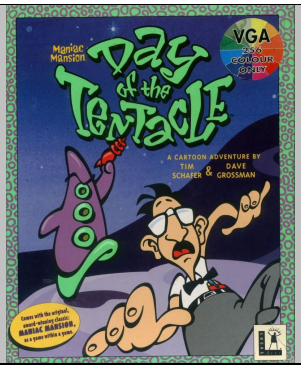
The Famicom version, released a year earlier in Japan and developed by Jaleco themselves, is a substantially worse port. The graphics are, again, totally different, and the characters have been redrawn to look smaller and cuter. All of them, what with their empty eyes and vacant smiles, look like they jumped out of a *Cathy* comic strip. This is the only version to have a real Game Over screen, which shows the characters as angels and looks particularly ludicrous. The box cover shows them all as super deformed dwarves, although at least there's some cool artwork in the manual. The rooms are even more compact than the NES version, and the ones that are multi-screen don't scroll at all. Various background details are missing. (Chuck the Plant is gone entirely, as if the programmers didn't get the joke.) Sandy now wears a full dress instead of a tube top, and Weird Ed looks more like a stereotypical nerd, although it does have the nude statue that was taken out the NES version.

There are other small changes due to the localization – the dime becomes a 100 yen coin, and the Three Guys Who Publish Anything apparently have an address in Tokyo. There's even a Japanese style mailbox in the first screen, which doesn't entirely make sense, because there's a regular mailbox in front of the porch two screens over. Outside of a few original tunes here and there (and an especially aggravating "Pause" ditty), most of the game is played without music, much like the PC versions. The only noises are the annoying footstep sound effects when your character shuffles from place to place. Unlike the NES version, the characters walk slowly and awkwardly. The hotspots don't give descriptions if hovered over, but you can see them holding down the B button and highlighting them. There's no save system, instead forcing you to work with 104 character passwords, making them one of the longest of any game on the system.



The Japanese version of Maniac Mansion is bizarre, to say the least.

In 2004, a group of fans developed *Maniac Mansion Enhanced* with Adventure Game Studio. Although most of the visuals are based off the enhanced PC version, the rest of the graphics have been totally redone in 256 colors, and the whole game looks substantially better. The interface has been updated to mimic its sequel, *Day of the Tentacle*, condensing the actions into nine verbs, adding visual icons for all inventory items, and implementing the context sensitive right mouse button. With the addition of a "Look" command, many items have newly written descriptions, although several just trigger generic comments which differ depending on which character you use. There's also music throughout the game, mostly borrowed from *Day of the Tentacle*, which changes on location rather than the characters used like the NES game. A few minor puzzles and inconsistencies are fixed too, although most of the game is identical. It's an excellent effort, and well worth playing.



Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Tim Schafer, David Grossman
Developer: LucasArts

Maniac Mansion was, of course, a decent success and began a steady stream of adventure games from Lucasfilm, including *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders*, *Loom*, two *Indiana Jones* games, and two *Monkey Island* games. By this point, Ron Gilbert left the company to join Humongous Entertainment, while his previous collaborators on the *Monkey Island* games, Tim Schafer and David Grossman, went on to direct the only *Maniac Mansion* sequel: *Day of the Tentacle*. Due to the change in direction, it shows a marked shift in both humor and tone, leaving behind the faux horror vibe in favor of *Looney Tunes*-style wackiness. That is in no way meant in the pejorative sense, because it also might be one of the funniest, most brilliantly designed adventure games ever created.

The animated intro begins with Green and Purple Tentacle outside the mansion, pondering a stream of sludge created by one of Dr. Fred's crazy inventions. On a whim, Purple Tentacle takes a gulp and somehow sprouts opposing limbs, opening up the potential for crazy plans of world domination. Dr. Fred manages to capture both tentacles, but not before Green sends out a cry for help via Weird Ed's hamster. It reaches the dorm of Bernard, now living up the college life with his roommates, a burnt out roadie named Hoagie and a vaguely psychotic med student named Laverne. The trio infiltrates the mansion and quickly frees the tentacles, only to have Purple escape and resume his schemes to enslave humanity. Dr. Fred comes to the (rather extreme) conclusion that the only way to stop him is to travel through time, precisely one day in the past, and prevent Purple Tentacle from drinking the sludge in the first place. The three are quickly enlisted into service and shoved into three Chron-o-Johns, portable toilets that can travel through time.

Something goes wrong, of course, as each of them are sent through the expanses of time – Hoagie lands 200 years in the past, during the time of the American Revolution, and Laverne ends up 200 years in the future, where tentacles have taken over the planet and humans are mere pets. On the other hand, Bernard ends up right back where he started in the present day. The others have their own quests to foil Purple Tentacle's scheme, and in the case of Hoagie and Laverne, return back to the proper time period. Hoagie must find and charge a super battery, a difficult task given that electricity had yet to be properly discovered, Laverne must figure out a way to blend in amongst the tentacles to recharge her own Chron-o-John, and Bernard must somehow obtain the funds to buy a replacement jewel for the time machine. Like *The Secret of Monkey Island*, *Day of the Tentacle* is clearly aware of the absurdities it presents – surely there are much easier ways to save the world than bending space and time – but the game gleefully rolls with it, for the simple fact that it's a lot of fun.



The heroes travel through time in a Chron-o-John, a time traveling portable toilet.

Once past the intro section, *Day of the Tentacle* greatly opens up, almost to intimidating proportions. In the present day, the mansion has been converted into a hotel, which is holding a practical joke convention. In the past, it's housing the forefathers of America, with the Declaration of Independence ready to be signed in its very living room. In the future, it's Purple Tentacle's headquarters. While Laverne is stuck to a few areas since she's a prisoner of the tentacles, both Bernard and Hoagie have free run of the mansion in both time periods. Unlike the first game, the characters don't possess any special talents, although each starts with their own personal inventory. It's also structured a bit more like a typical adventure game, in that it no longer runs in real time, although there are still occasional humorous cutscenes that pop up on occasion – these include musings from the forefathers in Hoagie's time, newspaper clippings

of Purple Tentacle's rise to power in the present era, and hate-fueled rants by an aged Purple Tentacle in the future.

Even though it removes the alternate puzzle solutions, it's still a lot more freeform and non-linear than most adventure games. The *Monkey Island* games usually give you several quests to tackle at once, under the assumption that if you get stuck at one, you can always move on to another. *Day of the Tentacle* takes that to a further extreme – you have to play around, find every item that you can, and identify the puzzles to be solved. Most of these aren't readily apparent, but nearly all of the major ones have to deal with time travel in some capacity, or finding ways to bend the rules. For instance, the three characters can teleport items to each other through the Chron-o-John (which is thankfully abstracted simply by dragging an item to their portrait on the command menu) but it doesn't work on anything living. Keeping in line with the first *Maniac Mansion* game, you'll need to capture Ed's hamster again, but you need to figure out some way to get it to Laverne without directly sending it through the time machine.

Some of them are pretty ridiculous, right from the outset. In order for Laverne to wander around freely, she needs a costume. One of the only items she has access to is a medical diagram of the tentacles. Meanwhile, Hoagie runs into Betsy Ross, who is in the process of designing the American flag. You need to have Laverne send the tentacle diagram to Hoagie, who gives it to Ms. Ross, thereby altering history and turning the American flag into the shape of a tentacle. Then Bernard can climb the flag pole, send it to Laverne, and voila! (No matter, of course, that Laverne looks ridiculous in it, but the dimwit tentacles in the future somehow find her incredibly attractive in her obviously fake get-up.) It's something of an absurd puzzle, and at least a few of them involve screwing up American history for your own personal gains. They're all hilarious to muse about despite their obtusity, but most are hinted at with various clues. There's a reason why Thomas Jefferson has a time capsule, and why Laverne can find that same time capsule 400 years later. There's also a very specific reason why the laundry room is completely identical in the present and future eras. Some of them are even silly without relying on the time travel stuff. Right at the beginning, once Bernard frees the tentacles and Dr. Fred sends you on a task to find the plans for his time machine, implying your first great quest... only to find them a couple feet away, in the same room, tacked to a cork board.



Hoagie pays a visit to our founding fathers.

Outside of the gleefully deranged puzzles, *Day of the Tentacle* is amazing to look at. In the six years between games, technology had moved from oddly gangling teenagers to a fully fleshed out cartoon. While *Monkey Island 2* (and most Sierra games at the time) elected to use painted and scanned backgrounds, *Day of the Tentacle* takes a page from classic cartoons and sticks with more solidly colored backgrounds, which removes the graininess of the 256-color limit while making the world much brighter. The backgrounds are all drawn in odd proportions with even

odder angles – nothing is quite straight on, which perfectly matches the deranged nature of its inhabitants. Even more beauty lies in the character sprites and their animation – Bernard marches with his pants hiked up too far, arms at his side, chugging along like his old *Maniac Mansion* sprite. Hoagie lumbers, hands in pockets, hair that always covers his eyes, with an unfortunately visible plumber's crack. Laverne has a weird bulging eye and doesn't so much walk as prance gleefully from place to place, with a wildly moronic grin as she skips and a blank expression of perpetual bewilderment when idle.

The rest of the characters beyond the three protagonists shine just as brightly. As one can see, the relationship between the heroes and the Edisons have changed quite a bit from the original *Maniac Mansion* – Dr. Fred and his clan are no longer enemies (and the Meteor is gone completely) and their personalities have been altered too. Nurse Edna is more of an insane cackling witch than a sexual deviant, and Weird Ed is more of a restrained weirdo who obsesses over stamps than a militant nutjob. (Apparently the microwaving of the hamster from the previous game was canon, because Weird Ed hasn't quite gotten over it.) Dead Cousin Ted is still around as a mummy in all three time periods (and needs to be dressed up by Laverne to win a "Best Human" contest). Various other Edison ancestors and descendants are found in each period, although the most amusing are the caricatures of America's founders – as it turns out George Washington and Ben Franklin were kinda jerks! It's a bit of a shame none of the rest of the *Maniac Mansion* crew is mentioned at all, although Razor was initially meant to return before getting cut in the planning stages.



Laverne tries desperately to win the "best human" contest in the future.

Day of the Tentacle also offers full speech in the CD-ROM version, and the exceptional dialogue mixed with the brilliant casting and acting is impeccable. Bernard is a typical weenie, Hoagie goes on irrelevant tangents and seems to be the least flummoxed by the situation they're in, and Laverne is prone to mad giggles between her lines. In taking another page from classic American cartoons, a good number of the voices are plays off famous actors and characters – a vandal randomly sounds like Jack Nicholson, Thomas Jefferson is reminiscent of Dudley Do-Right, and both John Hancock and his lousy great-great-great-great-grandson salesman both sound like Woody Allen. In the past, there is also a talking horse, for some reason or another, sounding a bit like Mr. Ed. (It really doesn't seem that out of place, considering the sentient megalomaniacal tentacles and whatnot.)

Although *Day of the Tentacle* can possibly be criticized for its arcane puzzles, and it lacks the replay value of its predecessor, it's otherwise one of the few nearly perfect adventure games – gorgeous visuals, an incredibly innovative setup, memorable characters and hilarious dialogue. If there's any true "canon of adventure gaming", this one deserves to be on the top.

The entirety of the original *Maniac Mansion* is included as a bonus in *Day of the Tentacle*, accessed by using the computer in Weird Ed's room. Unfortunately, it's the initial release with the really blocky graphics instead of the enhanced version. This function also doesn't quite work with ScummVM – you just have to look at the resource files and add *Maniac Mansion* separately on the main menu, and launch it from there.

Maniac Mansion: The TV Show

Maniac Mansion was somehow turned into a sitcom, which was produced in Canada in 1990. There were 66 episodes in total for the Family Channel, a cable network that, at the time, had very low penetration. It has since morphed into ABC Family.

Maniac Mansion is only very, very loosely based on the LucasArts game. It ditches the whole bit with the teenagers and just focuses on the Edisons, except the Edisons are nothing like they are in the game. Sure, the head of the household is named Fred, he's a mad scientist, and there's a meteor in his basement (which isn't sentient like the games), but that's about all they have in common. The rest of the family is completely different, albeit with some quirks due to his experiments – his four year old son was turned into a hulking, mentally handicapped giant with an annoying falsetto voice, and his brother-in-law was turned into a fly. None of their names rhyme with "ed", as they should. The developers of the game had little hand in the TV show's production, naturally.



The Edison family in the TV show bears little resemblance to their game counterparts.

The quote on the cover of the sole VHS tape release, "The Love Collection", says that New York Post claims it's "The '90s equivalent of *The Addams Family*". It isn't. It has none of the same horror-fueled charm as the Addams, nor even the schlocky atmosphere of the game. The house isn't even so much a mansion as just kinda large, and the family certainly isn't crazy enough to be considered maniacs. Anyway, it's a pretty standard sitcom, so the family faces dilemmas which they handle in humorous ways, and then everything's happy at the end. Some consider it a spiritual successor to the Canadian sketch show *SCTV*, since a few of the same people worked on it. It stars Joe Flaherty (also known for his role as the crazy dad in the excellent *Freaks and Geeks*) as Fred and was created by Eugene Levy (Jim's dad from the *American Pie* movies). Despite its comedy roots, the show really isn't very funny outside of its slightly offbeat premise.



Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: Commodore 64 / Atari ST / Amiga / PC DOS / FM Towns
Designer(s): David Fox
Developer: Lucasfilm Games

Released as a follow-up to Lucasfilm's massively popular *Maniac Mansion*, *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders* never quite garnered the same respect. There are any number of reasons – it never received a console port, nor any follow-ups, and all that remains of its legacy is a rather aged game with a cult following.

Zak McKracken is a tabloid reporter who aspires to cover some real news, instead of just making it up. He's haunted by dreams of an alien civilization, of Mars, and of a beautiful woman, all of which creep him out when they begin seeping into real life. (Parts of it do bear some passing resemblance to the movie *Total Recall*, which was released the year after.) An alien race known as the Caponians have invaded the planet, disguised in Groucho Marx masks, and are secretly running the telephone company. Their plan? To turn the population into mindless drones via electric buzzing. Zak becomes intertwined with the woman of his dreams, a scientist named Annie, as well two Yale co-eds named Melissa and Leslie, who have already begun an expedition on Mars. Only by uncovering the secrets of a long departed alien race can Zak and his compatriots foil the Caponian menace and save the minds of humanity.

Zak McKracken's adventure is heavily influenced by the postmodern New Age movement. It has a particular fascination with Stonehenge, the Mexican and Egyptian pyramids, and their connection with extraterrestrial life, and Zak will make a visit or two with various spiritual gurus and tribes. There's also a bit of conspiracy theory humor, what with the alien king actually being (or claiming to be) Elvis himself. A good chunk of the adventure involves Zak jetting across the globe to these different locations, solving their mysteries, and eventually uncovering two sacred crystals, one of which can control animals, while the other can allow teleportation. Like *Maniac Mansion*, there are multiple characters to control – once Zak meets Annie, the player can switch to her viewpoint, as well as Melissa and Leslie. Unlike *Maniac Mansion*, their special skills are barely distinct – Annie travels with Zak on Earth to solve the few puzzles that he can't, while Melissa and Leslie are tasked with mucking around in the Martian pyramids and providing clues for the earthbound folk until Zak can find his way into outer space.

The biggest problem with the structure involves all of the global jet setting. It's easy enough to travel between locations, but airplane tickets aren't free. Every time you jaunt from destination to destination, you lose a bit of cash, which is in limited supply. But almost all of the game's puzzles revolve around items that can only be found at some other location, which are very easy to miss unless you know specifically what you're looking for. Right at the beginning, it seems logical that you're supposed to board the bus once you dig out your bank card, but no – you're actually supposed to do about a half a dozen things first, unless you want to double back later on, wasting both time and money. At a certain point, you can predict lotto numbers to increase your fortune – which can be done repeatedly, if necessary – but until you reach that point, if you run out of cash, you can screw yourself over. There are also a couple of minor no-win situations not regarding money (make sure to remove the pipe from the sink before grinding the bread into bread crumbs) and if any of your characters die (make sure to keep your oxygen tanks full once you're on Mars), it'll make the game unwinnable. Furthermore, in all of

the releases except for the FM Towns version, you need to input exit visa codes when flying outside the country, as a method of copy protection. As if the whole process wasn't tedious enough.

Beyond that massive irritation, *Zak McKracken* has a troublesome fascination with mazes. There are at least half a dozen of them, and while most have some kind of trick that allows you to navigate them easily (the jungles can just be traversed by moving forward regardless of your direction, just don't double back), the ones that don't quickly grow tiresome.

From a gameplay perspective, *Zak McKracken* might be the lousiest of any of Lucasfilms' games, although functionally it's still better than most early Sierra titles. What keeps it going is its bizarre premise and sense of humor. Since it runs on the same engine as *Maniac Mansion*, there's not much dialogue, seeing as there's no Talk command, nor is there a Look command to muse about the surroundings. Zak's personality only shows through when he faces the screen and announces potential headlines for whatever silly situation he's gotten himself into, but Annie barely does anything, and Melissa and Leslie seem to exist just so the game can include "Yale co-eds" on its laundry list of wacky elements found therein. The cover artwork illustrates most of these – the two-headed squirrel, the loaf of French bread, Zak's goldfish Sushi and his bowl (which, along with some duct tape, a wet suit and an oxygen mask, gets Macguyvered into a homemade spacesuit), a broom alien, and those Groucho Marx masks.



Zak learns of his true mission when visiting Mars. (FM Towns version)

A handful of situational gags produce some laughs, like when Zak is abducted by aliens when flying over the Bermuda Triangle, only to have the pilot react like it's a regular (and only slightly annoying) occurrence. On Mars, you'll find a gas can, which your character remarks is "for a different game", referring to the tantalizingly useless chainsaw in *Maniac Mansion*, which in turn was out of gas. You can inhabit the mind of a yak, and as it turns out, the only thing they can do is "Chew" and "Poop". If you'd like, you can stick Sushi in your sink's garbage disposer and send him to a horrible death, making for a parallel to *Maniac Mansion*'s infamous hamster microwaving incident. Whenever Zak gets kidnapped by the aliens, he's strapped into a device called the Mindbender, stripped of important items and returned to Earth. For a few moments, the command menu almost completely disappears, slowly returning as Zak comes to his senses – it's a clever, game-y way to represent Zak's state of mind, and probably one of the most interesting parts of the adventure. Also, if you fail the copy protection, you get locked in prison and given a lengthy speech by the guard on the evils of software pirating.

Zak McKracken's quest, as devised by Lucasfilm's David Fox, was initially meant to be more serious, but input by *Maniac Mansion's* Ron Gilbert fleshed out the goofier elements, which

is really what makes *Zak McKracken* as memorable as it is. But *Maniac Mansion*, despite also being somewhat awkwardly designed, still holds up due its non-linear structure and multiple puzzle solutions, elements which are (with a few exceptions) missing from *Zak McKracken*. Both Fox and Gilbert left the company a few years after, and so this lone game stands as a not-quite-essential curiosity.

Zak McKracken was originally released on the Commodore 64, and then ported to the IBM PC format. These versions have very blocky, low resolution 16-color graphics, and minimal sound. There were plans to develop this for the Apple II, although this was never released. When ported to the Amiga and Atari ST, all of the graphics were redrawn in a higher resolution, although still only 16-colors. This upgraded version was later ported back to the IBM PC. Although it's not quite as a nice looking as *Maniac Mansion*'s revamp, it's still a huge improvement, with more detailed sprites and a substantially less ugly color scheme.

The game was also ported to the Fujitsu FM Towns computer, which was only released in Japan, and was published alongside other Lucasfilms' games like *Loom* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. This version once again has completely redrawn graphics, this time with 256 colors, with a nicer looking interface. Released on CD, it also has redbook audio music, although since a good chunk of the game was silent to begin with, many of the areas only have atmospheric noises. The only real song of note is the opening theme, which is remarkably catchy. Although this version was never released outside of Japan, the CD includes both English and Japanese language modes. The game technically runs in 640x480, but only the Japanese interface makes use of the higher resolution, and the rest of the visuals still look like a VGA game. Strangely, when the game is set to Japanese mode, the main character sprites have larger eyes, giving them a more manga-esque look to match the redesigned characters in the cover and manual artwork. It also adds an extra poster for *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* in one of the alien's quarters. All of these versions are playable in ScummVM.

In spite of (or perhaps, because of) the lack of any true sequels, *Zak McKracken* has developed a small but devoted fanbase over the years. For years, there have been unofficial fanmade sequels purportedly under development. The first, *Zak McKracken and the Alien Rockstars*, began development in 1996, although it was eventually cancelled in 2008. This version was meant to feature 2D art similar to *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle*. Another, *Zak McKracken and the Lonely Sea Monster*, was announced in 2007 and was designed to look like the original C64/PC version, although this version also fell into development hell.

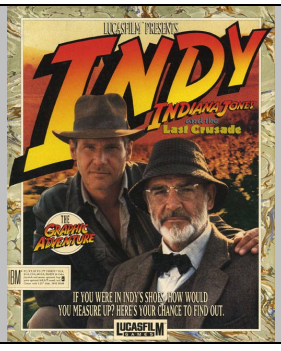
As of this writing, only two of these fan sequels have seen completion. *The New Adventures of Zak McKracken*, developed by LucasFan Games, the same group behind the *Maniac Mansion Deluxe* remake, uses the Adventure Game Studio engine. It's comprised of graphics ripped from the FM Towns version of the original game, along with several other video games, including *The King of Fighters*. Although it technically has a new plot, most of it looks and feels recycled, and it's quite short and insubstantial.

Far more interesting is *Zak McKracken Between Time and Space*, released in 2006, which features a brand new plot, completely hand drawn modern 2D graphics, CG cutscenes and full voice acting. The story takes place a bit after the first one, as Zak's five minutes of fame for saving the Earth has come and gone. He's left his crappy job and started his own newspaper, and is once again wrapped up in a series of globe spanning adventures. Developed by The Artificial Hair Bros. over the course of seven years, it looks and sounds excellent, easily presentable as one of the best fan efforts right up next to *Broken Sword 2.5*. Unfortunately, the game is only available in German, and an English version has yet to be released.

Indiana Jones

Indiana Jones is a name that you are required to know unless you studied abroad on Mars for the past thirty years. The films bearing his names are action and adventure tales, which ideally make them prime cuts for video game adaptations. Of course, many gamers who know how the industry works find that games based off of movies end up sucking for various reasons. *Indiana Jones* has had a relatively decent track record with virtual entertainment, but "relatively" is the key word here.

The very first *Indy* game was released for the Atari 2600 in 1982, based on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Depending on who you ask, it's either a highly advanced epic that set the bar for other games of the time or an outright bloody frustration that's way more complicated than it should be. In 1984, *Indiana Jones and the Lost Kingdom* was released for the Commodore 64, which was mostly a quick cash-in effort, sticking a sprite looking vaguely like Indy into a number of puzzle-oriented dilemmas. In 1985, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* got its own game for the arcades, developed by Atari and made as a straight-on action game. A mostly-unknown text adventure based on an original adventure, *Revenge of the Ancients*, was released in 1987. From here on out, most *Indy* titles were developed by teams working under Lucasfilm's virtual development branch, which led to two excellent adventure games.



Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade: The Graphic Adventure

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Macintosh / FM Towns / Amiga CDTV
Designer(s): Noah Falstein, David Fox, Ron Gilbert
Developer: Lucasfilm Games

1989 saw the theatrical release of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and to promote the film, two completely different games were released: One subtitled the *The Action Game* and the other *The Graphic Adventure*. *The Action Game* has bad control, poor hit detection, and too much other frustrating crap, thus classifying it as your typical underdeveloped cash-in. However, *The Graphic Adventure* turned out fantastically.

The story is identical to the film off of which it is based: in 1938, after a thrilling adventure concluding with the retrieval of a long sought after artifact, Doctor Jones is accosted by a duo of taciturn men. They recruit Indy on behalf of wealthy businessman Walter Donovan, a man fascinated with the ancient Christian legend of the Holy Grail, the drinking vessel graced by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper. According to legend, whosoever drinks from this sacred chalice receives immortality. Naturally, the Nazis can abuse this to create an invincible army of deathless super soldiers and keep Der Fuhrer alive for a damn long time. Donovan presents Indy with a diary full of information about the Grail and a broken slab alluding to the Grail's possible location; Donovan states that these items were secured from their original owner, an agent Donovan trusted to obtain the Grail but was captured by the Nazis. Donovan offers Indy a chance to pick up the job after the previous explorer was forcibly detained, and while Indy initially refuses and claims that the Grail is his father's area of expertise, Donovan drops the bomb: Henry Jones, Sr., is the explorer currently in captivity!

If you've seen the film, then you know the major characters involved. Indy and his father are joined by their pal Marcus Brody, the very model of the typical absent-minded professor, as

well as Elsa Schneider, a gorgeous archaeologist who initially collaborates with Indy to search for the Grail in Venice. Unfortunately, Indy's good friend Sallah is absent from the game, and so is Kazim of the Brotherhood of the Cruciform Sword. The game follows the basic structure of the movie, but several events from the film actually play out quite differently in the game, toning down the action aspect to focus more on the adventure and omitting some film scenes entirely. Most of the puzzles have alternate solutions that greatly differ from the events of the film. Different solutions earn you "Indy Points," which add up to an overall total of 800. The only way to obtain all 800 points is to play the game multiple times and figure out almost every different solution to each puzzle and obstacle.

The opening pays tribute to the Young Indiana sequence at the beginning of the film, as the credits are painted as art on the circus train atop which young Indy ran to evade the bandits who stole the Cross of Coronado. After the backstory is introduced, the game itself starts at Barnett College, where you are put in control of Indy and presented with the interface. There's not too much to do at the college except advance the story or don boxing gear and fight with a trainer in the gymnasium. It is worth doing this little side task to get a feel for the game's fighting controls.



Remember: X never marks the spot.

Wait, what now? Fighting in a point-and-click adventure game?! Though action may not be the focus of this particular title, the fact that it's based on an action film means some of Indy's brawling has to factor in somehow. As you could probably guess, the fighting controls are awkward and stodgy, utilizing the numeric keypad to deliver punches, shuffle around, and block. Fighting is only necessary at a few points, and most situations that might lead to brawls often have alternate solutions allowing you to circumvent them. Aside from the fighting, the point-and-click controls are similar to *Maniac Mansion* and *Zak McKracken*, although the higher resolution allows for a much smoother looking interface. Some commands, such as "Pick Up" and "Open", will often be required, while some other commands are decidedly specialized and have very little use. This is before the days where right-clicking on an object automatically puts it into use, so it's somewhat annoying to navigate with all the commands at times.

After searching through the elder Dr. Jones' ransacked house (where it would be in your best interest to find a painting of the Grail or else be lost later), the adventuring begins proper in the city of Venice, where Indy and Brody meet up with Dr. Elsa Schneider. Most of the events should be familiar. You have to find the secret entrance into Sir Richard's tomb beneath the library, but this time around, "X" does not always equal the spot. You stumble through the Venetian catacombs, where you need to refer to the faux newspaper clippings and Grail diary entries that came with the box to beat the copy protection.

After Venice is Castle Brunwald, which is arguably the most frustrating part of the game. If you know what to do, it can be cleared in about fifteen minutes. However, screwing up will get

you captured or killed, and you can potentially boff it up bad enough that the game becomes unwinnable. There's a fair deal of trial-and-error throughout this section where you can elude the apprehension of the several Nazi guards wandering around the halls. You can talk your way around them, but you need to know the exact dialogue path and be wearing the right disguise (and in a couple of cases, offer a special item) to avoid fisticuffs. If you don't know what to do with a guard, then you will be forced to fight him. However, the crappy part is that you only recover a little bit of life after each fight, and med kits are rare.

The game becomes more lenient after Brunwald, and it gets creative with the alternative solutions to drastically change the course of events from the film. For example, if you trick Colonel Vogel by giving him a false Grail diary, you'll skip over the Berlin scene entirely and go straight to the airport. (If you do go to Berlin, you'll meet with Der Fuhrer himself, who was involved in one of the most hilarious moments of the film. In the game, you can opt to punch him in the face. It does not go well.) At the airport, you can steal tickets, pay directly for them if you have enough German Marks, or fight the ticket-taker. Going onto the zeppelin will eventually force you to navigate a maze on catwalks fraught with lots of vicious fights before you get to an escape plane. However, if you picked up a certain book from the library, you can opt to start up your own biplane instead of boarding the zeppelin and forgo the hassle of having to navigate around the blimp's infrastructure. Flying the plane requires you to utilize the number pad (in a slightly less frustrating way than the fights) to dodge the Luftwaffe assault while Henry blasts the enemy planes. Depending on how many planes you destroy before you get shot down, you will have to face fewer roadblocks on the way to Alexandretta when you continue the rest of the journey by car.



Indy's relationship with his father is one of the highlights of The Last Crusade.

Finally, you get to the climax of the adventure, the three trials that will determine whether or not you are worthy enough to possess the Holy Grail. Two of the trials simply require clicking in the right place, and if you've seen the film, you know how to pass the "Word of God". It culminates in you choosing the true Grail, which isn't as simple as picking the humble cup of a carpenter. You'll have to refer to the texts mentioned in Venice that came with the game and the special Grail painting in Brunwald to choose the correct chalice; failure here causes Indy to turn into a corpse and promptly explode, which is not at all a good thing. Screwing up at any point during the final trials boots you back to the beginning of this segment, and unless you are playing on ScummVM, you cannot save during this end stretch. You could just decide on the true Grail using trial and error, but this would mean having to slog through the previous trials over and over again. Once you correctly determine the true Grail (or make a lucky guess) and pick it up, you can make one final break from the events from the movie and manage to give the Grail back to the knight and even keep Elsa alive!

All in all, *Last Crusade* is fairly short for an adventure game, but it offers variety and replay value with the many different solutions to its puzzles. It's also quite remarkable for being a licensed title that is entertaining and reasonably faithful to its source material. Due to its license and a design that is decidedly less frustrating than its predecessors, *Last Crusade* was Lucasfilms' biggest adventure hit before *The Secret of Monkey Island* hit the market. If you are an *Indy* fan, and are willing to put up with some typical adventure game frustrations, then this title comes highly recommended for your inner archaeologist.

Naturally, the visuals and music vary depending on the version you play. *Last Crusade* was originally made with a 16 color palette in mind, and it looks decent aside from some garish coloring brought about by technical limitations. The Amiga and Atari ST versions have better sound quality, but at the cost of slower movement in gameplay. It was later re-released in 256-color VGA for DOS, which looks substantially better. This version was also ported to the Japanese FM Towns computer. Other than some extremely minor graphical changes here and there, the only difference is the CD audio music, rather than the MIDI synth used in the other versions. The Amiga version was also released on the Amiga CDTV platform in Germany, and while the graphics are the same, it also includes CD audio.



Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Macintosh / FM Towns / Wii
Designer(s): Hal Barwood, Noah Falstein
Developer: LucasArts

In 1992, Noah Falstein teamed up with cinematographer-turned-writer for LucasArts, Hal Barwood, to release an all-new *Indy* adventure in virtual form, *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*. Widely considered to be the hottest *Indiana Jones* property not based on any of the films, *Fate of Atlantis* was hailed as another success for the point-and-click adventure genre.

The adventure kicks off with the opening credits showing through an interactive intro sequence played purely for slapstick, fitting in perfectly with the series' unique blend of action and comedy. The year is 1939, one year after *Last Crusade,* and while the dark shadows of Nazi rule loom over Europe, our man Indy is clumsily stumbling about the various artifact rooms in the Barnett College museum. He is searching for a small statue at the request of a Mr. Smith, an ominous man who just so happens to be tall, blond-haired, and blue-eyed. Indy finds the statue and brings it to his office where Marcus Brody and Mr. Smith are waiting. Smith claims he has a key that fits into the statue, and this key indeed opens up the statue's base to generate a small gold-colored bead. Smith pulls out a gun and forcibly takes the statue and bead, but while waiting for his getaway car, Indy leaps forth and fights him. The bad guy flees, but Indy manages to remove his coat in the struggle and dig up some information.

The Aryan's true identity is Klaus Kerner, an agent for the Third Reich. Marcus pulls out another item from the coat, an old issue of National Archaeology that highlights Indy's first big job – an expedition into Iceland with Sophia Hapgood, Indy's assistant for the mission and described by himself as "a snobbish rich brat from Boston". She gave up archaeology to become a psychic, obviously not a profession of which Indy approves, although she is also the foremost authority on Atlantis. Marcus realizes that if Kerner could track down Indy, he might know where to find Sophia as well. Indy agrees and goes to New York City, Sophia's current residence, for two reasons. (A): Indy's a good guy, and even if he does not have a high opinion

of Sophia, he's obligated to save the annoying woman (a trait Indy proved with Willie in *Temple of Doom*). And (B): If he finds Kerner in New York, he might find out more about the bead in the statue and the evil reasons behind the Nazi's motivation to acquire it. Whatever it is, it can't be a damn bit of good!

This is the setting for the stage of an incredible adventure which is pure *Indiana Jones* all the way through. It may not be based on a film like *Last Crusade*, but the setting and plot of *Fate of Atlantis* are good enough to have a film based off of it. If anything, the fact that *Fate of Atlantis* is an entirely new adventure works to its advantage, as it directs an original story for which it has more freedom than can be allowed for two hours of cinema. It's a decent plot too, just what you'd expect from an epic Indy adventure. The magical MacGuffin this time around is Orichalcum, a mystical metal purported to harness far more energy than any radioactive element; the object Indy finds in the idol at the beginning of the game is a bead of this mineral. Legend has it that Atlantis is where Orichalcum was forged, and powers within the sunken city allow it to reach its maximum potential.

Just like it wouldn't be truly *Indiana Jones* without a female companion, there are a number of antagonists, and most of them are Nazis. The big bad of this adventure is Dr. Hans Ubermann, who wants to harvest as much Orichalcum as possible and channel their energy for vile purposes. You'll also converse with Nur-Ab-Sal, the "ghost" of Atlantis' former king, who makes for an impressive part of Sophia's presentation until Indy mucks it up. However, his actual spirit resides in Sophia's necklace. Other secondary characters include Felipe Costa, a funny little man who deals in information and only talks kindly to Sophia, likely due to being a bit of a lech; Alain Trottier, a French businessman who is also an expert on Atlantis; and Omar Al-Jabbar, an Arabic trader who, depending on how you approach him, is either thankful that you save him from the Nazis, or a severe jerk to you for finding his secret house.

The game is well-written and is scripted in a typically familiar fashion akin to the films. There's a lot of action, puzzle-solving, mythological lore, humor, and of course, romance with Sophia. Interestingly, that last part is optional depending on how much you care for her around the end of the game. There's a good chunk of funny stuff, such as when Indy screws up Sophia's presentation in New York and has to enlist the help of a parrot to tell him the name of a valuable book. It's not as humorous as the *Monkey Island* games, but when it's not funny, it's still entertaining. *Fate of Atlantis* has a hell of a lot of fine dialogue overall. The CD version also has voice acting which is more than competent. They couldn't get Harrison Ford for the voice of Indy, as usual, but his replacement, Doug Lee, gives a good voice that doesn't sound like Ford but still fits the character well enough. The rest of the cast is pretty decent, though Dr. Ubermann's voice is so hilariously over-the-top that it has to be heard to be believed.

Fate of Atlantis adopts the interface from *Monkey Island 2*, which evicts deadweight commands such as "Turn On," and "Turn Off" and simply appends these specific actions to the "Use" command. Fighting sequences still exist, and they still use the awkward control scheme with the number pad, but there's an alternate method of control that simply involves clicking the cursor on Indy to defend and on your enemy to attack. It too is awkward, perhaps even more so than the number pad, but for those who cannot deal with the tricky fighting controls, you can just press the "0" key to throw a sucker punch and KO the bastard instantly. This will not earn you any points, but if you're not concerned with scoring this is an acceptable alternative for studious adventurers who can't be bothered to fight in a game not built around fighting. While LucasArts had officially instituted a policy of "no deaths" in their games starting from *Loom*, *Fate of Atlantis* violates this rule and presents several opportunities where you can get snuffed by the Nazis. However, these moments are not quite as common as in *Last Crusade*, and there are no situations where a mistake early on makes the game unwinnable later. It just wouldn't be an *Indy* adventure without an ever-present element of danger.

Last Crusade had multiple solutions to various obstacles that would earn you "Indy Points", which would add up to a cumulative total of 800 points for doing all possible solutions on repeated playthroughs. *Fate of Atlantis* further expands on this by offering three very different

paths that determine how you will eventually play the game, with the total amount of Indy Points reaching up to a total of 1000. The focal point of your preferred path is decided by an event very early in the game, where Indy deals with a lunkheaded bouncer named Biff. In order to see Sophia's show, you have to get past Biff with one of three different methods. If you decide to keep insulting Biff until he wants to kick your ass, and you beat him up in the ensuing fight, you will embark upon the "Fists Path", where the likelihood of fist-fighting Nazis increases in your adventure. If you avoid Biff entirely and instead navigate the maze of crates to the right of the entrance, you choose the "Wits Path", where you'll encounter more puzzles on your quest. If you appeal to Biff's fandom of Sophia and give him a brochure of her presentation, you'll go on the "Team Path", where you get to control Indy and Sophia and have them work together.

Whichever path you choose, it doesn't kick in for the first part of the adventure. You first need to gather information by visiting colleagues around the world in Iceland, Tikal and the Azores. All of these meetings lead to the acquisition of the Lost Dialogue of Plato, the Greek philosopher's Atlantean study. After obtaining this vital book, Sophia gives you a psychic reading and predicts your following gameplay path depending on what you did back in New York. However, this path is merely suggested for you, and you are actually prompted to choose between the Fists, Wits, and Team paths at your discretion. Whatever you pick will bring you to the cities of Algiers, Monte Carlo and the island of Crete. The Fists and Wits path get you to the island of Thera, and the Wits and Team paths place you on a Nazi submarine.

The Fists path is, naturally, quite action-packed. In Algiers, you get to slug it out with Nazis bugging Omar Al-Jabbar, and you ride out on the desert on a camel while avoiding Nazi jeeps or risk battling them. After climbing out of a dig site in Algiers, you'll have to disarm a Nazi's machinegun before getting down to brawling. Crete is just crawling with soldiers, and you'll even come across a singing and yodeling Nazi named Arnold, the successor to similar character named Biff from *Last Crusade*. This is probably the fastest way to get through the game, but only go through with it if you don't mind the somewhat awkward action.

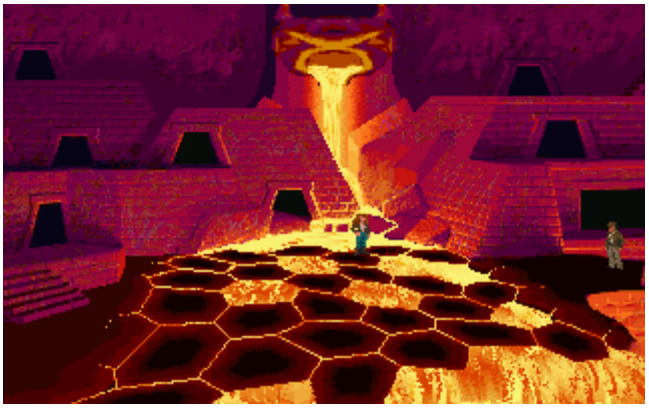


Indy discovers the lost city of Atlantis.

The Wits path requires more brains, obviously. In the dig site, you'll have to figure out how to activate a truck so you can return to Monte Carlo, where you learn about a trap to bait Sophia. At Thera, you'll need to build a hot air balloon by working around a jerkass port authority. You'll get to board a Nazi submarine and escape by ejecting yourself out of a torpedo tube. The cave in Crete is bereft of Nazis, but it does require some more intellectual effort to clear. The puzzles here are, for the most part, not too abstract and unintuitive as some of the crazy puzzles in other adventure games.

The Team path begins with Indy and Sophia holding a séance with Trottier. You get to swindle him by either using Sophia's psychic powers or disguising Indy as a wrathful spirit to scare him off. In Algiers, the two negotiate with Al-Jabbar to find enough items that help them form a balloon. In Crete, you'll have to help Sophia up from an elevator that drags the both of you down and use her to get around a gate with the opening pulley on the other side. You'll also have to free her from Nazi captivity once you get down to the submarine. There's not a lot of fighting if you drag along Sophia, and she's a bit of a load if you decide to pick this path. There is a lot of amusing interplay between Indy and Sophia, including one bit where you have to convince her to volunteer for a knife-throwing act.

Whichever route you choose eventually gets you to the sunken city of Atlantis itself, though the path you take to get there changes the method in which you enter it. Being that this is the climax, this is where it gets scarily difficult. The outer circle of Atlantis is a gigantic maze where you have to run from or fight Nazis and explore various rooms containing certain parts of Atlantean machinery. One room gives you as many Orichalcum beads as you need if you figure out how to use it, and the beads will be used in many places across the city. Basically, anything that looks like it has a mouth requires you to feed it a bead. You can also either save Sophia or leave her behind, and you get a good or bad ending depending on your actions.



Lava flows in the depths of the ancient city.

Fate of Atlantis is approximately three times as long as *Last Crusade*. It was originally made for the PC with 256 color VGA graphics and has a realistic overall art direction. The characters look somewhat similar to the sprites from the first two *Monkey Island* games and have decent animation, even if they don't vary too much beyond walking and talking. The backgrounds look great, even if they're not particularly colorful, but they're far advanced above even the VGA version of *Last Crusade*. The graphical quality is roughly the same across all different versions, aside from some different hues and shades. The sound design has also been upgraded since the last game. Unlike *Last Crusade*, *Fate of Atlantis* has music playing all the time provided by veteran composers Clint Bajakian, Michael Land, and Peter McConnell, along with the main *Indy* theme by John Williams; much of it is fitting and well done, even if not much of it is particularly catchy. There's less variation among the ports this time around, but the PC and FM Towns versions are the finest of all them. Only the PC, FM Towns and Macintosh versions were released on CD and thus have voice acting. A Sega CD version was planned, but cancelled after the console's port of *The Secret of Monkey Island* flopped.

Fate of Atlantis is arguably one of the greatest games in the graphic adventure genre due to its variety, replay value, fine aesthetics, and the authentic *Indiana Jones* feeling that could pass it off as an actual film. Very few adventure games offer such a degree of replay and an overall fine combination of aesthetic design, an entertaining story, and well designed puzzles.



The lousy Fate of Atlantis action game.

Much like *Last Crusade*, *Fate of Atlantis* had an action game released alongside it, for the IBM PC, Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, Commodore 64 and ZX Spectrum. It's a pretty rotten game, utilizing an isometric perspective and extremely awkward movement scheme. It roughly follows the adventure game's plot, starting off at a casino in Monte Carlo, before moving to the Nazi sub, onto the island of Crete, and eventually into Atlantis itself. You can switch between Indy and Sophia (who has blonde hair here, as opposed to auburn in the adventure game), who have slightly different skills – Indy can punch or whip, while Sophia can only kick with her high heels. The stages are fairly huge and non-linear, requiring a bit of wandering around to find your goal. This game remains forgotten in the shadow of the adventure game, and for good reasons.

After *Fate of Atlantis*, the quality of Indy's track record is debatable. *The Infernal Machine* is the most interesting as it heralds the return of Sophia from *Fate of Atlantis*, but it's more of a *Tomb Raider*-style action game than a graphic adventure. The Wii version of *Staff of Kings* also includes a port of *Fate of Atlantis* as a bonus unlockable, which works well with the Wiimote.

LucasArts also planned another adventure game entitled *Indiana Jones and the Iron Phoenix*. The plot was intended to revolve around the Philosopher's Stone, the legendary alchemy rock that turns base metals into gold and revives the dead. The story, set after the end of World War II, would have revolved around Indy working with Russian major Nadia Kirov and gathering pieces of the Philosopher's Stone before some of the last remaining Nazis find them and resurrect Adolf Hitler, who would have been a more important plot figure instead of a hilarious cameo like in *Last Crusade*. Sadly, a number of factors slammed down on its release, including the resignation of project co-leader Aric Wilmunder, arguments over what the art style the game should use, and the realization that the game's nature could not have it gloss over all Nazi references. This would have banned the game in the German market and led to a huge loss of sales – a very bad idea, given the dependence on the European market at the time for graphic adventures – so the game was ultimately canned. However, as with *Fate of Atlantis*, *Iron Phoenix* was published as a four-book comic miniseries by Dark Horse and expands upon the basic concepts of the planned game.



Loom

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Macintosh / Turbografx-16 CD / FM Towns
Designer(s): Brian Moriarty
Developer: LucasArts

Out of all of LucasArts' adventure games, only one is rooted in the genre of high fantasy (not counting their very first adventure based off of the film *Labyrinth*). This game is *Loom*, the invention of Brian Moriarty, a former employee of Infocom. Moriarty was responsible for some of Infocom's better titles, including *Wishbringer*, *Trinity*, and *Beyond Zork: The Coconut of Quendor*. *Loom* was the first game in LucasArts' graphic adventure library to institute the company's unofficial policy of no deaths or unwinnable situations. This made *Loom* notable for its time, not to mention the gorgeous graphics, fantastic sound quality, and the original plotline which made for an engrossing fantasy epic.

There is a fair amount of backstory that doesn't appear in the game, but can be found in a half-hour audio drama that was included on cassette tape with the original releases. It's mostly gravy, as you can figure out most of what's going on in the game itself, but it explains a few things that help to better understand the context. *Loom* is about the Guild of Weavers, who have grown powerful and moved on from simple cloth to sewing patterns into time and space itself. The Weavers have been ostracized for their reality-manipulating powers, cast out into a small island from the rest of the Guilds for their fearsome witchcraft. They have named their island "Loom", after the great multicolored loom which is the focal point of their powers. Cut off from the rest of the world, the Weavers suffer and dwindle in numbers.

A troubled Weaver, Lady Cygna Threadbare, decides to use the great loom to help by planting a gray thread into the loom. This thread causes an infant to appear out of the loom, an unforeseen event that earns Cygna the wrath of the Guild's Elders. Her punishment is to be transformed into a swan and be banished from the "pattern", the universe as the Weavers had made it, essentially condemning her to an existence in between dimensions. Kindly Dame Hetchel takes in the loom infant and names him Bobbin Threadbare, but she is forbidden by the Elders from teaching Bobbin any of the Weavers' techniques. The Elders are jerks and they fear that Bobbin will eventually unravel the pattern of existence, but Hetchel believes in young Bobbin and decides to teach him about weaving nonetheless.

That's quite a mouthful, and while the "devil child cast away from society" story is not the most original plotline around, it's the most developed story LucasArts had made up until this point. Despite the company's tendencies to write their stories with a lot of humor, *Loom*'s story is relatively serious (though not bereft of funny moments) and starts out on a grave note. Bobbin, the dreaded "loom child", is summoned to the Elders on his seventeenth birthday, but when he gets to the main hall, he finds his adopted mother, Dame Hetchel, being chewed out by the Elders. They found out that she taught Bobbin about weaving despite strict orders to not do so. For her intransigence, she is subject to the same fate inflicted upon Lady Cygna; however, she is mysteriously transformed into an egg instead of a swan. On that note, a swan flies in from a dimensional pocket and plays the draft of "transcendence" on the great loom, transforming all of the Elders into swans themselves! All of the swans fly off into the blue yonder, leaving the village empty and Bobbin thoroughly confused after having beheld this inexplicable event.

Loom is a distinct oddity in the graphic adventure genre, as it shows no commands on the lower half of the screen, nor does it display an inventory. There is only one item Bobbin carries with him throughout the majority of the game: The distaff, a magical stick which has the power to manipulate the physical properties of objects. All you have to do is click upon an object and play a four-note tune on the distaff to cast a "draft", a spell from his clan's Book of Patterns. This musical mechanic is similar to the ocarina from *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, but *Loom* predates Nintendo's classic by nearly a decade.



Bobbin Threadbare is the "loom child", born from this mystical apparatus.

After acquiring the staff, the first order of business is to look at the egg into which Hetchel was transformed. Doing so causes four notes to ring out from the loom, and astute observers will notice the graphic of the distaff on the lower part of the screen and the three sections of the staff with the notes of "c", "d", and "e" below them. The notes on the loom play out with colored sparkles, and these colors are also coded with the notes beneath the distaff. The four notes that resonate with the egg form the draft of Opening, which is always e/c/e/d, and will open up any door or container like the egg. Bobbin learns many other drafts later, but each new game alters the notes of most drafts, except for the Opening draft and a few others which are vital to the storyline. Some drafts can be played backwards to achieve their reverse affect; playing the Opening draft in reverse (d/e/c/e) makes it the draft of Closing and seals off open passages. However, some drafts are palindromes (like f/g/g/f for example) and cannot be reversed. Loom's primary gameplay consists of finding drafts and applying them to solve puzzles. Drafts are usually acquired by looking at key objects and listening to the four-note tune if they have a draft to teach. On the highest selectable difficulty level, you need to recognize them strictly by sound.

It's an innovative mechanic that lends the game a unique identity, but it does have a somewhat frustrating old-school problem. The instant a draft is learned, it is not stored in any sort of menu that can be referred to for later use. They have to be memorized or ideally written down. (To aid this, the original release came with a book to record them.) There are a few drafts that Bobbin learns early in the game that will be used much later, and by then there is no way to relearn those drafts from their appropriate objects. Also, many drafts are randomized on each play, so drafts cannot be recorded for one playthrough and be applied to all subsequent playthroughs.

Despite this problem, the adventure itself is actually quite short, and players who know what they are doing could conceivably beat the game in about an hour. Bobbin's goal is to find

out to where the Elders and the mystery swan disappeared. His adventure starts on Loom Island, which is completely barren after he frees Hetchel from her eggshell prison and she goes off to find the swans.



The emerald city is quite gorgeous.

Bobbin's journey takes him to the mainland where he comes across three other Guilds: The protective and agricultural Guild of Shepherds, the artistic and pacifistic Guild of Glassmakers, and the reclusive warmongering Guild of Blacksmiths. The Glassmakers reside in Crystalgard where the hospitable Master Goodmold shows off the radiance of their crystal city. The Shepherds live in the Fold, a once-peaceful pasture of sheep where the livestock is constantly terrorized by a fearsome black dragon. Fleece Firmflanks, a gorgeous maiden of the Shepherds, laments that she cannot defend the sheep, but Bobbin just might have the ticket. The Blacksmiths constantly toil in the Forge, their massive anvil-shaped fortress. He finds a loafing young Blacksmith named Rusty Nailbender sleeping around an iron graveyard, and the only way Bobbin is going to get into the Forge is by committing a severe case of identity theft.

The one responsible for the disruptions in the pattern is Bishop Mandible, a callous cretin hailing from the Guild of anti-secular Clerics who wishes to (guess what) take over the world. He somehow manages to harness Bobbin's distaff for his own evil needs and summon the forces of the dead to rip the pattern asunder. The bastard brings Chaos, the high demon of the dead, into the world and causes... well, chaos. It all falls on Bobbin to mend the damage done by the dead and confront Chaos to try and restore order to the threads of reality. How does it all end? Rather suddenly. *Loom* becomes painfully easy after Mandible summons Chaos, and figuring out what to do takes an almost insultingly small amount of effort. The "final battle" against Chaos has the game practically shoving the correct drafts into your face, and it all culminates in a rather unsatisfying cliffhanger. It's almost as if the game was only two-thirds finished when the developers decided to attempt an experimental method of programming the last third while sleepwalking.

Loom may be a bit light on the gameplay department, which was amusingly mocked in Sierra's *Space Quest IV*, where a parody game called "Boom" described as having "no conflict, no puzzles, no chance of dying, and no interface [that] make this the easiest-to-finish game yet!" But it does excel in aesthetics with some of the finest visuals to be found in any adventure game of the time. The graphics give the game's world a whimsical appearance that reaches just about across the range of the color spectrum.

As was the case for most of LucasArts' earlier releases, the graphics come in two distinct flavors: 16-color EGA for the original computer releases, and 256-color VGA for the others. Specifically, the 16-color palette is used for the original PC release, as well as the Atari ST, Amiga, and Macintosh versions, with only subtle differences between the versions. The bright EGA color scheme actually works in *Loom*'s favor and really adds to the world's surreal fantasy appearance. The Turbografx-16 CD version uses the EGA graphics as a basis, but improves them slightly with more color and detail. The VGA graphics are still preferable, and can be found on only two of the releases: The 1991 release for the Japanese FM Towns CD home computer (which is still playable in English), and the 1992 IBM PC CD-ROM re-release.

This was the first LucasArts game to prominently feature music, as opposed to their previous titles, which mostly played in silence. All of *Loom*'s music consists of excerpts from Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*, which is not only fitting for most situations, but also symbolic for the overall theme, what with the swans being a vital plot point. In the EGA versions, as well as the IBM PC CD version, the music plays once before it fades into silence, but the Turbografx-16 and FM Towns versions have the music running throughout the entire game.

Naturally, the music on the CD versions is the best, and while it's not recorded with a full orchestra like you'd find on most classical CDs, the synthesized renditions still sound excellent. The IBM PC CD version is the only one that features voice acting, technically making it the first dubbed LucasArts adventure, pre-dating *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* by a few months. The voice acting is decent for its time, with most of the characters speaking with classy British accents, but does not add a lot of impact to the game. The problem is that all of the voices are recorded on the CD's redbook audio tracks, rather than being compressed as samples like most other dubbed games. Since this technique takes up a monumental amount of space, a good deal of the original dialogue needed to be cut short and altered. Furthermore, many of the character closeups were removed, since the developers had problems lip-synching the dialogue. The FM Towns version lacks the voice acting, but it has the 256-color graphics, the CD music, the full dialogue, and the closeups. Thankfully, this version is easily playable on ScummVM, even though finding a legitimate copy is extremely difficult and overwhelmingly expensive.

While *Loom* is an overall short game lacking in substance, it is still an entertaining and visually alluring adventure game certainly worth a playthrough. It may be over too soon and it ends unceremoniously, but *Loom* is a fine game that adventure aficionados will likely enjoy.

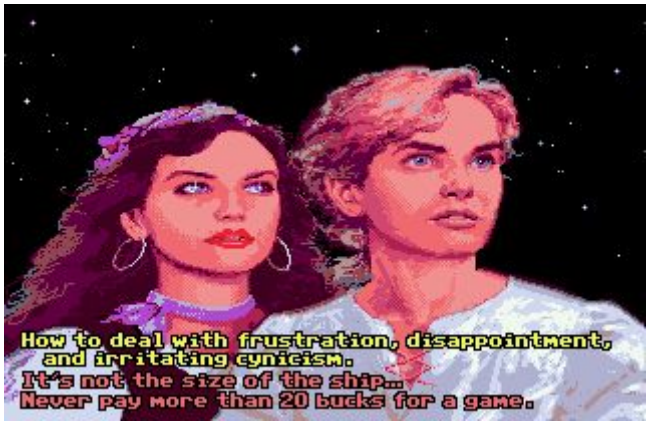
However, while it met with moderate critical success for its time and became a veritable cult classic in later years, LucasArts unfortunately decided to not follow up on the game's story. *Loom's* dire cliffhanger ending is the result of plans that eventually fell through due to lack of developer and audience interest, but what could have been would have tied up the loose threads of the story (pun slightly intended). The second game, *Forge*, would have starred Rusty Nailbender, Bobbin's blacksmith pal, fighting to regain control of the Blacksmith's stronghold after Chaos and the forces of the dead wrested control of it. The trilogy's end, *The Fold*, would focus on Fleece Firmflanks of the Shepherds, joining forces with Rusty and Bobbin to ultimately obliterate Chaos and restore peace to all the land, uniting all Guilds in harmony. It could have been an adventure epic in the making, but the developers of *Loom* were already focused on other projects at the time, and Bobbin's quest remained the only game of its kind.

Loom is also notable for its reference in *The Secret of Monkey Island*. Here, a minor character from *Loom* named Cobb appears sitting in a bar. He's dressed as a pirate and wears a button that reads "Ask me about *Loom*". When spoken to, he'll reluctantly reply to nearly every dialogue option with a succinct "Aye", but when asked about *Loom*, he goes off on a long winded spiel about how amazing it is, while the word "ADVERTISEMENT" flashes at the top of the screen.

Monkey Island

LucasArts' *Monkey Island* series is undoubtedly one of the most well known in all of adventure gaming. Sierra's *King's Quest* may be able to take the crown of being "the first", but it's definitely *Monkey Island*, with its clever design, memorable characters and witty dialogue that has endeared a whole generation of gamers.

The initial entry, *The Secret of Monkey Island*, came to being after work completed on *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade: The Graphic Adventure*. Ron Gilbert, the director (and guy whose name appeared on the box) wanted to do a fantasy game, but didn't want to stick with the standard swords and sorcery bit. Instead, he wanted to develop a game focused on pirates, inspired by both the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride at Disney theme parks, as well as Tim Powers' historical fantasy novel *On Stranger Tides*. During the conceptual stages it was meant to have somewhat serious overtones, but when the game began development, the programmers and scripters, consisting of David Grossman and Tim Schafer, implemented some of their own goofy dialogue as placeholder text. The result was so funny that the rest of the game was planned to have sort of a silly undercurrent running throughout, filled with strange insults and numerous pop culture references, with a particular fondness for George Lucas movies.



Monkey Island teaches several important life lessons.

LucasArts was quick to make a follow-up in 1991, which garnered extremely strong reviews. Ron Gilbert left the company a bit thereafter, while others continued the legacy in the form of *Day of the Tentacle* – directed by Grossman and Schafer – as well as *Sam and Max Hit the Road*. The popularity of the genre exploded with the advent of the CD-ROM, allowing *Monkey Island* to build up a stronger audience. It wasn't until 1997 when they followed up with a sequel, this time using gorgeous hand-drawn cel animation and full voice acting, and another three years later, featuring fully 3D characters. By the fourth *Monkey Island* game, the adventure genre had died out, and it wasn't until 2009 when it was resurrected by Telltale Games, a company founded by some former LucasArts staff which specialized in episodic graphic adventures.

Due to the time span between releases, there's a pretty sharp divide between the first two *Monkey Island*s and the next three. In addition to the advances of technology, Ron Gilbert only worked on the first two games, which is one of the reasons why some old school fans tend to turn up their noses at the later entries. That's not to say that the more recent games are poor (although the fourth one is debatable) – it's just that the improvement in graphics and sound, as well as the different staff members, resulted in a slight shift in style and humor.

The Secret of Monkey Island was also one of the first games to implement a more player friendly attitude, which contrasted sharply to Sierra's overtly cruel design philosophies. Still, even though it won't force you to constantly save and reload, *Monkey Island* is still a very archetypical adventure game series, filled with halfway insane puzzles that are likely to drive casual fans nuts. The first game isn't especially difficult, but the second and third have some fairly convoluted puzzles – not coincidentally, they're also two of the only adventure games out there that actually have difficulty settings, so you can reduce some of the wackier roadblocks to more manageable levels.

At the core of each game are three main characters – our hero, the improbably named Guybrush Threepwood, his love interest Elaine Marley, and undead nemesis Captain LeChuck.

Guybrush wants to be a pirate, even though he's told he looks more like a flooring inspector. Why? Well, why does anyone want to become a pirate? He doesn't really seem to know, but we have to assume it's the same reason any five year old kid wants to be a pirate – to live an exciting life of action and romance, to sail the seven seas and find untold amounts of treasure. Guybrush doesn't quite understand the reality of his dreams, and much of the humor comes from how completely naive he is. Still, he proves halfway competent enough to defeat LeChuck on numerous occasions, even though he screws up plenty of times in the process. In the second game, he tries to grow a beard, which doesn't work very well. By the time he's a more established pirate in the *Tales of Monkey Island* series, he actually has a vaguely respectable goatee. Guybrush's only real talent is the ability to hold his breath underwater for ten minutes, and he's deathly afraid of porcelain, for reasons that have never been explained.

His name evolved during the development process. One of the artists named his sprite "Guy", while the file extension for the image program was ".brush". Put together, they became "Guybrush". His last name just evolved from all of the silliness.

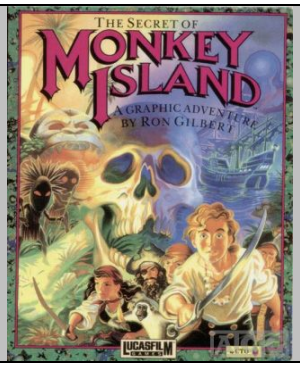
Elaine Marley is the Governor of Mêlée Island. She's the kind of damsel-in-distress who can take care of herself without any interference from bumbling wannabe pirates. She first meets Guybrush when he tries to steal an idol from her mansion, but soon finds herself falling in love with him, for some reason. Guybrush continues to pursue her, despite her being somewhat annoyed at his immaturity, but they eventually find themselves married at the end of the third game. Her name evolved from the wedding sequence at the end of the first game, which is a parody of the movie *The Graduate*.

As for Captain LeChuck – during his time on the mortal plane, he was desperately in love with Governor Marley. She told him to drop dead, so he did. As a ghost, he tries to claim her as his bride once again, but is thwarted (kind of) by Guybrush. In the later games, he just wants revenge on Guybrush, as he becomes a zombie, then a demon. In *Tales of Monkey Island*, his evil is expelled into the air, and he becomes a human once again, apparently reformed from his nasty ways.

The *Monkey Island* games are filled with interesting characters, some of whom pop up numerous times throughout the series. One of the most prominent is the Voodoo Lady, who shows up in each of the five games. She doesn't actively do much and just sits in her store, which also relocates itself every game, but she does give lots of cryptic advice to Guybrush in each adventure. The whirlwind romances of her past are a big part of *Tales of Monkey Island.*

Less directly useful to Guybrush's quest is Stan, an amalgamation of every irritating salesman on the face of the planet. He's loud, wears a ridiculous hat and even more ridiculous plaid shirt, and can't talk without gesticulating wildly. He never actually has the best interest of his customers in mind, but he also proves himself useful in each of the games he's in. He sells used boats in the first game, used coffins in the second, life insurance in the third and time shares in the fourth. He also shows up as a lawyer in the fourth chapter of *Tales of Monkey Island*, and does a fairly skeezy job. His plaid jacket is made from "unmoving plaid", a shortcut used in animation to easily show complicated patterns.

There's also a running gag involving the "secret" of Monkey Island. It's never explained in the first game, nor any subsequent titles, leaving it a mystery to all but Ron Gilbert himself.



The Secret of Monkey Island

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / FM Towns / Macintosh / Atari ST / Sega CD / Xbox 360 / PlayStation 3 / iOS
Designer(s): Ron Gilbert, Tim Schafer, David Grossman
Developer: Lucasfilm Games

"Hi! My name's Guybrush Threepwood, and I want to be a pirate!"

The Secret of Monkey Island begins with Guybrush Threepwood wandering on to Mêlée Island without giving the player any clue of who he is or how he got there. After being laughed at and ruthlessly taunted about his name, Guybrush is guided to the SCUMM Bar and happens upon three Important Looking Pirates to get him started on his way to join their illustrious ranks. Once you've successfully convinced the pirates that you're serious, they'll send you on the Three Trials, a series of tasks that will promote Guybrush to full pirate-hood. He must find a buried treasure in the middle of the woods by decoding a secret map. He must find and defeat the Sword Master, the quickest (and deadliest) fencer around. And he must steal an idol from Governor Elaine Marley's mansion.



Mêlée Island is perpetually stuck in twilight.

With the help of the Voodoo Lady, who appears to be mysterious for the sake of being mysterious, as well as a grizzled old sword trainer, Guybrush takes on the Three Trials. This is the key element of many of the *Monkey Island* games – having multiple goals at once that can be conquered in any order, so a player needn't be stumped in a single situation for too long. The other big change from standard adventure gaming is that it's impossible to get stuck or get killed, except for a few small instances where you really need to go out of your way to do it. This might be standard procedure now, but back in the early '80s, when Sierra games were still killing you for walking through the wrong door, this is a drastic improvement. There's even a very overt parody where you can send Guybrush off a cliff, which results in a Game Over message exactly like Sierra games... only for Guybrush to bounce back up to safety. ("Rubber tree." he explains.)



Take that, Sierra!

Of the three trials, the most interesting are the sword fights. The developers wanted to include sword fighting in the game, but knew that most adventure gamers hated the poorly implemented action elements typical of other games. Taking inspiration from the witty barbing in old Errol Flynn movies, all sword fights are won or lost with insults. All of these were contributed by noted science fiction author Orson Scott Card. One pirate will say an insult, and the other needs to respond with an appropriate comeback. If you choose wisely, you'll gain an advantage. Get it wrong, and you'll be put on the defensive. For example, the following is a proper insult/comeback pairing:

Insult: You fight like a dairy farmer.
Comeback: How appropriate. You fight like a cow.

Or:

Insult: I'm not going to take your insolence sitting down!
Comeback: Your hemorrhoids are flaring up again, eh?

Or:

Insult: You make me want to puke.
Comeback: You make me think somebody already did.

And so forth. Learning these insults and comebacks does not come naturally – instead, you need to repeatedly fight pirates around the island to learn new phrases, until you've built up a fairly comprehensive library of knowledge. Once you've reached this level, you need to fight the Sword Master, where things work a bit differently. Here, you're always on the defensive, plus the Sword Master has a totally new slew of insults. You need to reassess your comebacks so you can properly combat them. Although the whole sequence can get a bit tedious, especially on replays, it's still one of the hallmark moments of the game, and elements of it appear in nearly all future *Monkey Island* games.

One other classic *Monkey Island* moment occurs when sneaking into the Governor's mansion. Upon breaking in and disappearing out of view into a room in the background, the game switches to auto-pilot, as Guybrush commits several unseen, increasingly ludicrous actions ("Use gopher repellent on... gopher. Use gopher repellent on... army of gophers. Use gopher repellent on... funny little man."), with nothing but dialogue, sound effects, and the command bar clueing you in to whatever the heck is going on. Upon getting apprehended by Fester

Shinetop, the local sheriff, you're chucked into the water, with the idol tied your leg. You're surrounded by half a dozen different sharp objects, each of which could cut the rope, but, ironically, they're all out of reach. (The solution to this puzzle is incredibly obvious, once you think about it.) This is also the only spot you can truly die – Guybrush can hold his breath for ten minutes, after all, but any more and he actually drowns, turning green and changing the verb menu into various morbid actions like "Bloat", "Rot" and "Order Hint Book".

Once completing all three trials, Guybrush learns that a pirate's life isn't so easy, especially when he falls in love with the beautiful governor, who's been kidnapped by the ghost pirate LeChuck and taken away to his stronghold on Monkey Island. After assembling a crew and obtaining a vessel from Stan, the hyperactive, loudmouth, pushy used boat salesman, Guybrush promptly sets out to sea and almost immediately finds himself faced with a mutiny. Luckily, the crew members are too lazy to actually do anything vicious, so Guybrush is left to work alone to find his way to Monkey Island. Upon reaching it, he finds it mostly uninhabited, except for an overbearing castaway named Herman Toothrot and a group of vegetarian cannibals, who are just as perplexed by their situation as the player likely is. None of them are happy about LeChuck's presence, and they eventually help you find your way through the hellish bowels of the island and into LeChuck's hold. The final chapter sees the cast returning to Mêlée Island, as Guybrush dramatically (and foolishly) attempts to stop the LeChuck/Marley marriage.



Guybrush meets up with Stan, the overly pushy used boat salesman.

At first glance, the world of *Monkey Island* appears to be relatively normal – at least, as normal as a computer game about pirates can be – but there are little bits of wackiness that come out of nowhere. It's all very self aware at how silly it is, too, and like the best farces, every weird little bit makes sense in its own strange little universe. It's especially amusing when it comes to its own bizarre puzzle logic. At one point, you need several items for a recipe, including a crushed skull and some monkey blood. There aren't any skulls around, but you do have a crumpled Jolly Roger flag. And there's no blood (and frankly, that's a bit cruel anyway), but red wine is basically the same thing, right?

The Secret of Monkey Island also introduced the gaming world to grog, the drink of choice of pirates all throughout the Caribbean. According to the Three Important Looking Pirates in the bar, grog consists of one or more of the following: kerosene, propylene glycol, artificial sweeteners, battery acid, rum, acetone, battery acid, red dye #2, scumm, axle grease and/or pepperoni. Despite its overly caustic nature, it can also be mixed into various other drinks, including grogatinis and grogaccinos. (Brilliantly, an Argentinean TV news show found this recipe posted on Facebook and reported on it as if it was real. What fantastic journalism.)

There's barely such a thing as a generic NPC throughout the entire game, as nearly everyone you can talk to has some kind of bizarre quirk. Within the first five minutes, Guybrush

is introduced to (and insulted by) the lookout of Mêlée Island, who is, ironically, blind; a hypocritical pirate who mocks Guybrush despite his own ludicrous name ("Mancomb Seepgood"); a dopey looking guy who can barely utter a word unless asked about *Loom*, another adventure game from LucasArts; a dog who mostly growls and barks, but can occasionally mutter a comprehensible word; and the trio of Important Looking Pirates who've concocted a series of elaborate trials for no real reason other than that they can. The three dialogue choices when you first speak to the pirates set the tone for the rest of the game – you can go the straightforward route ("I want to be pirate."), the crazy, brazen route ("I mean to kill you all!") or the silly, non-sequitur ("I want to be a fireman.") A lot of the fun comes through with the dialogue choices. There are straight replies in any situation, but it's more fun to pick the completely random ones ("Call me Squinky.") or the unnecessarily belligerent replies. Upon visiting a house on a solitary island, Guybrush can insult the dweller, who happens to be bald. There's something uncannily amusing about barging into someone's house and acting like a confrontational jerk for the sake of it.

Meathook: Who are you?
Guybrush: I'm a pirate, cannonball-head. Who are you?
Meathook: My name's Meathook... and I think you've got a little attitude problem!
Guybrush: Well, I think you've got a little hair problem.
Meathook: Geeze! You just don't know when to quit, do you?
Guybrush: Obviously, neither did your barber.

This is the sort of game where you can find a red herring (an actual fish) which turns out to be entirely necessary to progress. One of the key items is seemingly useless Rubber-Chicken-With-a-Pulley-in-the-Middle. (The fact that these do not exist in the real world is such a tragically missed marketing opportunity on the part of LucasArts. There is actually a Rubber-Chicken-With-a-Pulley-in-the-Middle store in the game, although you can't enter it, sadly.) This is a game where the antagonist decides that Guybrush is a threat to his "plan" for no actual reason, or that the Governor falls in love with our hero because, well, he's the hero. Every time a character mentions the name of an island, it's designated with a little trademark symbol (Mêlée Island™), something which is never internally addressed, but is emblematic of the sort of completely random, left field humor that has come to typify not only the *Monkey Island* series, but LucasArts adventure games in general.

The Secret of Monkey Island was initially released in 16 color EGA format on floppy disks for the IBM PC, and later, the Atari ST. This version used an interface similar to the *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* adventure game, with 16 verbs and the inventory represented by text. Not long after, a 256 color VGA version was released, which naturally offered substantially improved graphics. The only major differences between these versions are the face portraits – they're pretty cartoony in the EGA release, but look much more realistic in the VGA version. The Amiga release is somewhere between the two versions, offering higher colored backgrounds but lower colored sprites.

There are actually a few jokes that are only contained in the disk version. If you wander around the forest a bit, you can eventually find a stump with a small opening in it. When Guybrush inspects it, he'll mention that it leads to a series of catacombs, try to go in, and then the game asks you to insert "Disk 22". The game obviously never shipped on that many disks, so after you page through the requests for more absurdly high numbered disks, Guybrush just comments about how he'll have to skip that part of the game. This led to some confusion, as apparently some people didn't get the joke and thought they were missing disks, which was further corroborated by a credit in the ending for "Artwork for Disk 22". This joke was removed from the CD version and *Special Edition* re-release, seeing how it didn't really make sense anymore. Apparently LucasArts got some calls about this, as referenced in a scene in

Monkey Island 2 where Guybrush calls the Lucasfilm Games Hint Line and asks who's responsible for "that damn stump joke."



Guybrush learns to swordfight against this absurd contraption.

Other than the infamous "stump joke", Guybrush will come across a skeleton in the Voodoo Lady's shop and remark that it "looks like an emaciated Charles Atlas." Apparently Mr. Atlas' family was none too pleased by this and threatened some kind of legal action, so it was changed to a more generic reply about not wanting to mess with voodoo crap.

Two years later, a CD version was released for IBM PCs, the second CD release of a LucasArts adventure after *Loom*. It incorporates the updated interface from *Monkey Island 2*, with 12 verbs and an inventory represented by icons. All of the music is now played through CD audio, and some of the previously quiet areas have some environmental effects. It's actually pretty disappointing that they didn't use the CD format for more than just music – voices would've been nice – but for a long time it was considered the definitive version of the original *Monkey Island*. This version was also released in Japan for the FM Towns Marty and is mostly identical to the PC CD-ROM version except for a few altered inventory sprites.

LucasArts also ported the CD version to the Sega CD. Given the 64 color limit on the Genesis, the graphics had to be downgraded a bit, but it still looks pretty good. The major issue, however, is the loading times. The Sega CD has a single speed CD-ROM, which causes it to spin and wheeze for several seconds every time you change screens. Also, it doesn't save data to the backup RAM like most games, instead utilizing a four digit password to track your quest. It only records the major items and most event triggers, so it's possible to find yourself missing some of the less relevant items once you reload. It doesn't keep track of your location, instead opting to start you off at the same point in each chapter. For the most part, it's not a big problem, except during the Sword Master trial. Since the password doesn't save any of your recorded insults or comebacks, you need to play through this whole segment in a single sitting, which is made more exasperating by the long load times every time you enter or leave a fight. ScummVM supports this version, although it eliminates the load times and uses its own save state system.

In 2009, LucasArts released a remake under the name *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition*, as a digital download for the PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 and various mobile platforms. It's built on top of the code from the original game, so it works almost exactly the same way, but with enhanced graphics and sound. On the positive side, this means that it's not only entirely accurate, but it also lets you switch between the revamped version and the original on the fly. On the negative side, the engine has a few issues which don't exactly work to its benefit.

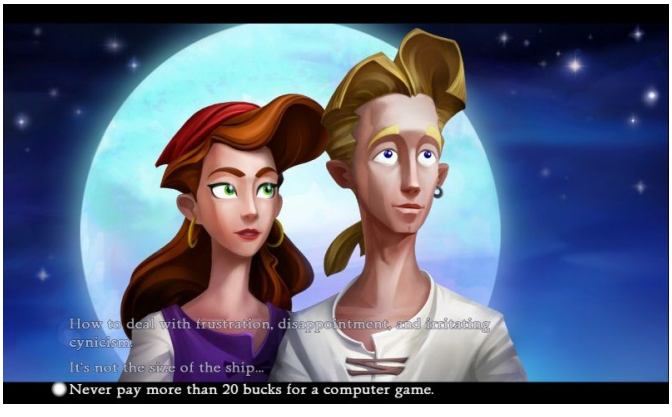
For starters – the graphics. The backgrounds are mostly excellent, all redrawn at a ridiculously high resolution, and many even have additional background details like the ships

docked in the Mêlée harbor. There are a few odd quirks here and there – the SCUMM Bar is missing the classic smiley face at the end – but overall it perfectly captures the feeling of the original artwork. The sprites, however, are more of a mixed bag. The art style is a bit cartoonier than the original, and while it looks decent most of the time, Guybrush looks completely terrible. His eyes are vacant and blank, and his hair is hideous. And one of the restraints of keeping the old engine is that the developers apparently couldn't add any additional animation frames. Not only does this look strange with the high-res graphics, but it now looks like Guybrush is gliding over the scenery instead of walking. Despite how crisp it looks in stills, it can't help but feel remarkably cheap in motion. The Max statue found on Monkey Island was also changed to a Purple Tentacle from *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle*.



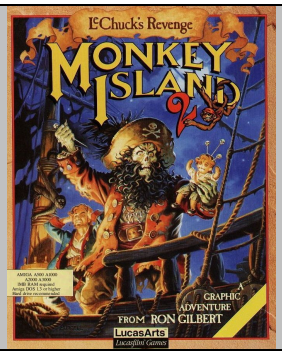
The redone artwork in the Special Edition isn't all bad.

The biggest addition is the voiced dialogue, done with all of the actors from the later games. Per classic LucasArts standard, it's all excellent, but it's clear that some of the lines really weren't meant to be read aloud, and a few of the jokes end up falling flat. The music has also been rearranged once again, and sounds fantastic. Some of the scenes that were previously silent now have more environmental noises, too. Strangely, there's no way to skip through individual lines of dialogue in the new version, only jump through whole sections – you need to switch to the old version to speed through them. You also can't listen to the voiced dialogue in the original mode.



On the other hand, Guybrush does look pretty awful.

That's not the only interface issue, though. The new version hides the interface completely, requiring that you use the keyboard to bring up the verb and inventory menus. This is alleviated somewhat in the console versions, where you can just use the shoulder buttons, and the mouse wheel can cycle through verbs in the PC version, but it's still a hassle. Some puzzles, like the grog carrying bit, where you need to transfer grog from mug to mug before they melt, is so extremely difficult that switching back to classic mode for this is almost a necessity. It's definitely a mixed bag overall, but the addition of voice acting still makes it absolutely essential for true *Monkey Island* fans.



Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Macintosh / Atari ST / Xbox 360 / PlayStation 3 / iOS
Designer(s): Ron Gilbert, Tim Schafer, David Grossman
Developer: LucasArts

The second *Monkey Island* game begins with Guybrush literally hanging by a thread, dangling helplessly over a pit and grasping onto some kind of treasure chest. Elaine Marley swoops in to save the day, but not before she makes our hero recount the tale of his precarious position. Jumping back a few days in the past, we join Guybrush telling a story around a campfire. He's now a full-fledged pirate, complete with blue overcoat and scruffy facial hair, but his glory days are behind him. He continues to recount his tale of LeChuck's defeat, although the few that actually believe him are sick of his stories, and his romance with Elaine clearly didn't last, either.

Not content with being a one-hit wonder, Guybrush sets off to make a name for himself by hunting down the legendary treasure Big Whoop. As one can expect, though, he's not terribly good at his profession, and ends up stranded on Scabb Island. Scabb is ruled by a little bully named Largo LaGrande, who harasses its inhabitants and has instilled an embargo against any ships. The only way to rid the island of this menace is by aiding the Voodoo Lady and constructing a voodoo doll with bits and pieces of Largo's persona. (Something of the Thread, something of the Head, something of the Body, and something of the Dead.) Upon ridding the island of the little bastard, Guybrush accidentally gives Largo a piece of LeChuck's beard, allowing him to resurrect the not-quite-so-dead pirate, who now comes back as a zombie.

Undeterred, Guybrush hunts down pieces of the map to Big Whoop by searching the local islands – the festive Booty Island, governed by Elaine Marley herself, and the oppressive Phatt Island, ruled by a bloated pig of a man. This second act is by far the longest, with each of the four map pieces requiring multiple steps to hunt down. The Tri-Island Area is home of numerous puzzles and dozens of items, but upon taking it step by step, you can eventually piece together the route to each of the four map pieces. It's also cool how the game doesn't completely forget Scabb Island – you'll need to revisit it several times, allowing you to interact further with some of the characters from the first chapter.

After piecing everything together (and avoiding any attempts on his life by LeChuck), Guybrush happens upon LeChuck's Fortress and discovers the terrible secret behind his beloved treasure. The final puzzle is a bit brilliant, as it's a variation on the task from the first chapter. You need to create a voodoo doll of LeChuck, much as you did with Largo, except since you're constantly being harassed by the zombie pirate, you need to think of clever ways to distract him and grab the items that you need.

Although it's not necessarily longer than its predecessor, *Monkey Island 2* certainly feels larger, especially since you spend most of the time traveling between three islands, each with several locations of their own. It's also a much brighter game, too. While Scabb Island, much like Mêlée Island, is perpetually stuck in twilight, the rest of the locations are more colorful and detailed. Much of this is due to the artists drawing the backgrounds by hand then scanning them into the computer, much like Sierra games had started to do around *King's Quest V*. Due to the color and resolution limitations, along with inexperience with the digital scanner, they look a bit messy, but the actual artwork is fantastic, and the sprites are just as expressive and animated as its predecessor.

Much of the atmosphere is also conveyed through the amazing soundtrack. The first *Monkey Island* had some great music, but it was sparse, and huge chunks of the game were played in silence. *Monkey Island 2* was the first game that used the iMUSE system, which perfectly transitions the music from screen to screen. Every screen in Woodtick village has a unique melody, each of which exemplifies its inhabitants and the town in general. Many of LucasArts' subsequent games also used iMUSE, but outside of the *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter* games, none used them as well as *Monkey Island 2*.

Many familiar faces from the first game return, including the Men of Low Moral Fiber (Pirates), the Voodoo Lady, and good old Stan (who's now in the business of selling used coffins). There are plenty of new and memorable characters too, like the near-sighted cartographer Wally (whom you rudely steal a monocle from early on), Jojo the piano playing monkey, and the hard-of-hearing laundry clerk Mad Marty.

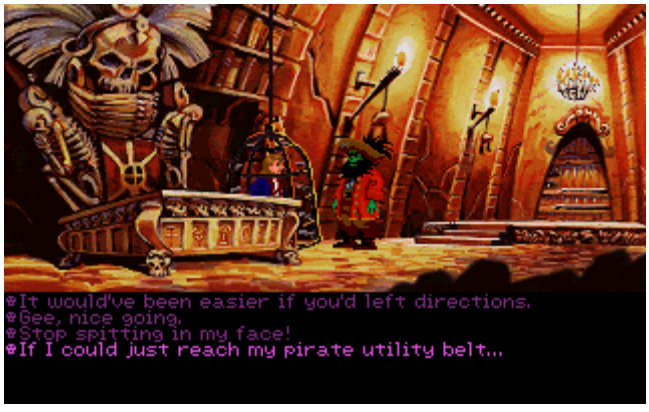


It's a calming feeling to walk around the town of Woodtick, enjoying the fantastic soundtrack.

Of course, *Monkey Island 2* is remarkably funny. There are dozens upon dozens of weird, strange and memorable moments throughout the entire adventure. In one, Guybrush knocks himself unconscious and has a dream where his long-lost parents come to visit him, but end up turning into skeletons and singing a variation on the folk song "Dem Bones". It's not only weird and trippy, but it foreshadows some of the darker moments of the game, and also provides some hints for a later puzzle. It's also insanely catchy. Some of it gets a bit silly and lowbrow too, like when Guybrush needs to dig up some remains from a grave. He holds up the bone to the sky, the music turns dramatic, the lighting strikes in the background... then his pants fall down.

The library contains dozens upon dozens of silly titles, including several of Guybrush's own (reportedly terrible) memoirs. There's an amusing allusion to the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride, where you're stranded in a cell and need to somehow get the key from the dog that's sitting just outside of your reach. And many of the laughs revolve around Guybrush's slightly amoral approach to puzzle solving. Need some cash? Well, simply steal a cowering rat (from the Men

with Low Moral Fiber), sneak into the bar's kitchen, toss the rat in the soup, get the current cook fired, get hired in his stead, take your advance salary, and sneak back out through the window. At one point you need a key from Stan – so, you convince him to hop into a coffin (to demonstrate its roominess), nail it shut, and make off with the key with him trapped inside. In fact, many of the puzzles revolve around distracting people so you can run in and steal something. The game actually keeps a running tally of all of Guybrush's misdeeds, in the form of a wanted poster on Phatt Island, which shows a picture of Guybrush as he appeared in the first game, but with a mustache doodled on.



Guybrush has an unfortunate run-in with his old nemesis.

By this point, LucasArts realized that some of their puzzles were a bit too bizarre. To compensate, there are two difficulty levels: Normal ("for video game reviewers", claims the packaging) and Hard. The storyline and events are the same for each, but Hard mode is substantially more elaborate and takes quite a bit more brainwork to solve. It's not unnaturally difficult, about on the same level as the first game. On the other hand, the Normal mode cuts out so many puzzles that it's almost stupidly easy. For example, one of the map pieces is in an antique store. In Hard mode, you need to trade for it with an artifact from a sunken galleon, which starts off a whole big chain of events. In Normal mode, you just buy it outright.

Hard mode does have a few annoying puzzles though. At one point you need to find a wrench to use on a pump. There are no tools of the sort, but you can use a hypnotized monkey to do the same thing. It's pretty funny, except a "monkey wrench" happens to be a uniquely American term, making this puzzle pretty nonsensical to anyone outside the country. At another point, you need to win a spitting contest. First, you need to thicken your saliva by concocting a special drink – not too hard. Then, you need to rearrange the flags on the field to make the goal shorter – again, pretty much in line with the usual puzzles. But, what's not immediately apparent is that you need to wait for the wind to blow in order for the spit to travel far enough. The only indication that the wind is blowing is the movement of the scarf that one of the audience members is wearing – a detail so small you could assume it was just a regular part of the animation. (The remake adds in sound effects, making the wind more apparent.)

But by far the most controversial aspect is the ending. It's full of unconventional twists and revelations, as Big Whoop is far from the typical pirate treasure that both Guybrush and the player were probably expecting. As the result, the finale is a bit out there, especially since it ends so suddenly. At least the sting of the finale is lessened by its sequel, but for fans that played it back in the day, the long wait between the second and third games – six years total – proved more than a bit frustrating.

In spite of this, *Monkey Island 2* is still a fantastic game, and is remarkably well regarded by its fans. Though its sequels are still excellent, there's something vaguely kooky – and even

foreboding – about the atmosphere that its sequels couldn't quite capture, and with that, it still remains incredibly unique even amongst its immediate brethren.

Most of the computer versions of *Monkey Island 2* are pretty similar, with the only major difference being color depth and music quality. However, in 2010, following the success of *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition*, LucasArts gave an overhaul to the second game, too. Many of the basic features are the same – upgraded graphics, full voice acting, enhanced music and redone interface – along with the ability to switch back to the original "Classic" mode at any time. It's definitely clear that much more time, money, and effort were put into this one. The background artwork is simply stunning, perfectly capturing the look and feel of the original scenes while making them much, much crisper. The sprites are much improved too, with Guybrush looking substantially better, as LucasArts responded to the criticisms towards his hair in the first *Special Edition*. The animations are much more fluid, too. Some of them look pretty awkward, but the quality is still far more hit than miss. The voice acting is still aces, you can skip individual lines of dialogue again, and you can listen to it in classic mode too. The interface has been fixed so you can bring up a context sensitive command menu by clicking on something, which is vaguely similar to the one implemented in *The Curse of Monkey Island*. You can also directly control Guybrush with a control pad, if you have a strange aversion to mice or are playing the console version.



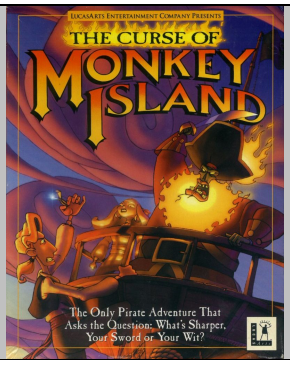
The visuals in the second Special Edition are much, much improved.

Still, even though it's a vast improvement over the first *Special Edition*, it's not without some hiccups. All of the music has been redone again, and sounds fantastic, but since it's all prerecorded with live instruments, it's extremely difficult to implement the musical transitions from iMUSE. The computer versions do their best and sound almost perfect, except for those with the most trained ears, but the Xbox 360 versions just crossfades the tunes, and it sounds off. The Classic mode also uses some lousy instrumentation, as opposed to the Adlib FM synth most old school PC gamers are probably familiar with, or the far superior Roland MT-32 music.

There's also a Developer Commentary mode, featuring comments from Ron Gilbert, Tim Schafer and David Grossman. At certain points through the game, you can hit a button and their shadows pop up, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*-style, and they'll reminisce about the game's development. There's some good stuff, but they seem to ignore the most potentially interesting points, like the crazier puzzles or, more importantly, the ending. It also won't remember if you've listened to a commentary and will prompt you every time you enter the screen, unless you disable the whole feature.

Elements like these feel a bit glitchy and unpolished, but some things have been strangely removed from the upgraded version, too. The opening credit sequence is gone, which shouldn't sound like a big deal, but it was a funny little bit featuring dancing monkeys. The ending

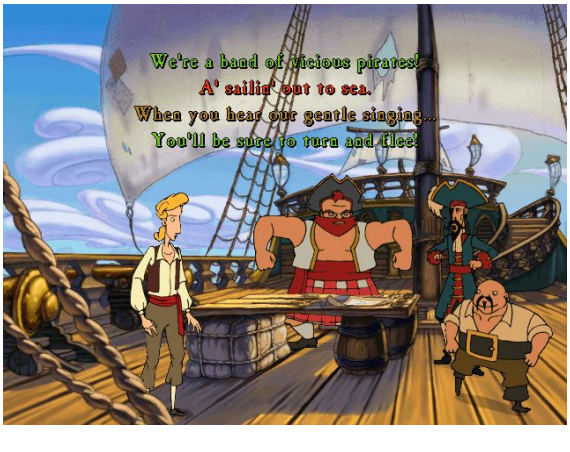
originally displayed several dozen suggestions of what you should be doing instead of being cooped up playing computer games ("paint a stranger's house in the middle of the night", or "publish a magazine about pencil shavings" or "sing Welsh folk songs at the bank") but these were missing in the initial release. They're available in Classic mode, at least, and they were added post-release via a patch. There's no Easy mode at all either, as only the Hard mode is available.



The Curse of Monkey Island

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Jonathan Ackley, Larry Ahern
Developer: LucasArts

Monkey Island 2 ended somewhat confusingly, and so the third game begins on a similarly baffling note. Guybrush is floating throughout the sea, apparently having escaped from LeChuck's "Carnival of the Damned", with little memory of the events at the end of the last game. With an outstanding sense of luck, Guybrush happens upon LeChuck, who's now a demon with a flaming beard, engaged in ship-to-ship combat with Elaine Marley near Plunder Island. Guybrush helps sink LeChuck's crew and finds a gorgeous looking ring in LeChuck's treasure hold. He gives it to his sweetheart, who graciously accepts, both unaware that the ring is cursed, and will turn anyone who wears it to gold. Guybrush sets off to explore Plunder Island and its fearsome Puerto Pollo, named after the ravenous (not really) chickens that infest the area. During his search through the Caribbean for a cure, LeChuck is still after Guybrush, and he must once again face off with him at the end.



These pirates will rhyme anything you say. So, what word rhymes with "orange"?

While Ron Gilbert had since left LucasArts by the time *The Curse of Monkey Island* was in development, the reins were handed over to Jonathan Ackley and Larry Ahern, who had previously worked on other LucasArts games like *Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle* and *Sam &*

Max Hit the Road. Ahern also serves as art director, with veteran Bill Tiller working on the backgrounds. And it's an outstandingly fantastic looking and sounding game.

Much technological progress had been made between the second and third *Monkey Island* games. This is the first of the series to be developed explicitly for CD, utilizing full voiced dialogue, SVGA graphics, and full motion video cutscenes. The backgrounds are gorgeously drawn, but the real standout is the character artwork. It's all scanned from illustrated cels, with a distinctly goofy art style that might vaguely recall *Looney Tunes* and occasionally a bit of Matt Groening but stands completely on its own. Guybrush is tall, lanky, with eyes spread a bit too far apart, and looks a bit like his rendition in the first game, clean shaven with a white shirt. The sprites are huge and perfectly animated, although Guybrush's sprite does pixellate as he scales back and forth on the scenery, which does slightly shatter the otherwise brilliant magic of the visuals. The full motion cutscenes are good enough to appear in a professionally animated movie – it's that good.

The voice acting, too, is spot on. Dominic Armato provides a perfect Guybrush (he's a self professed *Monkey Island* fanboy), while Earl Boen sneers wonderfully as LeChuck, and Alexandra Boyd gives Elaine Marley a charming British accent. All of the secondary characters are just as inspired, with even famed child star Gary Coleman playing a small role. The change in art style and the addition of voiced dialogue does lend for a more cartoonish feel than its predecessors. Primarily, Guybrush takes on a bit more personality than before, where he previously was a cipher who had a sarcastic sense of humor if you wanted him to. Here, he's more expressive, more involved, a bit more inept and still somewhat naive, while a bit less snarky. There's also a lot more dialogue in this one, and all of it is both splendidly written and voiced.



The finale is a bit long-winded and slightly out of place, but seeks to resolve the ending of its predecessor.

Naturally, *The Curse of Monkey Island* features a delightfully deranged set of characters, including Murray the talking skull, who has delusions of world conquest despite not having a body; the deranged pirate Mr. Fossey and his crew of not-so-faithful monkeys; Slappy Cromwell, who has edited all of Shakespeare's works into a forty-five minute production called *'Speare!*; Kenny, a young entrepreneur who tries to trick customers at his lemonade stand with his bottomless mug policy (the mug, in fact, has no bottom); and a trio of retired pirates who have given up the life at sea in order to run a barbershop, one of whom is violently Scottish and is voiced by Alan Young, the voice behind Scrooge McDuck. There's also a number of returning characters, including Stan, who's still stuck in the coffin from the last game and takes up selling life insurance, and Wally the cartographer, who has somehow convinced himself that he's a bloodthirsty pirate despite his diminutive stature and general nebbishness. You'll also run into the Voodoo Lady, who serves the same purpose as she always has and simply doles out advice.

There's a situation where you get swallowed by a huge snake, where useful items (like high-fiber cereal) lie just outside your reach, just like the part in the first game where you're tossed into the ocean with the idol, surrounded by potential escape tools. In one of the final areas, you even need to recreate an important item from earlier in the game – a hangover cure – similar to how you made another voodoo doll to defeat LeChuck at the end of the second game. There are even allusions to single lines from the older games, including references to a barber named Dominique (the code word Guybrush gives to the shifty man on Mêlée Island) and claiming to be a flooring inspector (the lookout's opinion on Guybrush when he first meets him). You even find a skeleton in a bar with a pin that reads "Ask me about *Grim Fandango*", like the pirate and his blatantly self-promotional *Loom* speech from the first game. It also goes so far as to reference the old stump joke. When Guybrush sticks his head through a hole and emerges out of the stump, he peers into the original background straight from the VGA release. (Meanwhile, Guybrush is still his high res cartoony self.) Guybrush comments on a herd of stunningly well rendered jaguars, which are just outside of the player's view, and then ducks back in.

If there's one aspect that feels uncomfortable, it's how the story deals with the events at the end of the second game. *The Curse of Monkey Island* acknowledges that many people were disappointed in the ending, going to great lengths to try to explain everything. That's undoubtedly a necessity, but since Gilbert was not involved in this game, it's obvious that the new directors were trying to dig themselves out of the hole that their predecessor dug for them, and it feels like they're straining themselves.



The full screen animated sequences are nothing short of brilliant.

Once again, there are two difficulty settings: a standard mode, and "Mega-Monkey", which includes even more ridiculous and bizarre puzzles. These are often quite ludicrous and bordering on impossible to figure out, even more so than any other LucasArts games. During a search for a piece of gold, you realize that a pirate has a gold tooth. In the regular difficulty setting, you just need to give him a piece of bubblegum, which dislodges the tooth, pop it the gum bubble, and take it. Simple enough. In Mega-Monkey mode, the pirate will realize his tooth fell out and won't let you leave with it, so you need to concoct a bizarre scheme by airlifting the tooth out of the room with a series of balloons. At another point, you need to trick a certain man into thinking he's a relative of yours. He drops the hint that he often looks at the paintings of his ancestors and reminisces. So, you need to rip out one of the portraits, stick it on a door, tear out the face, and stick in your head in from the window on the other side, somehow convincing him that you fit in the rest of his family.

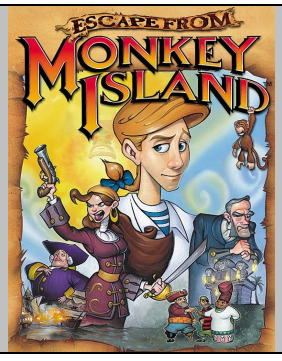
Still, like its ridiculous brethren in the *Maniac Mansion* and *Sam and Max* games, the puzzles might be frustrating, but at least they're funny. You get to fake your own death at least twice,

catapult a corpse into a crypt, impersonate a gigantic ravenous chicken known as El Pollo Diablo, infuriate a lactose intolerant volcano god, play a game of dueling banjos, and attempt to join a barbershop quarter using a series of spectacularly off-tune (but hilarious) songs. ("Ohhh... there's... a... monkey in my pocket and he's stealing all my change. His stare is blank and glassy, I suspect that he's deraaaanged!") The whole third chapter features the return of the insult sword fights, and they work pretty much the same way as they used to, right down to the special insults thrown by your ultimate enemy, Captain Rottingham. The only difference is that the comebacks now rhyme with the insults. For example:

Insult: You're as repulsive as a monkey in a negligee!
Comeback: I look that much like your fiancée?

The nonsense comebacks you can make Guybrush utter when you don't know the right ones are pretty comical too. It's all framed in a ship-to-ship cannon combat minigame, an element which was originally planned for the first game but ended up on the cutting room floor. You control the ship from an overhead perspective as you try to maneuver around your opponent and blast them with your cannons. It's not terribly fun, but it can be greatly simplified if you find yourself sick of it.

While some hardcore fans of the older games have found its movement towards cartoony graphics and humor somewhat off-putting, that certainly shouldn't stop anyone from playing it. *The Curse of Monkey* Island is one of the funniest, best looking, best sounding adventure games in the genre, and, along with the rest of the series, is absolutely essential.



Escape from Monkey Island

Initial Release Date: 2000
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / PlayStation 2
Designer(s): Sean Clark, Michael Stemmle
Developer: LucasArts

The Curse of Monkey Island ended with Guybrush burying LeChuck under a glacier and finally marrying Elaine Marley. They spend a few months at sea on a honeymoon, only to return to Mêlée Island and find that the Governor has been declared legally dead. Guybrush sets off to find out why, only to run into an evil Australian real estate mogul named Ozzie Mandrill. His plans? Overhaul the entire Caribbean and turn it into a huge tourist trap, destroying the pirate populace and replacing it with family friendly restaurants and amusement park rides. His true plan, as it eventually unfurls, is to discover the Ultimate Insult, words in a language so ancient that they pierce directly into the soul and turn any mortal into a mortified shell of a man.

Meanwhile, Elaine is trying to prove herself not-dead, and runs for re-election against the mysterious Charles L. Charles, who is very clearly (ahem) not LeChuck in disguise. Guybrush first runs into trouble when he's framed for a bank robbery and is detained on Lucre Island until he clears his name. Once he discovers all of the pieces of the Ultimate Insult on Jambalaya Island, he is captured by LeChuck and Ozzie, and sent back into the (not quite) terrifying jungles of Monkey Island. Guybrush must naturally escape and do what he must to save the dignity of all pirate-dom.

Escape from Monkey Island uses the GrimE engine, which was initially built for *Grim Fandango*. The point-and-click interface is also completely gone, replaced with an awkward direct control scheme. All of the backgrounds are pre-rendered, while the characters are all polygonal models, making it feel a bit more like *Alone in the Dark* and *Resident Evil*. There are options for both character-relative (the much loathed tank controls) or screen-relative (where up is always up regardless of the camera angle), but both are fiddly, and neither are completely comfortable. Interacting with objects is also a pain, since you either need to use different keys to look at or use different items, or use the Page Up/Down keys to cycle through multiple objects. This may shatter the soul of long-time PC gamers, but *Escape from Monkey Island* really is best played with a gamepad. At least there's a feature which lets you immediately exit the screen you're in.

The shift to 3D graphics may have seemed like an improvement when it was released, but time has taught us that it really wasn't. The CG rendered backgrounds are pretty good, but the character models have a noticeably low polygon count. The angular look worked for the heavily stylized *Grim Fandango*, but it doesn't quite pan out here. It's particularly noticeable with Guybrush, especially his boxy hair, stiff movements, and nearly complete lack of facial animations. There are a lot of subtle actions in the 2D games that are completely lost here. Still, it looks better than some other 2D-to-3D transitions, like *Gabriel Knight: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* and *Simon the Sorcerer 3D*. Visually, both of those were pretty bad, while *Escape from Monkey Island* is at least acceptable.



The character models are a bit boxy, a product of late 20th century polygon modeling.

Still, the big draw of the game is seeing familiar locations remodeled in a more modern style and hearing the voices of familiar characters with voice acting. Roughly a third of the game takes place on Mêlée and Monkey Islands, which is good for a nostalgia kick, while the rest focuses on Lucre and Jambalaya Islands. Guybrush is once again voiced by Dominic Armato, while Elaine's actress is different, with her British accent replaced by an American one. Some classic characters you'll meet include Carla, Otis and Meathook, the mutinous crewmembers you abandoned on Monkey Island way back in the first game and are still dealing with the trauma, as well as the half-senile hermit Herman Toothrot, who's the subject of some substantial retconning.

Escape from Monkey Island is largely regarded as the bastard of the series, and not just for the switch to 3D. *The Curse of Monkey Island* was criticized by some fans for being a bit too cartoony, but *Escape from Monkey Island* is even less restrained. Much of this change can be traced once again to the change in directors – this one is helmed by Sean Clark and Michael Stemmle, who previously worked on *The Dig* and *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. They're still funny guys, but so much of this game is hit or miss.

The previous games seemed like they meant to take place around the 18th or 19th century, with bits of anachronisms thrown in for occasional humor. *Escape from Monkey Island* breaks through that completely, especially with its numerous parodies and pop culture references. The resort of Jambalaya Island is filled with places like Planet Threepwood (a play off the Planet Hollywood restaurant) as well as Starbuccaneers (naturally, Starbucks), and it's the only *Monkey Island* game with an OJ Simpson reference ("If the nose fits, you must acquit!") The wackiness escalates even further in the final segments, where you control a gigantic monkey robot. (This was apparently a discarded idea from the original game, and probably should've never left the cutting room floor. This whole segment was meant to be the "true secret of Monkey Island" as evidenced by the title of the cutscene, but most fans choose to ignore this.) The commentary on the effects of modern development and commercialism are amusing, but one can't help but feel that it's a drastic departure from the themes of its predecessors and feels somewhat out of place.

It doesn't help that certain other elements just fall flat. Elaine Marley was never much of a presence in the previous games – she was more like a big sister figure, and the erratic romance between her and Guybrush was mostly played for laughs. Here, they're married, and he's completely henpecked (the game introduces him as Guybrush Marley-Threepwood), an overplayed trope that just isn't very funny. (While Ron Gilbert has generally had nice things to say about the series after he left, he has expressed his disapproval over Guybrush and Elaine getting together.) Ozzie Mandrill isn't particularly funny either. His only real distinguishing characteristics are being cranky and possessing a penchant for littering his speech with references to Australian animals. And pretty much everything relating to the Ultimate Insult (outside of its initial reveal) is just overplayed.



The background graphics are still excellent.

Many of the secondary characters lack much flair. Sure, it's cool to run into old faces like Stan, the Voodoo Lady, and Murray, the latter of whom has been reduced to a (rather useless) bouncer, but the rest of the cast? There's Ignatius Cheese, a man with a silly name and some food-related jokes similar to the Goodsoup family from *The Curse of Monkey Island*. There's a cranky harbor mistress, a daft cannonball operator, and a snooty diving champion named Marco Pollo. A good chunk of people are simply brain dead tourists and clerks. Some of them are funny, which is largely due to the still-outstanding voice acting, but none are particularly memorable, and it's unlikely we'll ever see them again in future *Monkey Island* games.

That's not to say the game is completely devoid of laughs though. There are still plenty of funny moments, some of the best coming from a Pirate Rehabilitation Center, which resembles an old schoolhouse. During a quiz, you're given several hypothetical situations and how to react to them – the "correct" answers are the polite, amicable ones, but the "fun" ones (and the ones

required to get an item to solve another puzzle) are the most ludicrously and unnecessarily violent responses. ("Your tofu burger is delivered medium well, despite your explicit request for medium rare. How do you react?" "I burn the restaurant to the ground, and string the chef up by his kidneys!") The classic SCUMM Bar is taken over by Ozzie and turned into the Hawaiian-themed LUA Bar, a joke only total nerds will ever find amusing. (Both are scripting languages, the former obviously the one LucasArts used in its 2D games.)

Much of the laughs shine through with the puzzles, of course. Early in the game you need to navigate through the Mists O' Time, which is a fairly simple puzzle, up until you meet your future self. He'll say a few things and give you a few items. Once you proceed, you'll eventually warp through time unknowingly and come across your past self – you need to repeat the exact same actions in the exact same order or else you'll cause a time paradox. This scenario has popped up in a few other adventure games, like Legend's text adventure *Timequest* and Adventure Soft's *Simon the Sorcerer II*, but it's never been quite this clever.

Some puzzles still prove irrational, per the rest of the series, even though they're still funny. Near the beginning, you'll come across a manhole with three different names written on it. Later, a shopkeeper at the prosthetics store will begin to tell a story and ask you to fill in the blanks with various names. Obviously, you're supposed to pick the names you found on the manhole. This doesn't remotely make sense, but the item he gives you – prosthetic skin – is used back by the sewer entrance, where you use it as a trampoline, tying it into one huge circle. More amusing is when you get the names wrong, which gives you some other useless prosthetic body part. Get enough of them and you can assemble them into another useless item called an Abomination of Nature.



Monkey Kombat might factually be The Worst Thing in the series.

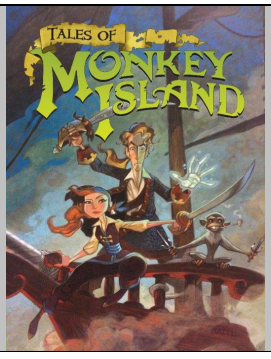
Unlike the second and third *Monkey Island*, there's only one difficulty level, and while there are some aggravating puzzles, it's not quite as tough as either of the previous games' hardest level. Their quality takes a nosedive once you reach Monkey Island in the last third of the game. First you need to roll rocks down a series of ledges, and time them so they bump into each other, launching them down different paths. It's easy enough to figure out, but the timing is annoyingly touchy. Then you're forced to navigate a log through a river of lava, which you're practically required to do several times to get it right. And then, the game ends with the worst thing in the entire series – Monkey Kombat.

Monkey Kombat is this game's variation on insult sword fighting. Basically, it's like a complicated version of Rocks-Paper-Scissors, with a variety of kung fu stances which can defeat (or be defeated by) other stances. It's not just enough to memorize these – you need to memorize the "insults" to switch positions, which are strings of monkey noises like "oop" and

"chee". The only way to get these is by, yup, repeatedly fighting monkeys over and over, until you gain enough experience and a long enough life bar to continue. The insult swordfighting bits from the first and third games were occasionally a bit annoying, but at least they were funny. This, not so much. Sure, someone probably thought the name was clever, and it's a bit neat to see Guybrush executing hadoukens and shoryukens like the guys from *Street Fighter II*, but that's not worth the exercise in tedium that it quickly becomes.

While *Escape from Monkey Island* has more than a fair share of flaws, it's still an enjoyable game, as long as you can accept the change in tone and the occasional eye-rolling moment. It may be the weakest *Monkey Island* – and perhaps one of the weakest LucasArts adventures – but it's still better than most others.

In 2002, *Escape from Monkey Island* was ported to the PlayStation 2. It looks almost identical, although the frame rate isn't quite as smooth and there are brief load times during screen changes. Still, since it was essentially made for a gamepad in the first place, it controls pretty well and didn't really lose much during the porting process. It also adds a concept artwork gallery and a guide during the Monkey Kombat sequences to make the whole thing slightly less painful.



Tales of Monkey Island

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / Wii / PlayStation 3
Designer(s): David Grossman, Michael Stemmle, Mark Darin, Joe Pinney, Jake Rodkin
Developer: Telltale Games

Escape from Monkey Island marked the end of adventure gaming for LucasArts, as they began to shift development towards legions of *Star Wars* licensed games. In 2005, Telltale Games was founded by some ex-LucasArts staff. They quickly grew into the niche of developing adventure games based on licensed properties, including *Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People*, *Wallace and Gromit's Grand Adventures*, and three seasons of *Sam and Max*. In 2009, Telltale partnered with LucasArts to create *Tales of Monkey Island*, a series of five downloadable chapters, to effectively create a brand new, fifth *Monkey Island* title. Some of the designers include David Grossman (from the first two *Monkey Island*s) and Michael Stemmle (from *Escape from Monkey Island*), amongst others. Ron Gilbert also acts as a consultant, and is given the title "Professor of Monkeyology" in the credits.

The story begins in medias res, with Guybrush having completed a quest for a mysterious voodoo root. Elaine and he run into LeChuck, whom they almost defeat – except instead of killing him, they accidentally end up summoning all of his evil energy and dispersing it throughout the Caribbean. This affliction, known as the Pox of LeChuck, begins infecting all of the other pirates, causing them to become even more dangerous and enraged. Furthermore, the disease infects Guybrush's left hand, causing it to develop a mind of its own. Even more bizarrely, LeChuck regains his mortal form and actually begins to help Guybrush and Elaine on their search. Their only clue lies in a mystical artifact called "La Esponja Grande", which is told to mitigate the curse. And so, Guybrush begins another adventure to hunt it down.

Tales of Monkey Island is the first step into true 3D for the series. At first it looks like a bit of a mixed bag – the environments look excellent, but the character models are noticeably low-poly and plasticky. Telltale realized that adventure game fans might not have super powerful rigs and have designed their games to work on low spec systems, in addition to allow easy porting to

consoles. Still, even though it's not the prettiest in stills, most of these concerns fade away when you see it in action – it's extremely well animated, with the numerous facial expressions and body movements greatly enhancing the dialogue scenes.

The other vaguely controversial move is the control scheme. It's not completely keyboard-based like *Escape from Monkey Island*, but it's not entirely point-and-click either. Instead, you use the cursor to interact with objects, while you move around with the keyboard (or nunchuck). There is an option to hold down the mouse button and direct Guybrush by pointing him in different directions, but it's clumsy and not recommended at all. Telltale's official explanation is that it's extremely difficult to implement a purely point-and-click interface when you have dynamic environments. And they're right – the camera scrolls and follows Guybrush as he moves around, potentially making it difficult to point to a location that's off screen.



The visuals aren't super amazing, but they're legions beyond the fourth game.

Like all of Telltale's games, *Tales of Monkey Island* was released episodically, with a new chapter published approximately once a month. While their previous games were largely standalone episodes with some recurring themes, each chapter of *Tales* is a smaller chunk of a larger narrative. It's not that different than the structure of the older *Monkey Island* games, it just happens that each ends on some kind of cliffhanger.

The first chapter, *Launch of the Screaming Narwhal*, takes place on Flotsam Island, where Guybrush is shipwrecked after his initial encounter with LeChuck. The island is afflicted with a strange condition, where strong winds make it impossible for anything to escape. Furthermore, an eccentric scientist named Marquis de Singe takes a particular interest in Guybrush's infected hand, to the point where it becomes a dangerous obsession. It's up to Guybrush to find out the source of the winds, eliminate them, and gain possession of a ship – the Screaming Narwhal of the title. Here, he is also guided by the Voodoo Lady to hunt down the long-missing Coronado De Cava, an explorer who supposedly knows the location of La Esponja Grande.

The second chapter, *The Siege at Spinner Cay*, begins with Guybrush and his partner, Captain Winslow, under attack by a bounty hunter named Morgan LeFlay. Sent by de Singe to retrieve Guybrush's hand, LeFlay is a huge Guybrush fangirl, gushing while simultaneously attacking him. After evading her (but losing his hand in the process, being replaced with an appropriately piratey hook), Guybrush ends up at Spinner Cay, a small grouping of islands and home to a race of androgynous merfolk called Vaycaylians. Here he runs into Elaine and LeChuck, who are arguing with another faction of pirates, driven mad by the pox, over the Vaycaylians' mystical artifacts. The peaceful talks soon erupt into chaos, and Guybrush must find a way to fend off their attacks, while learning more about the location of De Cava.

The third chapter, *Lair of the Leviathan*, is largely set in the stomach of a gigantic manatee, which has swallowed Guybrush and his ship, along with LeFlay. Conveniently, he happens upon

De Cava, as well as the rest of his crewmates, who have set up their own society deeper in the belly of the beast. Guybrush needs to guide the manatee to the Manatee Mating Grounds, where La Esponja Grande apparently resides, but its cochlea (the part of the inner ear which aids in navigation) is damaged, resulting in the first major quest of the chapter. After guiding the manatee and escaping from its insides, he must somehow find a way to distract the female manatee guarding their treasure.



The character models aren't always the prettiest, but there's still some gorgeous scenery.

Murray also pops in here again, and serves more of a useful function than his gratuitous (but still funny) cameo back in *Escape from Monkey Island*. While in the belly of the manatee, you come across a stranded crew who've used the opportunity to take a nice, relaxing vacation. The three of them are so contently deluded that they somehow refuse to believe that the fourth, a guy named Santino, actually died a long time ago and is now a mere skeleton. You'll need to switch his skull with Murray in an attempt to get him to do you a favor... until he double crosses you, anyway.

The fourth chapter, *The Trial and Execution of Guybrush Threepwood*, returns the action back to Flotsam Island, where Guybrush is brought in front of a courtroom under various trumped up charges. After disproving all of the witnesses, Guybrush still has to face up to his most grievous charge – the spreading of the pox of LeChuck. Elaine is a key witness, but unfortunately the pox has driven her to near madness, and she insists on fighting with Morgan, partially out of jealousy. Furthermore, Guybrush learns that La Esponja Grande needs to be charged before it's of any use, requiring some more item gathering and questing to find the appropriate recipe.

This chapter sees the return of Stan, who appears as the prosecutor for the trial and seems to show up solely to make a buck by selling unlicensed toys. While most of the locations are the same as the first chapter, it now takes place at night, and a few new areas are available, including the courthouse and the bar Club 41. It's also quite a dramatic chapter, something which the series has never pulled off successfully before, with a helluva cliffhanger ending.

The fifth chapter, *Rise of the Pirate God*, is by far the darkest chapter ever seen in a *Monkey Island* game, as Guybrush and Morgan explore the underworld and work with its obtuse denizens to return to the land of the living, where the climactic encounter awaits. It's definitely true that the third and fourth *Monkey Island* games moved away from the creepier elements of the first two, and this final episode does a fantastic job of bringing those back, while still maintaining a flippant sense of humor.

The characters are much better written than in *Escape from Monkey Island*, especially with the romantic subplot and the tension between Morgan and Elaine. Guybrush's love affair with Elaine was always kind of a joke in the first three games... until they ended up married by the end of it. By the time the fourth game rolled around, Guybrush clearly had the lower hand in the

relationship, and Elaine was kinda bitchy, making it rather unpleasant. Elaine's more restrained here, less mean and more of a capable woman who can clearly take care of herself, as evidenced in the first game. And she's actually pretty charming too, as evidenced by the one scene where you can make Guybrush try to say "no" to her in a dozen different ways, only to end up conceding after exhausting all of them. It also helps that her British voice actress from *Curse* is back. And then there's Morgan LeFlay, easily one of the most memorable cast members in the series. Most of her charm is carried through the outstanding animation and overly enthusiastic voice actress, and it's hard to be too scared of her when she's so damned chipper.

There are still some issues though. Take de Singe, and compare him to Ozzie Mandrill, the villain of *Escape from Monkey Island*. He was one of that game's weaker links, whose only major characteristic, other than being evil and cranky, was being Australian. Like Mandrill, de Singe is just another stereotype, this time a super gay Frenchman. Still, it's not all bad – the part in the first chapter where you need to coerce a monkey to free you from his operating table is pretty inspired, and his squeaky/shrill voice acting is slightly funny.



Morgan LeFlay is one of the best additions to Tales of Monkey Island.

The puzzles are some of the best of the series, if only because they're clever without being obtusely difficult. There's sort of a built-in hint system where Guybrush will make comments about the situation as you wander around, so at least it'll help point you in the right direction. While there are still numerous inventory puzzles, Telltale really shines with the dialogue puzzles, which comprise the best moments of the game. While *Escape from Monkey Island* beat the whole insult swordfighting joke into the ground, there are some pretty clever variations here, the most amusing being the manatee flirting. Once you've made it to the manatee breeding grounds, you need to lure the female manatee out of her cave. The male manatee is too frightened to do anything, so you need to teach yourself their language to get them hooked up. However, the only guide you have is a travel book, filled with stock phrases. The female manatee will say something threatening – you need to pick one of those fairly neutral sentences to make it sound like you're being coy.

In another amusing scenario, Guybrush gives LeChuck a lesson in adventure puzzle logic, slowly walking him through all of the steps to figure out what to do. ("If I stick this in there, then it looks like a cow. Do I need a cow?") In another section, the crew is captured by De Cava, who believes Guybrush is involved with his dear love, the Voodoo Lady. In order to save himself, he claims that he and Morgan are actually married. This obviously not being true, Guybrush needs to interpret various clues to answer De Cava's questions or face death. (Or so he threatens, you still can't actually be killed.)

A particularly silly moment is when you need to get initiated by De Cava's crew by winning a scary (more like stupid) face contest. Functionally, it's a very easy puzzle, since you just need

to walk around and look at other things (and talk to other people) to get inspired, and just not use the same expression more than once to win. It's remarkably dumb, but watching it all play out is gleefully ludicrous. It's even better later on when you need to scare one of the other crew members by mimicking the expression of the person he fears most – his childhood teacher, a bug-eyed monstrosity named Sister Agnes, Director of Discipline.

The plot and writing is definitely a step up from *Escape from Monkey Island*. The dialogue still isn't quite as funny nor as snippy as the older games, but the inspired situations and puzzles more than make up for it. The voice acting still sparkles, utilizing most of the cast members from *The Curse of Monkey Island*. Earl Boen, the voice of LeChuck, was absent for the initial release of the first chapter but appears in the last two episodes. He also went back to re-record lines for the first chapter to make it consistent. He's voiced by a different actor for the second and third episodes, seeing as how he's human and not as sneeringly evil as he used to be.

Plus, due to the pace at which Telltale needed to crank these out, some of the assets get reused a bit too often. The first chapter features not one, but two puzzles where you need to navigate through a jungle maze, similar to the Treasure Trial from the first game. In the second chapter... you come across an almost identical looking maze. Thankfully there's no more puzzle to solve, but you still need to wander around. The same maze pops up again in the fourth chapter, but at least there's a twist. Per usual protocol, you're given a map, but you can fold and refold it, altering reality so you can navigate successfully through the maze. Still, the reuse of locations – and character models for nearly all of the NPCs – is one of the game's biggest weaknesses.

In addition the PC release, *Tales of Monkey Island* was also released on the Wii as WiiWare downloads. Unfortunately, Nintendo gamers get the hose on this one. The episodes are more expensive – the whole season was released for $35, but the Wii version requires buying each individually for 1000 points, or $10 each. Each episode was released after its computer counterpart, usually by several weeks. The game obviously runs in a lower resolution, but it also suffers from a choppier frame rate and stuttering graphics. Furthermore, due to the size restrictions of WiiWare games, all of the dialogue is heavily compressed, making it sound significantly worse. The control scheme practically seems tailor made for the remote and nunchuck, but that's the only thing the Wii release has going in its favor. The PlayStation 3 version is a bit more awkward to play due to the controller, but overall it's far better, almost as good as the PC version.

Tales of Monkey Island was quite successful, sparking LucasArts' further interest in the series. Given that it's probably the most well-known in all of adventure gaming, it would only be beneficial for them to keep it alive, as long as they can figure out fantastic new adventures for Guybrush and crew – in other words, more like *Tales*, less like *Escape*.

Sam & Max

Sam is a six foot tall canine shamus with a slick suit and a tie. Max is a psychotic grinning lagomorph with a penchant for mass destruction. Together they fight crime as "Freelance Police", investigating numerous idiotic and baffling incidents as directed by a mysterious voice known only as The Commissioner. As a cartoonish mixture of detective mysteries and flat out lunacy, Sam and Max are one of the two most recognizable heroes in adventure gaming (if one could call them heroes, anyway).

Like most good buddy comedies, the charisma derives from the interplay between the eponymous heroes. Sam has a penchant for overtly long sentences, obtuse vocabulary, and elaborate non-sequiturs, all tendencies which frustrate Max to no end. Max is completely naked but apparently stores a massive Luger pistol on his person. ("It's none of your damn business, Sam." he replies when asked where he hides it, which has become a running joke.) A good amount of the banter are vague references to past, unseen events, leaving the player to fill in the implications. ("We don't go upstairs." "Not since the accident.") They are both technically sociopaths, but lovable sociopaths, if there were indeed such a thing. Max is violent and homicidal, and approaches mayhem with a curiously child-like glee. Sam is calm and collected, relatively speaking. He'll occasionally try to suppress Max's id-like tendencies, but he's also known to flip into a violent rage, when provoked.



Our two heroes (literally) burst into the scene.

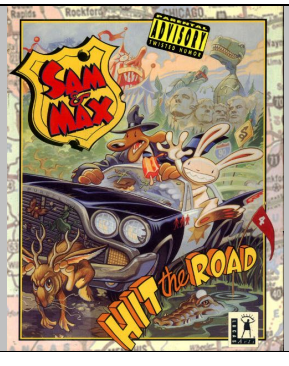
Their craziness is, of course, their main draw. While Sam and Max will regularly drive in a manner most befitting drunkards, haphazardly fire their guns at anything they remotely deem a threat, or otherwise show a complete and total disregard for the safety of both themselves and others, it's rare that you actually see any of the violence they purport to cause. Wanton destruction of property, yes, but actual shootings and beatings? Not really. Even when Max flies off the handle and ruthlessly pummels someone senseless, the camera obscures the action, with Sam delivering wincing commentary. While the violence is essentially *Looney Tunes* knocked up a couple of levels, the general aversion to showing anything truly horrifying keeps the duo innocuous and lovable, a balancing act that's hard to pull off with consistent hilarity.

Sam and Max live in New York City, or at least some variation on it. It's a dilapidated cesspool filled with garbage, crime, and disingenuous advertising, although most of the cynicism is played for laughs. While the heroes exist in a world mostly filled with humans, many of its inhabitants don't think twice about a six foot tall talking dog and a diminutive but no less bizarre grinning rabbit. Indeed, the duo is relatively normal compared to talking rats, molemen, bigfoots, gigantic cockroaches, and robotic Abraham Lincolns.

There is little restraint in their antics, and pretty much anything goes in the world of Sam and Max. Between the comic, the cartoon and the games, the two travel to the moon, fight volcano gods, befriend the devil and defeat an evil Santa Claus. They drive an old DeSoto, which can travel everywhere around the globe (and beyond) with seemingly mystical powers. (Except for the time they travel into the outer space, which they accomplish by sticking numerous matches into their exhaust pipe and lighting them.)

Sam and Max got their start as doodles by a young aspiring comic book artist named Steve Purcell. Based on some crude drawings done by his little brother, they soon starred in their own small series of independent comic books, published beginning in 1987. Shortly thereafter, Purcell found professional work doing artwork for LucasArts on *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders*. His characters quickly became popular around the office, and Max's visage can be found in many of their games. Eventually, they starred in short comics for The Adventurer, LucasArts' product catalog, thereby making them sort-of official mascots. But their big break came with *Sam and Max Hit the Road*, their first computer game, released in 1993. It was a massive hit, and in 1997, Sam & Max even starred in their own cartoon series.

Despite their relative popularity, LucasArts was never able to follow up on it. A sequel was devised several years later, but was cancelled in 2004 due to "market conditions". Shortly thereafter, Purcell re-obtained the license for his characters and hooked up with Telltale Games, a then-new studio comprised of some former LucasArts staff that focused on adventure games. Throughout three "seasons", each consisting of five-to-six episodes digitally distributed online, Telltale resurrected the brand, and brought Sam & Max back into the limelight.



Sam and Max Hit the Road

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Sean Clark, Collette Michaud, Steve Purcell, Michael Stemmle
Developer: LucasArts

There's something strange going on at the carnival! Bruno the Bigfoot has disappeared, and has kidnapped Trixie the Giraffe-Necked Girl. The owners are eager to have their sideshow attraction freaks returned to them, so Sam and Max are enlisted to hunt them down. They quickly end up following the tracks of one Conroy Bumpus, a diminutive, arrogant country music star with a penchant for hunting endangered species. Their investigations take them across the entire country, as they discover the true mystery behind Bruno's disappearance, and save the Bigfoot race in the process.

Sam & Max Hit the Road is about one of the greatest American traditions – the tourist trap. Practically anyone that's taken a road trip in the Great USA can recall any number of bizarre, inane attractions positioned on the long stretches of highway, existing to lure in unsuspecting families with promises of something truly wacky. The America portrayed in *Sam & Max Hit the Road* is filled with such attractions, usually exaggerated, but only slightly. Beyond their office in New York and the carnival, each location pays homage to various roadside disasters.

The World's Largest Ball of Twine is exactly what it sounds like. (There's a real one of these in Minnesota, but it's not quite as large, nor do you need to take a cable car to reach the top.) The World of Fish is a glorified river bed. Bumpusville is a museum dedicated to Conroy Bumpus, not too far off from similar locations in the honor of Elvis Presley and (horrifyingly

enough) Dolly Parton. The Celebrity Vegetable Museum will grow you a vegetable in the shape of any person, assuming you can provide them with a photograph. The Mystery Vortex is an enigma where the laws of physics don't seem to apply. And the glorious, breathtaking Mount Rushmore has been demoted to a bungee jumping attraction/dinosaur park. The ubiquitous roadside gas station/restaurant Stuckey's also appears in parody form as "Snuckey's", which are all (almost) spookily identical to each other and houses employees who graduate from the distinguished Snuckey University.



Max takes a no-nonsense approach to puzzle solving.

At first, there's not a whole lot of guidance, as progress is made by finding various souvenirs or brochures, which opens up new locations on the United States map. Eventually your goals become clear – the first major one involves collecting bits of Bruno's fur for a bizarre ritual concocted by the molemen, a strange hybrid race unique to the *Sam & Max* universe. Other tasks involve assembling a makeshift bigfoot costume, and finding arbitrary items to solve some kind of mystical totem pole puzzle. Like most LucasArts games, many involve finding a series of three-or-four different items, using various stuff scattered around each of the locations. One involves fetching a mood ring hidden in the World's Largest Ball of Twine, which is obtained by combining a magnet, a golf-ball retriever, and a severed hand (which once belonged to Jesse James). Despite how cracked out that sounds, the puzzles actually aren't too difficult by LucasArts standards, and the quest isn't terribly long either.

It just also might be one of the funniest games LucasArts ever produced. They've made so many winners, so it's hard to pick out one, but *Sam & Max Hit the Road* continuously hits the high notes with their dry, witty dialogue. The introduction sequence might be one of the best in the history the medium, where they briefly discuss what to do with a ticking time bomb obtained in the earlier scene. "Max, where should I put this so it doesn't hurt anyone we know or care about?" Sam muses. "Out the window, Sam. There's nothing but strangers out there." Sure enough, he chucks out the window, where it detonates not-so-harmlessly off screen. "I sure hope there was no one on that bus." "No one we know, at least... "

Try to continuously pick up an immovable object and Sam will grow frustrated before bursting into tears, causing Max to directly threaten the player. At one point, Sam enters the world of virtual reality, rendered in extraordinarily crude polygons, a quaint reminder of how awful early 3D graphics looked. One of the best bits is a history lesson on naturalist John Muir, in the form of a song as performed by a series of mounted animal heads, complete with a blinking "Edutainment" sign.

The SCUMM interface in *Hit the Road* has been cut back a bit. The command window is gone, so the main visuals can take the full screen. All of the verbs have been condensed into five icons: "Walk", "Look", "Talk", "Get" and "Operate". Although you control Sam, Max also tags

along, and playfully pokes and prods at bits of the background. He's also useful for bits of puzzle solving. One of the first puzzles is to extract their orders from a cat, who's swallowed them for safe keeping. Just "Use" Max on the cat, and he'll pick him up, jam his hand down his throat, and chuck the useless feline to the side. The second major puzzle involves sabotaging a Tunnel of Love ride. You do this by picking up Max, dipping him in the water, and jamming him face-first into the fuse-box. He doesn't mind – afterword, he just blinks and keeps on grinning, completely unfazed, and perhaps even slightly elated.



Sam and Max's office provide a home base for all of their mayhem.

The conversation system has been changed slightly too. Instead of picking the exact lines of dialogue spoken, all options are designated by icons. There are three standard ones – a question mark, an exclamation point, and a rubber ducky, indicating a non sequitur. Further chatting will also bring up icons to discuss other topics. It works pretty well, because you're never quite sure what will come out of their mouths until you pick an option. Conversations are usually quick and to the point, though, and while the dialogue is often hilarious, it almost feels like they should be longer. One of the most entertaining characters is the swearing swami, whose expletives are censored. "Percent sign, ampersand, dollar sign." "And colon, semicolon too!" Sam and Max remarks. "What are you &#*in' doing?" the swami asks. "Swearing in longhand, asterisk-mouth." Sam replies.



The World's Largest Ball of Twine is mighty impressive.

Unlike many LucasArts games, there are numerous minigames. These take the form of a Whack-a-Rat game (just like Whack-a-Mole, of course) and Car Bomb, a variant of *Battleship* using cars. There's also a 3D driving game where you drive down the highway and make Max jump over signs. Outside of the Whack-a-Rat game, none of these are mandatory, and they're mostly just there so you can distract yourself from the main game.

Sam & Max Hit the Road is such a brilliant little game. It's filled with fantastic attention to detail, and practically every dryly delivered line is eminently quotable. The voice acting is stellar, the bright cartoonish graphics are beautiful, and the bouncy nightclub jazz soundtrack feels strangely fitting. In other words, it's a true classic.



Sam and Max: Freelance Police

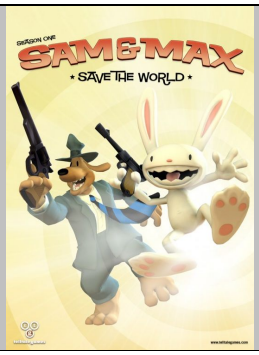
Initial Release Date: Never (cancelled)
Platforms: None
Designer(s): Michael Stemmle
Developer: LucasArts

Things were awful for adventure gaming at the turn of the 21st century. LucasArts' brilliant *Grim Fandango* underperformed and *Escape from Monkey Island* didn't particularly go over well with fans. There were a number of projects in development after these, all of which would eventually be cancelled, including an *Indiana Jones* game, two attempts at a *Full Throttle* sequel, and sadly, a new *Sam & Max* game.



One of the few screenshots of the cancelled Sam & Max game.

While the other games had run into development issues, *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* had apparently been going quite well, until LucasArts suddenly pulled the plug in 2004. Their reasoning was typical of the time – the brass didn't think that the marketplace could sustain an adventure game, and would continue to churn out crappy *Star Wars* games instead. All that exists are a handful of screenshots showing the new 3D graphics and some small notes about the story. It was to contain six smaller stories held together by one larger plot, the nature of which was never revealed. While fans were heartbroken at the news, it eventually spurred some of the designers to form Telltale Games, who would obtain the *Sam & Max* license for themselves and continue the legacy.



Season One: Sam and Max Save the World

Initial Release Date: 2006
Platforms: IBM PC / Xbox 360 / Wii
Designer(s): Brendan Q. Ferguson, David Grossman, Steve Purcell, Charles Jordan, Jeff Lester, Heather Lee Logas
Developer: Telltale Games

The cancellation of *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* was seen as a tremendous blow to the adventure gaming market, which by 2004 was subsisting almost solely on indie games and low budget European-developed titles. However in 2005, Dan Connors, Kevin Bruner and Troy Molander founded Telltale Games, with the eventual intention of creating new adventure games. Eventually, an opportunity arose – the rights to *Sam & Max* had reverted back to Steve Purcell, so Telltale purchased the rights for themselves and began to develop a new series starring the duo. However, since they were still a small company and adventure games were risky business, they decided to adopt an episodic model – each month, a small portion of the game would become available to download, with the full game spread over the course of six months. All six episodes would form what would eventually become known as *Season One: Sam and Max Save the World*.

Like the concept for the cancelled *Freelance Police* game, *Season One* features six distinct, largely standalone stories, held together loosely by the recurring threat of hypnosis. As such, there's not much plot development, at least until the end when the big baddie is revealed. You could probably get away with playing them in any order (except the final episode), because outside of a few small elements, there's not much that carries over from episode to episode.

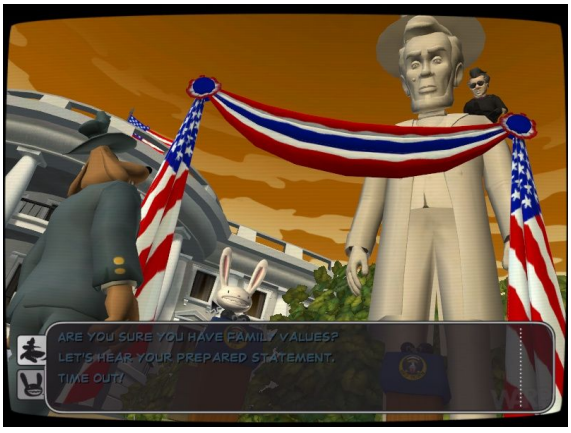
In order to develop each episode in a timely manner, the Telltale games reuse many assets, with each mission starting at Sam & Max's headquarters, branching out into their neighborhood, and then reaching out further to a unique location. In addition to their office, there are two stores to visit on their block. One is Bosco's Inconvenience Store, which had previously made an appearance in *Hit the Road*, although you couldn't actually see the interior or talk to the proprietor. You can walk inside this time and gaze on the horror of disgusting hot dogs and artificial cheese. Bosco is now a pretty major character, an affable but paranoid wacko who develops increasingly complicated security schemes and changes his persona from episode to episode – while he's "normal" in the first episode, he tries to be British in the second episode (complete with monocle), French in the third, and so forth. His disguises are flimsy and his fake accents are ridiculously bad, much to Sam and Max's amusement. Despite his insanity, he's also a talented inventor, and will nearly always have some kind of device that's vital to progression, even though it's usually some hastily MacGuyvered piece of crap sold at an exorbitant price.

On the other side of the road is Sybil, a young woman who constantly reinvents her store every episode. She starts off as a psychiatrist, and then eventually moves into professional witnessing (which is as odd as it sounds) and product beta testing. Like Bosco, her Career of the Week will always prove to be in some way relevant to the case at hand

The first episode, *Culture Shock*, acts as an introduction to the reborn series, to acclimate both old fans and newcomers to Sam & Max's neighborhood. The area has come under assault by The Soda Poppers, a group of former child stars who have become low quality vandals, spray painting the neighborhood with the visage of Brady Culture, an afro-wearing guru who promotes Eye-Bo, a unique type of ocular exercise. Sam and Max quickly realize that the diminutive duo is being hypnotized, although they themselves are invulnerable – Sam is

protected by his hat, and Max's obtuse biology simply renders it ineffective. After figuring out a method to break the subject free of their hypnotism – smashing them on the head seems to work – they track down Brady and confront him.

The second episode, *Situation: Comedy*, involves an Oprah-esque talk show host named Myra who has, literally, held her audience (and her viewers) captive via hypnosis. In order to break onto the set, Sam and Max need to star in a series of other unrelated TV shows in order to prove their credentials. The two get a starring role in *Midtown Cowboys*, a thoroughly stupid show about two cowboys living in Manhattan who need to hide their cow from their landlord. Also, their landlord is a talking chicken. This episode also introduces the flamboyantly cheerful Hugh Bliss, leader of Prismotology, a religion/cult who follow the colors of the rainbow, as well as Philo Pennyworth, the aforementioned talking chicken who's actually a trained Shakespearean actor slumming it on network television.



The animated statute of Abraham Lincoln proves to be a mighty political opponent.

In the third episode, *The Mob, The Mole, and the Meatball*, Sam and Max follow-up on a lead from the last episode, wherein they learned that Myra's audience was hypnotized by a stuffed teddy bear on her desk. This bear is traced back to the Toy Mafia, a crime organization which runs an incredibly bright and cheery casino. Here, you get to break the soul of a shady gambler through a series of "Yo Mamma" jokes. The catch is, Sam only knows the beginnings of the insults, while Max only knows the endings, so you need to use both of their skills for full effect. It's a segment that falls flat, because there's a sparse amount of responses, making it all too easy.

The fourth episode, *Abe Lincoln Must Die!,* brings Sam & Max to the White House, to investigate a series of bizarre laws passed by the President of the United States, including one that requires group hugging at all sporting events. With a bit of effort, they learn that the Commander-in-Chief is, quite literally, a puppet. In an emergency election, the statue of Abraham Lincoln from the Lincoln Memorial leaves his chair and begins to start campaigning, but he too appears to be in cahoots with the hypnotizing scheme. To combat this menace, Max runs for president himself, and must ruin Lincoln's speeches so he gives upsetting answers to various national issues. Once Max gets elected, the evil Lincoln goes crazy and starts rampaging through the streets. Not only that, but North and South (and the newly formed West) Dakota have declared war on each other over the possession of Mt. Rushmore, making Max's opening days quite troublesome.

Sam and Max take on the Internet in the fifth episode, *Reality 2.0*, where the denizens of the planet have been enslaved by a new virtual reality simulator, which creates a parallel version of the neighborhood in cyberspace. Here we meet the "Computer Obsolescence Prevention Society", otherwise known as the COPS. This group includes Bluster Blaster, an '80s arcade

machine who speaks entirely in angry exclamations and was inspired by the game *Sinistar*; Bob Bell, an automated telephone answering system who sounds suspiciously like Mr. Moviefone; Curt, an old Osbourne-1 who speaks with a voice synthesis unit and has a fondness of overtly technical terminology; and Chippy, a *Pong* machine who can only speak in bleeps or bloops. Together, they control various aspects of Reality 2.0, and can be messed with to hack the parameters of Sam and Max's avatars. This episode features tons of geek humor, as you need to gather coins *Super Mario Bros.*-style to buy stuff from Bosco, who has gotten hooked on RPGs and dubbed himself a half-elf. You also get roped into a few turn-based RPG battles (including one against a slime, a nod to *Dragon Quest*) and find a save point that looks suspiciously like the floating multi-sided ball things from *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*. In the final segment, Sam and Max find themselves inside a text adventure (although navigation is determined by picking selections from a menu) as virtual reality crumbles around them, which is written in the typically deadpan Infocom style.



Like the comics and the cartoon show, Sam & Max eventually end up on the moon.

The final chapter, *Bright Side of the Moon*, finds all the plot threads loosely coming together, as Sam and Max travel to the moon, where the big bad has set up his fortress. Here you'll find several old characters, all of whom have also fled into outer space to find fulfillment. Here, Max's vices will be separated from his person, and take on troublesome physical forms. This leaves the real Max as a listless shadow of his former self, so Sam needs to reassemble all of the parts of his buddy before the final showdown.

Beyond the episodic nature of the series, numerous aspects are significantly different from its LucasArts incarnation. The interface uses a single-icon cursor for all actions, although there are tons of hotspots to interact with and comment on, so at least it doesn't feel as barren as most modern adventure games. The dialogue system is more direct, with the exact lines of dialogue to choose. Max isn't used for puzzles any more, and in fact, usually just gets in the way, causing Sam to knock him into the sky and land harmlessly seconds later. In a few instances, he can also join in conversations with unique dialogue options. There are also a few arcade-style driving sequences, although they're mostly used for simple puzzles, and are quite easy.

Perhaps the biggest change is the emphasis on story, dialogue and characterization. In *Hit the Road*, outside of Sam and Max, none of the secondary characters played any real role beyond acting as signposts. While the dialogue there was quick and snappy, it's much more drawn out in the Telltale games. It offers substantially more characterization and storytelling, but the writing is often inconsistent, resulting in lots of blathering or jokes that just plain aren't funny. In generally, the dialogue just isn't as dry nor as witty as *Hit the Road*. There tends to be too much reliance on things that are conceptually amusing, like the Soda Poppers (washed up ex-child

stars, isn't that just crazy?!?), and they end up totally beating the joke into the ground with little payoff. This is because there are usually something like half a dozen designers that worked on the season altogether, which accounts for some of the differences. The voice work is generally excellent, although Sam and Max have completely new voice actors (Max's even changes again after the first episode) and they just aren't quite as good. Like the cartoon series, Sam's actor can't quite pull off the more sarcastic lines, and Max is missing his vaguely Brooklyn-ish accent.



Graphically, the Telltale Sam & Max looks a lot like the cancelled Freelance Police game.

While it takes a few episodes for *Season One* to find its footing – it's not until *Abe Lincoln Must Die!* that Telltale really finds their voice and does something really worthy of the characters – but it's still a great start. However, the later seasons are substantially improved, making this one seem weaker in comparison. In addition to the PC release, *Season One* was published on the Xbox Live Arcade and as a physical release on the Wii. Neither are worthwhile – it's tough to control the Xbox version, and the Wii version is quite glitchy, with a choppy framerate and dialogue that gets clipped off at the end of lines.



Season Two: Sam and Max Beyond Time and Space

Initial Release Date: 2008
Platforms: IBM PC / Xbox 360 / Wii / Macintosh
Designer(s): Brendan Q. Ferguson, David Grossman, Heather Lee Logas, Charles Jordan, Ian Dallas, Jeff Lester, Steve Purcell
Developer: Telltale Games

Season Two of Telltale's *Sam and Max* series, retroactively named *Beyond Time and Space*, is much the same as the first. It features five episodes instead of six, and it focuses on various supernatural occurrences – demonic possession, vampires and zombies, alien conspiracies, and so forth – all loosely tied together. From a technical standpoint, it allows widescreen support, but little has changed otherwise. You'll also see some familiar faces – Bosco is still running his convenience store, and Sybil can be found courting the head of Abraham Lincoln. The COPS have also taken up residence on the block, operating a body shop called Pimp le Car.

The second season also introduces two new (-ish) characters. Flint Paper, who showed up in the comics and appeared off-screen in *Hit the Road*, is Sam and Max's next door neighbor, who happens to be hard-boiled (albeit rather friendly) private detective. And Stinky is the proprietor of the local diner, a rather shapely young aqua haired woman who inherited the place (and her name) from her mysteriously absent grandfather. She's a pathological liar, as well as an appalling cook, and numerous suspicions are raised about her murdering the real Stinky. (You can find her scrubbing a blood stain from the counter, yelling "Out, damn spot!")

Like in the previous episodes, you'll usually visit some far off location and need to make return trips to the home block for various important items. It's still formulaic, but at least the framework and characters have changed up a bit, so it feels fresher. All of the episodes are also introduced with a nonsensical "based on" quote on the title card, much like the comic books.

Ice Station Zebra (Based on the obscure holiday penny dreadful "Sam & Max in the Case of the Frostbitten Protuberance") begins with the neighborhood being terrorized by a gigantic robot who has a thing for misquoting '80s pop music. After disposing of him, Max uncovers a terrible secret – the lumbering monstrosity was a misguided Christmas gift sent by none other than Santa Claus itself. A quick jaunt to the North Pole reveals that Saint Nick has gone stark raving mad, having barricaded himself in his room and holding his elves hostage at gunpoint. To complete this episode you'll need to go on a *Christmas Carol*-esque journey through time, using the past, present and future to manipulate the rat Jimmy Two-Teeth and his son Tim, who has a terminal case of Tourette's Syndrome. There's also a rather brilliant *Punch-Out!!* homage as a minigame, complete with a near replica of the original music and sound effects.



Sam and Max end up as zombies in the third episode of season two.

Moai Better Blues (Based on the unfinished teleplay "Sam & Max Jump in a Triangle") kicks off with Sam and Max, along with Sybil and Abe, being sucked into the Bermuda Triangle – apparently they're halfway-sentient portals rather than an actual place – and transported to Easter Island. It's here where they discover the Fountain of Youth, along with a number of historical characters that have mysteriously disappeared – Amelia Earhart, Glenn Miller and Jimmy Hoffa. They've all become addicted to the water of the fountain, and have thus reverted into talking babies. Sam & Max need to lightly drink from the fountain to solve a puzzle or two, temporarily turning them into precocious youths. The ultimate goal is to stop the explosion of a local volcano, which you'll need to do by convincing a tribe of sea gorillas that Max is their true High Priest, and not the dead goldfish they are currently worshipping.

In *Night of the Raving Dead* (Based on the heretical apocrypha "Sam & Max Meet a Guy Who Sucks"), zombies have been unleashed over the globe, and their source is traced to a castle in Stuttgart, Germany. Sources indicate this place is named "The Zombie Factory", but that's not

literal, and it's more of a dance club for the undead. Its lord is a vampire named Jurgen, an effeminate goth who gets his powers from his sense of style, and bears more than a passing resemblance to Sacha Baron Cohen's Brüno character. After ruining Jurgen's cool (in the process partaking in another shooting of *Midtown Cowboys*, which is mysteriously popular in Germany), the duo are unceremoniously murdered (complete with a *Resident Evil*-style "YOU HAVE DIED" blood splatter) and are cursed to wander the world as zombies. The rest of the episode is spent reuniting Sam and Max's souls with their corporeal bodies, and destroying Jurgen for good.



The Time Mariachis are pretty bizarre, even for a Sam & Max game.

The fourth chapter, *Chariot of the Dogs* (Based on the best selling addle-brained musings of noted aliens-made-all-our-stuff theorist Erich Von Dannyohday), picks up with Sam and Max being abducted by a mysterious spaceship. They run into Bosco, who, as it turns out, was completely justified in his absurd paranoia, and has been captured by a mysterious entity called T.H.E.M. He has also been turned into a half-cow. He can only be saved by time traveling through the ages, where they run into Bosco's mom and cause a *Back to the Future*-style paradox which threatens his existence. Time travel was used to an extent in earlier segments, but here it's the crux of the episode. While potentially comparable to *Day of the Tentacle*, in *Chariot of the Dogs*, it's a bit too convoluted, especially when it comes to dealing with Sam and Max's alternate selves. Once all of that confusion is cleared up, Sam and Max have to deal with the Time Mariachis, the owners of the ship, who have formed a pact with Hell to deliver souls into the afterlife in exchange for the ability to warp through time and sing birthday songs. These games have always been quite surreal, but when it comes to the events of this episode, the story becomes head-scratchingly weird.

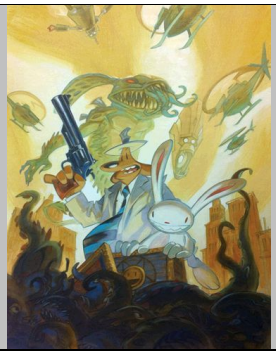
In the final episode, *What's New, Beelzebub?* (Based on the heartwarming holiday sestina "Sam & Max Meet the Father of Lies"), Sam and Max enter Hell in search of Bosco's soul. It's not exactly filled with the fire and brimstone that one usually pictures, as Hell is actually closer to a corporate office, complete with a cubicle farm. It's far from pleasant, for the most part – every day is Monday and the clock is perpetually stuck at 4:59. And Satan, while still a scary and imposing guy, is too busy running the bureaucracy that is the afterlife, and just doesn't have the time to be properly evil. Here Sam and Max meet numerous past villains, some of whom are actually quite happy in their positions as the damned. Rather shockingly, our heroes discover a shrine erected in their honor, where they find the souls of those who have perished due to their reckless behavior. In addition to Bosco, there are a handful of others, including their DeSoto, who are trapped in their own personal hells. After rescuing them, Sam and Max get damned themselves and need to escape from their own nightmares. At the same time, Satan himself is

fired from his position as Lord of the Underworld by an even more nefarious villain, and so Sam and Max must come to his rescue.



Hell, a Limited Liability Company.

Overall, *Season Two* is a substantial improvement over the first one, if mostly because it's more consistent, and doesn't take nearly as long to reach an appropriate level of funny. In addition to the standard PC release, it can also be found in downloadable form on the Xbox Live marketplace, and as a retail release for the Wii. While the Wii port is a step above the first one, as it fixes the dialogue glitches, it still has some performance issues, and is best avoided.



Sam and Max Season 3: The Devil's Playhouse

Initial Release Date: 2010
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation 3 / iPad
Designer(s): Charles Jordan, Andy Hartzell, Michael Stemmle, Joe Pinney, Brendan Q. Ferguson, David Grossman
Developer: Telltale Games

The Devil's Playhouse marks a further evolution for the Telltale *Sam & Max* seasons. Although still consisting of five episodes, they tell a continuous story rather than dealing with unrelated incidents connected only by vague recurring themes. This time it revolves around a legendary artifact called The Devil's Toybox, which is sought by various entities for a number of reasons. Of course due to the episodic nature, the story runs off on various tangents as they concentrate on the villains and their plans in each episode, but it's also far more cohesive than either previous season. Each episode also ends with a cliffhanger which leads directly into the next.

There's also far less repetition, as the routine has been broken quite a bit. While the exterior of Sam and Max's office still plays a recurring role in the story, it's no longer the hub of each episode, and the scenery is usually entirely different from case to case. You no longer need to visit Sybil or Bosco or the COPS every episode – in fact, these characters only play small roles in the story, if they even appear at all. (Bosco is completely absent.) Instead of just spoofing various movie titles, it parodies various motion picture genres. One plays with old-time

adventure flicks. Another takes a page from detective noir. Homages are also made to zombie and kaiju films. Some characters are still re-used, but it's less much inappropriate than some of Telltale's other games.

In addition to the change in structure, the third season brings about some enhancements to the engine. The visuals have been improved, although not substantially, and are set to widescreen regardless of your monitor size. The interface has been changed to the one found in *Tales of Monkey Island*, where you control Sam using the keyboard and use the mouse cursor to interact with stuff. The dialogue system has been yanked from *Mass Effect,* with a radial menu that features various topics, rather than explicit lines of dialogue. Many of these seem to exist to make it more playable on a console, although it functions well enough on the computer.

Max also has newfound access to a variety of psychic powers. "Future Vision" lets you peek a few moments forward in time. It is not merely a hint function, because most of the time, its usage is mandatory to figure out what you're supposed to be doing. In one early example, if you use Future Vision on Flint, you'll see him get murdered by an axe. Just give him a helmet to protect him, and you're set. Obviously, this puzzle makes no sense unless you've used this skill. "Ventriloquism" allows you to project your voice into different characters or objects. Not technically a psychic power, Sam remarks, but a useful skill nonetheless. "Teleportation" lets you visit any location with a phone, as long as you have its number. It's mostly used to speed transitions between locations, although there are a few puzzles involving it as well. "Mind Reading" is obvious enough. "Rhinoplasty" gives you a piece of silly putty, which you can use to copy an item and make Max transform into it

So many of the puzzles (and extra gags) are focused on the psychic powers that they become the crux of the gameplay. Most of their usage is remarkably clever, since many of them provide clues without solving the puzzle outright, and it's up to the player to interpret them. For all of its ingenuity, though, certain puzzles are a bit overused, especially when it comes to the Rhinoplasty skill. The specific powers vary from episode to episode, gaining some and losing some as appropriate.

Each chapter is introduced by the Narrator, who explains the scenario much like Rod Serling from *The Twilight Zone*, with a pinch of Bela Lugosi's "god" character from various Ed Wood movies. His scenes are entirely in black and white, except for the red rose on his lapel. They're gloriously cheesy and melodramatic, and the way this frame story ties into the main plot is one of the most brilliant moments of the Telltale seasons.



Sameth and Maximus meet up with the baby Amelia Earhart.

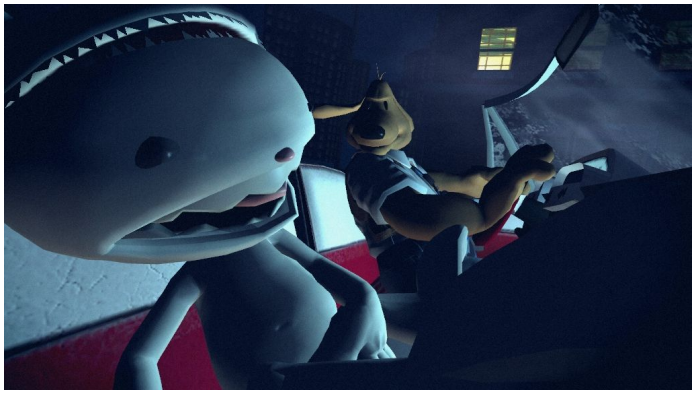
The first chapter, *The Penal Zone* (Based on the classic instructional video "How to Use Your New SM-301 Industrial Strength Dehumidifier"), introduces the world to Skun-ka'pe. (It's pronounced "skun-KAH-pay", although the heroes just call him "Skunkape".) He's a space

gorilla who happens to be a toy collector. His goal? To find the Devil's Toybox, a mysterious artifact filled with items which hold various psychic powers. Of course, Max gets a hold of them instead, which is the cause for hijinx. In an interesting twist, the introduction to the chapter finds Sam and Max captured by Skun-ka'pe, but this is merely a vision of the future told by Max's powers. Once returned to the present, the heroes are already well aware of the threats presented to them, and try to avoid them. Naturally, things don't quite work out as planned.

Compared to some of the other chapters, *The Penal Zone* is relatively restrained, at least as restrained as one can get when combating tyrannical intergalactic apes. Most of the chapter involves driving around the city and figuring out the various mechanisms of Skun-ka'pe's spaceship. The eventual goal is to damn the villain to the Penal Zone, an alternate dimension used to punish and contain intergalactic threats. This naturally leads to some juvenile but reasonably funny jokes. ("Not only did I defeat Sam & Max, but I took care of the Penal Zone in one stroke!" Skun-ka'pe proclaims, much to Max's bemusement.)

The Tomb of Sammun-Mak (Based on the scandalous 19th Century zoetrope "The Lady Visits Her Chiropractor") takes place after banishing Skun-ka'pe to the Penal Zone. Sam and Max discover a pair of skeletons in the basement of their office building. They look suspiciously like the duo, with Sam grappling Max's neck. Clearly disturbed, they find a projector with four film reels, which recount the exploits of their great-grandfathers, Sameth and Maximus. This old-timey partnership look and act much like their descendents, except Sameth has a mustache and Maximus actually wears clothes. Together, they must uncover the *Riddle of the Sphunx*, a cheesy stageshow led by the suspicious Monsieur Paperwaite. This eventually leads them to the Tomb of the Sammun-Mak in Egypt, where they need to steal the Devil's Toybox and make it sure it arrives safely back home in New York.

In the meantime, they need to deal with the mole people, who are positioned as a mish-mash of various ethnic groups. They are the guardians of the tombs, technically making them Egyptians, but their accents make them sound like Eastern-Europeans. They also have the power to inflict curses, which is actually mandatory for certain puzzles. Many characters from prior games have been reused, which feels a little bit lazy. Santa Claus reappears as Mr. Kringle, the maleficent toy mogul, although interacting with his goofy legion of elves is amusing, as you get to visit their ghetto in "New Arctic Circle". Also appearing is Baby Amelia Earhart from *Moai Better Blues*, for no real reason, and Jurgen, back in his pre-vampire days.



They stole Max's brain! And when that happens, there's hell to pay.

This episode uses a unique gimmick, in that the storyline is not entirely linear. Each "act" is encapsulated on one of the four reels, and you actually begin in the middle of the third one. However, you need to change reels in order to get necessary information from previous parts of the plot. For example, when trying to escape from the tomb, Sameth and Maximus need to

decode some hieroglyphics. They don't know how to do this, but upon transporting back to an earlier reel, they can question one of the mole people for the answer. Naturally, the fourth reel is the epilogue, and can only be properly completed once you've finished the first three. Not only it is remarkably innovative, but it's also the first real time you can actually "die" in a *Sam & Max* game. If you screw up, though, Sam and Max simply rewind the film in the present day, allowing you to immediately redo your actions.

The third episode is entitled *They Stole Max's Brain!* (Based on the similarly-titled novel by Jane Austen). During the finale of the Sammun-Mak film, Sam sneaks off to take a bathroom break. He returns to find Max's lifeless body, with his head unzipped and his brain stolen. Going completely unhinged, Sam goes on a rampage around town, browbeating various witnesses to figure out the location of the perpetrators. This film noir parody takes the form of an elaborate dialogue puzzle, where Sam can threaten or accuse the questionees at various points in their monologues, getting them to spill more information. These truths can then be used to call out other witnesses, as you slowly piece together the truth. (It's also somewhat similar to the courtroom scenes in Capcom's *Ace Attorney* scenes.) During these interrogations, there's also an option labeled "Noir", which will prompt Sam to meander off into a darkly cheesy metaphor. This section is awesome, if only to see the normally straight-laced Sam charge on an anger-fueled frenzy, verbally pummeling the poor schmucks that get in his way.



The narrator ties together the whole story rather brilliantly.

The trail eventually leads to the Museum of Almost Natural History, where Skun-ka'pe, who has escaped from the Penal Zone, and Paperwaite, who is now immortal, are fighting over possession of the Devil's Toybox, using Max's psychic brain to unlock its secrets. However, they briefly ally their powers against Sam, their common enemy. At this point, Sam discovers the preserved brain of an ancient pharaoh – Sammun-Mak, of course – and uses it to reanimate Max's body. They manage to overtake Skun-ka'pe and Paperwaite, only for Sammun-Mak to take control of the toybox and use it to enslave the city through his brainwashing powers. The only one unaffected is Max, still separated from his body and merely a brain in a jar strapped to Sam's back. It's up to their strained partnership to connect with the underground resistance, knock everyone back into their senses, and take down the deluded psychic pharaoh. This episode also introduces two new characters – Sal, a rather genial giant cockroach who sounds a lot like Patrick Warburton, and Hubert Q. Tourist, a perpetually confused European (you guessed it) tourist which a penchant for peppering his speech with German-sounding gibberish.

They Stole Max's Brain! has been criticized by gamers for playing too much with the dynamic between the heroes. Max is completely missing from the first act, while Sammun-Mak takes his place in the second. They share some commonalities, mostly in their delight for violence, but something doesn't feel right, and Sam is clearly disturbed. And in the third act, Max isn't fully

able to interact with Sam, due to his zombified status. While it removes some of the familiarity, in the end it actually works to strengthen the bond between the two. It shows how much the duo depends on each other, as both are clearly ill at ease without the other's presence.

In *Beyond the Alley of the Dolls* (Loosely based on the forbidden scrimshaw carvings of Bob Keeshan), the city is overrun by an army of Sam clones, all clad in only their undies. Shacked up in Stinky's Diner and attempting to defend themselves a la any number of zombie flicks, the duo find a secret lab underground with hundreds of cloned Sams. The conspiracy takes further twists, culminating in a battle on the Statue of Liberty. This episode introduces Yog-Soggoth, a Cthulhu-like entity from a different dimension. While he once sought to become the lord of humanity, he's cooled off a bit since then, and is more than content to simply find his way home. He's also in a weakened state, as he only exists as a tumor in the chest of one of the other characters. Yog-Soggoth aids in your quest to avert the resurrection of his son, Junior, whose attitude towards humanity may not be as pleasant as his own.

In the final chapter, *The City That Never Sleeps* (Based on the Cherished '80s Adult Film, "Totally Into Max"), Junior's seed has accidentally been fused with Max, turning him into a gigantic Lovecraftian monster and unleashing a Godzilla-like spree across New York City. He feeds off the dreams of the populace, so none of them can fall asleep, hence the title. This episode sees the return of characters who were missing from previous episodes, including Sybil (now very pregnant with Abraham Lincoln's child) and Mr. Featherly, although Bosco is still absent. The cast gets together to formulate a plan to get inside Max's gigantic belly, which involves turning the DeSoto into an enormous corndog.

Max's interior is far from the typical biological setting, as each of his major organs has been redone to look like the interior of a '70s household. You need to gain control of his motor functions in order to access his brain and put a stop to everything, but all of the psychic powers that you've used previously are now being used against you. Indeed, this is another odd chapter, since Max technically isn't part of your gang. Little flaming apparitions of him float around and provide similar commentary, but the psychic powers are no longer as your disposal, and the puzzles are relegated to the standard inventory and dialogue types.

This chapter feels tacked on, because the main storyline involving the Devil's Toybox is finished up at the end of the fourth episode. Instead, it feels like more of an epilogue to use returning characters and finish the arcs of the existing ones. It's also hard to hold much against it, because it's an excellent chapter. There are a lot of great jokes, especially the storeroom, which holds memories from both the previous Telltale games and the LucasArts adventure. And some of the best sight gags in *Sam & Max* comes from the satirical signs and products – this one has a box of "Oops, Diabetes!" breakfast cereal. Max also has a library of story ideas, which is represented as a series of records. In addition to the one needed to solve a puzzle, there are also a few really goofy ones, like the Flint Paper fan fiction and a historical thriller involving Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin.

The finale also explains the title, which has nothing to do with the devil Satan (although he does make an appearance). It's a reference to an old saying, with a bit of a twist – if idle hands are the devil's play thing, then an idle mind is the devil's playhouse. The ending is also surprisingly heartfelt. Like *Tales of Monkey Island*, Telltale introduces a significant amount of drama to the story, adding quite a bit of depth to a series which has rarely been more than an incredibly silly cartoon.

While the tone is ultimately far, far removed from the sardonic, happy-go-lucky shenanigans of the original LucasArts games, *The Devil's Playhouse* is an incredibly well-written, well-crafted series of adventures, and easily one of Telltale's best.

The Comics

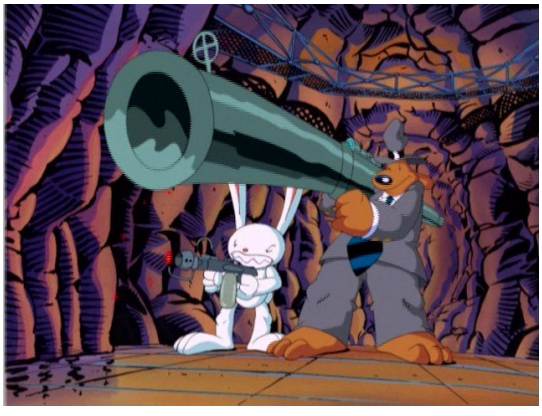
Most of Sam and Max's original adventures are contained in the anthology *Sam & Max Surfin' the Highway*. This includes several chapters of the original comic, as well as some of the works

Steve Purcell created for The Adventurer, the LucasArts catalog. These often put Sam & Max in the role of various other Lucasfilm properties, with amusing results.

Sam and Max: Freelance Police – The Animated Cartoon

Sam & Max also found themselves subject of a cartoon series, produced by Canadian studio Nelvana. Airing in 1997 on Fox networks, the season includes a total of thirteen episodes, most consisting of two ten-minute stories. Steve Purcell was actively involved in the project, and even scripted a few episodes.

Of course, Sam & Max were originally meant for adults, and some of the duo's antics have been toned down to make it suitable for children's programming. Max isn't sociopathic anymore so much as lovably weird, and Sam loses some of his dry edginess in favor of flat-out goofiness. Most of their pseudo-eloquent vocabulary was also toned down to understandable levels. Their handguns have been ditched for being too realistic, but they've been allowed to keep some of the crazier weapons, like rocket launchers and flamethrowers. Perhaps to make the program more relatable, there's also a new character known as The Geek, an incredibly intelligent young girl who works as Sam & Max's inventor. Thankfully, her presence is minimal. Unfortunately, the voice actors from *Hit the Road* were unable to reprise their roles, and the new guys, while tolerable, sound a little bit too wacky.



Sam and Max still cause plenty of violence in their cartoon.

While it's substantially bowdlerized compared to its original incarnations, it still captures much of its madcap insanity. One of the earlier episodes is based on a comic story, "Bad Day on the Moon", where they launch their DeSoto into space to take on a roach menace. In other episodes, Sam & Max are stalked by the fanboy Lorne, their self-appointed "Friend for Life", who even gets his own stupid little jingle. They also meet up with Granny Ruth, Sam's take-no-guff grandmother who also runs a maximum security prison. The team occasionally faces off against various super villains, including Mack Salmon, a criminal with a fishbowl for a head (who was also briefly in the comics), and they even get entangled in the marital woes of Zeus and Hera. Other aspects remain faithful to the comics, include the preoccupation with rats, sasquatches, and molemen. And similar to Warner Bros. cartoons like *Animaniacs*, there are plenty of movie parodies that only adults would fully understand, and both Sam & Max are quite cognizant of the fourth wall.

While *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* probably would've worked better as a primetime cartoon (or at least something on Adult Swim, although that didn't exist back in 1997), as a cartoon aimed for kids, it's pretty decent. The entire series was released on DVD in 2008 to capitalize on the popularity of the Telltale *Sam & Max* games.



Full Throttle

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Tim Schafer
Developer: LucasArts

"Whenever I smell asphalt, I think of Maureen. That's the last sensation I had before I blacked out; that thick smell of asphalt. And the first thing I saw when I woke up was her face. She said she'd fix my bike. Free. No strings attached. I should've known then that things are never that simple. Yeah, when I think of Maureen, I think of two things: asphalt... and trouble."

The world of *Full Throttle*, as much as what's shown to the player, is a desert wasteland, filled with dilapidated businesses, scummy bars, and long, open roads. Cars seem powered by hover technology, but that's the only hint of a futuristic setting. It might seem like a nightmare to a normal person, but it's the way of life for the Polecats, a group of bikers in this quasi-post-apocalyptic landscape. Keeping up turbo powered, flame-exhaust-spewing motorcycles is a drain on the wallet, though, leaving the Polecats hard up for cash. They stop at a bar, and, in a stroke of what appears to be luck, they're contracted as bodyguards for Malcolm Corley, president of Corley Motors, the last company in the country still producing the bikes they love. Despite being a bit old in the tooth, Malcolm is a lively gentleman, filled with stories from his younger glory days, and he's heralded as something of a hero amongst all the biker gangs. Naturally, the Polecats are enthused.

Their leader, Ben, isn't quite so convinced. He has something of a bad feeling, especially when he meets Adrian Ripburger, vice president of Corley Motors, an all-business corporate suit who cares little for bikers or their culture, but does care for their money. Before Ben can properly decline, Ripburger and his thugs rough him up and chuck him in the dumpster, convincing the rest of the gang to go along with his plans. Ripburger, it seems, has a devious plot to murder Corley and stage a hostile takeover of the company, turning the product line entirely to minivans. If this weren't insidious enough, he plans to pin the murder on the Polecats.

And so begins *Full Throttle* proper, created by soon-to-be-revered developer Tim Schafer. Although Schafer had previously worked on other LucasArts titles, including *Monkey Island 2* and *Day of the Tentacle*, *Full Throttle* was his first truly original project. In many ways, it's a bit different from typical LucasArts fare, which gained a reputation for silly, light-hearted works like *Monkey Island* and *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. While *Full Throttle* still has something of a cartoony art style, the visuals are much darker, the tone much more serious. That's not to say the game isn't funny, it's just that the humor is more subdued.

At the center of this is Ben (last name: Throttle, although this isn't officially stated in the game or manual, due to sensitivities over a similarly named character in the cartoon *Biker Mice from Mars*). He's huge, with a '50s superhero-style lantern jaw, a permanent five o'clock shadow, and eyes that appear to be permanently squinting. He's voiced with a low grumble that somehow manages to convey a bit of emotion without really changing tone. He's gruff and slightly sarcastic, although some of the laughs come from the contrast of sticking such a manly man into slightly emasculating situations, like stealing a horde of cute, mechanical bunnies to clear a minefield.

The first time you control Ben, he's still stuck in that dumpster, left for dead and none too pleased with the thugs who stuck him there. Your first act is to break out of it by punching straight through its lid. You can stick around and kick it, if you'd like ("Take that." He quips

nonchalantly. "And that.") You're unable to start your bike ("Some joker took my keys." Ben states, slightly irritated. "I don't like that.") so the first step is to get back inside the bar. The door, of course, is conveniently stuck, but that's nothing a quick boot won't fix. The bartender will claim ignorance of the dealings between Ripburger and your gang, although he'll talk quickly when you grab his nose ring and slam him into the table. ("You know what might look better on your nose? The bar.")

Ben drives away but finds his bike has been tampered with, causing him to crash, and once again drift back into unconsciousness. This time he wakes up in the company of a mysterious woman who calls herself Mo (short for Maureen), who seems to know a whole lot about motorcycles. Ben doesn't quite know it just yet, but Mo is the lost daughter of Malcolm Corley, and she plays an important role in putting a wrench in Ripburger's plans. But before they can do that, Ben needs to search the local town for tools, all of which involve breaking and entering in some capacity.



That flaming skull thing is actually part of the interface. How awesome.

These two introduction sections set the tone for the entirety of *Full Throttle*. Like any point-and-click adventure, there are puzzles, but many of them revolve around simple (and occasionally clever) use of force. This obviously suits Ben's demeanor, as he's more of a "beat up dudes, don't bother asking questions" sort of guy anyway. It uses an advanced version of the SCUMM engine which changes up the interface considerably. Instead of cycling through icons, when the mouse hovers above something you can interact with, it turns red. Hold down the mouse button and a menu pops up, allowing you to look at, interact with, talk to, or kick whatever you've highlighted. The menu itself is appropriately themed, with a blazing skull and painted flames. The right mouse button will bring up the inventory, although you don't really use it all that often.

Some of the puzzles are a bit more action-focused, especially right at the end, where you need to think (and react) quickly under a strict time limit. You can die, technically, but the game immediately starts over the segment from the beginning, so there's no need to save constantly, keeping alive another hallmark of LucasArts gaming, while still throwing in a sense of danger and excitement that's usually missing.

About halfway through the game, you can control Ben's bike directly as you speed along the highway. The visuals are displayed with sprites over looping full motion video, using the same technology as *Rebel Assault* and *The Dig*. Though it looks nice, in reality, there's not much control here, because there are only a few locations at opposite ends of a straight line. You can, however, exit on to Mine Rd., which is specially designated for combat. In order to get a few vital items, you need to defeat various members of opposing bike gangs. Although you start off

with a mere tire iron, beating up thugs eventually awards you with better torture devices like maces, chains, 2x4s, and chainsaws.

In some ways, these sections are pretty gratifying, because controlling a bike simply by pointing and clicking would completely remove the visceral feel of flying down the road. Alas, adventure games have never been known for their quality action segments, no matter how hard they try, and unfortunately *Full Throttle* is no different. The bike-to-bike fighting is sluggish and awkward at best, and frustrating at worst. Most of the time, victory depends on choosing the right weapon and bashing away, although the battles that necessitate some skills – like grabbing a pair of goggles from a biker while still in motion – requires steady driving and some vaguely abstract sense of timing. You don't get to choose your battles, either, you simply come across bikers randomly, and you may need to fight several pointless battles until you happen upon the one you want. (There is a way to cheat by hitting Shift-V to win any bike fight, at least.) There's also another segment where you control a car in a destruction derby. This section isn't really focused on reflexes or even action, although it's an interesting device for puzzle solving, even if the controls are still pretty irritating.

The shift away from abstract puzzle solving and more towards action was definitely a conscious choice. Although LucasArts had produced several CD-ROM games, most of them were identical to their disk releases, only adding in voiced dialogue. *Full Throttle* is their first game that really puts the medium to use, with tons and tons of cutscenes for a full cinematic experience. They wanted something that anyone could see to the end, without getting stuck up on mindbenders with obtuse solutions.

Still, the issue faced by *Full Throttle* is the same one faced by Japanese RPGs when they got too cinematic – it's focused too much on storytelling and not enough on interaction. It's also startlingly linear, especially compared to the freeform design of other LucasArts games, and it's remarkably short. Even without a guide, anyone can probably see the whole game in less than five hours. Still, it's an amazing experience while it lasts, and doesn't feel over bloated by unnecessary subplots or tacked-on puzzles.

At least it looks fantastic, even years after its release. Instead of using compressed FMV like many games of the time, *Full Throttle* pulls off most of its animation using the in-game engine, looking much like the intro scenes from *Day of the Tentacle* and *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. Much like these, it runs in 320x200 256-color VGA, using lots of flat coloring and pixellated black outlines. Despite its quaintness, there's a certain unique charm to the style – as much as *The Curse of Monkey Island,* released three years later and running in 640x480 SVGA, might be superior on a purely technical level, there's something amazing about seeing beautifully pixel drawn artwork, drawn so huge and animated so smoothly. The full motion video backgrounds of the scenery, however, are heavily compressed, and the artifacting is definitely noticeable, although it's used sparingly and doesn't detract too much overall. It sounds fantastic too, featuring at least a few vocal tracks from a "real" biker gang called "The Gone Jackals". It fits perfectly, and the handful of other instrumental tracks provides more than adequate ambiance.

The voice acting is also uniformly excellent. Roy Conrad completely defines badass as Ben, while Mark Hamill does a lovably slithering Ripburger. Even the minor characters have recognizable voices – the leader of the Vultures is played by Tress MacNeille, using the same voice she later used for the evil character Mom in *Futurama*, and Maurice LaMarche, famous for his Orson Welles impersonation (and the voice of The Brain from *Pinky and the Brain*), supplies the voice of Nestor, one of Ripburger's henchmen.

So even though it's over way too soon, *Full Throttle* has earned itself the title of an adventure gaming classic. Schafer's strengths don't always lie in the dialogue like many other adventures, but rather in the world he creates. Although not quite as fleshed out as the Day of the Dead-themed afterlife in *Grim Fandango*, or the psychic training camp of *Psychonauts*, two of his later games, *Full Throttle* succeeds because it inhabits a completely unique setting that plays by its own rules while still being relatable. Like the rock and roll soundtrack suggests, there's a universal theme of rebellion, especially against heartless corporations, which can resonate deeply

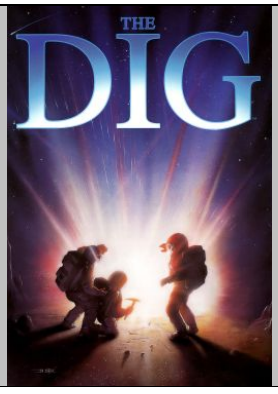
even if you couldn't care less about Harleys. The background story is also remarkably deep, especially the cultures of the rival biker gangs. The Rottwheelers consists of a bunch of stupid but tough thugs, the Vultures are all about snark and speed, while the creepy Cavefish – wearing goggles and clad almost entirely in mummy-like bandages – view their way of life as something of a religion. These are barely touched upon in the game, and there certainly would've been room for expansion, had a follow-up ever come to fruition.

There were actually two different attempts to create a sequel to *Full Throttle*. The first, beginning around 1999, was *Full Throttle: Payback*, to be helmed by Larry Ahern, one of the artists from the original game and one of the project leads from *The Curse of Monkey Island*. From day one there appeared to be management issues – Tim Schafer was not asked to be part of the development team, effectively distancing himself from him and his baby. Other issues from the higher-ups also caused development to stall during the conceptual stage, and thus, it didn't make it very far off the ground. All that exists are some concept sketches. The plot was to involve Ben attempting to stop an assassination attempt on Father Torque, the former leader of the Polecats, while taking down an evil governor who was in cahoots with Ripburger.



One of the many thrilling action sequences has Ben outriding this gigantic truck tractor.

The second game, *Full Throttle: Hell on Wheels*, was announced in 2003 for the PC, PlayStation 2 and Xbox. The project lead was Sean Clark who, unlike Larry Ahern, had not worked on the original *Full Throttle*. Rather than an adventure game, it was supposed to be more focused on action. The game's press release makes mention of 35 different "levels", which makes it sound quite a bit divorced from the original structure. It also mentions it having over 40 weapons, further emphasizing its focus on combat. The plot involved Ben teaming up with Maureen and Father Torque to take down the Hound Dogs, a new rival gang. It got much further into development, even appearing as a hands-on demo at E3 2003. The reason for its cancellation is much less nebulous than its predecessor – the game simply wasn't shaping up to be very good, and LucasArts just figured to cut its losses early on. Given that the abandonment of point-and-click elements messed up *King's Quest: Mask of Eternity*, and further damned both *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude* and *Box Office Bust*, maybe it was for the best.



The Dig

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Brian Moriarty, Sean Clark
Developer: LucasArts

Development Hell: A damnation that not even Vergil would attempt to guide anyone through. Mired in horrifying staff changes and dreaded rewrites, many games never see the light of day. Many that do are mere shadows of their potential glory or disfigured carcasses that flail around, desperately trying to convince you that they were once beautiful and worth playing. *The Dig* is one of those games. It managed to escape its purgatory, and while not horrible, once you learn some of its history, you can see it should have been much, much more.

The Dig had much going for it to raise expectations. It was being produced by LucasArts and carried the name of Steven Spielberg, no less. The concept was based partially off of an idea he had for his *Amazing Stories* TV show from the mid-1980s. It was a mixture of the classic 1956 sci-fi movie *The Forbidden Planet*, where a scientific team explores a seemingly deserted world, and the 1948 drama *The Treasures of Sierra Madre*, where three miners slowly turn on each other out of greed. Deemed too expensive to be produced, this unborn episode was shelved for a couple years. That is, until Spielberg brought his idea to LucasArts in 1989, to eventually be turned into a computer game. It was, however, not released until 1995.

Nowadays people are accustomed to long development times, but even so, six years was a pretty long time for a game to get into our hands. During this time, LucasArts released screenshot after beautiful screenshot, enchanting adventure game fans with the unexplored ruins and caverns of an alien world. It went through four designers and three total overhauls, and the final product bears only some resemblance to its initial concept.

The basic premise was similar through most of the project. There is an asteroid heading towards Earth, dubbed "Atilla", which is potentially large enough to wipe out the entire human race. A scientific team is assembled to fly into space, set some nuclear charges and destroy the approaching rock. It's superficially similar to other asteroid disaster movies like *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, but *The Dig* has a substantially stronger sci-fi bent. Once the team reaches Atilla, they begin to dig in order to plant the explosives. However, a strange geometric formation (the first of many) is noticed shortly after the second charge is placed. After mucking around with it, they inadvertently activate some mysterious bit of alien technology, which shoots them off to a seemingly dead planet at some distant point across the galaxy. The team's new mission is, of course, to escape. In the process they explore the planet and uncover the secrets of a civilization that apparently fled to another plane of existence, leaving behind ruins... and their ghosts, creepily enough.

You control Boston Low, a retired astronaut and the leader of the mission. You might recognize his voice from *Terminator 2*, or later episodes of *The X-Files*, since he's voiced by Robert Patrick. He's a pretty flat character, but the actions you can do make him kind of likable. He has a fondness for lots of terrible, terrible puns and one-liners. Press Ctrl+B and Low will flex his muscles, providing some humor if one of the other characters is around. He's definitely not as intelligent as the other crew members, as they really don't take him seriously.

Low is joined Maggie Robbins, a reporter assigned to the crew who possesses a vast aptitude for linguistics, which allows her to decode and translate the bits of alien language scribbled about. She often seems bored at having to talk to Low, yet for some reason, an inexplicable romance between the two develops at the end of the game.



The seemingly barren planet has little evidence of intelligent life.

The trio is rounded out with Ludger Brink, a German archaeologist and geologist. He sounds boring, but is quite easily the most interesting character in the game. Early on, he is digging a hole (you do such things on alien worlds, you know) and the ground collapses, sending him to an early demise. But after a bit of exploration, Low and Robbins stumble onto an alien "museum" and discover what they term "life crystals", which are one of the driving elements of the plot. Low cracks one of the bad boys open on Brink, which resurrects him. But the crystals induce madness, paranoia, and hostility due to their addictive properties, and Brink alienates himself from Robbins and Low, preferring to attempt to build a machine that will produce even more of these precious minerals. It's here where the conflict between the team becomes enraged, if their initial bickering weren't enough, and where the story parallels *The Treasures of Sierra Madre*. One of the best scenes occurs when Brink, reaching for one of the green crystals in a crevice, gets his hand caught when the earth shifts. How do you free him? In one of the most macabre scenes in the game, you sever his hand.

The Dig is quite a bit different than LucasArts' typical fare. Although Boston interacts with the other crew members, they are really the only characters in the game, outside of the alien apparitions. Other than the bits of humor, it's also fairly stern and somber, a stark contrast to the likes of *Monkey Island* or even *Full Throttle*. The dialogue is provided by veteran sci-fi author Orson Scott Card, but it's straightforward and not at all remarkable.

Beyond the narrative, the interface and puzzle design is a bit of a break from the norm. The single icon cursor and general lack of hotspots makes the world seem more barren than it really is, and makes everything feel slightly simplified. While you have an expansive inventory of scientific instruments and random tools found around the planet, a sizable portion of the puzzles involve fiddling with various alien machines and such, rather than typical inventory usage. The focus is largely on the look, the feel, and the atmosphere, which almost puts it more in the league of something like *Myst*. Of course, it's not quite as pretty – like other SCUMM games of the time, it runs at VGA resolution, where *Myst* and similar games ran in SVGA, and were much crisper. But the graphic design itself is still remarkably inspired.

Still, *The Dig* succeeds in what it sets out to accomplish, and that's to immerse you in a strange, fantastic alien world. The scenery is dominated by blues, purples, and greens in addition to the dingy brown of the planet surface, which is aesthetically quite gorgeous. The primary theme for the alien technology is a strange marriage of geometric and organic shapes; many

puzzles have you focusing on patterns of geometry or assembling shapes. Light manipulation is a primary aspect of the alien technology as well, and you'll often find yourself traversing convenient "light bridges". Much of the world itself lies in ruins, and there is very little animal life left. There are plants that feed off of electricity, and glow when you touch them.

Some of these scenarios are actually pretty damn cool. At one point you come into possession of a bomb. A bit later, you wander by a lake inhabited by something resembling the Loch Ness monster. It consumes some turtle-like animal, and coughs up the bones. Nearby are fossilized remains of the same creature. Using your adventure gamer logic, you rebuild the turtle according to the fossil, but add a little explosive surprise, and resurrect it with the life crystals. Ol' Nessie eats the turtle-thing, and a few seconds later, KABLOOIE! Pool's safe, kids. Also, there is a section in which you must control the moons of the planet using two silver and gold rods. The goal is to create an eclipse in just the right spot. It's a pretty cool instance in any game, being able to move whole planets, but unfortunately this takes a lot of trial and error. There are some other nice touches, too. Low has a PDA called the "Pen Ultimate", which is used to communicate with the rest of the crew, in addition to having a playable clone of *Lunar Lander*.

The Dig isn't exactly LucasArts' most popular adventure game, which, as noted, is largely because it's such a departure, both in structure and theme. That shouldn't be held against it though, because it's still a gorgeous game with some thoughtful design, beautiful visuals, and a haunting electronic orchestral soundtrack. If there's any legitimate area where it stumbles, it's due to the limits of the technology. *The Dig*, along with *Full Throttle*, were the first LucasArts' adventures to take full advantage of the CD medium. The extensive full motion video consists of some decently rendered computer graphics, but they're all terribly compressed, with lots of pixelated artifacts that detract from their beauty.



A ghostly apparition haunts Low and Brink.

The Dig is also kind of a short game, which potentially may have had to do with its development cycle, as it was scrapped and redesigned multiple times. The first version was led by Noah Falstein, with some aid by Hal Barwood. The two later went on to develop *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*. Although the general idea of three characters marooned on an alien planet is the same, many elements of this version were substantially different. Instead of taking place in the present, it was set in the future, after humanity has discovered faster-than-light travel and colonized various other planets. An exploration team is sent to explore a newly discovered planet named Ozymandias, which appears to be desolate but, of course, nothing is quite as it seems. The team is led by one Major Tom, and the player would have been able to choose from the two other crewmates – a Russian engineer name Terasov and an Australian biologist (and somewhat sexy lady) named Fox. When the team sets down Major Tom goes missing, and so the remaining team begins to look for him, stumbling upon alien ghosts in the process. At one

point, the two characters would have had an argument and split, with the other occasionally popping in to provide necessary aid.

Although the initial design documents have surfaced on the web, very little of this version seems to have actually gone into development. After 18 months Falstein left the project, and Brian Moriarty, the designer of *Beyond Zork* (Infocom) and *Loom* (LucasArts), took over. He scrapped everything that had been done, and his version became the zygote of the final experience. The three main characters were changed to Low, Robbins and Brink, as they were in the final game. In his original version was also a fourth main character, Toshi Olema, a Japanese businessman who was funding the project on the condition that he could join the team.



An early screenshot of Moriarty's version shows some inspiration from Egyptian architecture.

This version would have been very violent, as Toshi was meant to die horribly in an acid-shower in a cavern (an "aciddent", if you will). Not only that, but it was filled with lots of scientific lingo, the sort of technobabble that sci-fi fans would likely enjoy the hell out of, but would scare the mass audience that the LucasArts' executives were hoping to attract. A lot of the final art styling came from this version in terms of color and general theme for the environments. It used a new engine called Storydroid, which supported additional visual effects, and had a traditional multi-icon interface. Unfortunately Moriarty left as the project became too stressful and he was unhappy with the direction management was taking with the project.

Dave Grossman, who worked on *Monkey Island* and *Day of the Tentacle,* led the project for a few months, then finally Sean Clark came in. He swapped it back over to the SCUMM engine, moved to the simple one-click interface, and eradicated much of the background story and technical stuff. This is the version of the game we got. While obviously stripped down, at least it made to the market, which can't be said of the other versions.

A novel based on *The Dig* was also written by noted sci-fi author Alan Dean Foster, who is known for his *Humanx Commonwealth* series, as well as adaptations of other sci-fi properties like *Alien*, *Star Wars*, *Transformers*, and many others. Although it doesn't follow the events of the game precisely, it hits most of the same points, and helps expand on the backstory a bit, especially when it comes to the alien civilization. It's still based on Sean Clark's design though, so it's probably not quite as in depth as Moriarty's version. The only major point of note is that they actually reveal the name of the alien planet – Cocytus, after a river in the underworld from Greek mythology, mentioned in both Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.



Grim Fandango

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Tim Schafer
Developer: LucasArts

"With bony hands I hold my partner
On soulless feet we cross the floor
The music stops as if to answer
An empty knocking at the door
It seems his skin was sweet as mango
When last I held him to my breast
But now we dance this grim fandango
And will four years before we rest."

According to Aztec mythology, most departed souls are not easily admitted into the afterlife. Instead, they are subjected to a four year journey fraught with perils. LucasArts' *Grim Fandango* takes this concept and runs with it, by introducing a karmic twist – people who led good lives can take a ridiculously expedient train that boils the travel time down from four years to four minutes. Lesser folks are handed walking sticks and told to be on their way. The division in charge of these decisions is the Department of Death, who employs a series of grim reapers – or, as they prefer to be called, travel agents – to provide the proper passage.

Manuel "Manny" Calavera is one such travel agent. He, along with everyone in the department, are lost souls, unable to proceed to the afterlife until they have paid off an unnamed debt. Unfortunately, he works on commission, and all of his clients are low-lifes unable to afford the better modes of transportation. As Manny quickly learns, it's not for lack of trying, as his co-worker Domino seems to be getting all of good clients. Feeling that something is suspicious, Manny intercepts one of Domino's potential clients, an altruistic young woman named Mercedes "Menche" Colomar. She should theoretically qualify for the express train, but the department's computer system says otherwise. This begins a chain of events that separates the duo and sends Manny through the underworld, as he attempts to piece together the mystery, escort Menche to her proper destination... and just maybe find redemption for himself. The story takes place over the course of four years, essentially breaking the game into four acts. It begins in the city of El Marrow, before moving to the forlorn city of Rubacava, to a factory at the edge of the world, and finally back to the big city.

Beyond its take on metaphysical concepts, *Grim Fandango* also has a uniquely appealing visual style. It's patterned after the film noir stylings of the '50s, with art deco architecture and a classy jazz soundtrack. Since the characters are all dead, technically, they are designed to look like Mexican calaca figures, skeletons used in the Day of the Dead festival. The land of living is only briefly visited, but is represented by a Richard Hamilton-style collage. The underworld denizens cannot be killed by most regular means, but the most popular method of murder is known as "sprouting", wherein a victim is shot with a special dart that causes flowers to grow out of their bones. It also gives new meaning to the term "pushing up daisies", a fact which does not go unmissed by Manny.

Grim Fandango is also the first LucasArts adventure game to utilize 3D. The backgrounds are all static prerendered bitmaps, with the characters consisting of polygons. While technology was quite limited back in the late '90s, the stylized look of the character designs are geometrically simple enough to be rendered effectively, making it much more appealing than similar games of the era (including its own successor, *Escape from Monkey Island*, which uses the same engine). While the software graphics mode uses some pixellated textures, the hardware accelerated options clean them up, as long as your video card doesn't choke on it.



Per noir genre standards, there is at least one double crossing dame in Grim Fandango.

While the transition to 3D is handled smoothly, the new interface proves something of an issue. The familiar point-and-click interface is completely gone, and instead you control Manny directly, with either the keyboard or a gamepad. You can choose from character relative controls (similar to *Resident Evil*, also known as "tank controls"), where you turn by pressing left or right and press up to move forward, or camera relative, where up is always up. Neither really works though, because Manny is way too slippery around corners. Each of the three commands ("Look", "Use/Talk", "Take") are mapped to various keys. If something catches Manny's eyes, he'll turn his head, but it's not always clear which bit of scenery he's looking at until you inspect it. It makes finding hotspots extremely difficult, requiring that you comb every edge of every screen to look for stuff. The puzzles themselves, save for one bit where you need to decode some abstract clues to forge a betting ticket, aren't really more difficult than standard LucasArts' fare, but this set up makes it extremely easy to miss vital items, and thus impede progress.

In a lesser title, these issues would almost be game breaking, but the rest of *Grim Fandango* more than makes up for it. At the core of it is, of course, Manny. Like many other LucasArts' heroes, Manny is something of a wisecracker, offering wry observations while being able to handle his dire situation with admirable aplomb. Most of the best lines from his commentary – try picking up something in the gigantic box of cat litter, and he'll just laugh at you. "Ah, my bread and butter," he says of his casino patrons. "Thrill-seeking rich folk with a poor grasp of statistics and probability." At open mic night at a beatnik club, you can get in front of the crowd and form some pretentious nonsense poetry from a series of randomly generated phrases.

One halfway brilliant scene involves Manny trying to obtain a metal detector from Carla, a security guard. She begins a long and rambling sob story about her time as the living, and Manny's dialogue responses constantly change as the tale of woe progresses. The first two options are ineffectual, although they grow amusing as the situation becomes awkward. The third option involves asking about the metal detector, and the responses slowly grow less subtle as Manny begins to lose his patience. ("I like short-haired cats." "You know what I like?

METAL DETECTORS!" or "People think I'm stuck up sometimes, believe it or not." "Why? Because you wouldn't let them touch your metal detector?")

However, while Guybrush Threepwood and Sam & Max rarely go beyond the roles of amusing cartoon caricatures, there's something, ironically, more human about Manny. He has astounding ambitions – in the transition between the first and second chapter, he takes a crappy little diner and transforms it into a swinging nightclub. Between the second and third chapter, he sneaks himself onboard a ship and works his way all the way up to captain. Like any good film noir hero, though, he's something of an underdog – he's outpaced by Domino at his salesman job, his casino plays second fiddle to the big-time mobsters in Rubacava, and his ship captain job is quickly ended when he's attacked by corrupt customs officials.

He is nothing if not persistent. He's not even sure why he's embarked on this adventure. Does he just want the high commission for escorting Menche? Does he truly feel guilty for abandoning her? Or is he, as one character suggests, in love with her? Manny is practically batting off the women like flies in Rubacava, but none of them mean anything to him beyond some flirtatious banter. And like Rick Blaine in *Casablanca*, it's never spelled out exactly what Manny did that got him stuck in his position – not many of them like to talk about the "fat days", but it's implied to have been pretty bad.

Through Manny's many internal conflicts, he manages to keep his cool. His voice is provided by Tony Plana (who would later become known as Betty's father in the American version of the sitcom *Ugly Betty*), and the dialogue is read with an appropriate world-weariness. And there are no dramatic monologues, nor ham-handed self-proclamations. It's quite subtle compared to most video game writing, which again puts *Grim Fandango* in a class of its own.



Manny and Glottis sure look swanky in their white tuxedoes.

Manny's constant companion is Glottis, a demon. Demons are not human souls, but are rather manufactured by the rulers of the underworld to perform various menial tasks. Glottis' job is to fix cars, although he also has a thing for turning them into ludicrously detailed hot rods. He looks like a monstrously oversized teddy bear, and would be scary if not for his goofy, expressive eyes, and tiny ears that flutter enthusiastically. Like Manny, he faces his own crisis of conscience when stuck in Rubacava – since there are no cars and therefore no need for a mechanic, he becomes a pianist for the club. But his penchant for booze overwhelms him, which would be depressing if his slurred one-liners weren't so hilarious. It's tragic, then – he was made for the sole purpose of fixing stuff, but he can't, and it makes him miserable.

While it's really the characters that drive *Grim Fandango*, the world design deserves a special commendation. Like Tim Schafer's other games, it's filled with random bits of silliness, like the flaming beavers that guard the Petrified Forest, or Glottis' vehicle, the Bonewagon, which is

eventually given ridiculous hydraulic lifts. The underworld isn't always the happiest of places, obviously, but it does contain one of the most entrancing locales ever seen in a computer game – the city of Rubacava, which is the center of the game's second act.



The Blue Casket in Rubacava is a stunning work of architecture.

Apparently most of the lesser souls aren't able to fully complete the journey to the underworld, and instead start a new life for themselves. Rubacava is filled with such drifters, those who have given up on their goals and are instead content to drink and gamble their troubles away for the rest of eternity. Like Las Vegas in the night, the neon lights brighten the darkness, and the place would be gorgeous if it weren't run by shifty mobsters and crooked cops. Manny fits in right along with these denizens, having opened up a casino to whittle away the days while he waits for Menche. Alas, Rubacava is such an amazing locale that the rest of the game really just can't measure up to it. The third chapter sees Manny stuck in an island prison solving a bunch of boring mechanical puzzles. And while the forth chapter provides a satisfying conclusion, it never quite replicates neither the humor nor the despair of the earlier acts.

There are dozens of ways you can praise *Grim Fandango*, from its unforgettable locales to its vulnerable cast of characters to its spot-on dialogue. But the biggest compliment you can pay it is that there's nothing else fully like it, especially compared to other adventure games. *Gabriel Knight* may have a fantastic story, but when placed against dozens of other supernatural murder mysteries, it doesn't really differentiate. The same can be said about *The Longest Journey* – also extremely well written, but it blends in together with numerous other works of fantasy fiction. If *Grim Fandango* was a book, or a comic, or a movie, it would still stand out as being entirely unlike anything else in the medium. It would probably still go underappreciated, of course – it's hard to adequately describe its intricacies in a way that's easily understood, which may have contributed to its disappointing retail performance. While not technically LucasArts' last adventure game, it's the point where it seemed like the adventure game genre had died. If viewed from that perspective, then *Grim Fandango* is the most beautiful swan song imaginable.

Introduction to Legend Entertainment

It's easy to admire Legend Entertainment, simply for fighting the good fight. The purchase of Infocom by Activision in 1989 was essentially a death knell for text adventures, as the company clearly had no idea what to do with them, other than creating some awful "interactive comics", publishing a few semi-relevant *Zork* games, and sticking the label in places it didn't really belong, like their localization of the NES game *Tombs and Treasures*. Despite losing traction against visual adventure games from the likes of LucasArts and Sierra, Legend believed that there was still an audience for interactive fiction, and hung tightly to their ideals, for at least a few more years.

The company was formed by Mike Verdu and Bob Bates, the latter of whom had developed *Sherlock: The Riddle of the Crown Jewels* and *Arthur: The Quest for Excalibur* for Infocom. Legend also realized that the sort of games they tended to make attracted the book reading audience, so many of their titles were based on various literary properties like Frederik Pohl's *Gateway*, Terry Brooks' *Shannara* and Spider Robinson's *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*. Though Bates and Verdu worked on many of the company's titles, they often called in other industry vets to help with the development. The famous Steve Meretzky, another former Infocom employee, developed their *Spellcasting* trilogy, while former Sierra employees Corey and Lori Cole, and Josh Mandel, worked on *Shannara* and *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*, respectively.

Legend's games can be broken into two generations, with each running on similar technology. Their early games are basically text adventures with various enhancements, but their later games ditched the text parser in favor of full mouse control, while still trying to keep all of the detail one would normally find in interactive fiction.

Those who worked on the later Infocom games realized that the white text on a stark black background was a little too intimidating for many people, so they started experimenting with fancy interfaces and other niceties. Legend Entertainment continued this trend by making their games as user friendly as possible. The screen is broken up into several sections and looks a bit like Windows 3.1, despite running in DOS. On the left side are columns which contain all available verbs and nouns, including everything in the area and in your inventory. The upper left portion of the screen shows a compass displaying all available exits, as well as a few different options. The upper right portion of the screen shows a small graphic of the area, but can be changed to a map or a list of your inventory. You can use the mouse cursor to point at objects in the scenery, or assemble sentences simply by clicking on any of the commands. All of the narrative text is in the largest window. In its default state, it's all a bit busy, but you can customize practically everything, turning it into a pure text experience if that suits you better.

By 1994, when companies like Sierra and LucasArts were creating worlds with 256-color VGA graphics and voice acting, it was clear that text adventures, no matter how dressed up they were, just couldn't compete anymore. Legend's second generation games are an evolution of their previous ones, but they expand the viewing window, and use context sensitive mouse-based commands to navigate the environments. As time went on, they got onto the multimedia bandwagon and started integrating full motion video into their titles, although they never used them as a replacement for the most important element of interactive fiction: quality writing.

Sadly, graphic adventures were going the way of text adventures by the late '80s, and Legend Entertainment was gobbled up by GT Interactive. They were tasked with creating first person shooters, with their only two releases being *The Wheel of Time*, based on Robert Jordan's expansive fantasy series, and *Unreal 2*, the follow-up to Epic's technological groundbreaker. They were closed down after the release of the latter, a sad ending to a company that fought hard in the face of market adversity.

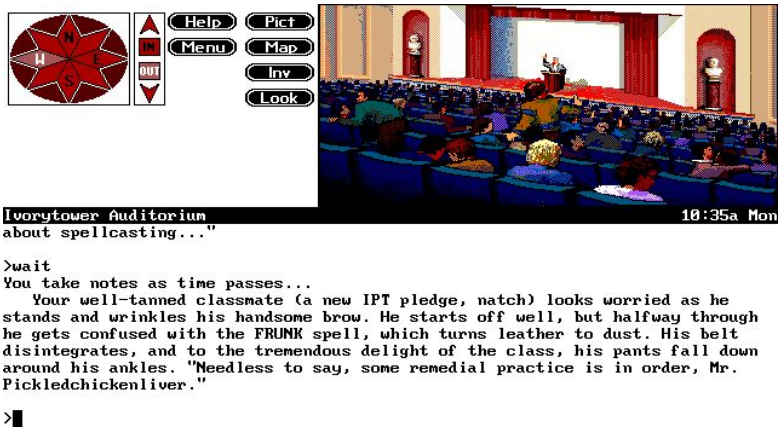
Spellcasting

So there's this series of games known as *Spellcasting*. The protagonist lives a normal life, but he's treated badly by his stepfolks and never quite fits in with his surroundings. His life takes a dramatic change, though, when he enters a magic school and becomes a wizard in training. Oh, and each episode represents a school year at the occult institution.

Right! Call Scholastic, we got us some serious case of copyright infringement! Wait, this is from 1990? In that case, call Steve Meretzky, we got us some serious case of copyright infringement!

Okay, no more obvious *Harry Potter* references, but with the many similarities between the two franchises and all the lawsuits around Rowling's series, one has to wonder why there's never been a juristic showdown with Legend Entertainment. There are even more links than those mentioned above, and when playing through the first game only, it becomes consecutively harder to believe J. K. Rowling never touched the series before conceiving *Harry Potter*.

While *Harry Potter*, however, is a series of deep, serious novels about the development of several strong young characters, *Spellcasting 101* presents itself as a variant on the humorous tale of the juvenile, nerdy outcast/loser trying to earn recognition and lose his virginity. In fact, like much interactive fiction, there's very little to the protagonist Ernie Eaglebeak at all, he's really just "you, the player" for all intents and purposes, other than his silly face on the title screens.



Just another average day at Sorcerer's University.

In the same vein, the game never puts the focus on a great overarching plot, but rather revolves around several setpieces and funny scenes, putting the puzzles and the laughs on its highest priority. That isn't to say the games lack story development. From the first game on, small hooks and allusions to further events and sequels are weaved into the scenes, which link the series into a cohesive whole, almost episodic in nature.

Yet it's the jokes that definitely steal the show. As is to be expected from a work of interactive fiction by Steve Meretzky, the writing is genuinely funny at almost all times, if intentionally juvenile. From hilarious descriptions of seemingly boring backgrounds to the genre-typical narrator who constantly breaks the fourth wall to tease or ridicule the player, the game, everyone and everything. The man definitely knows his job. You know you're playing an adventure game with great writing when failure brings almost more joy than succeeding. The parser is strong enough to keep frustration from invalid commands to a minimum, and even when it can't process the input, it's usually easy to discern what's wrong. Most of all, it's pure fun to try out all your spells on the most nonsensical targets.

Despite the somewhat raunchy subtitle and cover art, the *Spellcasting* games are entirely tame – until you activate the "naughty" setting. Female characters that put Ernie through chores or played board games with him are now eager to copulate, and there are a lot of female characters. A game of this theme quickly calls for comparison to the *Leisure Suit Larry* series, but other than the short, polyester loving loser, sorcerers do indeed get all the girls. (Well, except for one.) Yet the visuals never get any racier than to show a woman in lingerie or putting her bare behind on display. The text, however, can get surprisingly explicit at times. One would think setting the game to nice mode would deprive one of most of the fun, but actually, the "censored" text reeks so much of fake moralizing and pretentiousness that it's gonna have you lying on the floor with laughter when reading with the knowledge of what is really going on. The questionable imagery usually either won't show anything at all or are replaced with alternative, less revealing versions. It seems, though, that Legend Entertainment wasn't quite sure what they considered adult content, and some graphics showing almost-nudity remain intact in both modes.

The tool to find your way through all of Ernie's exploits is Legend Entertainment's well-proven interactive fiction interface. Actually, it wasn't well-proven at all at the time when *Spellcasting 101* was released, as it was the very first game to introduce the system. Above the typical text adventure text window and parser input rests by default a visual representation of the current scene. To the left are listed a lot of – but not all – verbs known by the parser as well as all things and persons Ernie can currently interact with. Finally there's the compass that provides for a clicking alternative to the directional commands.

The plain artworks don't seem look much, and many interactive fiction veterans would likely rather have more space for text than all these bells and whistles, which is possible, as the interface is customizable. Still, they're more than mere decoration and full of hotspots, so the games can be played almost like point-and-click adventures by the less old-school players, although with an awful lot of verbs to browse through. There are even a few extra responses especially reserved for mouse clicks and objects you wouldn't know were there by the textual description alone. Still, seeing the picture is never a requirement to solve a problem. The image can also be swapped for a map of the current area, a list of your inventory or the text description for the current scene.

Oh, and there's also the clock, which you should always pay attention to. While the game doesn't run in real time, every action advances the timer, and many of the events in the game are momentary.




```
>repair shower
With dazzling skill, you repair the plumbing, turning it on and off several
times to demonstrate the lack of steam and the more desirable temperature mix.
The barmaids melt all over you. "Hey, he's not a nerdy sorcerer, he's a studly
plumber!" "Oh, Ernie, come fix MY plumbing!" "Meet me after the welcome back
party!" "I'm free tonight, okay?" "Let's run away to Spittul..."
"...Dandervill..." "...New Barfton..." "Here's the key to my room..." You feel
a key being pressed into your hand. "You're so handsome!" "And strong!" "Oh,
take me! Take me!"

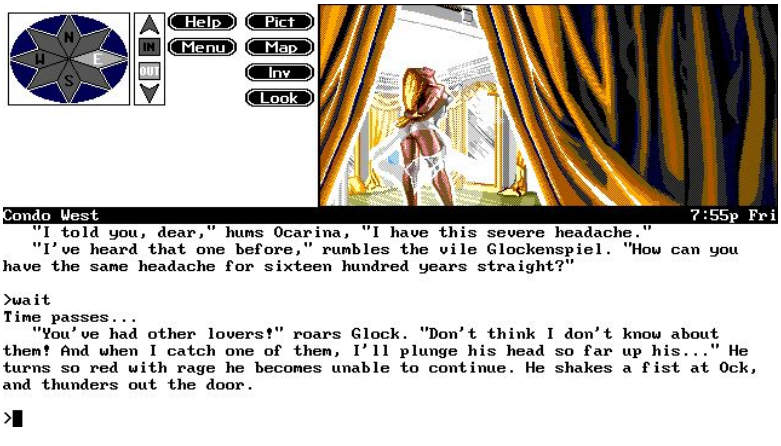
>
```

This is one of the many, frequently naughty scenes.

That's right, there are a dozen ways to miss your chance, screw up, die, or maneuver into a dead end. Fortunately, the game offers an undo function to revise an unwise command. Once.

Saving often is imperative, as is keeping several backup states. Despite the inventive and modern presentation, below the surface the *Spellcasting* series proved dauntingly old school even for the time of its release, and the games are prime examples of obfuscated design. A player not ready to take notes, read every line of descriptions carefully, think around three corners and then do it all again after failing, is in danger to give up on the series swiftly. *Spellcasting* is also one of those games better enjoyed together with a friend, as two (or more) brains are not twisted as easily as one. The logic is often crazy, but finally getting it is one of the most rewarding experiences in video gaming ever.

Seeing how Legend Entertainment was the quasi-successor to Infocom, it only seems natural that the games come with a number of feelies that double-serve as copy protection. Printed maps, charts and other documents put immersion to new heights in 1990, but hold the potential to frustrate the modern retro gamer to no end in trying to get hold of them. There's also a sense of realism to some mechanics that even adventurers spoiled by the LucasArts-comfort zone might view as needlessly bothersome, like Ernie dropping all his stuff each time he falls asleep.

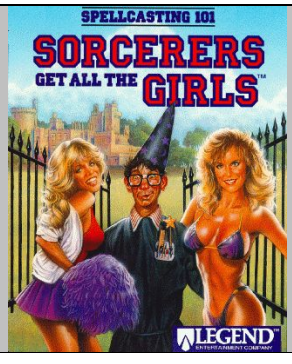


More naughtiness, of course.

Besides being required to be in the right spot at the right time, most puzzles are solved with the help of magical spells. While there are a few inventory puzzles, most are very simple and about as obvious as "unlock door with key". The tricky part is interpreting and applying the descriptions in your spell book to get the required items in the first place. Take for example the SKONN spell in the first game, whose purpose it is to "increase bust size". No, you can't help any female characters to a new cup size with it, but yes, you'll encounter a situation where you have to put it to good use. There are generally two methods to learn new spells: most are confined in spell boxes received by triggering certain events and just have to be opened to be transferred into the spell book. Yet there are a few spells that can only be gained by hard training in the spellcasting simulator, kind of a magical holodeck that puts the Sorcerer's University students in typical situations that a sorcerer's apprentice is faced with in his daily life.

The hero of *Spellcasting* is Ernie Eaglebeak (yes, all the characters have silly surnames). Escaping his hellish life, he enlists at Sorcerer's University. But, as how it usually goes at college, he is more occupied with doing other things than studying. Ernie's big, secret love is Lola Tigerbelly. As usual for love interests of nerdy loser protagonists in comedy like this, she's the most uncaring and shallow bitch you could possibly imagine. Joey Rottenwood is Ernie's evil stepfather, who keeps him locked up tight for fear of an ancient prophecy. He also apparently has unfinished business with Sorcerer's University. Otto Tickingclock is professor of spellcasting at the university. The old geezer has a heart of gold, but a memory made of fish

nets. He constantly forgets what he is currently talking about even in the direst moments. If he doesn't just doze off, that is. And Hillary Tickingclock is Otto's wife, who is scandalously young and even more scandalously unfaithful. Hardly getting the satisfaction she needs in her marriage, she is apparently determined to do it with anyone that stumbles into her room. And stumbling into places is something Ernie Eaglebeak does exceptionally well.



Spellcasting 101: Sorcerers Get All the Girls

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Ernie Eaglebeak lives miserably under the fists of his stepfather, Joey Rottenwood, who keeps him locked up in the attic and beats him up good regularly. Only two things help Ernie see the light: His secret love to his neighbor Lola Tigerbelly, and his admission to Sorcerer University. So when the opportunity arises, he breaks out of his prison and makes a run for the institution. After registering at the lobby with his registration form (keep your feelies ready), school can begin. With the form comes a schedule of Ernie's classes for this term, but skipping most of them usually won't hurt. Some hold valuable information, though. Ernie barely gets to know his new home before the school is attacked and the mighty Sorcerer's Appliance – which holds the ultimate magic but whose actual purpose is impossible to discern – gets stolen. Ernie is the only one left, and so he jumps on a magic surfboard to find the appliance and its great attachments on various small islands.

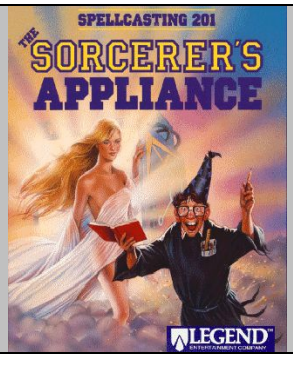


Otto Tickingclock frequently forgets the most basic things.

This setup allows for a modular plot progression, as each island is played as a chapter in itself. Very thankfully, as this means your problems are usually confined to a single island, which makes it easy to recognize when messing up (usually when one misses the new important spell or item at the end). It also allows for a distinctive setting in each chapter, and all of them are

hilarious. What other game makes you re-enact Goldilocks and the Three Bears – backwards!? Some parts can be tiring, as the Island of Lost Soles, where Ernie has to solve 80(!) riddles based on puns to find out the names of the lost souls he has to recover. Fortunately, it is possible to get hints by helper nymphs after a while.

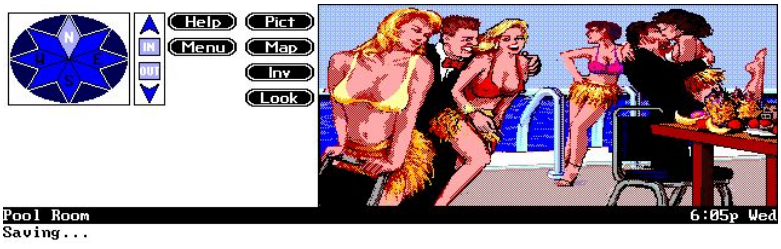
In the end, Ernie finds out the truth about his stepfather and his pedigree, saves the day and gets instantly promoted to a sophomore. But he doesn't get the girl, even after saving her life. Well, at least he got all the other girls he met.



Spellcasting 201: The Sorcerer's Appliance

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Sophomore year is a busy time for Ernie Eaglebeak. He is called by the new University president, his trusted professor Otto Tickingclock, to find the Five Greater Attachments for the still wildly unexplained Appliance. He is also trying to become accepted at the fraternity Hu Delta Phart and thus has to deal with all kinds of tasks and chicanery, especially seeing as the pledgemaster Chris Cowpatty seems to hold a special grudge against him.



Watch as the party gradually gets out of hand after your magical meddling.

This time around almost the entire game takes place on the campus, but it has been significantly enlarged and some of the old backgrounds are redrawn. So the bulk of the game world is accessible at any given time, subjecting the player to even more confusion than in the last game. To make things worse, time is always of the essence, so even when knowing exactly what to do there's not much room to fool around. Be prepared for lots and lots of replays, trying to figure out where to go when and to do what and which classes are essential in order to skip the useless ones. One of the greatest challenges provides operating the Sorcerer's

Appliance, with a crapload of different setups. If you made it through the first game by the skin of your teeth, chances are this episode still will drive you insane.

Almost as frustrating is the feeling that a good portion of the game is copy protection. Not only it is necessary to rely on external material for the class schedule, Ernie also learns to play a magical instrument called Moodhorn, whose notations are only available in print, or at least were originally. Finally there's the map of the impossible labyrinth that is the university's new sewage system. At least reading that map proves a challenge in itself, for better or worse.

The engine in the first episode was capable of playing sounds and music, but it still was a very quiet game and seemed as if it didn't quite know what to do with the medium. The sequel makes more frequent use of these features, especially sound effects, which are quite common. Yet *The Sorcerer's Appliance* is still a text adventure, and the speakers will be idle most of the time. Music only plays when it's perfectly appropriate to the current scene, mostly when Ernie himself can hear it in the context of his adventure.

Through all these hardships Ernie still doesn't win Lola's heart, but he ends up in bed with several other females once again. Yet *Spellcasting 201* might be a bit less naughty overall (after all, there are girls left untouched by Ernie this time), instead the focus lies on silly pranks and Ernie applying his studies to solve the mystery of the Appliance.



Spellcasting 301: Spring Break

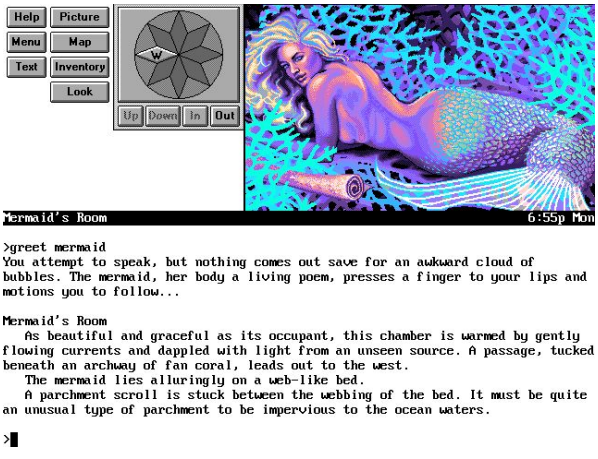
Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Even though the third game in the series is titled *Spellcasting 301*, there'll be no lessons to attend to this time. Instead the game revolves around the sub-titular spring break, which Ernie and his fellow Pharts are eager to get to. So, they load lots of booze, money and sun lotion on their flying carpet, and take off towards the beach resort. Ernie is in charge of flying the thing (which results in what is basically another impossible maze for copy protection). But something goes wrong, and as their vehicle is short one failsafe lever, Ernie has to drop all their belongings to save their lives.

Big bummer, but at least they can relax on the beach, or can they? Unfortunately, within minutes after their arrival, they clash with Getta Lodda Yu, a fraternity from a rival college. They're a bunch of big, muscular jerks, quite in contrast with the nerds from Sorcerer's University. Of course they want the wimps off the beach for fear their meager, untanned bodies could scare away the ladies. A blonde woman, as gorgeous as mysterious, shows up and forces the guys into a series of contests for the sovereignty over the beach. Of course Ernie and his friends are no match for their newfound enemies in competitions like body surfing, bullfighting or throwing wild parties with as many hot chicks around as possible.

Given the subject matter, this episode is lighter in tone than the previous installments for the most part, but of course it doesn't forget a proper adventurous climax. Taking place at spring break, it also shows legions of scantily clad women. The game is definitely the naughtiest out of the bunch, showing more explicit imagery than ever before. The actual sex scenes,

however, are extremely peripheral and one cannot help but think they're just in for tradition's sake.



You're on spring break, so of course there are mermaids.

When trying to activate naughty mode for the first time, the narrator jokes that it had to be removed for the game to "qualify for an NEA grant", but activates it nonetheless just for you when no one's looking. Actually, though, it's the nice mode that should have had to take a step back. Some scenes are still censored, but a girl's bare breasts can still be spotted in one of the backgrounds, which is more than the other games showed even in naughty mode. The adjustments to the text are also less thorough, leaving, for example, the wet t-shirt contest intact with all its (textual) indecency.

Spellcasting 301 is still a game of scheduling, as being at the right place at the right time is as essential to the puzzles as ever. It's much more forgiving than *201*, though, as it is okay to lose one or two contests against Yu, and Ernie has a little more time to figure out a way to win than before. As long as the score isn't too dividing, the outcome will be decided at the grand finale, which then requires preparations one never would have guessed on a first playthrough, so it's a lot of trial and error once again.

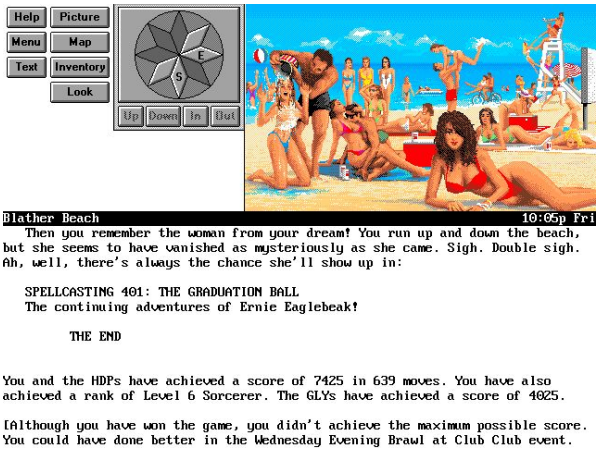
Still, Meretzky doesn't fail to reward the ordeal he puts his players through with witty puns, great slapstick and an even better implementation of the spell system for innovative puzzles. The RATANT spell is used for spell mutations, which becomes one of the most valuable and funniest spells in Ernie's repertoire. Not all of its effects are equally useful, though. At least it would be hard to figure out whatever to do with UPPSSY, spell of opposites, after mutating it into DOWNSY, spell of opossums. Higher spellcasting levels aren't acquired by accumulating points anymore, as instead our hero encounters a sorcerers' guild that entrusts him with several side quests for that purpose.

Spellcasting 301 introduces a new version of Legend Entertainment's adventure interface, which would come to use in all their subsequent games. The menus are made out to almost look like a Windows application, but the game doesn't gain too much from the change. Only the map is vastly improved, as it now gives an abstract overview of all visited locations. And thankfully so, as the terrain is vast this time.

On the technical side, the game now uses the VGA standard for the graphics, generally in 16 color mode for a bigger vertical resolution, which results in 3 more lines of text that can be displayed on one screen. Whoever deems that still too little, can switch almost the entire interface off to get a full text-only mode. Sometimes the game switches to hi-color low-resolution mode, for cutscenes in comparatively ugly pixel art and gratingly inappropriate

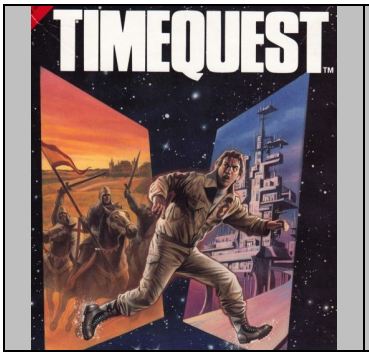
digitized photos for the chapter cards. A musical score now plays at all times, with versatile, fitting melodies. Hearing a variation of the theme from Epyx' *California Games* at the beach or hints of Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* soundtrack in the stereotypical wild west town would greatly enhance the experience, if it wasn't for a seemingly trivial, but significant problem. The music changes upon most screen transitions and causes a noticeable pause each time. After one or two restarts, this gets so annoying that one just wants to turn it off in order to progress faster (fortunately the game gives that option).

Spring Break offers a welcome breath of fresh air after the first two games felt very similar in tone and composition of the puzzles. Despite the change of location, it contains many nods toward its predecessors, although they're never more than brief cameos this time. Its elements at times seem to fail to form a cohesive whole, but it compensates through sheer power of creativity. This last episode could have been a worthy conclusion to the series, only it wasn't.



A promise of a game that never arrived...

The *Spellcasting* series would have come full circle with *Spellcasting 401: The Graduation Ball*, where players would have accompanied Ernie Eaglebeak to his graduation. Endings of *301* promised wild orgies and a reunion with the woman of Ernie's wet dreams (which for once wasn't Lola). Unfortunately, this game has never been made for whatever reasons, leaving the series a tetralogy in three parts. A shame, but after the lousy *Leather Goddesses of Phobos 2*, it may have been for the better for *Spellcasting* to not jump the shark and make a transition to point-and-click adventures, too. It's puzzling that no one decided to pick up the series again, so far. After all, it's become legally hazardous to create new franchises about ordinary guys turned students of sorcery ever since the *Harry Potter* hype, a phenomenon that already helped to resurrect *Simon the Sorcerer*. But not even a re-release of the old games is in sight, making them hard to find nowadays, as they have last been compiled with the *Spellcasting Party Pak* in 1993.



Timequest

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Bob Bates
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Timequest, Legend Entertainment's second release, is very reminiscent of Sierra's text adventure *Time Zone*. Spanning six disks and retailing at nearly $100, this massive (for 1982) game sent you traveling around the world through eight different time periods, meeting with many famous historical figures. While extraordinarily ambitious, it also suffered from the same sparse writing, arcane puzzles and awful design that plagued all of Sierra's other early products. It was still an amazing concept though, although it took nearly ten years for it to be properly fleshed out under the care of a different developer.

The story is, you're part of the Temporal Corps, an elite unit with the ability to travel through time with a device called an Interkron. One day, a fellow officer named Vettenmeyer totally snaps and decides to totally screw with history, altering ten events that changed the course of the human species. Your job is to fix the mess he made, uncover the clues that point to his secret hideout, and take him down. None of these scenarios are actually related in the game itself, as instead they're all described in a mission briefing guide included in the game's packaging. The way they're presented, it seems like you could conquer them in any order, but the items required to beat a certain scenario are usually found after completing another. You're given the starting points of each problem, but it's difficult to get a grasp on what you're supposed to be doing until you discover what items you can find and piece together where they can be used. Your Interkron can travel through both time and space, sending you to six different locations around the globe in nine different time periods, not counting your own. Of course, not every era is relevant to your quest and therefore is not visitable, but there's still a lot of ground to cover.



Most games with time travel have to involve Hitler to some degree.

In the various time periods, inhabitants rarely question your presence and you can easily sneak into many places without much of a hassle. While bizarre, it allows you to concentrate on the larger goals of each quest, rather than worrying about constantly maneuvering around guards. They also all speak modern English, although that's written off due to the futuristic translation technology.

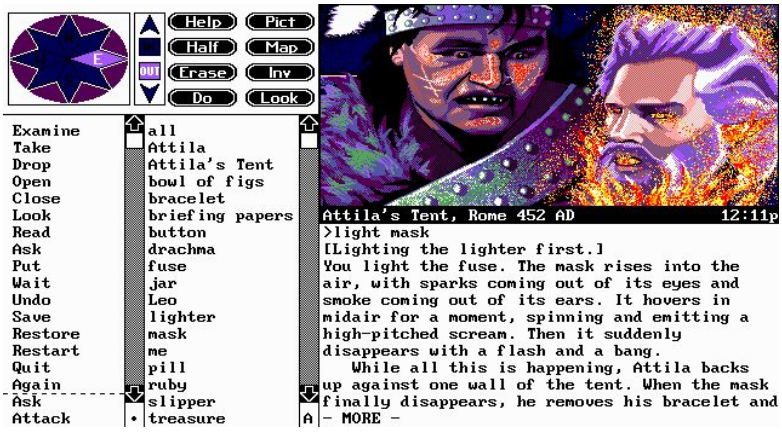
In each scenario, there's also strict time limit to get everything done. If you miss the timing, the game ends the next time you try go to a different period. It's strange, then, for a game about time travel, that you can't just travel to an earlier point, reset the events, and try again. This is because the clock essentially "stops" whenever you leave a time period, and resumes at that same exact spot when you return. It was probably to keep things from getting too complicated, or potentially from causing time paradoxes from running into yourself, but since there are dozens of ways you can get stuck in unwinnable spots, it would've been cool to manipulate time to correct mistakes like this.

Once you've rationalized how it all works, you can begin correcting the timestream. The first – and most straightforward – case involves Julius Caesar, who was famously killed by conspirators in a power struggle. Vettenmeyer has scheduled an "accident" to occur months before his intended death, disallowing his assassins to argue over his succession and thereby avoiding the downfall of the Roman Empire. Another involves the slaughtering of the Aztecs by the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez. The Aztecs believed that Cortez was the human form of the god Quetzalcoatl, who had promised vengeance upon them, and therefore led to the downfall of their civilization. Their myth has since been changed so the Aztecs believe they are invincible, thereby fighting against Cortez rather than submitting to him.

The most contemporary scenario involves the Battle of Dunkirk, one of the turning points of World War II. Although the Axis was in a position to defeat the Allies, Hitler stopped his advances for three days, for reasons which are widely debated. This waiting period allowed the Allies to successfully evacuate their troops. Through the antics of your time-travelling nemesis, now Hitler is scheduled to continue his assault, thereby winning the battle and therefore the war. You need to convince Hitler that the Allies have surrendered, so he will not resume his attack. England has no wishes to give in, and you cannot persuade them otherwise. During this time, Churchill is giving a speech regarding the situation. The secret keyword indicating the British surrender is "cigar", so you need to trick Winston Churchill into saying it on air. Once you do so, he obviously realizes his mistake and recants it almost immediately. At this point, you need to travel to Rome, where the Axis leaders are listening to the speech, until the point where Churchill says the keyword, and then unplug the radio so they can't hear his correction, thereby completing the ruse.

Sometimes the cases intertwine, as they do with Napoleon. During his quest for European domination, he decided against directly attacking England, fearing they would be too strong, instead heading towards Egypt to cut off their trade routes. Vettenmeyer has told him otherwise, and since it's believed that his assault on the British Isles would have succeeded, you need to put Napoleon back on course. But then there's the case of Charlemagne, the man who believed himself to be on a holy mission from God, who would then proceed to unite most of Europe. But Vettenmeyer has planted the seeds of doubt into the would-be king, causing him to deny the crown and thus potentially leave Europe in the Dark Ages. So, in an extremely elaborate series of events, you need to steal the crown, and give it the young King Tut, who keeps it buried in his pyramid for thousands of years. However, you cannot retrieve the crown yourself, because it is hidden in such a small passage. But what you can do is convince Napoleon to follow you into the pyramids (after you've gotten him to invade Egypt), whose tiny stature allows him to squeeze through and get it himself. Since Napoleon believed himself to be the rightful successor to Charlemagne, he has this engraved on the crown when he coronates himself. Then, you need to jump forward to 1940, where the crown is held in Mussolini's museum, steal it, then return it to Charlemagne, who will now be assured of his holiness after reading the engraving.

The final puzzle allows you to fool with time traveling little bit more. When facing off against Vettenmeyer, there are two teleportation pads, both of which will send you a short time into the past. When you first arrive, your future self will give you an important piece of information, which you need to use and then relate again to your past self in order to complete a full logical time loop. It's a bit mind boggling, but it all makes sense if you've gotten this far without your brain exploding.

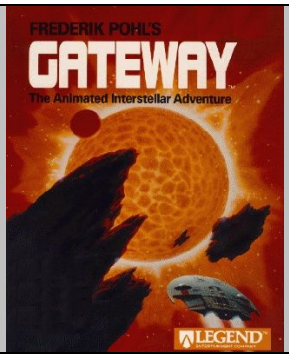


Attila the Hun stopped his conquest of Europe due to his fear of the Christian God, so they say.

The convoluted scenarios are the crux of the game, but it's got plenty of other things going for it too. The writing is dry and straightforward, but there's plenty of understated humor. In contrast to the lady loving of *Spellcasting 101*, any potentially romantic entanglements go awry. Cleopatra invites you for a special session, but deems you unworthy for a full night of passion, and attempting to copulate with the twenty hookers you can purchase in China will result in a heart attack. (You're supposed to use them to distract the guards.) Try to kill Caesar and he'll simply say that he can't fit another assassination attempt into his schedule. Try to kill Cleopatra, who was his mistress, and Caesar's wife Calpurnia cheers you on. Despite the historical density of the plot, it's not above fooling around, which of course allows you to do absurd things like convince Attila the Hun of the Christian God's power through a fireworks display or establish yourself as the founder of a Buddhism.

There is a certain point where it's hard to believe anyone could figure these puzzles out on their own. If *Timequest* was made back in the Infocom days, they probably would've had to designate it above their already extraordinarily difficult "Advanced" class, and without a walkthrough, it will remain inaccessible to all but the most expert text adventure players. But the puzzles are so damned creative and ridiculous that it ends up working in the game's favor. Sure, some of your actions are cruel – one of the scenarios involves opening the doors to the city of Peking, thereby allowing Genghis Khan to invade, and causing the massacre of thousands – but you're just setting history right. As such, it's a dream come true for history buffs that love to see the ways the world can be manipulated, along with some of the delightfully silly things you can do.

Gateway



Frederik Pohl's Gateway

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Duane Beck, Michael Verdu, Bob Bates, Michael Lindner, Glen Dahlgren
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Gateway is rather distinguished in Legend Entertainment's adventure game lineup. It's the first game Legend released that was based on a pre-existing series of books, preceding *Death Gate*, *Companions of Xanth*, *Shannara*, and *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*. Unlike those other later games, it uses Legend's older game engine, also seen in the *Spellcasting* series and *Eric the Unready*, and it's also unique in that it merited a sequel. Finally, along with *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*, it diverges from the rest by taking place in a science fiction setting rather than fantasy.

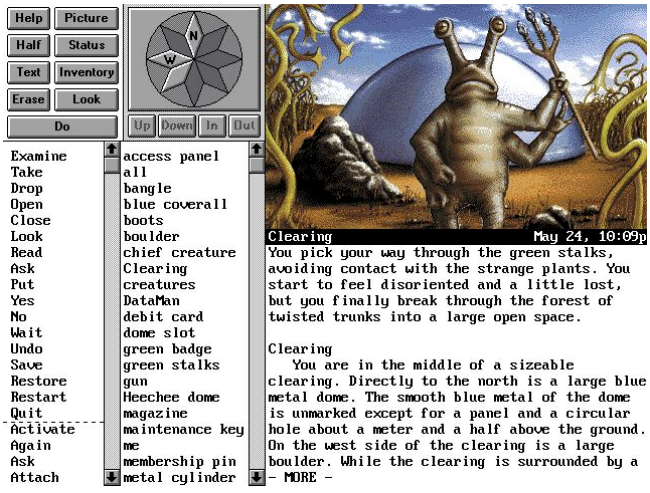
In fact, Frederik Pohl's *Gateway* is itself a fairly distinguished novel as science fiction goes, winning the Hugo, Nebula, and John W. Campbell awards upon its first release in 1977 and spawning several sequels. The first book and much of the subsequent novels are largely focused on Robinette Broadhead, to whom Pohl introduces us as he undergoes extensive psychotherapy at the "hands" of an AI named Sigfrid. You might imagine that Mr. Broadhead underwent some fairly intense trials to have ended up in this situation, and you would discover this to be correct as you read the first book.

It may thus come as a disappointment that Robinette does not feature at all in Legend's game, which pretty much throws out everything but the setting of Robinette's experiences: the titular Gateway space station. Discovered in 2077, Gateway orbits between Mercury and Venus and is the product of an alien race that humanity refers to as the Heechee, which vanished from the galaxy long ago. Gateway happens to be well-stocked with faster-than-light ships, and while they are easy enough to operate, their guidance systems are utterly incomprehensible – a pilot who enters a course code could end up at a habitable planet somewhere, but could just as easily meet an untimely end in a black hole. Nonetheless, those with the financial resources to travel to Gateway are enticed by the possibility that some random course code could bring them to a planet bearing useful Heechee technology or to some other discovery potentially worth millions of dollars, and there is thus no shortage of so-called "prospectors" arriving on Gateway to try their luck – including the character you play in the game, a lottery winner fresh from the increasingly resource-starved Earth.

The game is rather sharply divided into three parts. You'll need to prove yourself to the authorities on Gateway by flying out on a few missions, culminating with the discovery that the Assassins, a deadly race responsible for the Heechee's panicked departure from the galaxy, are monitoring the rise in FTL activity resulting from humanity's use of Gateway. You'll thus find yourself saddled with the weighty task of activating four shield generators, each on a different planet, that will serve to incapacitate the Assassins' galactic listening post, before undertaking a final mission to disable the outpost entirely.

The game starts off with a rather astonishing quantity of flavor text. There's a communications terminal that can bring up bulletin board messages and news reports that resemble the asides sprinkled throughout the *Gateway* novel. You can even enter a virtual reality relaxation session with Sigfrid, and play an "old Earth trivia game" stocked with fairly amusing

factoids about the twenty-first century. Very little of this information is relevant to your success in the game, although the things you actually need to know stand out fairly well and could probably be intuited even if you didn't read about them. (Oddly, the game's authors evidently neglected to properly introduce "prayer fans", a common kind of Heechee artifact in the books that shows up on one occasion in the game without any kind of explanation, but it's easy enough to figure out what to do with them.) You do have to interact with a couple of characters that might seem familiar from the book, but "interact" is probably a bit too strong of a word – they show up and say their lines, and there isn't even a dialogue tree to provide a pretense of communication.



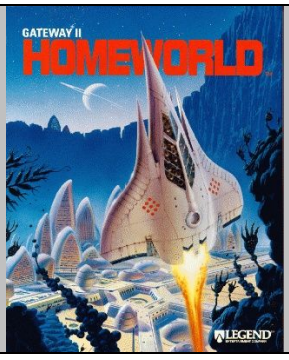
The game goes to great lengths to describe trivialities, while there's an alien standing right in front of you.

While the book focused on the strain of life on Gateway and the prospect of risking one's life in exchange for tremendous wealth, Legend's *Gateway* seems more like your typical lighthearted space opera fare – travel to strange new worlds, find new life forms, annoy them repeatedly, and so on. It doesn't help that some of the puzzles are hopelessly contrived affairs bordering on the insultingly easy, dealing with arrangements of shapes and colors. You'll also spend a fair amount of time in virtual realities, providing some lively and varied challenges. Noticeably absent, especially considering Legend's other games, is any sense of humor, though the parser does have the occasional amusing response for particularly odd commands.

The puzzles you encounter are largely straightforward if you pay attention, and you'll rarely be banging your head trying to figure out the twisted logic of the developers. There are a few red herrings thrown in here and there (hint: Do not bother trying to take the maintenance man's pliers!), but you'll know if you're on the right track if a particular action triggers a notification that your "score" has increased. Making things especially convenient is the fact that you generally can't carry items from planet to planet, limiting the number of possible actions. You can still visit the four planets in the second part of the game in any order if you start getting frustrated with one of them. Getting stuck or dying is possible, but does not generally happen unexpectedly. (In a further divergence from the book, even running out of money is fairly difficult, given that there's almost nothing you need to buy.)

As mentioned, *Gateway*'s engine is identical to that used in *Eric the Unready* and others. You'll be typing your way through most of the game, but the friendly interface provides very convenient indicators for the objects you can interact with and exits from your current location, as well as a tiny visual window serving little purpose other than to give you something to look at. The game also features fairly terrible MIDI music, but it might grow on you after a while. So if

you're up for a rather light sci-fi text adventure that won't tax you overmuch, *Gateway* is worth a spin – but don't expect anything on the level of the novels.



Gateway II: Homeworld

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Michael Verdu, Bob Bates, Glen Dahlgren
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Upon starting up *Gateway II*, you're presented with an extravagant little animation of the word "CD-ROM". Don't be too alarmed, though – *Gateway II*, far from being yet another one of the hollow multimedia experiences of the mid-1990s (see *Phantasmagoria*), is actually the last of Legend's games to use its old-fashioned text parser. In fact, the game's uncompressed data files are only about 25 MB, a tiny fraction of the capacity of the CD.

The flashy animation isn't entirely misleading, as the few cutscenes of *Gateway II* are considerably more elaborate than the first game's animations. Still, they're rather primitive, low-framerate experiments in early 3D animation. Fortunately, some of that extra size is also indicative of *Gateway II*'s increased length over its predecessor, spread out over four chapters rather than three.

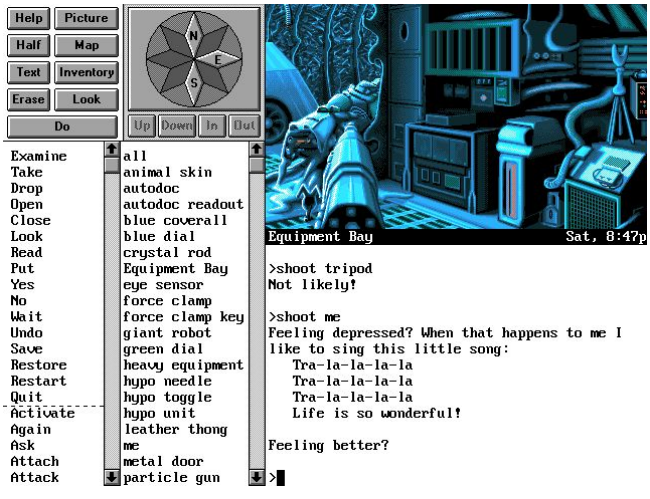
The game begins with your character happily retired on Earth with millions of dollars in the bank after the events of the previous game, when suddenly a large, mysterious "artifact" ship enters the solar system. Plans are made to launch a shuttle to the Artifact, and though you initially only intend to aid in an advisory capacity, the shuttle's launch site is ambushed by terrorists. Specifically, a doomsday cult named the Phoenix Sect believes the Artifact to herald the arrival of the Assassins, who are worshiped by the Sect despite the race's well-established civilization-destroying tendencies.

Outwitting the terrorists ultimately leads you to board the shuttle yourself and fly to the Artifact, beginning the game's second chapter. The Artifact is probably the closest thing in either of the two games to something in Pohl's books, specifically the setting of *Beyond the Blue Event Horizon*, *Gateway*'s sequel. The Artifact, which turns out to be Heechee in origin, is patrolled by a fearsome robotic monster with a tendency to brutally murder anyone who happens to cross its path, clumsily storing its victims' personalities in the Artifact's computer system. You can communicate with these personalities, and even though only one of them has information of real value, the stories told by the others about Gateway and the Artifact do a much better job of establishing an atmosphere than anything else in either of the two games.

Tragically, what might have been a chilling survival-horror vibe is quickly swept away in favor of more space opera antics. Traversing the ship is a matter of working your way through a couple of simulated planetary environments, or "zoos", inhabited by various life forms somehow gathered by the Artifact. There is one rather nifty little puzzle involving a Heechee gene manipulation machine, but otherwise this section is hardly distinguishable from the planetary visits of the first game.

Taking control of the Artifact ultimately leads to it being taken over by the Phoenix Sect, to your exile to a frozen ice planet, and to more space opera adventures with some lazily anthropomorphized aliens. Finally, in an event that will only come as a surprise if you missed the subtitle, you'll end up transported to the Heechee homeworld. Unfortunately, the Heechee

aren't about to let you leave, much less help you and risk exposing themselves to the Assassins they fled from thousands of years ago, and getting what you want means insinuating yourself in some ancient political struggles.

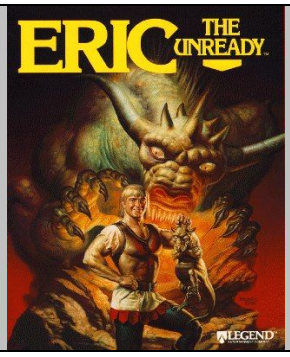


The big strength of Legend's games is the flexibility of their parser.

Given that you spend a fair amount of the second and fourth chapters interacting with characters, *Gateway II* features proper dialog trees. These trees also provide a certain amount of levity, as many of the things you can choose to say are pretty ridiculous. It's a bit disingenuous, though, as much of the time there's really only one possible outcome for a given conversation.

The difficulty level of *Gateway II* is only slightly higher than its predecessor. None of the puzzles are quite as overly simplistic, and the environments are quite a bit larger too. There's a rather irritating maze in the third chapter, and you have to be pretty sharp to catch the trick that will let you get through without brute-force mapping. Still, in general success once again comes easily if you pay attention and manage to avoid the red herrings.

Pohl's own followups to his *Gateway* novel are generally regarded as failing to reach the same lofty heights as the original, but on the whole *Gateway II* is at roughly the same level as Legend's earlier game. The lack of a single cohesive setting does give it a slightly more loose, sprawling feeling than its predecessor, but the added length makes up for it somewhat.



Eric the Unready

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Bob Bates
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Eric the Unready was one of the last text adventures produced by Legend Entertainment before they ditched the keyboard parser in favor of a mouse-based parser. It's the tale of a foolhardy knight that brings a "HOW TO JOUST" book to his first battle with a rather ominous foe. Eric defeats him, entirely by accident, and somehow ends up earning the respect of the knight's guild. Still, his ineptitude has given him the reputation of a buffoon amongst his peers. That doesn't stop him from being ordered on a quest to retrieve five mystical artifacts – the Pitchfork of Damocles, the Crescent Wrench of Armageddon, the Raw Steak of Eternity, the Crowbar of the Apocalypse, and the Bolt Cutters of Doom. All of these items are necessary to defeat an evil witch, who is involved in a sinister plot to marry off the real princess and give control to the insidious Queen Grizelda, who wishes to turn the kingdom into a giant strip mall.

The game is divided into seven chapters – the intro, one chapter for each of the items, and then the finale. After the end of each chapter, Eric is comically thrown from one area to the next, causing him to lose any unnecessary items, keeping your inventory slim. It's impossible to revisit past locations, but there's never really a case where you can get stuck without the proper items, except for one spot near the end. Even then, the farthest you have backtrack is the beginning of the final chapter. There are a handful of spots where you can die (usually in amusing fashions – try eating some magic beans to have a beanstalk explode out of your arse), but you can undo any action, so rampant saving isn't necessary. Most text adventure veterans seem to consider the puzzles to be pretty easy, but anyone accustomed to point-and-click adventures will find it substantially more difficult. Many of them require following the game's bizarre sense of logic, but most are clever and humorous.

For example, at the beginning of the game, you need to get past a group of guards. In the town square is a bard who, upon command, will recite the epic poem of Baldur, which will put anyone in the area to sleep out of sheer boredom. To solve this, you need to grab a pair of earmuffs from a kid, wear them and get the bard to recite the poem. You'll be invincible to its effects, and the bard will follow you out of respect. So, walk to the guards, get the bard to tell the story again, and voila! They, too, will collapse, allowing you to progress.

The next step on your quest requires entry to a kingdom suspiciously like the beginning screen of *Zork*, complete with a white house and a mailbox. Here, you'll meet an overly enthusiastic rock salesman, and disguise yourself as a height-challenged dwarf (HINT: Just wear a beard and type "kneel", they can't tell the difference.) The next chapter has you defeating a group of ravenous attack turtles through the use of a muscle relaxant ("Tort-Ease") and then playing an impromptu game of *Jeopardy* against a Frenchman based on the largely nonsensical history of the kingdom. Then you dress up as a vestal virgin and purposely sacrifice yourself to a silly looking idol, only to bumble into the Land of the Gods, a place ruled by a rather inept bureaucrat. One chapter, affectionately referred to as "Swamp Trek", features Eric piloting a raft with a crew suspiciously based off the famous sci-fi TV series – they join you after you show them some "rodenberries". The paddles are controlled by Indians, paving the way for such jokes as "Injuns working at 87%!". During this segment, you come across Phantasy Island,

where you're greeted by a Ricardo Montalban-style character, who then morphs into "Kahn" (complete with the appropriate outfit) and takes the rest of your crew prisoner. In the final segment, you're captured by the evil witch and imprisoned. She puts a curse on you – when the sands of the hourglass run out, you'll die. The brilliant solution? Just tip the hourglass on its side.



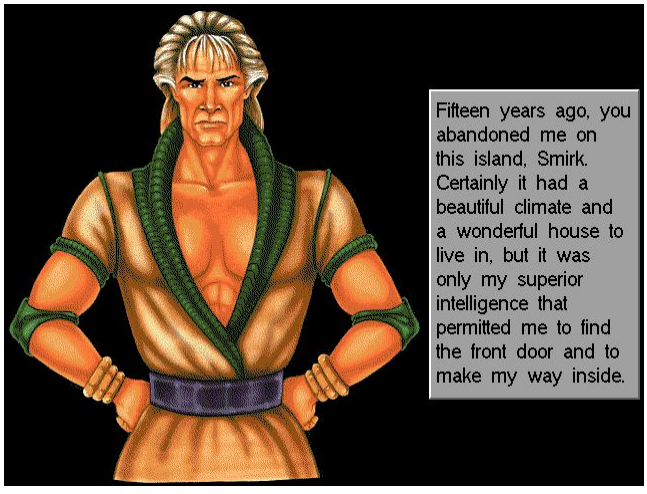
The dragon's "weak spot" moves around a bit.

It's evident that *Eric the Unready* is at least somewhat inspired by *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* – there are more than a few direct allusions to it – and while it shares in the British troupe's style of absurdist humor, it has its own unique voice too. There are a lot of pop culture references, and plenty of completely random situations that come out of left field. Like other text adventures, *Eric the Unready* has a lot of fourth wall breaking commentary, usually when you try to do stupid things with the text parser. Like all great humor games, the events of the actual quest are funny enough, but the true gems lie in mucking around with everything. This is one of the very few games where you can type "fuck ____" at every person and actually get a unique response. *Leisure Suit Larry* gave you the zipper icon, and yet the responses usually weren't as funny as you'd think. (And besides, you were supposed to get it on with everything in those games.) You can even type it for inanimate objects and get the response "OK, press Space when you're finished having your way with the _____".

At the beginning of each chapter, you find a newspaper which recaps Eric's exploits in the previous section in a tabloid style. Since the game is all first-person, and Eric is merely a cipher for the player, the hero doesn't have much of a personality of his own, but it's cool to look at previous events and see them commented on. (In particular, the part where you have to perform a ritual by dressing up like a chicken, eating an insect and spinning around, only to be politely informed by a passerby that said ritual is long outdated and provides a much less humiliating solution.) At one point, you need to distract a two-headed ogre by giving them some beer. In the next chapter, you learn that the ogre got into an accident and ended up killing a puppy. That's actually pretty funny, in a sad way – adventure games are usually full of amoral activities and it's weird to see the negative effects of your selfish actions. In addition to giving hints, it's also full of goofy personal ads from various real life figures. (One of the best, still funny years after this was first produced: "Lost: All sense of proportion and decency. – Madonna")

Like all of Legend's titles, there are small graphics on display, and conversations with certain characters have close-up portraits. While it's nice to have visuals to accompany the text, they really aren't very good. The style is fairly generic and don't really express much of the

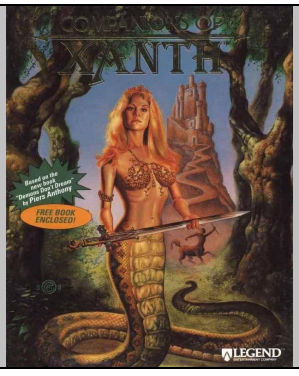
humor that comes from the text. In fact, it's generally only useful when the text makes fun of it, at one point commenting on how a particularly stupid looking elf has ears that look like hotdogs stapled to the side of his head. Still, they don't look too bad considering they're drawn with only 16 colors. The cover artwork was also provided by prominent fantasy illustrator Boris Vallejo, and it would've been cool to see the whole game in this style. The interface is pretty messy, but you can disable the noun/verb columns so at least the text fills the bottom two-thirds of the screen, making it much easier to read. There's some light MIDI music which occasionally changes as you move between areas, although none of it's particularly memorable. Although the game was distributed on both floppy disk and CD formats, the versions are identical, as there's no fancy audio or voice acting.



The Swamp Trek chapter is completely brilliant.

There are a few minigames and brief sections where the game breaks away from the standard text entry, particularly when you talk to someone. The interface fades away and just gives you a series of dialogue choices to pick from. It does make character interaction much easier than normal, even though these segments are often the weakest point of the game, humor wise. The situations are generally much more amusing than the dialogue.

Eric the Unready has a lot going for it. Despite being one of the most outright funniest adventure games ever made, it tends to be cast aside from the usual classics like *Monkey Island* and *Space Quest*, perhaps because point-and-click fans would rather shuttle it off into the interactive fiction ghetto, reserved solely for the oldest of old school fans. Perhaps the game would've received greater accolades if it more closely mimicked LucasArts adventures, but it would also remove a lot the flavor text which makes the game so funny. As it stands, it's still a classic in every regard.



Companions of Xanth

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Michael Lindner
Developer: Legend Entertainment

This is a brilliant little tie-in. Piers Anthony's *Demons Don't Dream*, the sixteenth book in his massively popular *Xanth* series, tells the story of two young humans who visit this mystical fantasy world via a computer game. The book calls this game *Companions of Xanth*. A year later, *Companions of Xanth* was released... for real! And it was developed by Legend Entertainment, who would eventually become known for their quality adaptations of various book series. You've read the book, it told *Xanth* fans, now play the same game that they were playing!

Indeed, it's a bit meta to be playing a game called *Companions of Xanth*, which starts you in front of a computer, with a game package called... *Companions of Xanth*. In the game, you are actually Dug, a sixteen year old with a girlfriend and a general disinterest in stupid fantasy games. Although Dug is initially reluctant to play, he's drawn into a competition to cross the land of Xanth and find a magical artifact. He's not alone, though – another Mundane (the term for humans from the real world) named Kim is competing for the very same prize. The two are only told that they are part of some cryptic "Game", but they don't realize that the fate of Xanth lies in whoever can reach the end first.

Getting acquainted with the interface is certainly easy enough. Legend Entertainment was founded to continue the legacy of text adventures, and did everything in their power to make them palatable to (then) modern gamers. Graphics! Automaps! A menu driven interface that lists all possible verbs and nouns! But despite these efforts, by 1994, certain business realities dictated that they finally give up the ghost and go with a completely mouse-driven parser. *Companions of Xanth* is the first game to use this interface, and its refinements were used in all successive titles. It's remarkably user friendly, while keeping many of the major elements of text-based games. The whole adventure is played from the first person perspective, with a list of verbs on the left side of the screen. The visual animation is very sparse, and many actions are simply narrated through text. You can double click on anything on the screen to interact with it, although picking any object will also bring up additional context-sensitive verbs (such as "Push" and "Pull" for a lever).

Although you can technically click on the screen to move, it's much easier to use the compass on the side of the screen, which illustrates all available exits. Like the older Legend games, there's also an automap option that replaces the main visual window, an extremely helpful feature for a maze sequence that would otherwise be maddening. There's also a "Wait" command to pass time, and an "Undo" command, handy for when a certain ill-thought action leads to death. The 256-color VGA graphics are pleasant, if a bit bland, and the MIDI music is much the same, and largely unremarkable. The CD-ROM version includes full speech for all of the dialogue, although all of the narration text is unvoiced.

Once introduced to the game, you're given the choice of four different companions: Nada Naga, the sexy serpentine princess; Jenny Elf, a young girl who's accompanied by the clever Sammy Cat; Che Centaur, the magical horse creature; and the Demoness Metria, who appears to have stepped out of a '50s pinup magazine. This selection poses a nasty ruse, because there's only one correct answer. All you need to do is look at the box artwork (or read the book) to see

that you're supposed to choose Nada, but all of the rest will get you killed almost immediately after transporting to Xanth. What a sham – it's not fair to call it *"Companions" of Xanth* when there's really only one. At any rate, a Companion's job is to provide advice to the Mundane, so Naga is on hand to point you in the right direction, and occasionally solve certain puzzles, if you ask her nicely enough. Her presence allows novice adventurers to jump in and enjoy the game without it becoming too difficult.



The Com-pewter feels a bit out of place against the rest of the medieval universe.

Once you get everything squared away, you and Naga meet up with Kim and her Companion – she chose Jenny Elf. Any time you run into them, they're animated via live digitized actors. This was a terrible choice, because it looks awful and clashes with the art style, but such interludes are rare. At this point you learn that you are represented in the world of Xanth by a computer screen. It's only when you truly learn to believe in magic (i.e. after a certain plot point) that your physical presence in transported, thus allowing full interaction with the denizens of Xanth.

The game uses exactly the same setup as the book and features a handful of its major events, altering some minor things to make them work in the context of an adventure game. However, huge chunks of the game are also entirely original, leaving out characters and locations from the book and adding in completely new elements. The biggest change is that the book focuses on both Dug and Jenny, alternating between chapters, while the game focuses almost solely on Dug, with only occasional glimpses of Jenny's adventure. The ending is mostly different, as well. The boxed release of *Companions of Xanth* includes a paperback copy of *Demons Don't Dream* as a bonus, so you can follow alongside to compare the two.

In many ways, Xanth is a typical fantasy universe – there are even four regions based on each of the classical elements. What sets it apart from dozens of similar universes is its light-hearted nature, and affinity for puns. Some of them are actually pretty funny – in the first major quest, you need to stop the censor-ship, a boat that makes it impossible to swear. (The CD-ROM version greatly enhances this section, if mostly because for the parts where the text simply reads "(bleep)", the voice actor fills in with dialogue like "g*d damn mother f**king c**k sucking *** licking".) It also requires some lateral thinking, the kind that adventure games are more or less made of. You find some medicine called Pain-B-Gone, which in turn can be used to make a window pane disappear. Most of such solutions are clever, and some are painful, as puns are known to be. Take the part where you need to get rid of a dog made of lava. You need to ask Naga to tie her hair into a bun, then garnish it with mustard. The dog runs away for its life – the text descriptor calls him a "hot dog".

Though there are the usual stock fantasy characters – ogres and dragons and what have you – there's enough of a twist to make them interesting. The stereotypical bridge troll lives in a fully

furnished modern house, for instance, and one puzzle is a game of wits with Com-pewter, an evil electronic device that's somewhat anachronistic against the rest of the backdrop. Certain inanimate objects are also sentient (though not necessarily intelligent) and at least a few puzzles can be solved simply by talking to them.

Companions of Xanth is perfectly playable – and enjoyable – if you don't have any experience with Piers Anthony novels. But there are numerous characters and references to the expansive series, and having familiarity with its background will definitely add to the enjoyment. For those without the fortitude to remember fifteen books worth of backstory and world history, an item called the Com-pendium of Xanth provides all of the most relevant stuff, and is required to beat a few of the game's more tedious puzzles.

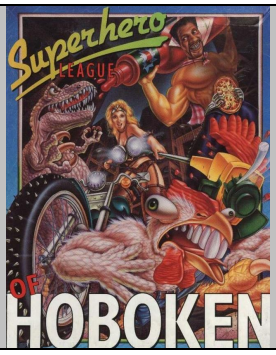
For all the times when it tries to welcome Xanth newbies, there are still some holes littered about. The most glaring comes when Naga is captured, and you have to free her from her chains. She's in her half human, half snake form, unclothed from the waist up with strategically placed hair. You can't look at her – well, you, the player can technically look at her, but you can't click on her and pick any dialogue that might infer that you're peeping, or else Naga will get pissed and resign as your companion, causing you to lose. Rather nasty and sudden, yes, but the book goes to great lengths to explain that Nada Naga's greatest liability is her "princessly quality", which generally means that anyone who isn't her husband can't see her naked. Dug tries this in the book and almost gets kicked out of the Game, per the rules of the Xanth universe, so at least that makes more sense, stupid as it may be. At least the game acknowledges the silliness of this fan service, and just a few screens after the awesome naked chick, you get a whole screen devoted to a fully nude fireman. (Literally, as expected – he's made of lava.)



Stay classy, Piers Anthony.

But this also points to the biggest flaw of *Companions of Xanth*. No offense to Mr. Anthony, but his writing has always been a bit on the juvenile side. The book can barely talk about Nada Naga without discussing her ample tits, and it shouldn't be surprising that the previous novel was called *The Color of Her Panties*. The game reels this back a bit, but it still keeps the rather simplistic style. Its straightforwardness makes it easier to get into than, say, Robert Jordan or J. R. R. Tolkien, but since the game apes Anthony so closely, it's missing much of the eloquence and wit that mark many of Legend's other games.

Legend planned a second game in the series, advertised as *Magic of Xanth*. A promotional booklet indicated that it would star Humfrey the Magician, but little else was ever revealed before the company was bought and tasked with creating first person shooters.



Superhero League of Hoboken

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Legend Entertainment

There have been many memorable humorous adventure games, but considerably less common is the humorous RPG. *Superhero League of Hoboken* thus distinguishes itself immediately as not only an RPG-adventure hybrid, but a thoroughly amusing one at that. Furthermore, rather than take the easy way out and poke fun at the same old fantasy tropes (see *Kyrandia*, *Companions of Xanth*, and *Simon the Sorcerer*), *Superhero League of Hoboken* is actually set in the vastly amusing world of post-apocalyptic New Jersey.

You wouldn't think that America would be a very funny place after the fall of civilization, what with the populace devastated by nuclear fallout and flooding from the polar ice caps. As presented in *Superhero League of Hoboken*, it is a land dominated by crazed warlords and fanatic religious cults, and should you fall prey to one of the many hideous mutations on the prowl, the only medical assistance you're likely to find is a maniacal chanting witch doctor.

It turns out things are not all that bad, however. You could hardly expect them to be – unlike many contemporary Legend properties, this is a game with an original story by the great Steve Meretzky, the industry veteran responsible not only for many of Legend's hilarious adventure games, including the *Spellcasting* series, but also for many of the classic Infocom text adventures that preceded them. Thus, the remnants of civilization are not overcome by despair, for they find protection in the form of the Superhero Leagues, including the titular Superhero League of Hoboken.

Hoboken is a real city in New Jersey, located across the Hudson River from New York City. The game's starting location of the League's headquarters is fortunately located above a Hoboken museum, presenting it as the birthplace of Frank Sinatra and the location of the first American brewery, among other things. You're assigned the role of the Crimson Tape, who has become leader of the League when it has fallen on hard times. His superpower allows him to create organizational charts out of thin air, an ability that serves no purpose whatsoever. Given that he is also a silent protagonist, he is probably the least interesting character in the game, but you're stuck with him for the whole time.

You'll soon discover Matilda, the League's Mission Computer, a surprisingly functional and personality-free appliance. At any given time, Matilda will have information on five different crises occurring in the area that demand your attention, including information on how to get to the location of each one. These missions can be accomplished in any order, except for one, which will inevitably pit the *Superhero League of Hoboken* against the notorious Dr. Entropy, a psychotic, brilliant Jack-in-the-Box constantly plotting some nefarious scheme to spread misery and terror. Dr. Entropy usually has some form of security that can only be defeated by using four objects, each of which can only be obtained by completing the other four missions. Defeat Dr. Entropy, and you'll be assigned a new set of missions and attract more superheroes to the League.

One of the first things you'll do in the headquarters is assemble a team of superheroes from among those gathered in the cafeteria. You'll never actually see anything more of them than what you can see in their portraits, and with one possible exception, none of them undergo any kind of character development. Still, they each have their own little paragraph of background

information and two unique dialog blurbs should you choose to talk to them. If nothing else, they're a fairly original bunch and you cannot easily call any of them a knockoff of something from DC or Marvel.

With your party assembled, you'll depart headquarters and be presented with a top-down view of the unexplored overworld, which you'll need to traverse in order to get to the various locations where your mission objectives lay. In the process, you'll inevitably experience random encounters with groups of enemies. Generally in such encounters the two or three heroes at the front of your party will exchange melee damage with two or three enemies at a time, while the other members of your party will attack with projectile weapons.

Some of your party members might be able to use their superpowers in combat. These powers, like projectile weapons, target individual enemies, and basically amount to magic spells – they're extremely effective against some enemies, and completely useless against others. It's usually pretty obvious which powers will affect a particular enemy, even though the powers take much more interesting forms than the usual fire/ice/lightning elemental stuff so common in RPGs. Tropical Oil Man, for example, can "Raise Foe's Cholesterol", effective against humanoids (and animals, to some extent). Conversely, Captain Excitement can "Put Animals To Sleep", an effective power against animals (and not so much humanoids).

Your party members can gain additional superpowers through the use of isotopes found throughout the game, though it takes multiple doses for these secondary powers to become as effective as their starting powers. Again, like magic spells, some party members are better-suited for wielding powers than others by virtue of their high "Brain" stats. Other members with a lower "Brain" stat are best kept at the front of the party to deal melee damage, as they tend to have higher "Brawn" stats. There are quite a few other stat-boosting items around to allow you to further customize your party, should you choose to do so.

All you need to worry about in battle is your party's hit points – superpowers can be used as many times as you want with no penalty. There is also a complete lack of healing powers or healing items that can be used in combat; the only way to heal your party is to get to a location where you can Rest. (Naturally, you can only Rest a certain number of times before you need to go back to HQ or pay money at a hostelry.)



The flavor text during combat is more or less the reason to play this game.

Despite its simplicity, combat is just lively enough to keep things interesting. There's the occasional enemy that can fire projectiles, induce status ailments, or launch a devastating suicide attack that will have to be given special consideration. Disappointingly, although there are some unusually powerful enemies, there aren't really any bosses to speak of – not even Dr. Entropy. The final combat of the game is just a big free-for-all featuring one of every enemy in the game, and it's not even terribly difficult.

But by far the greatest saving grace of the combat is the writing. There's a wonderfully varied selection of forty-one different baddies to thwart that almost rivals that of *Earthbound* (probably the only other humorous RPG you're likely to encounter) as far as diversity goes. There are no palette swaps to be found here! Nor does the detail end merely with the well-drawn looping animations. Rather than something simple along the lines of "the foozle strikes for 10 damage", the precise combat techniques employed by your enemies tend to be described in hilarious depth, as are their reactions as they take damage from your party. The CD-ROM version even includes voice samples for many of them. Of course, if you're in a hurry you can easily just click through everything without having to read it, but there's just enough text for each enemy and just enough enemies to make you slow down a bit.

Enemies are pretty much what you'd expect in a devastated future – technological conveniences run amok, vicious biological mutations, and lawyers. One of the coolest enemies is probably the Espevangelist – an advanced form of a religious televangelist capable of projecting his thoughts directly into other people's minds. Dealing damage to him often brings up descriptions of your party members revealing dirty secrets about their personal life.

Your movements on the world map are principally restricted first by the massive floodwaters, which can either be overcome by having enough members of your party who have the "Really Good At Treading Water" superpower, or by purchasing a particular item later in the game. Once water is no longer a problem, you'll still be prevented from wandering everywhere by a lack of Tube Car passes, used on an experimental high-speed mass-transit system described as having been built during the Gore administration. These restrictions easily prevent you from wandering into an area where enemies are too powerful or from wasting too much time at locations where there's nothing to be found at a particular stage in the game, but there's still a good amount of exploring to do at any given time if the adventure game component gets you down.

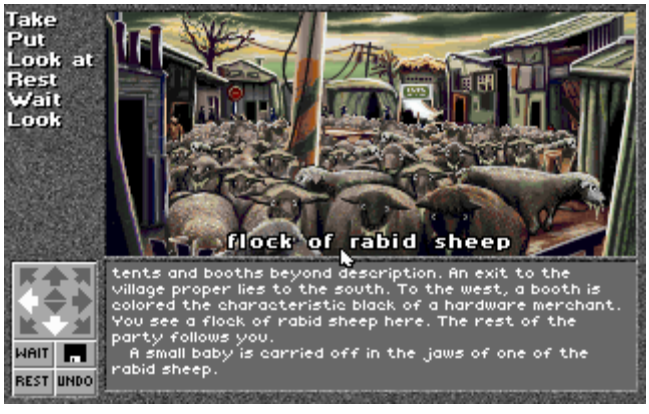
Like pretty much any RPG, you'll encounter towns equipped with the usual shops, as well as the aforementioned hostelries. Somewhat atypical are the brothels, which basically serve as an amusing way of trading money for experience points. There's occasionally some mission-related adventuring business required at any given town, and pawn shops also often hoard vital items. Every single item is unique, so you'll never have more than one of any particular item. The game consequently has some really inventive names for weapons and armor – you can outfit a character with an iron thimble, gore-tex hot pants, a vomitproof vest, and a concrete mortarboard, while having him fend enemies off with arsenic-tipped deer antlers and a bowel disruptor. In fact, every character can equip two weapons and a whopping ten pieces of armor (each for a different body part), without any other restrictions.

One of the game's annoyances is that there is very little to distinguish one town from another, especially after you've bought everything that's for sale. There are also no names to be found on any of the maps that the game makes available. Nonetheless, you will occasionally be directed to go to, say, Yonkers or Staten Island, with no further indication of where these places are located other than some occasional vague clues.

Apart from towns are the many other locations you'll visit over the course of your missions, most of which only take up a screen or two. Many of them are based on actual landmarks ravaged by the fall of civilization – Dodger Stadium, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and so on. There are plenty of parts of suburban New Jersey too, including Paterson, East Orange, Morristown and Hackensack, as well as parts of New York (Poughkeepsie) and Pennsylvania (Scranton). These locations are presented through an interface that looks exactly like Legend's other adventure games, with the usual first-person point of view and serviceable VGA graphics with largely nonexistent animation. There's a good number of NPCs to talk to, and the CD-ROM version provides fully voiced dialog.

Some missions require you to bring a superhero with a particular power to a particular location. For example, the Iron Tummy, with his ability to eat spicy foods without distress, is a natural choice to bring with you when you go on a mission to Newark, where a warehouse filled

with dangerously spicy bio-engineered jalapeno peppers threatens to contaminate the local water supply. However, as that's the only spicy food you're going to encounter for the entire game, the Iron Tummy's power is completely useless afterward. (There are a surprising number of missions where you might think the aforementioned "Put Animals To Sleep" power would be entirely appropriate, but the game stubbornly refuses to ever let you use it outside of combat.)



Here is the city of East Orange, NJ, which is infested with rabid sheep.

While there are a couple of fetch-quest missions, most of the other missions do involve at least a little typical adventure-game puzzle solving. Thanks to Legend's interface, most of these puzzles aren't terribly difficult – every verb you can apply to an object (except for superpowers) pops up as soon as you click on it, practically spelling out the solution to whatever problem you're facing. The only catch is that it is absolutely essential that you pick up everything you can in every location. If you don't, you can be in for a real headache, as there are just so many different places you can visit, and even when the random encounters have been taken care of, backtracking is very time-consuming.

As with the combat, the whole experience is made more than bearable by the hilarious writing. There are a few bits that are definitely a bit dated; the references to former Yankees owner George Steinbrenner reek of the '90s, so Dr. Entropy's plan to revive his cryogenically-preserved body and have him wreak havoc upon the land falls a bit flat. By and large, though, it's timeless stuff, albeit hard to pin down stylistically. There's no shortage of images showing decay and ruin, but the game doesn't really wallow in it or descend into black comedy. At times there is some vague commentary about the excesses of present-day society, but the game never gets preachy either. Some elements seem to verge on total absurdity – what is a guacamole factory doing in a devastated landscape, and how could its workers afford to strike? – but the realistic quality of the graphics makes it all too easy to take everything in stride. There are a few jokes based on the idea of a future civilization being unable to comprehend the meaning or functionality of some present-day artifacts, but not so many that it gets old. In the end, it's just good solid writing of the sort you'd expect from an experienced interactive fiction author.

Steve Meretzky reportedly set out to create a game whose RPG components would not intimidate adventure gamers, and whose adventure game components would not prove to be an obstacle to those who preferred RPGs. While he succeeded, the whole thing might have ended up being largely forgettable if not for the stellar quality of the writing. As it is, it might just be the funniest RPG you'll ever play.



Death Gate

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Glen Dahlgren
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Based on the series of fantasy novels by Margaret Weis and Tracy Wickman, the folks behind the *Dragonlance* novels, Legend Entertainment's *Death Gate* puts you in the shoes of a young Patryn named Haplo. Patryns are a humanlike race imprisoned in a world known as the Labyrinth, a harsh, nightmarish land where every day is a struggle to live. Miraculously, Haplo manages to escape and meets another Patryn named Xar, who had also managed the same task years before. Xar tells the story of a war between the Patryns and the Sartans, another humanlike race that condemned your people to the Labyrinth. Xar wants retribution for the evils perpetrated against his people, and would gladly crush every Sartan in existence, except for one major hitch – the Sartans seem to have disappeared completely. Xar send Haplo out into the world to search for the remaining Sartans, and report back on his findings.

Aside from the Labyrinth, the world is divided up into four lands, each occupying its own floating island in space. Each of these islands is its own self-contained chapter, and there are usually a few major locations in each, which are accessed via Xar's flying ship and selected via a map screen. The land of Arianus is based on the element of air, and is a mountainous region largely inhabited by a group of dwarves. Their job is to maintain a strange device called the Kicksey-Winsey, which burrows holes through the planet's surface, which in turn provides water for the people. Said dwarves are also slaves to a group of elves, who have used trickery to disguise themselves as glowing gods. The land of Pryan, although based on the fire element, largely consists of lush forests. It is inhabited by groups of humans, elves and dwarves, which has led to some tight racial tensions. The land of Aberrach, based on stone, is a world filled with lava and death. Most of its remaining inhabitants are mindless zombies brought to life with the power of Necromancy. The final land is Chelestra, the realm of water, with a beautiful city that reveals the resting place of the Sartans. The final chapters involve Haplo returning to the Labyrinth to save the worlds – all of them – from total destruction.

Although *Death Gate* contains the usual elements of fantasy fiction – dwarves and elves, swords and sorcery, wizards and dragons – it's far from a typical adventure story, which helps it stand out from Legend's other fantasy titles like *Companions of Xanth* and *Shannara*. The mystery of the Sartan plays a large role in the story, and it's clear even in the beginning that Xar's intentions to destroy them go beyond a mere thirst for vengeance. All of the realms, while in varying states of disaster, show that the Sartans may not be nearly as evil as the Patryns have painted them, and once Haplo discovers a tomb filled with their bodies, hint that something may have gone dreadfully wrong somewhere.

In telling the expansive backstory, there's tons and tons of dialogue, in addition to history books and journals that further flesh out the world's history. It's well written and avoids the dryness inherent to some fantasy text, although sometimes it is overwhelming. The first fifteen minutes or so are spent as Xar elaborately explains the plight of your race, and it's all too tempting to click right through it just to get into the game. Outside of Xar and his somewhat troublesome ambitions, the most interesting character is Zifnab, a Sartan who looks an awful lot like Gandalf. Despite his immense power, he's largely confused and addle-brained, often believing he's a secret agent akin to James Bond. (His pop culture references aren't intended to

break the fourth wall, seeing as the events of *Death Gate* are meant to take place far in the future of our own world.)

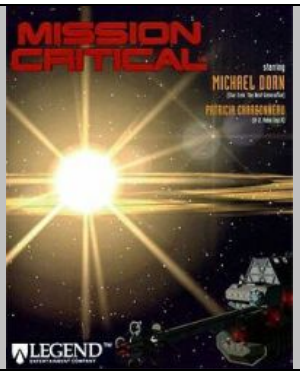


The vicious Sang-Drax, pictured here, is presented somewhat differently than the books.

The look and feel is very similar to *Companions of Xanth*. Running in VGA, its visual style is very similar to *Xanth* too, although the CD-ROM version features higher resolution SVGA graphics, which look much better. Since Legend's games evolved from text adventures, much of the action is told through narrative text, although the intro and ending sequences feature aged CG animation.

In addition to the usual inventory puzzles, Haplo is also a wizard and learns a fairly vast number of spells throughout the game. Some of these have simple uses, like the heating and cooling of objects or the possession of animals, while others are a bit more advanced, like one that can create a whole pocket of reality based on a painting. The magic in *Death Gate* is cast by assembling a series of runes into a pattern. Spells can be automatically cast by selecting them from a menu, although there are a few instances where you'll need to look at the individual runes for the solution. There's a single instance where you must make up your own spell by arranging the runes, which is rather clever, and the game could've used more instances as such. Otherwise, the puzzles are of fairly average difficulty. There are spots where you can die, and while the game features an "Undo" command, it's not always very useful. There are a number of "timed" situations, where you need to complete certain actions in a specific number of turns, but since the "Undo" command can only rewind a single turn, you can trap yourself in an inescapable loop of death.

Death Gate is not based on a specific novel from the seven-book series, but rather takes aspects from the first four entries and creates its own ending, since the final book had not yet been published when the game was undergoing development. Since there's so much compressed into a single game, it's obviously missing huge chunks of the story and some of the characters are totally missing, but it's a good way to experience a sizable chunk of the storyline in interactive form. Unlike some of Legend's other games based off novels, it feels more self-contained, and you don't really need any prior exposure to the books in order to really understand it, The retail package also includes a pamphlet containing a short story written by the original authors, which has very little to do with the game itself but fleshes out the Assassin's Guild from the series, and is meant for fans of the books. Overall, it's a pretty fantastic game, certainly one of Legend's best, weaving an excellent plot and dense backstory into an extremely enjoyable experience.



Mission Critical

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Michael Verdu
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Science fiction loves to do two things – show us how awesome the future might be, and show us how the march of technology will inevitably destroy us. In the world of Legend's *Mission Critical*, a war has broken out between the countries of Earth. The United Nations, fearing for the future of the human race, outlaws technological development, while the Alliance of Free States secedes in favor of their freedom. This results in a cold, bloody war that stretches far into dark, endless reaches of outer space.

In the midst of this war, an exploration vessel, the SV *Jericho*, is escorted by the military vessel, the USS *Lexington* of the Alliance, on a secret mission. Before they can reach their goal, they are ambushed by the UNS *Dharma* of the United Nations, and their fighters are completely wiped out. With surrender not being an option, the captain of the *Lexington* drugs you, an unnamed lieutenant, and hides you in a corner of the base. The rest of the crew is captured by the *Jericho*, but they also manage to smuggle a small nuclear bomb on board. They sacrifice themselves to destroy the *Dharma* but leave the *Lexington* in relative safety. When you awaken, everyone aboard the *Lexington* is gone, and the ship is in bad shape. With only the instructions by your departed superiors, it's up to you to get the *Lexington* back in shape, and complete its mission, whatever it was.

That's the quick summary behind *Mission Critical*, although there's much more backstory beyond this. Like most Legend games, there's an astounding amount of detail, both in the history of this future universe, and the technology that makes it all work. There's an obvious *Star Trek* influence, even if the actual story is far bleaker.

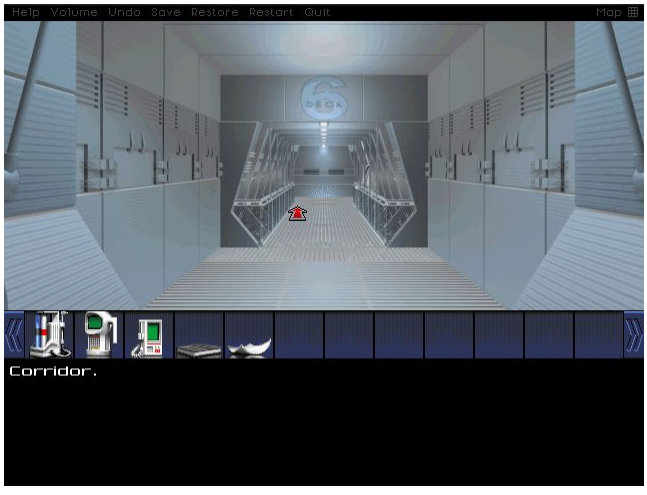
For a good chunk of the game, though, the story is hardly in the forefront. The first three-quarters puts you in the role of an intergalactic repairman, ferrying yourself all over the ship to repair hull breaches, fix communication systems, prevent the reactor from exploding, defuse a bomb set by a traitorous crew member and so forth. It's not until the last quarter when things pick up, where you crash land on an alien planet and get involved into some kind of trippy alternate dimension/time traveling stuff, all of which ties into the overall message about the dangers of technology. While it is typical classic sci-fi at its heart, the payoff is mostly worth it, even if a huge chunk of the plot is vomited at you in the last moments.

You're almost entirely alone on this journey, so you spend most of your time walking through the ship's largely featureless corridors. You can piece together bits of the background story by reading journals or asking the shipboard computers, once you've gotten them operational. Through these documents, there are at least half a dozen characters that technically have roles in the story, even though you never see nor hear nor talk to them. Obviously they're all dead by this point, but it would've done plenty of good if their logs were voice acted or there were some kind of portraits, so you could identify a character by more than just their name.

Much ado was made about Michael Dorn appearing in the full motion video segments, where he plays the captain, but there are only a total of three characters that ever appear in these segments. The video quality is pretty crisp, and the actors do a decent enough job, considering

they spend most of their time staring straight at the camera and looking concerned. But these segments are largely isolated to the beginning and ending.

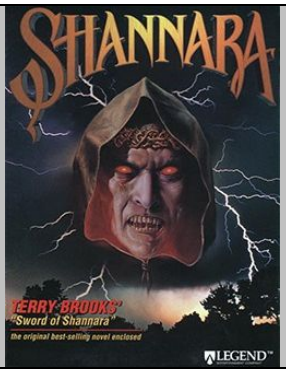
The puzzles are fairly straightforward and inventory based, which mostly involve tracking down the proper repair tools and figuring out where to use them. Occasionally you're presented with some variety, like playing with valves to properly cool a reactor core or relaying signals through a series of satellites by studying star maps. But the most interesting is a real time strategy segment, which is less of a puzzle and more of a minigame. Here, you control three types of fighter drones to protect your capital ship while destroying all of the enemies in the area. The graphics are all displayed in wireframe, but they're animated quite nicely and it looks pretty cool in action, especially considering you can zoom out and rotate the view in three dimensions. It's fairly clumsy compared to a legitimate RTS, though, as screen scrolling is awkward, and it's tough to command multiple units simultaneously. Still, considering how disastrous these segments usually are in adventure games, this one turned out pretty well. You need to fly through eight training courses as well as a handful of live exercises, as you fend off attacks from UN ships. However, if you're not interested in any of this, you can also just set the difficulty to the lowest setting, so the computer will just play for you.



A majority of the game is spent crawling through dull grey corridors like this one.

There's a lot of CG animation, although it's used inconsistently. Sometimes you'll get a smooth video of walking from one end of the hall to the other. Sometimes you'll simply jump forward with no transition at all. You can turn to the left or right, but it just scrolls to the next picture instead of smoothly panning over the scenery, which ruins the immersion.

Most of Legend's games at the time were based on literary properties, but *Mission Critical* is one of their few original stories. It's well written, like most Legend productions, but as a game, it's poorly paced and rather dull, to the point where it probably would've been better off as a book. Someone at Legend must've felt the same way, because not long later, a sequel was released in novel form. Dubbed *Mission Critical: Death of the Phoenix* and written by sci-fi author Paul Chafe (who had nothing to do with the development of the game), it focuses on a man named Lewis Tyrell, who was a captain in the United Nations army. The UN lost due the actions from the game, and so Tyrell is captured and sentenced to a life in prison. The rest of the novel deals with his further adventures after he escapes. It helps expand the well established universe from the game, and also provides a different view of the conflict, given how it portrays the Alliance in a less than favorable light. It also references some events and locations from the game.



Shannara

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Corey and Lori Cole
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Terry Brooks' *Shannara* series is one of the most prolific of modern fantasy novels, consisting of over twenty entries over the course of nearly thirty years. Legend Entertainment, fond of creating graphic adventures based on books, developed their own entry into the series, simply dubbed *Shannara*. It's technically an original story, although it functions as a sequel to *The Sword of Shannara*, the very first book, a copy of which was bundled along with the packaging. In the game, you play as Jak Ohmsford, son of Shea Ohmsford and hero of the first novel, who learns of the return of the Warlock Lord Brona, commander of the undead. He can only be defeated with the Sword of Shannara, which has, as luck would have it, been broken and rendered unusable. Only by venturing through the land can Jak and his companions reassemble the sword and defeat Brona once again. Your quest is doubly important, because Jak's life is inadvertently pledged to Brona during a summoning ceremony, dooming his eternal soul unless the nefarious lord can be stopped. It's easy to jump into the story if you're unfamiliar with the series, because while there are numerous references to *The Sword of Shannara*, it's never completely reliant on it.

When Brooks first published *The Sword of Shannara* in 1977, he was heavily criticized for blatantly ripping off J.R.R. Tolkien and his *Lord of the Rings* books. The game hews closely to those themes, and thus it never wanders from the established fantasy tropes. Jak is accompanied by his lady friend (and obvious love interest) Shella, as well as a spritely elf sage named Davio, a stumpy dwarf named Brendel and a troll named Telsek. Each new village brings the group together with another race, whose traits should sound more than familiar. The dwarves are stout and hairy, the trolls are violent and stupid, the elves are snobbish and pompous, and so forth. During your adventures, you'll have to defuse the war between trolls and elves, uncover the secrets of the legendary Elfstones, solve a mystery with the dwarves involving a missing axe, and save a castle from a marauding horde of zombies. There's little to set it apart from any other fantasy universe, which makes the proceedings feel somewhat bland.

It doesn't help the game feels remarkably stripped down compared to Legend's previous games. Since their graphic adventures evolved from text-based games, their eloquent and detailed writing helped set it apart from the crowd. Their previous titles, *Death Gate* and *Companions of Xanth*, both based off other fantasy novel series, contained far more descriptive text, and much, much more dialogue. In *Shannara*, conversations are sparse and straightforward, and you can't talk to anyone beyond what's relevant to the plot, making the world feel strangely empty. When tragedy befalls your friends, it's hard to feel much for them, because they barely have much in the way of personality. The world is quite pretty, at least – the lush, colorful SVGA graphics are a huge leap beyond any of Legend's previous games, and the detailed character portraits when talking are much improved – but it hardly makes up for its deficiencies. The game is essentially broken up into small chapters, and each chapter is rarely more than a couple screens in size – the standard automap function from other Legend games is gone, because it clearly just isn't needed.

To differentiate itself, *Shannara* is set up a little bit like a role playing game. You travel between towns via an overhead map, not too dissimilar to *Ultima* or other classic RPGs. It's

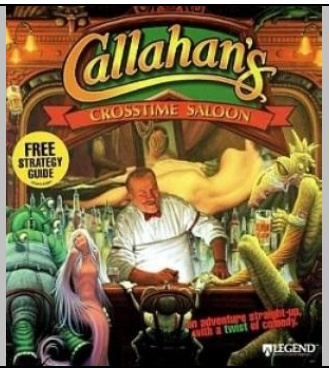
really just an illusion of freedom, though, because your quest is quite linear. Venturing off the path will either result in your party members redirecting you, or plunging you right into a group of monsters. There are a number of fight scenes, with CG-rendered enemies taking the center stage, but beyond a few specific areas where you need to use special items, there's no strategy other than continuously hitting the "Fight" command. There's no point to combat either, since there's no experience system or any upgradable equipment. These parts feel like a dumbed down version of *Superhero League of Hoboken*, another Legend game which is a RPG/adventure game hybrid. During the adventuring segments, your party members' portraits appear at the bottom of the screen, but other than a few specific instances – Shella can shoot things with her bow and arrow, Telsek can lift and smash stuff, and Davio can use his Elfstones for magical purposes – they're little more than expanded inventory slots.



Shannara has some gorgeous artwork, but that's about the only thing going for it.

All of this is particularly disappointing, since the game was designed and written by Corey and Lori Cole, the husband and wife team behind Sierra's *Quest for Glory* series. These were extremely innovative games that melded RPG mechanics onto graphic adventures, and it would logically seem like they'd be the best folks for the job. But not only are all of the RPG elements in *Shannara* tacked on and pointless, but the text is totally missing the devious humor that made *Quest for Glory* so amusing. The writing isn't bad, but since it follows after Brooks' style rather than their own, it's pretty flavorless and lacks distinction. At least the convincing voice acting helps the text from becoming too droll.

The whole package seems like it's aimed towards novices, those familiar with the *Shannara* novels (or at least fantasy fiction in general) but unfamiliar with the adventure gaming genre. As much as Legend's games have usually been quite excellent, they could get quite difficult, and the text could become overwhelming. By cutting those back, *Shannara* makes itself welcoming to newbies, but beyond the pretty graphics, it's missing what makes Legend's games so worthwhile. The result is something remarkably average.



Callahan's Crosstime Saloon

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Josh Mandel
Developer: Legend Entertainment

Science fiction author Spider Robinson is the recipient of three Hugo awards, one Nebula, and the Robert A. Heinlein award for lifetime achievement. His most popular series started with *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*, which began as anthologies of short stories which soon spread out into full-size books, numbering nine in total. In the late '80s – the early days of the consumer internet – the *Callahan* fandom registered as one of the largest non-porn newsgroups, at least according to the flaps on Robinson's more recent books. It's a bit tragic then, that despite its previous popularity, much of his work has since gone out of print in the last decade.

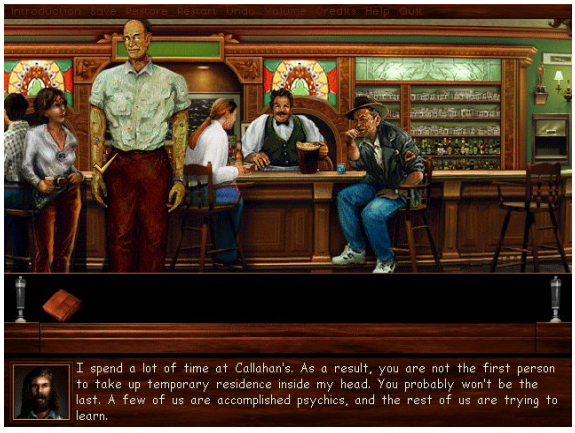
Legend Entertainment often made its living on adventure games tied in with various literary licenses. Beginning with two text adventures based on Frederik Pohl's *Gateway* novels, they produced entries on Piers Anthony's *Xanth* series, Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Death Gate* cycle, and Terry Brooks' *Shannara* books. *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon,* released in 1997, heralds the return of a science fiction license after a number of traditional fantasy based games, but Robinson's books are a far cry from hard sci-fi. Rather, they combine fantastical elements with a good bit of comedy, and more than its share of drama.

Callahan's Crosstime Saloon focuses on a bar in Long Island, but not any old bar. This particular bar is a gathering point for any number of beings, ranging from aliens to vampires to time travelers – and of course, humans. It's a warm, friendly place that's often compared to an intergalactic version of *Cheers*, a place where the regulars are more than happy to lend their ears to the troubles of anyone who's willing to open up. This setting acts a device for a number of strange folk to join the crew and tell their own bizarre tales of pain, love and loss. The recurring theme throughout the novels (and the game, of course) is that the best way to deal with life's tragedies is through laughter. As the first story of the first book puts it, "Callahan loses a lot of his regulars. After they've been coming around long enough, they find they don't need to drink any more. It's that kind of bar."

Much like the initial trilogy of books, the *Callahan* computer game is set up as a series of short anthologies. As folk singer Jake Stonebender (and stand-in for Spider Robinson himself), you aid and explore the lives of five of the bar members, each with their own dilemma. Very little time is actually spent in the bar, which acts as a hub for all of the other adventures. The first three can be completed in order, and finishing those will open up the next two, before the (fairly short) final chapter.

In one chapter, the vampire Pyotr runs back to Transylvania to mourn the loss of his long time lover to another man. Jake must hitch a ride halfway across the world to make things right. Along the way he'll infiltrate the ranks of the locals and discover a bar strangely parallel to Callahan's, except it's filled with monsters drawn from mythology and horror movies alike. In another chapter, the alien Squish has second thoughts about his race's plan to bombard the Earth with a dose of testosterone inhibiting rays, so Jake and retired bomb squad cop Noah take a journey into outer space to stop it, all the while futzing with alien controls and futuristic thingamabobs. And another segment involves the time traveler Josie as she laments the extinction of a special plant in South America that can produce the most delicious chocolate in

existence. The duo must first visit the offices of Faston Casteroga, an evil pencil conglomerate that's bulldozing the rain forest, before visiting the jungle itself to make one final candy bar.



The regulars at Callahan's are an odd bunch.

The fourth story revolves around the talking German Shepherd Ralph von Wau Wau, who has been captured by the government and is being experimented upon to learn his fantastic secrets. Jake must play the role of a super spy and sneak into a facility deep in the mountains. The fifth chapter involves the time traveling conman Al Phee, who has been cursed with uncontrollable psychic powers, coming from a future where everyone can read everyone else's minds due to drug influence. Jake finds himself jumping to the future (not at all how William Gibson described it), joining a gang, and rising through the ranks to meet with a malicious doctor to find the cure. Once all are completed, a more pressing matter comes to light – the whole universe is about to be shut down due to budget cuts, but the compassion shown through your adventures acts as a justification for humanity's continued existence. The final areas involve all of your friends visiting what is essentially the courthouse of the gods to argue your case.

This setup essentially mirrors the very first story of the very first book, where the inhabitants of Callahan's convince an otherworldly being that Earth has a valid reason for existing (this alien, a tall gangly fellow named Mickey Finn, ends up joining the Callahan crew but only plays a small role in the game). Although the characters are all taken from the books, the scenarios themselves are entirely new. However, for those unfamiliar with the original stories, it can take a little while to get settled in. The "Look" command offers short descriptions of each of the major character, and the enclosed hint book gives sufficient backgrounds for all them, but going in cold feels like entering a community where everyone knows each other very well, and assumes that you do too. Once you've begun your first adventure and the stories become more focused, it's much easier to acclimatize to Spider Robinson's eccentric little world, but reading the books first is definitely recommended.

The interface is similar to other Legend games, although it eliminates the command bar on the side of the screen in favor of a completely contextualized menu system, which brings up all relevant commands when clicking on something. This frees up some screen real estate, which is especially important because each location is not merely a single screen, but rather one large panorama image. Although each chapter contains a small number of locations, rarely numbering more than half a dozen, each area is filled to the brim with hotspots, whether interactive or just there for flavor.

The depth of writing has always been Legend's greatest strength, and this is where *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon* excels. You can spend tons of time on a single screen, looking and prodding at everything, and many give different responses if you continuously muck with them.

Most prompt commentary from Jake and whomever his sidekick is at the moment, but the best are the numerous tangents and jabs that come from investigating the most innocuous objects. Check out a random part of the bar and the game will start a rant about how certain words, like "rivulet" or "ichor" are only ever used in Stephen King novels. Investigate an innocuous box and the game will inform you that it's been psychologically profiling you the entire time and dumps a text file in your directory with its analysis (it doesn't seem to actually work though, appearing to be the same thing every time regardless of your actions). In keeping with Robinson's books, there's an unfortunate fondness for legions of puns, which manage to be both clever and (self consciously) painful. Although Robinson had nothing to do with the game beyond his authorization (and approval, as his introduction in the hint guide says), Sierra veteran Josh Mandel, the writer of *Freddy Pharkas* and *Space Quest 6*, does a damn fine job of capturing the spirit of the original stories, all while creating a world that's so full of colorful details it's possible to become distracted from the task at hand.



It's probably better not to ask exactly what's going on here.

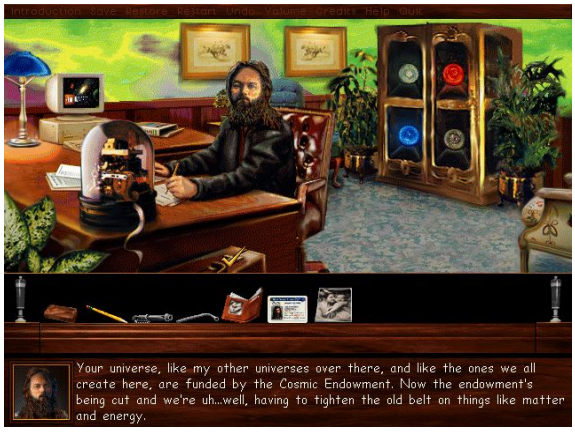
If there's any problem with such richly detailed locations, it's because of the total sensory overload. There's so much to see and do in each possible screen – some of which even change slightly as you leave and reenter – that it's hard to pick out what's relevant to continue your quest. Amidst all the hotspots, sometimes just finding where the exits are can be difficult, and the quick travel arrows from the older Legend games are sorely missed. It also takes several seconds for the screens to transition, even on the fastest computers running DOSBox, making some of the puzzles a bit tedious, especially when you need to backtrack to pick up items that you missed. In spite of the occasional headache, it's hard to really spite a game for being too detailed, especially when said detail is almost always amusing.

The puzzles, for the most part, aren't too hard once you've figured out which items are important and which aren't. The game opens with a pun-based word puzzle, as the denizens of Callahan's subject you to a series of riddles. Here, the game provides a word from a phrase and you need to think of a synonym. When strung together, these synonyms form the sounds of an entirely different word, each with its own theme. At the beginning, you're challenged to name various famous musicians. The first is: "Cranky; exist; bootlegging devices; grind teeth; additionally; green." The answer? "cranky = cross", "exist = be", "bootlegging device = still", "grind teeth = gnash", "additionally = and" and "green = young". Put together, that yields "cross be still gnash and young", or "Crosby Stills Nash and Young". There's no doubt that for those who aren't masters of the English language, these can be damn hard, especially considering this is the first puzzle of the game. Still, for this one, if you're familiar enough with American music, you can piece together most of them by figuring out a small part of the puzzle.

A later permutation of the same puzzle, based off movie monster actors, is a bit more obscure, and can potentially require a bit of research (or at least some time spent exploring Transylvania).

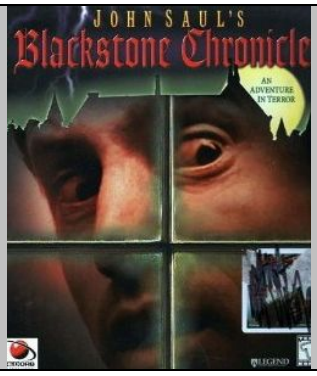
Some other puzzles require similar types of wordplay, or at least a bit of outside knowledge, enough for you to piece together that, say, the phrase "CIVIC MILL MILD DILL MIX" looks awfully like a series of roman numerals. There are a few other puzzles that might cause hiccups, but for the most part they aren't too bad. There's one involving placing small stones in various formations, although there's an in-game option to cheat past it totally. And there's a maze section where you crawl through a series of vents and disable their fans.

Graphically, it's easily the best looking of Legend's adventures, with visuals just as detailed as the writing, and a realistic appearance that still maintains its own artistic stylings. Since the *Callahan* novels were never adapted to any other medium, this is the only graphical representation of Robinson's world outside of the book covers, and it looks fantastic. The animation is sparse, but there's enough to make it seem lively despite the fact that the characters never actually move. The voice acting, as with Legend's other games, is impeccable, with each character being brought to life through their own unique mannerisms and accents. The music lies mostly in the background when it's present, and most scenes are accompanied by atmospheric effects, although there are a number of songs sung by Spider Robinson himself. As his introduction in the hint book states, he originally wanted to be a folk singer, and this game gave him the opportunity to make up some recordings. They're only played on request at the bar, or during the credit sequences, but they're all quite catchy and usually pretty funny too.



This is the headquarters of the universe, more or less.

There's little to actively criticize about *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon* – like the books, it's rich, funny, and even a bit heart-warming without being schmaltzy. Despite its largely light hearted tone, it's not afraid to get serious, as in the section where Jake recounts his own tragic backstory involving his departed wife and daughter. Fans of the books will find more tales beyond Robinson's work, and newcomers will perhaps find themselves as converted fans to a series that deserves more popularity.



John Saul's Blackstone Chronicles: An Adventure in Terror

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Bob Bates
Developer: Legend Entertainment

You'd be forgiven for mistaking *Blackstone Chronicles* as a rip-off of *The 7th Guest*. After all, they're both solitary journeys into abandoned estates – this time, a decommissioned insane asylum – complete with fully CG-rendered visuals and a crazy old man who constantly belittles you. But beyond their initial appearance, they have little in common, for *Blackstone Chronicles* was developed by Legend Entertainment – their last adventure game, in fact – and contains the sort of high quality storytelling that *The 7th Guest* and its clones didn't bother with.

For starters, that crazy old man? That's actually the ghost of your departed dad, Malcolm Metcalf, the founder of the Blackstone Asylum. He is not a demon incarnate, and you will not be playing games of chess against him, although he is maliciously crazy. You, Oliver, were meant to take over the family business, as it was, but rebelled in absolute disgust of the methods he practiced, and sought to have the place bulldozed. The disturbed spirits within its walls have since bled into the surrounding town, setting the scene for the short novel series written by John Saul. Consisting of six novels, this game acts as the seventh (and final) installment, as Malcolm has captured your son and threatened to teach him the ways of the family business. It's not entirely clear what that entails at first, but it's certainly not a good thing, and you must find him before dawn lest he become lost forever.

Though the asylum has been closed for years, it has since been cleaned up and turned into a museum. Each of the rooms has a computer which tells the story of its function, its inhabitants and their conditions, and concise explanations of their diseases and treatments. Great strives have been made in the field of psychology over the past century, obviously, and it should be no surprise that most of the treatments in the days of old were absolutely barbaric. Got emotional attachments to objects? Let's chuck them in the furnace right in front of you! How about a problem with schizophrenia? No worries, some simple electroshock therapy will get rid of those nasty demons! The computer files are naively innocuous, in a creepy way. One tells of how steam baths were given in order to soothe the patients, which is believable enough. Until, that is, you get locked inside one, and overhear disembodied voices outside talk of how your slowly boiling blood will eventually congeal, causing your heart to sputter to a stop, and your life to be forfeit.

For a story about ghosts, *Blackstone Chronicles* handles them remarkably well. They do not appear as apparitions or any other such cliché. Instead, they are merely voices you can converse with, with perhaps a portrait to show what they looked like during their earthly years. Most of the spirits are friendly, and their aid is essential to progress through the asylum. While you have a full key ring, none of them are labeled, and only through conversing with the ghosts can you match which key goes to which door. (Thankfully, once you're clued in, this is an automatic process, as the door in question will be unlocked automatically.) Getting the ghosts to cooperate is usually as simple as tracking down an important object or two and returning it to them.

Most of these spooks are in varying states of denial and still suffer from the same afflictions that they suffered in life. One has an imaginary pregnancy. Another one thinks she is Mary, Queen of Scots. Their rooms are usually decorated to support their delusions, strangely enough.

The false Queen has a fanciful bed and medieval paintings, a far cry from the common "padded room" images of asylums. Janitors and orderlies still haunt the place as well, although not all of them are quite as friendly. Oliver rarely acts as the narrator – instead, looking at or interacting with items will prompt a comment from the resident spectre, which lends to the eeriness.



For a haunted asylum of unspeakable terror, the place sure is nicely decorated.

The worst of the specters is, of course, Malcolm himself. At one point you'll find a box filled with vials, each with a different affliction – snake venom, bubonic plague, typhus and malaria. Malcolm will temporarily take over your body, take a syringe and make you jab yourself with one of these deadly maladies. You have a few hours to live, you are informed, and since the vials weren't labeled, you don't know which one you have. As a puzzle, it's a little disappointing – Malcolm will simply tell you your symptoms, which will help you choose the correct antidote. It probably would've been cooler if the game had come up with a more clever way to display the symptoms of something like the famous Black Death.

While Legend's titles were born as text adventures, subsequent games began stripping away the interface in the name of straightforwardness. While *Blackstone Chronicles* basically controls like their earlier games, the interface is entirely transparent, with a single cursor bringing up a context-sensitive menu to interact with items. Much like the earlier *Mission Critical*, it uses full motion videos to transition between nodes, although it doesn't actually contain any live action video. (However, Oliver's son appears as a digitized photograph of a real kid, and it feels out of place.) The full screen visuals are welcome, but the visual design itself is sterile and unremarkable. The package includes two CDs, with one offering lower quality movies for slower computers. The animations are still slow, though, and since you'll be ferrying back and forth between floors fairly often, you're more than likely to just skip them entirely, accomplished by carrying out commands with the right button. But while the graphics seem a bit late to the party, the creepy soundtrack almost entirely makes up for any other deficiencies.

The only other real trouble with *Blackstone Chronicles* lies not within its script, nor its storytelling or puzzle designs, which are all excellent. Rather, it's Legend's only adventure game to run under Windows, and as such, has some trouble running on modern systems. Most of these issues can be traced back to using an early version of Apple's Quicktime, which was terrible back then, and is completely incompatible with modern versions of it. Providing you can get the game working, it's a fantastic sendoff to one of the hallmark companies of the genre, one which went almost entirely unnoticed.

Interview with Bob Bates

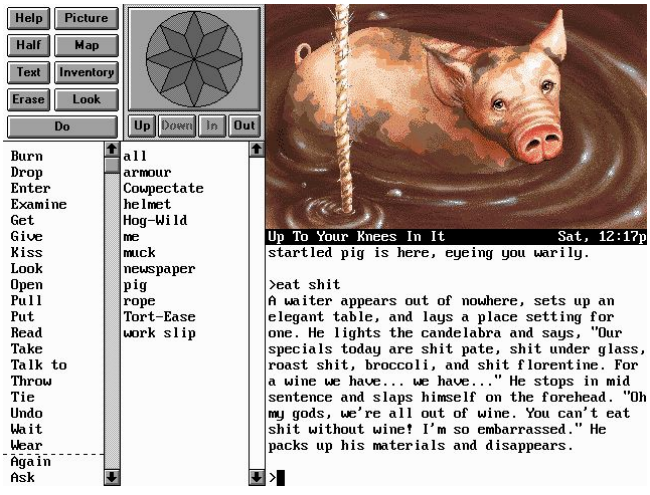


Bob Bates began his game development career at Infocom, where he designed *Sherlock: The Riddle of the Crown Jewels* and *Arthur: Quest for Excalibur*. After the closure of Infocom, he co-founded Legend Entertainment along with Mike Verdu, to keep the spirit of text adventures alive. In addition to running the company, he also wrote and designed some of their titles, including *Eric the Unready*, *Timequest*, and *John Saul's Blackstone Chronicles*. After the closure of Legend, he served on the International Game Developers Association for several years. As of 2011, he is Chief Creative Officer for Zynga External Studios

How did your days at Infocom result in the formation of Legend?

When I started writing games for Infocom in 1986, it was as an independent developer. I was never actually an Infocom employee. Because I was a writer with no programming experience, I hired two contract programmers named Mark Poesch and Duane Beck from a small company called Paragon Systems. Mark and Duane did all of the coding for my first two Infocom games.

By the time Infocom shut down in 1989, Paragon's owner, Mike Verdu, was interested in starting a game company. His company had been purchased by a large Washington area defense contractor, and he convinced that company to invest in a startup that we called GameWorks. But it turned out that another company owned the rights to that name, so we renamed the company Legend Entertainment, which worked out quite well for us.



Eric the Unready had some consistently brilliant writing.

Since Infocom had died, what did Legend try to do to correct their mistakes?

The most obvious thing we did was to add graphics to our games. Infocom had begrudgingly included some illustrations in their final games, but we knew we had to embrace graphics from the start. Our biggest competition were the point-and-click graphic adventures by Sierra and LucasArts. We still wanted to do parser-driven games, but we included graphics as well.

Legend also took note of some of the barriers to playing Infocom games and tried to simplify them. Typing as a skill was still rare in those days before everyone had grown up with personal computers. And playing "guess the parser" was always a problem. We addressed those issues by creating an optional interface that players could use to build commands from menus, which eliminated typos and made it certain that the parser would understand the player commands.

Much of Legend's design output seemed contracted out to other well known computer game writers and designers. How many were part of the in-house staff, and what did their roles comprise?

Actually, we had only two outside designers – Steve Meretzky, who wrote four games for us, and the husband/wife team of Lori & Corey Cole, who wrote one. Steve did the three games in the *Spellcasting* series and the *Superhero League of Hoboken*, and the Coles wrote *Shannara*. All our other games were written by Legend employees.

Text adventures were obviously a tough sell compared to graphic adventures, especially once CD-ROM technology became more prolific. From both a design and marketing standpoint, what did you do to compete?

From a design point of view, we always preferred the unlimited "open world" feeling you get from a parser-driven game. Players felt as if they could try almost anything, and the designers could reward even the most arcane of inputs with funny text responses. But with graphic adventures, as Brian Moriarty once pointed out, "you can only design what you can afford to show, and you can't afford to show anything!" The cost of creating graphic responses to player inputs was so high that the designers of our competitors' games had to limit those inputs.

From a business/marketing point of view, we were also able to keep our development costs lower than fully animated graphic adventures, which meant that our break-evens were much lower than our competitors'. In those days, you could sell 30,000 units of a game and still be profitable. Today, that would be a disaster!



Death Gate heralded some of the best writing in the fantasy adventure genre.

Given the first-person viewpoint and stronger narrative voice, what advantages do you think Legend's games held over other graphic adventures?

Because we were able to create more content and to respond to a wider range of player inputs, I think we were able to write deeper and better stories. While the graphics were first person, our *voice* was actually second-person, and as writers we spoke directly to "you", the player.

I think we also had a lower frustration factor because we never had the "hunt the pixel" problem that graphic adventures had to deal with. In those games, players often ended up slowly sweeping the cursor back and forth across the screen, hoping that something would light up.

On that note, many text adventure developers seemed to have trouble adapting to the development of graphic adventures. Legend was one of the few companies that made the transition pretty smoothly. How does one need to change their mindset when changing from text to graphic development, as far as storytelling, puzzle solving and so forth, to account for both the visuals and the interface?

The biggest problem is that the designer has to deal with all the stuff that the *bleeping* artists put into the scene in order to make the graphics look interesting! (smiles)

In a pure text adventure, the player only tries to interact with the objects that the designer mentions. But in a game with graphics, the designer has to write interactions for all the seemingly minor objects that fill out a scene. If there's a window, for example, there's probably also a window sill, and a latch, and curtains, and trees that you see beyond the window, and a road winding off into the distance, and sky, etc, etc. Our philosophy was that the player should be able to interact in text with anything he sees in the picture, and that's really quite hard.

It might be obvious, but was *Timequest* meant to be a spiritual successor to Sierra's *Time Zone*?

At last an easy question! I never played *Time Zone*, so it's easy to say that the answer is no!

You've mentioned in other interviews that your own favorite game is *Eric the Unready*. Can you provide some background on your favorite gags or puzzles? (The whole Swamp Trek part was my favorite, personally.)

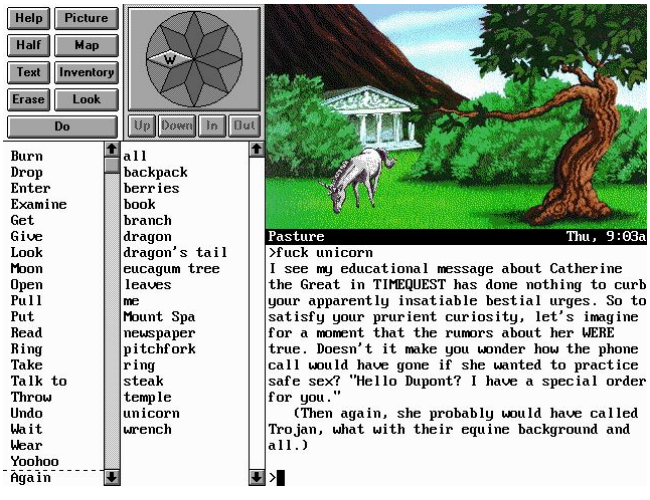
I have a notoriously bad memory about my own games, and I really don't remember large swaths of them. When someone asks me for the solution to a puzzle, I always have to go back to the code to a) remember what the puzzle was, and b) to find out the solution. (One peculiar side benefit of this malady is that on the rare occasions when I actually do go back and play a section of one of my games, I'm constantly surprised and often laugh out loud at stuff that I actually wrote myself.)

But picking out particular gags or puzzles is really hard. I liked the Three Wall-Castle with the parody of the Monty Python defenders up on the walls and the super-slow turtle down below (inspired by the steamroller attack in *A Fish Called Wanda*). I liked the jokes in the *Jeopardy* game (e.g., Category: "Famous Sayings of Bjorn the Berserker." Question: "The fastest way to a man's heart is through... "Answers to choose from: "his stomach," "his mouth", "his breastbone with an axe.") I liked the reverse Babel fish puzzle to get the Chamberpot of Tomorrow. I liked that you could attempt to have, er, intimate relations with every human and animal in the game, and one response I remember in particular was to trying to make love to one of the young ladies in the Temple of Virgins:

> (verb) the Virgin

The room is filled with a rosy glow, and suddenly hundreds of lovely woodland nymphs appear. They gently raise the slumbering girl, remove her robe, and bathe her with ten thousand dewdrops. Then a silk covered four-poster bed appears out of nowhere. They place her upon it and beckon to you. As you approach, one of the nymphs glances at a line etched into the bedpost just above your head and she says, "Oh. Sorry. You must be taller than this line to (verb) the virgin. The nymphs disappear as quickly as they came, and when you blink your eyes everything has returned to normal.

But the reason the game is my favorite is that I just had so much fun staying up late into the night, thinking of all the weird things players might try and writing funny answers for them. By that time I was coding my own games, and the joy of coding and designing and writing all mixed together made it one of the happiest times in my career.



Rumors of Catherine the Great's horse loving may or may not have been exaggerated.

What criteria did Legend use to pick which licenses to use for their games?

Mostly it was whether a designer was a fan of the license, and after that, whether the license was available for a reasonable price.

How involved were the original authors when it came to the development of games based on their works?

There was a very broad range of involvement. Some authors just wanted the royalty check and really didn't care what we did. Others wanted various approval rights. Only two authors became closely involved with game design and storytelling – Terry Brooks collaborated with us on *Shannara* (accent on the first syllable, by the way, not the middle one), and John Saul and I co-developed the storylines for the *Blackstone Chronicle* series of books and the game, working closely with each other to ensure that the two stories were consistent with each other.

Superhero League of Hoboken **was a change in pace, in that parts of it were much more like a role playing game than a graphic adventure. Before the purchase by GT Interactive, was there any movement to try any other genres than adventure games?**

When the adventure genre finally became too unprofitable to continue, we started making the move to first person shooters, mostly because a lot of our team was big fans. Glen Dahlgren's *Wheel of Time* was the first game done in the Unreal Engine by a company other than Epic, and we focused on shooters from then on.



Companions of Xanth certainly had an odd sense of humor.

One of the advertising flyers mentioned a sequel to ***Companions of Xanth*** **which didn't see release. Were there any other games that were in the works but didn't make it to completion?**

We had lots of ideas for games that never actually got developed. Two of the more interesting ones were a sequel to *Shannara* that Ken Rolston was working on when he was a Legend employee, and a game based on one of my favorite books of all time – Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.

Since Legend had the ***Wheel of Time*** **license, were there any plans for an adventure game on that, before it became an FPS?**

We originally signed and pitched the game to Robert Jordan as an adventure game, but both he and Glen were unhappy with the early direction of the design, and eventually Glen re-worked it into a fantasy shooter with spells as weapons.

How did management change after Legend was purchased by GT Interactive, and then Infogrames?

Mike Verdu and I had always been co-Studio Heads of Legend. Originally he was the biz guy and I was the design guy, but he had a real interest in design and he ended up co-designing two games (*Gateway*, and *Gateway 2*), and then designing his own science fiction adventure game, *Mission Critical*.

But after the sale, we could no longer concentrate solely on Legend products and our focus was split between Legend and other GT/Infogrames products. For the first time, we also had to deal with the quarterly-driven goals of a public company, and that was difficult to reconcile with our

development philosophy, especially since we were developing *Unreal 2* for Epic, the original "it'll be done when it's done" company.

After Mike eventually left to begin his meteoric rise at Electronic Arts, Glen took over the design of *Unreal 2* and I did the writing, but we were never able to get another game greenlit after *Unreal 2 XMP*, and the studio was shut down in January of 2004.



Meretzky's Spellcasting series was often ribald, but also quite funny.

What are some of your other favorite adventures games? Are there any other designers or writers whose work you admire?

Not surprisingly, I'm a big fan of many of the Infocom games, especially *Zork*, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *Trinity*, *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*, and *Planetfall*. You'll note that three of those games were written by Steve Meretzky, probably the funniest game writer alive, although Tim Schafer and Ron Gilbert certainly give him a run for his money. My favorite adventure game of all time was Ron Gilbert's *The Secret of Monkey Island*.

Is there a chance any Legend games could be released on a classic digital distribution service like Good Old Games?

There's a chance, but it's complicated. The rights to most of the games went to GT/Infogrames, and are now owned by Atari. But all of the licensed games were published under agreements with the authors that specified a time period during which they could be published, and of course all of those time periods have now expired. There's a chance I could buy back the rights to the original games from Atari, but to date we haven't been able to reach an agreement about that.

Zork

Hello sailor! Welcome to a world of adventure, excitement, and low cunning that only exists in the far reaches of your imagination (literally)!

Zork is considered to be one of the great milestones in computer gaming, and the classic example of a genre known as the text adventure (or interactive fiction, as it's sometimes called, take your pick). It also has quite a history. It started as a halfway light-hearted treasure hunt, dabbled in an RPG format, made the jump to CD, gone *Myst*-style, tried being serious at the same time, and gone back to comedy again, all in the process of the last 30 years.

The seeds of *Zork* were sown by another game, the grandfather of the text adventure, *Adventure* (AKA *Colossal Cave*). Created in 1976 by programmer William Crowther, the game was loosely based on his explorations of Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, and featured a few fantasy elements for fun. The original version, which was feared lost for a long time until the recent discovery of the original source code, boasted the possibly limitless idea that you could have the computer describe your location, and you could tell it what you wanted to do, and (if you were lucky enough that the programmer had the foresight to think of the same action,) your in-game avatar would do it! Back in the '70s, this was a revolution in gaming.

Later, a student named Don Woods discovered the game, and asked Crowther if he could add to it. In 1977, Don Woods released the version of *Adventure* that most people are familiar with. Additions included new puzzles, locations, and characters, and even a scoring system that would become a standard in many adventure games to come. The game is not copyrighted, and fans of the game (including co-creator Don Woods) continue to make new versions of the game to this day.

At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *Adventure* was incredibly popular, but the puzzles were frustrating, leading some students to crack the source code to find out what to do or how to get that last point. One student enthralled with the game was Dave Lebling, who, along with friends Marc Blank, Michael Berlyn, Tim Anderson, and Bruce Daniels, decided that they should create their own take on *Adventure*. After a few discarded attempts, they finally created the first section of what was to become *Zork* on a PDP-10 "Supercomputer." The word "zork" was MIT slang for an unfinished program, and it was never meant to be the official title of the game. Certain early mainframe versions of the game were called *Dungeon*, but the name was dropped after worries about copyright infringement. The name *Zork* stuck, and no one attempted to change it again.

By 1979, *Zork* was so huge it could barely fit on the massive computer it ran on, and no more additions could be made. At this time, Lebling, Blank, Anderson, and Daniels were graduating and preparing to start their own computer software company, Infocom. At this time, home computers like the TRS-80 and the Apple II were beginning to take off, and the group debated what product to show off as the launchpad for their new company. They eventually decided on *Zork*.

But there was a big problem. *Zork* could barely fit on a huge supercomputer with its program size of nearly a massive for the time one megabyte! (We've certainly come far...) How on Earth could Infocom squeeze it onto a computer a fraction of its size? To accommodate this, the game was split into three chunks, each part slightly enhanced, lengthened, and reworked. Blank then created a special program that would read the game code and translate it into a special compressed programming language. Blank's code-reading program would then be reprogrammed to run on every computer the game was released for, and the code it read would not need to be changed at all. This way, the game could be ported to every home computer of the time with minimal effort and time required.

Zork I: The Great Underground Empire, was originally released in December 1980, with *Zork II: The Wizard of Frobozz*, and *Zork III: The Dungeon Master* following shortly thereafter. *Zork I* contains roughly the first two-thirds of the original mainframe game, while *Zork II* contains

most of the rest, while slightly expanded. *Zork III* contains the endgame, and is almost entirely all new material. The very final puzzle from the mainframe version was shifted to *Sorcerer*, one of the later *Zork* spinoffs.

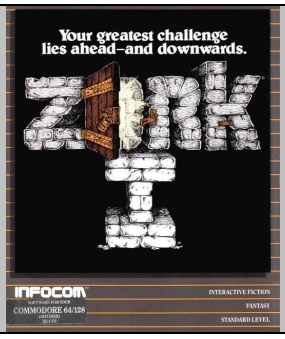
The main problem people have getting into *Zork*, besides the interface being admittedly archaic, is that the puzzles can be quite obtuse. For the first time player, it's easy to get stuck right at the beginning of *Zork I*. The first step is to check under the rug for a trap door, but there's not a single clue to do so. It's easy to assume that it's just a room decoration, along with the trophy case, which is also a key feature of the room. The games can be quite frustrating to those who aren't willing to experiment with anything and everything, make maps, discuss findings with friends, etc. So, why even bother with it today, you ask?

It's still easy to appreciate the games because of way Infocom implemented everything. What they did was think about a lot of different things that players would attempt during the course of playing. The games are filled with secrets and surprises. Infocom knew that players would do a lot of experimenting on their quest, and they rewarded the players for it, something that a lot of "open world" games today are still trying to perfect. You could do a lot of interesting things in *Zork* that, while serving no purpose in helping you to complete the game, or sometimes even hindered you if you did something stupid, would almost always make you laugh. The game would allow you to do a lot of crazy things. Do you want to count the leaves in a pile? Go ahead. Do you want to cuss like a sailor? *Zork* won't like it, but it'll let you. Everything from opening an iron grate from underneath without moving the pile of leaves hiding it, addressing the game by name, asking about game features and characters, and even committing suicide, Infocom and its staff of Implementors (their title given to those who create interactive fiction) seemed to be one step ahead of you with a witty response. This is the magic of what makes interactive fiction interesting!

There are numerous recurring elements in the *Zork* series, most of which were introduced in the first game. In the original *Adventure*, if you walked around the caves in the dark without a lit lantern, you would quickly fall into a deep pit and die. For a while it was the same in *Zork*, until someone asked why there were bottomless pits in the attic of a house that couldn't be seen from the ground floor, that is. To solve this problem, Lebling created (or stole from fantasy writer Jack Vance, accounts vary) the creature known as the grue, arguably the most famous creature in the *Zork* universe. Grues are dark-loving creatures who live in the caves and other dark areas of the World of Quendor, the land where the *Zork* games take place. Their diet consists of unwary adventurers who stupidly roam their territory without a source of light. Mysterious as well as dangerous, it was never described what they looked like until *Zork: The Undiscovered Underground*, a text adventure released in 1997 to promote the upcoming graphic adventure in the series, *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*, and even then, the description was quite vague. Many *Zork* fans love this idea of not knowing what a grue really looks like – mystery makes an unseen menace even more terrifying.

One of the more interesting jokes to note is the series' strange pseudo-catchphrase, "Hello sailor." It appears throughout the entire series, and if you type it, you usually get the response, "Nothing happens here." For some bizarre reason, this saying (and its inevitable response) has become one of the great *Zork* secrets, appearing in almost every game in the series, including the graphical adventures. Pretty good for something that you are only required to type once in the entire series. Also present in the FrobozzCo Magic Company, whose many, many subsidiaries can provide the exact object you need for your quest, making them the equivalent of Acme from the *Road Runner* cartoons. The Kingdom of Quendor has been ruled by a family known as the Flatheads (which look just as they sound), and the unit of currency is the zorkmid.

One final thing to note is the hintbooks that Infocom released to help people through their games. Infocom realized that the questions themselves could be used as spoilers for what to expect later in the games, and added fake questions with silly answers to throw off cheaters. You can find these booklets in online form. Definitely give them a read after beating the games; they are screamingly funny.



Zork I

Initial Release Date: 1980
Platforms: Amiga / Amstrad CPC / Apple II / Apple Macintosh / Atari 8-Bit / Atari ST / Commodore 64 / Commodore 128 / Commodore Plus/4 / CP/M / IBM PC / TRS-80 / NEC PC-98
Designer(s): Marc Blank, Dave Lebling
Developer: Infocom

Zork I takes place in 948 GUE, according to official *Zork* timeline sources. It tells the first part of the story of an unnamed adventurer coming to the location of the ancient kingdom of Quendor, and discovering the many secrets and treasures hidden within the bowels of the Great Underground Empire. To tell it straight, your goal is to find your way into the caves, find all 20 treasures, and put them into the trophy case in the house near your starting point.

None of this is actually covered in game, though. The above info comes from manuals for this and later *Zork* games. The game itself begins with the following incredibly ambiguous passage of text, one of the most famous in all of adventure gaming:

```
West of House
You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a
boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.
```

Interestingly, the original *Adventure* had more in-game story than this. Even opening the mailbox and reading the advertisement within the game doesn't reveal much. Still, it definitely sets an interesting tone; you are, in all senses of the term, on your own. The manual also included a small excerpt from a book describing the history of Quendor in brief, also helping to set the tone that you should prepare for brilliant comedy. Actually, all of Infocom's text adventures, not just *Zork*, came with cool bonus items they called "feelies." The book is a parody of history textbooks used in elementary schools, complete with "Questions, Discussions, Projects, and Further Readings" for you and your classmates, including such total nonsense as:

-Find Quendor on a modern map. Is it a large area? What natural features of the area would have helped Quendor to conquer all the neighboring lands?

-What would it be like to live underground? If there are any caves near your home, spend a week underground to see what it's like.

-Try to collect 10 zorkmids from everyone on your block, telling them that the money will be used to erect a giant statue of yourself. Use force if necessary. See if the others on your block begin to resent you.

-Collect several horses for yourself and your classmates. Ride through the center of your town, pillaging stores, burning homes and slaughtering young children and old women. Afterwards, ask people around town what it was like to live in a lawless state.

Apparently Quendor had very different ideas about what children's education entails.

As for the game itself, it is incredibly complex, unforgiving and hard. It's one of those games that could take you years to beat without a walkthrough, or a map, or both. Still, there are many incredible challenges to see and attempt.

There are few characters in the game, but they are definitely enough to get on your nerves. The Thief is almost legendary in how aggravating he is. He robs you of your treasures, he kills you without provocation, he even moves stuff you've left around just to screw with you! Dueling with him near the end of the game after what seems like a lifetime of being abused by him, and finally killing him, is a payoff in itself. Still, before you do that, he might be useful for something. Then there's the Troll. The first living opponent you'll face, the Troll is pretty much a joke. The battle with him usually only lasts a couple turns and as long as you keep on him, you'll more than likely win. When you throw something at him, he'll eat it. You beat him by throwing him the knife. The rest can be left to your imagination.

The Cyclops has no problems with eating you right up. He seems quite hungry, but he is deathly afraid of his old nemesis from classical mythology. The Vampire Bat, if you accidentally wander into its territory, will pick you up and whisk you to a random room. Still, it's pretty obvious how to get past him – you'll know it when you see it. One of the more frustrating elements is definitely the limited inventory space. Your character can only carry so much weight, and you'll often find yourself having to drop items to carry others, praying that the thief doesn't mischievously run off with one of the things you dropped. And then there are the mazes, large sets of interconnected rooms that all have the exact same description, and are there just to piss you off. This is by far the most obnoxious feature of this game.

Now, this would all be fine, except for one problem. The batteries in your lantern can run out. Yes, whenever you are underground, unless you can find another light source somewhere in the vast maze, you are on a time limit. Every turn you do something, your lantern is that much closer to giving out. There is nothing more anger-generating than getting a message that your lantern appears to be dimming, and realizing that you are nowhere close to the end of the game, and will likely have to start over. You might think, "surely the time limit isn't that strict!" But to be certain, when that lantern's only been on for a couple hundred turns, and it starts to go out, you'll think it's pretty strict. Even in the original *Adventure*, you could buy new batteries for your lantern! Yes, you wouldn't get a perfect score, but who cares? You can try again next time. But in *Zork*, there are no extra chances. If you run out of light, the grues feed tonight!

There are also many chances to get stuck in a dead end, the bane of the adventure gamer's existence. If you are carrying a sharp object when you get in the inflated boat, it pops and you can't win. If you try to force the jeweled egg open instead of getting the last person on Earth you'd want help from to do it, you break it and can't win. If you eat the garlic for a laugh, you won't be able to get past the vampire bat and guess what? You can't win!

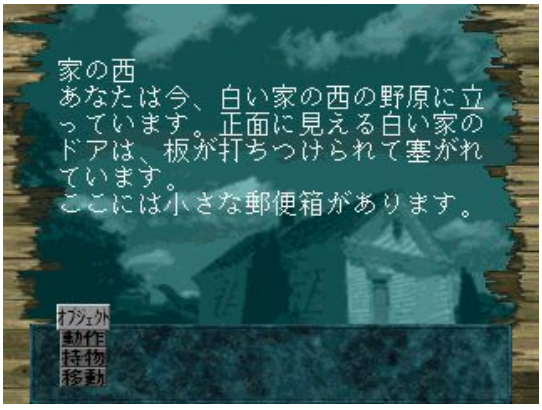
You also can die. When you die, you lose points, all of your possessions are scattered across the map, and you are warped back to either the forest, or Hell if you've visited it, in *Zork I,* and to the first room of the game if you are playing *Zork II* or *III*. But be forewarned, die three times and the game ends! Luckily, Death isn't nearly as rampant and random as it is in a Sierra game; usually you will only die in situations that are obviously dangerous, the exception being if the thief randomly kills you the moment you enter an otherwise safe room.

It's definitely a game for patient people. But those who persevere will be rewarded with some awesome moments. It has many flaws that add up to create frustration, but there is still plenty of fun to be had. It would have been nice if the narrative were a little more focused and obvious. As it is, you basically stumble from puzzle to puzzle until the game abruptly ends.

The game also introduces many famous *Zork* landmarks and moments. The white house that is your starting point is the most iconic. Flood Control Dam #3 is also memorable, enough for it to appear in some of the later games. "Hello sailor" makes its debut, although it is quite useless. The grues make their first appearance in this game, as well, as does the first mention of a "Frobozz Magic (Object) Company," a branch of a monopolistic company that serves all your magical item needs.

In Japan, *Zork I* was released on the Japanese home computer, the NEC PC-98, with newly-added visuals as well as text. Strangely, only the first game in the trilogy was given this treatment. However, this version was upgraded and released for the PlayStation and Saturn in

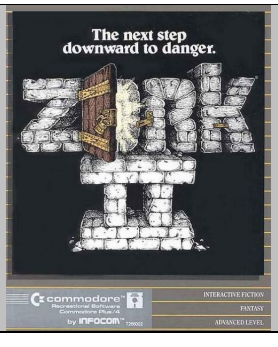
1996. These versions looks a lot like other visual novels for the 32-bit systems, like *The Silver Case* and *Baroque Syndrome*, with a faded, barely visible background, and bright white text superimposed over it. It's really only graphical in the vaguest sense of the worse, because you can barely make out much of anything. At least the borders change depending on your location.



"You are standing in an open field west of a white house."

There are four primary commands – "Object", "Action", "Inventory", and "Move". You can use manual text entry with the Action command, but this is extremely aggravating without a keyboard, obviously. The Object command will let you highlight a noun in the text, which then brings up a particle menu ("wo", "ni", "de", functioning as "to", "at" and "with" in various circumstances). This is where the Action command comes in handy – based on the item you've selected, it'll automatically pick all suitable verbs. The use of the Move command is obvious, and even shows all available exits. There's an ingame map, as well as a foldout included in the manual. It's actually not all that hard to play with a bit of Japanese knowledge. *Zork* didn't exactly have complicated writing in English, and it's still pretty simple in Japanese. As long as you're familiar with the original game and have a kanji dictionary nearby, you should be set.

Not that there's really anything else to it besides the novelty. It does have a very nice CD audio soundtrack though, which consists mostly of atmospheric noises and various other electronic music. The music is composed by veteran Yuzo Koshiro, along with Motohiro Kawashima. It's neat for an interesting bit of curiosity, especially in seeing how American developed games take on their own lives when transported to different cultures.



Zork II

Initial Release Date: 1981
Platforms: Amiga / Amstrad CPC / Apple II / Apple Macintosh / Atari 8-Bit / Atari ST / Commodore 64 / Commodore 128 / Commodore Plus/4 / CP/M / IBM PC / MSX / TRS-80
Designer(s): Marc Blank, Dave Lebling
Developer: Infocom

Zork II is more of the same: more puzzles, more treasures, more strange places, more ridiculously creative thinking. It begins at precisely the moment *Zork I* left off. After finding all of the Treasures of Zork, defeating the Thief, and getting out of the dungeon alive, you find that

a mysterious map has appeared in your trophy case. Recognizing the location it represents, you realize that it has a path that you never noticed before. Taking it, you find an old tomb. As you enter it, the doors slam shut behind you, leaving you, your lantern (batteries inexplicably recharged), and your elven sword to go on a new adventure, with tougher puzzles than ever. The nice thing about this game is that your ultimate goal is a little easier to figure out: defeat the maniacal Wizard of Frobozz. Of course, the game refuses to tell you exactly how to do that, so ultimately, it's another treasure hunt. At least the treasures seem to serve a purpose this time, once you get far enough to learn what it is, anyway. The bonuses for this game are a travel guide and two brochures for places of interest in the Great Underground Empire. Once again, they are quite humorous and worth the read.

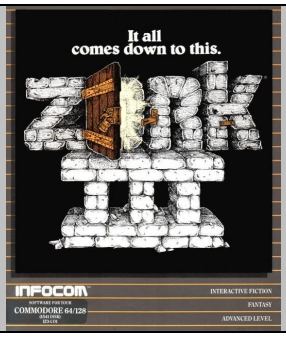
Once again, there are only a handful of characters to note. The Wizard of Frobozz basically replaces the Thief as the annoying, reappearing adversary who constantly causes you anguish. Although not quite as bad as the Thief (although that is debatable), he can still cause you quite a lot of grief with his annoying spells. The Demon, although assumedly evil, might still be willing to give you a hand, for a price, of course. If you die during the course of the game, pay attention to your surroundings. They are hints on where and how to find the Demon.

As far as gameplay goes, you still can only carry a certain amount of weight, and the lantern can still die if you take too long to win. There are still two mazes, but they at least are integrated into the game much better. But now, on top of mazes, there are a couple rooms in the game that, no matter what direction you go, you end up in a random adjacent room. Luckily, this can be deactivated in the main room. One nice thing is that, even though the puzzles are still quite obtuse, the solutions make much more sense. Well, usually. The Bank of Zork area is absolutely ridiculous. Basically, where you end up depends on what room you enter from, and if you end up going to the wrong place, you get trapped. Unfortunately, the game doesn't give you enough clues to figure it all out.

Another obnoxious puzzle is the "Baseball Diamond." You are presented with an "Oddly Angled Room" and are supposed to realize that it resembles a baseball diamond. Even if you have an idea of what you have to do, it's still unfairly difficult due to the fact that it's simply too hard to understand the layout of the area, and it's also unfair to people who come from places where baseball isn't a popular sport.

There's also a nifty new feature not present in the original. If you get stuck in a certain area and are unable to escape, a gnome will give you a chance to escape at the cost of a treasure. However, this can only be done once, if you wish to beat the game! Of course, there are other ways to screw up and be unable to win. Thank goodness your lantern lasts a lot longer.

Zork II is one of those games that takes two steps forward, and one step back. It fixes a bunch of problems with the first game, but then goes and adds a few new ones. Still, it's decent, and perhaps a tad better than the first.



Zork III

Initial Release Date: 1982
Platforms: Amiga / Amstrad CPC / Apple II / Apple Macintosh / Atari 8-Bit / Atari ST / Commodore 64 / Commodore 128 / Commodore Plus/4 / CP/M / IBM PC / MSX / TRS-80
Designer(s): Gregg Barnett
Developer: Infocom

Zork III is the final chapter in the original "*Zork* trilogy". Being the last segment of the original mainframe game, the home version breaks the mold of the first two in a few ways.

First, it actually has a plot beyond "find the treasures" or "defeat the wizard." (Gasp!) Yes, in this game, things are explained, a goal must be achieved, and this time, you get an ending for your troubles, not just "To Be Continued..." like the first two games. It feels good to know we've gone through all this stuff for a purpose (beyond greed or revenge, that is).

Second, the traditional score system has been ditched. In its place is a score system based on potential to solve a puzzle, not the actual tasks being completed. What this means is, whenever you come across a puzzle, you get a point. This is absolutely ridiculous. The maximum score in the first two games allowed you to judge how far you were in the game based on your current score. With this new system, not only can you only get seven points total, but they don't tell you a thing about how far you've progressed! You could in theory get to the very end of the game without solving a single puzzle, and then have no idea why you can't complete the game. This is crap.

Third, the lamp is useless! The only time you need it is to get past the rooms at the very beginning, and then you can just drop it and never pick it up again. There are no more dark places where the lamp is required. After the gripes about the battery life in the first two games, you might think this would be for the better, but no, now they've gone from "unfair" at one end of the spectrum, to "why bother?" at the other end. You and this lantern have been through so much together that this is quite a cruel anticlimax to put it in the game just to tease you! All they had to do was make the battery life a little longer! Now, instead of a time limit throughout most of the game, you have a time limit that, while completely unrelated to the lantern, is somehow even more annoying.

A little while into the game, after a certain number of turns, there is an earthquake that causes some parts of the game to become inaccessible, and others to open up. Of course, this means you have to hurry up and complete certain sections first, and of course they don't warn you about the coming earthquake beforehand; that would be too nice! So now, instead of being warned a few times about the lantern's batteries dying, and then possibly being screwed, a plot device comes out of nowhere, and you are most likely screwed because you didn't do everything in the exact order you had no idea you were supposed to take! And if you didn't know that the earthquake caused this, and didn't know that you were supposed to go to a certain area now blocked by the quake, you'll spend hours wandering the game world, trying every possible thing, to figure out what you've missed, not knowing that the game is now unbeatable! This is a beginner's trap of the worst kind, and should have never been put into the game. It's cruel, obnoxious, and way too subtle; definitely the worst design flaw in the entire *Zork* trilogy.

The story, of course, picks up right where *Zork II* left off, with the Wizard of Frobozz defeated, and a path found to a lower level of the Great Underground Empire. Your mission is to prove to the Dungeon Master, the ruler of all the caves of *Zork*, that you are worthy to become his heir. To do this, you must retrieve all of the symbols of the Dungeon Master, search him out, and solve his final puzzle, and become the new Dungeon Master by succeeding.

Now, by *Zork*'s present storytelling standards, that's not half bad. But some of the most obnoxious puzzles in the whole trilogy somewhat ruin the experience. How you are supposed to know what to do in some instances boggles the mind. There are many sections where you must wait somewhere for a considerable amount of time, and unless you've played the game before, you'll have no idea why you're doing it, much less know to do it in the first place!

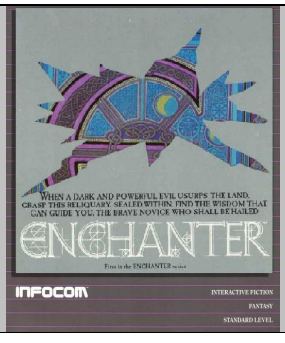
The puzzles are vicious. The one everybody quotes is the pushwall maze known as the "Royal Puzzle". The problem is that you need to understand what's going on in the big picture, even though you're only able to see your immediate surroundings in the game itself. It's also not immediately obvious what you are trying to do in the maze, as if doing it wasn't hard enough. It's basically just trial and error, experimenting until you get it perfectly right, but at least it makes more sense that the God-forsaken Bank of Zork, even if it is a million times harder.

Another crazy moment is the time machine, but this one is fun. The idea is to go back in time to a point where getting the item you need will be easy compared to the present. Seeing how you can't take objects with you in time, the obvious solution would be to hide the item in a

place where it won't be found until you return to the present. The problem is that the place you need to hide it is in a place even you wouldn't think to look: under the seat in the time machine. There are some funny ways to die if you go to the wrong time period! Unfortunately, this part is marred by a timed puzzle that has a facepalm-worthy solution that is quite out of touch with the rest of the trilogy. Yet another insane puzzle is the mirror box. The moment you enter the box for the first time and see that the description is longer than the screen can show, you know it can't be good. But strangely enough, once you know what you're trying to accomplish, it's actually quite easy.

On top of all these issues, the game just isn't that funny. Unlike the first two games, there are only a handful of moments where one might crack a smile, while the first two games routinely provoke laughter. The main highlight is the moment that "hello sailor" is actually useful. Yes, it finally serves a purpose (and it never will again!) Unfortunately, it is optional, and hidden way too well. Another problem is that the game just seems to go at a very leisurely pace. There is no thief or wizard causing you stress, and their presence is actually missed. Without a constant threat looming around, the game just feels kinda boring in comparison. The quest even feels much shorter than the first two.

Zork III has the sad fate of being the worst of the trilogy. The puzzles are cruel, it has several design flaws, and it just feels dull. It is still worth a playthrough, though, as it ties up the story of the trilogy, and it does have a couple fun spots.



Enchanter

Initial Release Date: 1983
Platforms: Amiga / Apple II / Atari 8-Bit / Atari ST / Commodore 64 / IBM PC / Other Unofficial Ports
Designer(s): Marc Blank, Dave Lebling
Developer: Infocom

After the *Zork* trilogy was completed, Infocom quickly began a new trilogy taking place in the same universe. The *Enchanter* trilogy is basically like *Zork*, only you are a wizard in training. The first game in the new trilogy, *Enchanter*, was developed under the idea that it would be *Zork IV*. However, this name was dropped, possibly due to the fact that it has nothing to do with the original trilogy. This was used as the basis of a joke in the *Enchanter* hintbook. While not *Zork* games by name, they are considered to take place in the same universe.

Enchanter is a quantum leap in quality from the original *Zork* trilogy. Everything from the story and writing to the puzzles and characters exude excellence compared to *Zork I – III*. The first thing you'll likely notice when you boot up the game is the screen full of text describing the basic idea of the story. An evil warlock known as Krill is terrorizing a nearby land and slowly drawing out his plans to take over the world. The circle of elder wizards, realizing that action must be taken, and soon, realize that Krill is too powerful for an all-out attack by their most powerful wizards. It was written in an ancient prophecy of this exact situation, which says that Krill can only be stopped by a young wizard in training. Belboz, the leader of the Circle, therefore summons one of his most promising pupils and gives him the mission of stopping the most powerful evil wizard of the time, and of course, that pupil turns out to be you. This might seem ridiculous, but it makes the original *Zork* trilogy look illiterate in comparison. According to official timelines, the game takes place in 952 GUE, a few years after the *Zork* trilogy.

The game proper begins with you approaching the castle that Krill is using as his base of operations. Your only possession is your spell book, with a few spells already written down

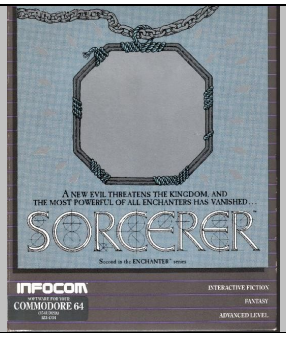
inside. As you progress through the game, you'll find scrolls containing new spells for you to learn. To prevent your inventory from being bogged down with all these scrolls (you can still only carry so much weight!), you start with a spell that allows you to inscribe the spells found on scrolls into your spell book. Being that this is a game about magic, it should be quite obvious that your spells play an important part in solving puzzles. However, just like in *Dungeons and Dragons*, it is not enough to simply have the spell in your book to be able to cast it; you will also need to memorize all said spells. Don't worry, it's as simple as "memorize (spell name)".

One interesting new feature is the fact that your character must also take care of basic needs, such as food, water, and sleep. If you don't get enough food and water, you die. If you don't get enough sleep, you'll eventually get exhausted, then forget your memorized spells, and finally pass out. Thankfully, you can easily replenish your food and water stores, and a bed can be found early in the game.

The descriptions of locations, characters, and objects are intricately written, and the jokes are back in top form, perhaps even better than ever. Even the error messages for when you do something not related to the story are funny! Be sure to try casting spells on yourself, although it would be a good idea to save first! One of the more brilliant hidden jokes comes when you learn the "zifmia" spell, which instantly teleports the target of the spell to the same room as yourself. In a certain room, you find a book of legends, one being about a monster of old being imprisoned in the earth, the other being a creation myth, in which it is revealed that the Implementors (name given to Infocom's text adventure authors) created the world as a test for others of their kind. In a brilliant scene, the player can actually "zifmia Implementors" for a chance to meet Mark Blank and Dave Lebling. Another wonderful point is when you actually meet up with the Adventurer that you play as in the *Zork* trilogy, whose personality, it turns out, is a list of adventure gaming clichés. He picks up everything he can find, gets into fights with monsters, constantly eyes your inventory items, and even follows you around like a puppy if you are carrying any "treasures." He even helps you with a puzzle!

One of the major problems with the *Zork* trilogy is the puzzles, which are incredibly obtuse and obnoxiously complicated. In *Enchanter*, almost every puzzle makes logical sense, while still being quite creative, and they are described with clues that are not too subtle, yet not too obvious. There are few red herrings, few ways to get stuck, and while the time limit (now related to running out of food) is still somewhat of an issue, it isn't nearly as problematic as the lantern in the *Zork* trilogy. There finally seems to be a balance. The only problem is that some of the puzzles require you to die a few times in different places to know you need to do something before that point.

All in all, *Enchanter* is a massive improvement on the original *Zork* trilogy, striking a perfect balance of difficulty, plot, fun characters, interesting puzzles, and secrets.



Sorcerer

Initial Release Date: 1984
Platforms: Amiga / Apple II / Atari 8-Bit / Atari ST / Commodore 64 / IBM PC / Other Unofficial Ports
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Infocom

Sorcerer, the second game in the *Enchanter* trilogy, is sadly, after the brilliance of the first game, a step down in quality from *Enchanter*. The story is incredibly vague and is never fully explained, there are not as many fun and interesting moments, and it just seems dull.

The story, taking place a few years after *Enchanter*, opens with you waking from a foreboding nightmare to find the Guild of Enchanters deserted. Belboz has disappeared, and the rest of the guild is out shopping (type "wake up" during the nightmare for a joke death). Upon reading Belboz's journal, you get the idea that an ancient demon may be behind all of Belboz's strange behavior of late.

This would be fine, if the game wasn't so drab. The story is never directly mentioned over the course of the quest, and there are few characters and interesting moments to break up the monotony. It plays like the *Zork* trilogy, only more linear. Once again, you are stumbling from one situation to another until the game abruptly ends, only this time, in a certain order. This of course leads to the possibility of getting stuck quite easily.

You can still cast spells, of course, but the uses for them feel much more obvious, whereas *Enchanter* made you feel that your magic could do anything, and had more creative uses. At the beginning you even drink a potion that keeps you from getting hungry or thirsty, effectively ridding the game of a full-length time limit, but it still feels like a letdown. Instead, there are a few sequences that are timed, the coal mine being the most frustrating; you have absolutely no free time. One wrong move, and you'd better restore. Ironically, this part has one of the more ingenious puzzles in the game. In the coal mine, you run into your future self, who helps you solve a puzzle. Later, you go back in time, and end up doing the same thing for your past self. A similar puzzle would later be used in *Escape From Monkey Island*. This part is quite ingenious, and would be a lot of fun, if you weren't busy worrying about the horribly strict time limit, which makes it hard to enjoy the moment.

Another puzzle that will have you howling with rage is the glass maze. There's a time limit, again, and not only is the maze three dimensional, but after going through it once, just to get the item hidden deep within, the maze layout changes, and now you have to go through it with a monster chasing you! Luckily, if you can't stand that, there is a spell that will allow you to get out easier, but the very idea of going through the maze "the right way" while under a time limit, without any help is terrifying!

The difficulty is incredible; if you can beat the game without any help at all, you should be very proud of yourself. Unfortunately, there is not enough satisfaction to be had afterwards. The climax is not nearly as satisfying as the end to *Enchanter*. The death system is also different in this game. Instead of a "three strikes" rule, you now must continue from a saved game whenever you die, and if you don't know what you are doing, you will die a lot.

Sorcerer is a huge step down from its predecessor, but unfortunately, it is nowhere near as much fun. This one is probably only for hardcore *Zork* fans, or for those who want to play all three games of the *Enchanter* trilogy.



Spellbreaker

Initial Release Date: 1985
Platforms: Amiga / Apple II / Atari 8-Bit / Atari ST / Commodore 64 / IBM PC / Other Unofficial Ports
Designer(s): Dave Lebling
Developer: Infocom

Spellbreaker is the first in the *Zork* series to be classified as an "Expert" level game, and for good reason: it is by far the hardest game yet, so hard in fact that players accused Infocom for deliberately making it nigh-impossible to beat in order to sell hint books!

The story takes place sometime after *Sorcerer*. Magic has been failing across the world, and the guildmasters have all been turned into reptiles by a mysterious cloaked figure. Of course, it is up to the player to figure out what's going on. At least this time, the story is actually explained at the end of the game. The game is more open-ended than *Sorcerer*, but less so than *Enchanter,* due to the fact that the world opens up the more you progress. Too bad the game's so hard you'll likely never see half of it!

Still, for those who persevere, there are several interesting elements in *Spellbreaker*. Early on, you get a bag of holding, allowing you to carry almost every item you find with you at the same time, which is very important, considering how many important items there are. Another neat idea is the magic marker, allowing you to "name" any object you find and refer to it by that name, which is quite useful when you are carrying a dozen otherwise identical magic cubes.

The puzzles will have you howling with rage most of the time. In the Green Rock puzzle, you are trying to get one of the Cubes of Foundation away from a constantly moving brown rock. To do so, you must ride a green rock, trap the brown rock in a corner of the area, and jump over to it to get the cube. The problem is that the brown rock has a mind of its own and unless you plan ahead carefully, you might never catch it. Just as infuriating is the compass rose maze. You have a magic compass rose which allows you to open the doors between the rooms, however there are several rules to how the maze and the compass rose itself work. What are they, you ask? The game certainly won't tell you!

Also obnoxious one is the cube puzzle. There are two piles of cubes, with six in each pile. Only one of the cubes is the one you want, and the rest are booby-traps. The real cube is randomized, and Infocom was evil enough to make it so you can't save inside the vault you're in. In other words, you can't cheat your way through by guessing. If you've been playing well up to this point, you should have a spell that will allow you to detect magic. The real cube is more powerful than the fakes. What you have to do is sort the cubes into piles and use the detection spell to slowly use the process of elimination to find the real cube. Oh, by the way: you can only use the detection spell a few times before you activate the vault's security system. Thanks for that, Infocom.

Another one: one of the cubes you need is inside an idol. Unfortunately, there's no obvious way to get to it, of course. You wouldn't even know the cube was there if you aren't being extremely observant. What you have to do is bring the idol to life, and make it sleepy so it yawns right as the life-giving spell wears off. The logic is so bizarre that... wait, there's logic to this puzzle? Obviously, the game doesn't let you do things the easy way by breaking or using your open spell on the idol. The only puzzle that's somewhat fun is bartering for the magic carpet, although even that one has a bit of a "low blow", because he'll initially sell you the wrong item, a classic novice adventurer trick. One other particularly annoying aspect is the copy protection. *Sorcerer* had something similar, but *Spellbreaker* strangely places it near the end of the game. If you screw up, the game doesn't tell you until later, when it suddenly kills you if you made a mistake earlier. *Sorcerer* actually got that part right.

The story is much better played out than *Sorcerer* or even *Enchanter*, and by the finale everything more or less makes sense. The ending is a downer, but is about the only real good outcome there could've been, considering the plot. The villain is interesting, but you end up wishing that you saw more of him. He's only referenced a couple of times before making a grand appearance at the end. At least the way you deal with him is clever, if a bit sad, considering the consequences. The downer ending is actually quite strange, considering that all the previous ones had some element of triumph. This one ends with uncertainty, but at least with a small joke (read your rank). Overall, this one is, despite its difficulty, arguably the second best of the *Enchanter* trilogy, due to its coherent story, interesting if absurd puzzles, cool gimmicks, and an ending with balls. It's much better in plot and gameplay than *Sorcerer*, but not quite as fun and exciting as *Enchanter*.



Wishbringer

Initial Release Date: 1985
Platforms: Amiga / Apple II / Atari 8-Bit / Atari ST / Commodore 64 / IBM PC / Other Unofficial Ports
Designer(s): Brian Moriarty
Developer: Infocom

Wishbringer is basically a *Zork* game meant for a younger age group. With an "Introductory" difficulty level, a wackier, more obvious sense of humor, and a magic item that allows you to easily solve certain major puzzles, it's definitely meant to introduce novice gamers to the medium in a less frustrating way. The story is that you are a postal clerk in the town of Festeron, Antharia (a land somewhere near Quendor), who is given the job of delivering a very important letter to the owner of the local magic shop. Upon doing so, you learn that the old woman who runs the shop has had her cat kidnapped by an evil magician who subtly calls herself "The Evil One". The Evil One is after the magic stone called Wishbringer (which grants wishes, of course) for some undoubtedly evil purpose. You decide to save the day, but upon leaving the shop, you find that the town has been changed into a land of darkness, now known as Witchville.

Witchville, where you will be spending most of the game, certainly is an interesting place. The Evil One enforces her will through the "Boot Patrol", which turn out to be a giant, anthropomorphic army of boots. Your allies include a kingdom of talking platypuses. You'll go to a very unusual movie theatre where you'll see... well, let's say that it's "based on a true story".

The game has many positives. The Wishbringer stone is a great way to ease the issue of puzzles for younger gamers, and is a brilliant idea in general. The writing is clever, with a lot of jokes and puzzles even younger gamers might get. The game is designed in a way that appears simple on the surface, but is actually quite intricate, offering many optional locations, puzzles, and ways to complete the game. Unfortunately, despite all of the clever jokes, puzzles, and overall writing and design, there are two problems with *Wishbringer*. First of all, despite appearing to be an "introductory game", it still has a few moments that might be problematic for children (or impatient gamers). The puzzle of how to get the Wishbringer itself will fly right over some people's heads unless they are very observant. You might even get stuck at the very end of the game because you didn't closely examine that **one** thing, to get that **one** clue on how to find the stone. The other problem is that the game is incredibly short – shorter even than *Zork I!* At least the glow-in-the-dark plastic stone replication feelie of the Wishbringer is pretty cool.



Beyond Zork: The Coconut of Quendor

Initial Release Date: 1987
Platforms: Amiga / Apple II / Macintosh / Atari ST / Commodore / IBM PC / Other Unofficial Ports
Designer(s): Brian Moriarty
Developer: Infocom

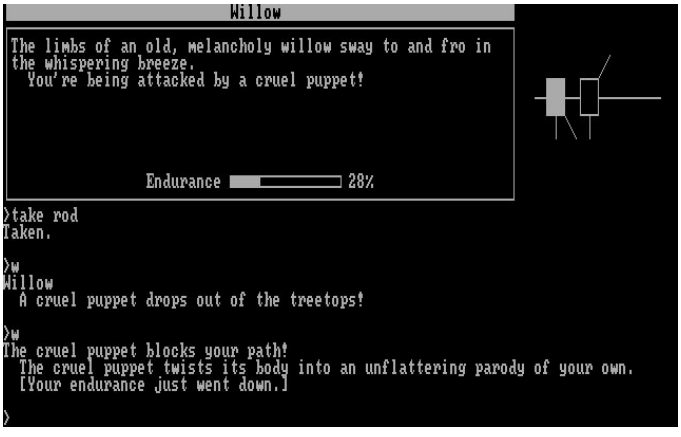
Beyond Zork was, at the time, a very unusual game for Infocom. First and foremost, it was one of their first games with graphics. It also took a different gameplay approach, combining puzzle

solving with RPG-style stats. Thankfully, the graphics used are very minimal, consisting of little more than a minimap, a stat window, the game text, and lines separating them into different compartments on the screen. You can also choose for the game to be in "color", but this really doesn't do anything besides change the background and text/graphic colors.

Upon starting the game, you are allowed to create a character, in which you invest points in six attributes: Endurance, Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence, Compassion, and Luck. You also get to name your character, and decide his or her gender. Unfortunately, these stats don't make the game more enjoyable. If anything, they feel designed to pad out the game more, there is no satisfaction in raising your stats, and because you don't "level up" in the traditional sense, you raise them through... what else? Obnoxious puzzles!

The story is thus: because of your character's actions at the end of *Spellbreaker*, Magic is failing and an age of Science is about to begin (Boo! Hiss!). In order to preserve what remains of Magic, it is decided that the Coconut of Quendor, a source of great magic, must be stolen from the Implementors and hidden in a safe place. This takes on a twist when the demonic Ur-Grue steals it for himself, requiring you to chase after him.

Of course, that's assuming you can get past areas with randomized maps, find a specific version of a randomly chosen item (you do it by restoring when the game doesn't like you), and so forth. This is the biggest problem with *Beyond Zork* – Infocom has taken all the most infuriating things about their previous games and found a way to make them even more irritating. If you thought the mazes in previous *Zork* games were unfair, imagine a maze where the layout is different every time you play! Imagine that you find an item that you think would be helpful, only to find that the game decided to play it sneaky and give you a nearly useless version of it and now you have to reload a save and try again, and again, and again...



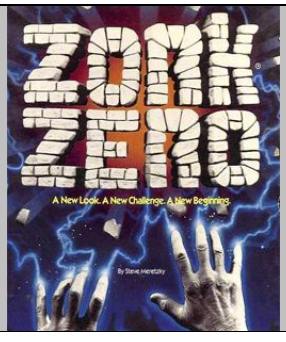
The interface in Beyond Zork is broken down into a few different sections.

It also doesn't help much that your stats are usually raised by extremely obscure actions, like improving your dexterity by squeezing a patch of moss, waiting until your fingers start to itch, and then looking at them. While many Infocom games could get quite obtuse, this one really seems like they were just trying to sell Invisiclues booklets.

All the *Zork* games so far have had some trouble with ridiculous puzzle design, but this one takes the cake. Some are amusingly clever, like the bridge based on Zeno's dichotomy paradox, where each step will take you halfway across the remaining distance, resulting in a number that gets infinitely small, making it impossible to cross through normal means. However, almost every puzzle has some frustrating element, whether it be a lack of hints, convoluted design, or ridiculous solution. Case in point: you need to get a jewel from an idol (déjà vu!) This puzzle has several steps and requires a certain item that, of course, appears in a random location each game.

The jewel is in the mouth of the idol but because the idol has a seesaw effect, you tumble inside each time you try to get it. Luckily, there is a creature called a hungus living nearby that, if you have the book Lore and Legends of Quendor, which comes with the game, you can read about being very protective of its children. Threaten the baby, and its mom will chase you. Run to the idol and climb up. The mother hungus will follow and hold down the "seesaw" so you can grab the gem. Unfortunately, you fall inside the idol anyway, and in the process, you drop the gem, which is eaten by the mother hungus. Once you get out of the idol, you use a magic wand that teleports the mother hungus so the gem is outside of her, allowing you to get it. It's all a bit drawn out.

There are also many random monsters to kill, some being simple "hack and slash until dead" matters, others like the Dorn will make you want to slit your wrists, not because the way to kill them is ridiculous, but because they take way too long to kill. After discovering the Dorn's weakness, you have to first exploit it, attack the monster until it recovers, and repeat until it dies. But the biggest sin in this game is the writing, which is drop dead boring. All the earlier *Zork* games had a few of the same problems, but at least they were usually fun to read. *Beyond Zork* has little to no jokes, badly designed puzzles, frustrating gameplay, and is just simply not fun to play. You don't even get the correct response to "hello sailor".



Zork Zero

Initial Release Date: 1987
Platforms: Amiga / Apple II / Macintosh / IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Infocom

Zork Zero was the last *Zork* game to be made by Infocom, but thankfully, they went out with a bang. The story begins during the reign of the infamous King Dimwit Flathead the Excessive, who has often been referred to throughout the course of the series so far, but besides an Easter egg in *Zork III*, has never been seen in person. After building a ridiculously-sized statue, the great wizard Megaboz seeks revenge for his favorite grove of trees, which is now under the toes of said statue. He casts a spell that kills Dimwit and his eleven siblings, and threatens to obliterate the entire kingdom. The court magicians manage to stall the kingdom's destruction for 94 years, hopefully long enough for someone to figure out how to stop the curse, right?

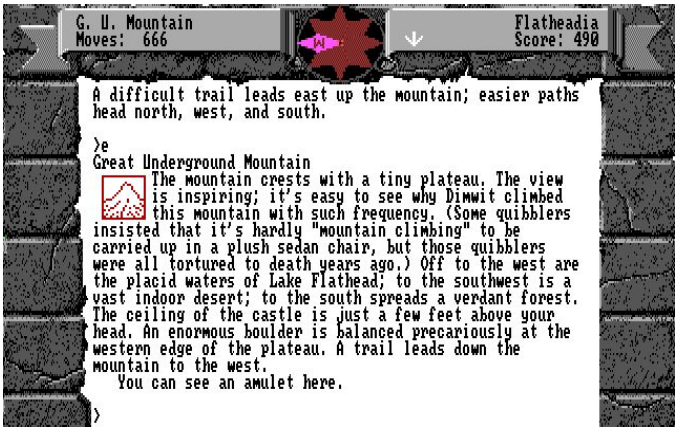
Well, it's now 94 years later, and within 24 hours, the kingdom will be destroyed. Luckily, you play the descendant of a servant who worked for King Dimwit who discovered the secret to stopping the curse, which you must do, of course.

Like the Wizard of Frobozz from *Zork II*, you are stalked by the Jester, who mostly exists to make your life difficult. He's constantly playing pranks that have the potential to really mess things up for you, and is also the source of many of the game's puzzles and riddles. Still, it's always satisfying when you get the better of him, and he actually has a dash of wit about him. Try going into a dark place with a dying torch and wait for it to go out. Still, what does he want? Why is he constantly testing you?

The first thing you'll notice when you boot up the game is that it's in full color. A beautiful (well, for the time) background surrounds the text and gives you an idea of where you are, but the game is still driven through text, although there is limited mouse support for certain puzzles. Purists may grumble, but don't worry, because the writing is definitely the star of the game.

After the boring prose of *Beyond Zork*, *Zork Zero* is a breath of fresh air. The writing is absolutely splendid.

Another thing of interest is that *Zork Zero* features a new parser system capable of understanding you better, which is always a good thing in these types of games. One example of this is when you come across several orbs that you will need later in the game. If you need to pick them all up, why bother typing "get [insert adjective here] orb" repeatedly when you can simply type "get orbs"? A great improvement, to be sure.



Zork Zero provides a few graphical flourishes.

However, this game is hard and long. Even though Infocom had stopped placing difficulty ratings on the box by this point, many *Zork* fans agree that this is one of the hardest games of the series. Thankfully, its difficulty comes from decent puzzle design, rather than design flaws. There are a few cop-outs, like some of the "graphical puzzles" being old classics like Towers of Hanoi and Peg Solitaire, but for the most part, they are decent.

Of course, being a computer game of the late eighties, there are moments when you're going to need the manual, but these moments are actually better integrated into the story than, say, *Spellbreaker*. At one point, you enter an office building to find an item hidden in one of the 1,600 rooms, and the place you need to go to is noted in the feelies packed in with the game. Another example is the secret way to enter the secret room in the castle which contains an essential item. Strangely, these feelies are items in the game, making it possible for your in-game character to potentially figure this stuff out on his own, so that the copy protection doesn't break the flow of the game's story as much.

One of the major highlights of *Zork Zero* is when you finally get to play Double Fanucci, a ridiculously complicated card game that has been referenced throughout the series, but is shown in action for the first time here. This is probably one of the more surreal moments, because the only thing you'll ever figure out about the rules is how to win. Still, it's a very interesting change of pace.

Another fun puzzle, believe it or not, is the construction maze. Yes, a maze that is actually fun. How is this possible? Well, first of all, there's a map in the manual. Second, you'll notice that some of the rooms are impossible to enter due to the fact that there are no paths leading to them. So how do you get over to them? Simple! You simply install a portable magic passageway! (One of the many fine products from FrobozzCo International.) Unfortunately, that will only get you so far – at a certain point, you'll be one room to the right and two rooms down from where you need to go, and you are out of magic passages. What do you do? Why, seek help from the chessboard knight! (You did find him, right?)

Zork Zero is an incredible game. It may be ridiculously hard to beat without a walkthrough, but the overall experience is totally worth it. It even has the best ending in the series so far. It has a few surprises, it wraps things up well, and it ties in perfectly with *Zork I*. It is also one of the better games in the series.

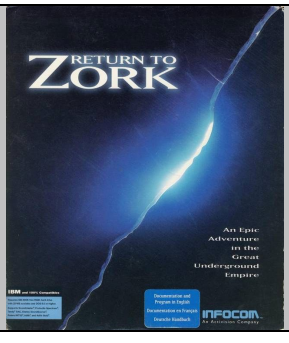
You Have Died: The End of Infocom

For awhile, it seemed like Infocom was on top of the world. Their games sold well, their net worth was in the millions, and they even turned down an offer to be purchased by Simon and Schuster, a large book publisher.

Sadly, by the late '80s, things started to go downhill. Infocom began losing money, computer graphics were becoming much more powerful, and a database software program that had been in the works since Infocom's early days, *Cornerstone*, flopped so drastically that it is sometimes sarcastically referred to as "Tombstone". It didn't help that Infocom was trying to go in two opposite directions at once: entertainment and business software. There were two separate divisions of the company working on each, and money wasn't coming in fast enough to support both, especially after a move to an expensive new office building in expectation of huge profits from *Cornerstone*.

Finally, Infocom allowed itself to be bought by Activision, a well known game company that started with Atari 2600 games and eventually moved into computers. It seemed at first like it would be a decent merger, but when the head of the board of Activision was replaced by a man against the acquisition of Infocom, he sued the company, believing it to have been too expensive to acquire, and forced them into a contract where they were to produce a certain number of games a year. Finally, Infocom as a subsidiary was eventually shut down. A few more games were released under an Infocom brand name, and then the name disappeared entirely.

It seemed like the fun and games were over, but suddenly, in 1993, with the birth of the CD-ROM era, the *Zork* series made its triumphant return. But with interactive fiction now dead commercially, *Zork* would have to evolve. The next game in the series would have to make a leap into the world of graphics.



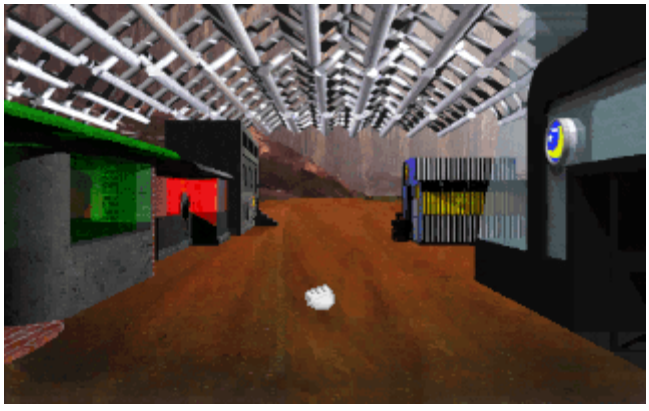
Return to Zork

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / FM-Towns / Macintosh / PC-FX / PlayStation / PC-98 / Sega Saturn
Designer(s): Doug Barnett
Developer: Activision

Return to Zork was the first game in the series in six years, and the increase in computer technology during that time shows in the game. It is also the first *Zork* game to be released on CD-ROM, and the new hardware was put to good use, as can be seen immediately upon starting up the game. It begins with a black screen, and some familiar text – the opening description of *Zork I*. Suddenly, a foreboding orchestral piece begins to play, and the image fades in to show us the infamous white house where it all began. The "camera", imitating a POV shot, moves from the back of the house to the front. The mailbox opens, revealing a crystal ball in which the image of a man appears, informing the player that they have won a sweepstakes. But before the man can continue, he suddenly notices something off-camera, reacts fearfully, and screams for help! The image then dissolves into a jaw-dropping (for the time) flyover of Quendor, the music

reaches a crescendo, and the credits begin to roll. For the time, it was quite a showcase for the new CD-ROM format, although it looks very pixelated and outdated by today's standards.

The story takes place centuries after any of the previous games (and even the games to come), to the point that some complain about it being too far removed from the world we've come to know and love. The IT&L Corporation (no relation to FrobozzCo) claims to have discovered the ruins of the Great Underground Empire under a place known as the Valley of the Sparrows. Unfortunately, this discovery seems to have awakened some ancient evil now threatening the land. People have begun having nightmares regularly, if they don't disappear entirely, and even whole buildings are starting to vanish! Of course, it's up to you to figure out what's going on and put a stop to it.



This is the land of Quendor? Looks a bit odd.

Of course, using a mouse with one or two buttons on a few menus doesn't allow the same level of interactivity and choices as typing does, but the game does try to be as interactive as possible. You can still die, though, so be careful and save often. The game is played entirely from the first person perspective. It is also controlled entirely with the mouse, and works very similarly to *Leather Goddesses of Phobos 2*. Despite these advancements, there are still a lot of concessions to the text adventure audience, at least when it comes to the interface. Whenever you use two objects together, there are usually numerous actions, some of them context sensitive, whereas any other game at the time would've been satisfied with an all-encompassing "use" command. It makes huge chunks of it seem redundant, because while you can do wacky stuff like throwing mice into boxes, as opposed to simply placing them inside, there's no real purpose behind. The text adventures worked the same way, but most of the good ones were kind enough to give clever retorts. *Return to Zork* does not.

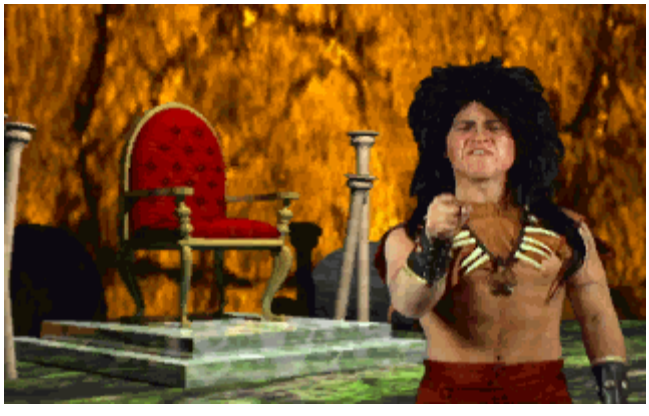
Still, with the amount of choices you can make throughout the game, it's really too bad that a lot of them are either completely superfluous, or worse, just traps to get you stuck. Take the very first screen of the game, for instance; you find a plant that you will need later in the game. The only problem is, there are numerous ways to get it (should you pull it out of the ground, or cut it, or so forth) and only one of them is correct. If you screw up, the plant dies. You can still win, but you'll have to do an incredibly obscure action to make another plant appear. It's almost like the designer knew that the "get plant" puzzle was obnoxious, and tried to make up for it by allowing you to still win if you did an even more obnoxious puzzle. Of course, this begs the question of why one should be obnoxious in the first place, especially at the very beginning of the game.

There's another problem; the Guardian of Zork. If you commit a crime, like killing or stealing, he penalizes you by confiscating all of your items, usually making the game impossible to win. (Unless of course you drop all of your items before he appears, in which case,

congratulations! You've outsmarted the game!) Now, this seems fair enough. Earlier *Zork* games didn't like you committing heinous acts (unless the game felt the victim deserved it, see: Thief in *Zork I*, Wizard in *Zork II*), but there's a small problem: The lack of consistency. See, apparently, it is not a crime to break into a store and steal money and tickets out of a cash register that you need to win (even though it obviously belongs to someone who would likely miss it), but it's not okay to steal a discarded brick in someone's yard. So, yeah... makes perfect sense!

Another problem is that the quality of the graphics and FMV sequences are inconsistent. When talking to some characters, you'll get a full motion video of them speaking. But most of time, you'll simply get a bitmap talking head, of similar image quality, flapping their lips with two frames of animation. This issue arises because *Return to Zork* was designed to be released on floppy disks, and they only shot a handful of scenes of FMV for the CD-ROM release. These irregularities apply to the rest of the visuals as well. When the graphics are good, they are really good, but sometimes objects will have weird, garish colors that just don't look right. At certain points, you will see an incredible CG video, showing you movement from Point A to Point B, similar to *The 7th Guest,* but they're often badly compressed and extremely pixellated.

Yet another problem lies in the fact that, in some cases, it just doesn't feel much like *Zork*. After spending years reading text, any visual adaptation is going to disappointing because it won't match the world you've built in your imagination. There's no narrative voice either, leaving the story to be conveyed entirely through the visuals and dialogue. It goes beyond these issues, of course, because most people didn't expect the Great Underground Empire to be filled with awkwardly colored buildings and notable character actors, like Jason Hervey, the older brother from *The Wonder Years*, dressed in an awful costume and purporting to be a "Troll King". Did they actually think this would work!? It's absurd to accept the idea that the troll in *Zork I* was just a guy in a funny outfit.



The awful live action video dates this game severely.

As such, you never really feel like you're in Quendor. Technically, you really aren't in the old Quendor, since so much time has passed. Still, it's strange to see the white house in the intro, and other famous *Zork* landmarks are rare. And despite some references to zorkmids and Flood Control Dam #3, it doesn't really match the realm as depicted in the manuals of the old games – there is neither a Flathead to be seen nor heard anywhere, nor any references to grues or even magic. These are only things hardcore *Zork* fans would have noticed, and most are disregarded, because *Return to Zork* isn't really aimed towards them. Some hardcore fans have even accused it of being inconsistent with the stories of the earlier games! At least the included Encyclopedia Frobozzica feelie ties in closer with the original series.

The original games gave you a sense of claustrophobia and loneliness that just doesn't come off in the early stretch of *Return to Zork*, where you spend a lot of time outside and even talking

to a lot of people. Still, the conversations have an interesting interactivity system, in which you get to choose how to react to what people are saying to you, but in the older *Zork* games, there was hardly anyone to talk to. This gave a real sense that you were on your own, which really adds to the atmosphere.

Still, if there wasn't anyone to talk to, you couldn't very easily convey the silly sense of humor. They did get that part right, with lots of very goofy lines, like the drunkard Boos' brilliant delivery of, "Want some rye? Course you do!" Strangely enough, even though he says it every time you see him, it doesn't get as old as fast as you would think. So the characters, while occasionally embarrassing, are at least pretty amusing. And what it lacks in Zorkian history, it makes up for in spirit. It's certainly got a similar sense of humor, in that technically it's a standard fantasy adventure but there are a lot of strange characters and weird happenings. The main reason for this is that none of the original Infocom staff worked on it, leaving it to an entirely new team. They may have been fans of the old games enough to pay homage to them, but not enough to accurately recreate them.

Regardless of its ties with past games, the story also has some major issues with keeping track of its characters and plot. The assumed catalyst for your adventure, a man apparently being attacked and begging for help through your crystal ball, doesn't pay off until the very end of the game, and isn't even mentioned again until that point. You begin with a strange object called a Tele-orb, which allows you to communicate with the Wizard Trembyle. He provides background hints in the early sections, then sort of becomes irrelevant as you venture further. The story doesn't develop much over the course of the game, and comes across as confused, convoluted and disorganized in the end. Even the climax and ending are a huge letdown.

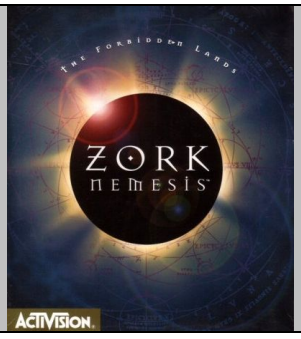
Of course, what would a *Zork* game be without at least one truly evil maze? *Return to Zork* has a doozy: The Bog. You are given a walking stick, which you must stick into the mud in front of you. If the stick sinks, you will die if you go in that direction, so the trick is to find the path through the swamp with the stick, but it's huge, with many dead ends. On top of that, you have to go through it twice! At least it has a simple layout, with no screens connecting in bizarre ways, but having to use the stick with every step quickly gets very annoying. The second maze isn't quite as bad – at least you have an item that can help you. The third maze, though, is pure evil.

The rest of the puzzles aren't too difficult. Yes, there are some unwinnable situations, and sometimes the numerous actions are overwhelming, but they aren't too obscure. A major point involves learning a chess-like game called Survivor, which is used to play the final battle. But why is there copy protection, even in the CD version? It just feels strange to be randomly asked by a character what one of the days of the week is called in Quendor. On top of all this, it's also quite a buggy product.

You might think that with all these problems that *Return to Zork* is a terrible game. Yes, it's plagued with problems from beginning to end, but the overall experience is actually fairly entertaining. But compared to what it could have been, *Return to Zork* is a relative disappointment and is ultimately mired in mediocrity.

While *Return to Zork* was only released on various computer platforms in North America and Europe, it found its way on to several home consoles in Japan, including the Sega Saturn, Sony PlayStation, and NEC PC-FX (the latter of which was mostly known for anime FMV games and little else). The PC-FX version suffers from some terrible sound compression, while the PlayStation version is the only one to span two CDs, offering the best video quality.

Return to Zork was the last game to bear the Infocom name, and it seemed to *Zork* fans that Activision had forgotten about the series. Three years passed with not a game to be seen. *Myst* was released, and quickly became a household name with its lush, beautiful pre-rendered images, intriguing puzzles, and simple, easy-to-learn gameplay. In some ways, it could be argued that *Myst* was the spiritual successor to *Zork*, although it is quite different in others.



Zork Nemesis: The Forbidden Lands

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Cecilia Barajas, Mark Long
Developer: Activision

Zork Nemesis, even though it takes place in Quendor, is in stark contrast to previous *Zork* games with its dark, somber tone, and because of this, is quite a polarizing game. Many fans criticized it for being such a departure from the *Zork* of old, while newcomers to the series praised its incredible graphics, clever puzzles, and gripping story.

As the story goes, four famous citizens of the Great Underground Empire have gone missing in the Forbidden Lands, where it is rumored that a curse as been placed by the evil being known only as Nemesis. You have been charged with finding the four people, together known as the Alchemists, and find out just what is going on.

The game was released on three CDs, and featured a unique "Z-Vision" interface which allows your viewpoint to rotate an entire 360 degrees, although you do not move around in real-time – you are still locked in to static nodes to move between, like *Myst*. The graphics are indeed high quality, evoking a strong atmosphere. While the general mood is indeed very dark, it is not entire devoid of fun – little in-jokes can still be found throughout the game by those with a keen eye, but it does not take away from the fact that you are in for a very different kind of *Zork* game. The one example everyone cites is the Asylum, where you must decapitate a corpse and stick its head in a machine to get it to tell you the combination to a safe, so it is arguable that perhaps Activision went a little too far with this one.



Zork Nemesis is certainly a much darker game than its predecessor.

When you first begin the game, you are treated to a spectacular cutscene that hints at the story to come, and when gameplay begins, you'll find that the interface is simple and intuitive, compared to the overly-complicated and confusing interface in *Return to Zork*. A left-click to go in the direction you click, or to interact with and pick up objects, and a right-click to toggle through your items. If you want to use an item, right-click until the item in question becomes

your cursor, and then left click the item on where you want to use it. The menu, where you save, restore, change game options, and quit, appears when you move the cursor to the top of the screen. It's that simple.

Like the previous games, it is possible to die if you're not careful, but you usually have a good idea of when this could be a possibility. Actually, death seems much rarer in this game than in previous ones, which is very nice. The puzzles are, for the most part, well designed and much more intuitive than those in certain previous *Zork* games. While a lot of them, especially in the early parts of the game, feel closer to *Myst* than *Zork* in spirit, things eventually pick up and we get more variation and story.

The dark atmosphere that many *Zork* fans have complained about actually really works in this case, because it really is quite creepy. It doesn't rely on "jump scares" like most horror games and movies, but instead tries to provide a constant state of unease that makes your skin crawl. The Asylum is particularly unnerving. It's not just the graphics, either – *Zork Nemesis* makes clever use of sound to disturb your psyche. As you wander through the barren, mostly lonely world, you will constantly hear noises in the background. What is causing them? Who knows, but the screams in the Asylum are terrifying. Any game can make you jump from being startled; it takes a special one to create true fear deep down. Part of the sense of unease comes from the mysterious letters and flashback cutscenes that only make you more concerned about what's really going on. Can you really trust the people you're supposed to be helping? There is one light-hearted location, though – the Music School/Concert Hall, with its look at the musical culture of Quendor, including popular instruments, which of course figure into a few puzzles.

A lot of hardcore fans have complained that *Zork Nemesis* deviates too far from previous *Zork*s, but this isn't really true. It's a nice change of pace that creates a larger, more cohesive world for Quendor, a place which likely has millions of stories to tell – would it really be interesting if every single one of those stories was a comedy? Activision should be applauded for attempting something different with the series. *Nemesis* is also better about tying in to previous *Zork* games than, say, *Return to Zork*. Besides, as previously mentioned, there are a few funny jokes to look out for if you are a fan of the series.



Zork: The Undiscovered Underground

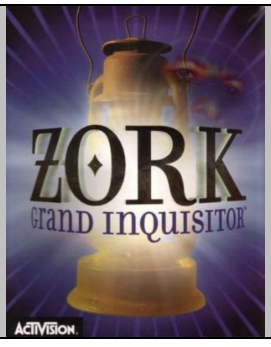
Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Marc Blank, Michael Berlyn
Developer: Marc Blank, Michael Berlyn

After the fan backlash and financial success from *Zork Nemesis*, it was decided to develop another *Zork* game right away, but this time it would be a comedy. During the production of *Zork Nemesis*, there was an attempt to create a small text adventure that would be available for free to promote the game, but unfortunately, the result of that idea was never released. However, with the next game, *Zork Grand Inquisitor*, it was decided to give the idea another shot. The release of *Zork: The Undiscovered Underground* is considered to not just be a call back to the salad days of *Zork,* or even to promote the newest game, but to also serve as an apology from Activision to Infocom fans for their mistreatment of the company. They actually even brought in former Infocom Implementors, Marc Blank and Mike Berlyn, to write and design the game. The result was a real treat for hardcore *Zork* fans.

Taking place shortly before *Zork Grand Inquisitor*, *The Undiscovered Underground* puts you in the shoes of a guard working for the Inquisitor himself, who has sent you on a mission to explore a recently excavated portion of the G.U.E. and see if there is anything of interest. Of course, being a *Zork* game, it's never that simple. You start your adventure with parodies of

classic *Zork* items; a brass lantern that doesn't work very well, and a cheap, plastic, elven sword that couldn't kill something if you paid it to. Clearly the Inquisitor has no qualms about putting his men in considerable danger. How is one supposed to keep from being eaten by grues if the lantern is always malfunctioning!? It's also possible that the crappy items are symbolism of the idea that *The Undiscovered Underground* could never match the classic magic of the original *Zork*, and is self-awarely admitting that the game itself is a cheap imitation. Still, the game is awesome in that classic *Zork* kind of way, so that explanation doesn't really fit.

Being a promotion for *Zork Grand Inquisitor*, the game is quite short compared to even the original *Zork I*, but so much effort was put into the writing that it matters not. The game is so much fun to read as well as play, possibly even more than most of the original games – clearly the original Implementors have not only retained their skills but in fact improved them. There are so many great lines and moments (including seeing a grue described for one of only a few times) that it is definitely worth the hour or so required to play it



Zork Grand Inquisitor

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Sara Margaret Stohl
Developer: Activision

The experience of *Zork Grand Inquisitor* begins before you even start up the game. While you are setting up the game, it proudly displays its Zorkish humor in the actual install program, walking you through the process with a brilliant hint of what's to come.

The titular Grand Inquisitor has taken over the land of Quendor, and because of this, life kinda sucks; magic has been banned, the GUE has been sealed off, and anyone caught defying the Inquisitor is punished by being put through a process known as "Totemization", which the game box kindly tells you is "a very bad thing". Obviously, being the good person that you are, you cannot allow this to continue. With the help of the Dungeon Master Dalboz (who speaks to you from your trusty brass lantern), you, an "Ageless, Faceless, Gender-Neutral, Culturally-Ambiguous Adventure Person" (this is a brilliant send-up to all those text adventures where your character has no identity and is nothing more than an avatar for yourself), must bring an end to the Grand Inquisitor's tyranny.

The game is hilariously funny from the beginning of the intro video, featuring plenty of great lines and ideas (especially from the loudspeakers placed everywhere). Even the death messages (yes, you can still die, even in this game) are well written, like the one where you enter a dark cave without a light and get eaten by grues, and the game pretty much responds with, "This is a *Zork* game! What did you expect to happen?" The great thing about these death messages is that when you die, the typical "Restore/Restart/Quit" menu shows a computer with the message written on the monitor in the style of the old *Zork* text adventures.

The game runs on an updated version of the Z-Vision engine, originally used in *Zork Nemesis*. Updates include a full inventory screen opened by right-clicking (instead of just cycling through your items one by one, like in *Nemesis*), and the ability to cast magic. There are new shortcut menus that allow you to instantly use an item or spell, which makes things easier than ever before. There are also options allowing you to better customize the panning of your viewpoint, just in case your computer is from the stone age. Besides these, it plays much like *Zork Nemesis*.



Grand Inquisitor looks similar to Nemesis, but the tone is much different.

There are many great characters to meet, like Antharia Jack, the Indiana Jones of Quendor; Y'Gael, the enchantress, complete with back-up singers; and of course, Mir Yannick, the Grand Inquisitor. All of them are great to watch in the FMV clips they appear in, even if sometimes their voices aren't what you'd expect for the character (Dalboz the Dungeon Master just doesn't sound right for the part). The jokes are top-notch, making fun of a lot of things that should be familiar to adventure game lovers. Antharia Jack complains about how unfairly difficult mazes are; Dalboz sarcastically acts like finding a subway token in a bucket lying at the bottom of a dried out well is par for the course (which it is, even though it's completely absurd on every level), and one of the instructions for citizens by the Inquisition is to "Save Often".

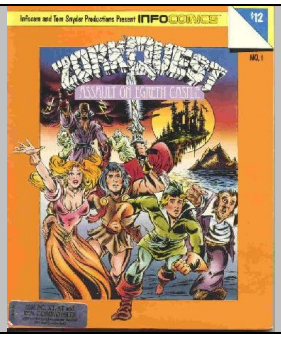
One great thing about this game is the fact that you get to visit several famous *Zork* landmarks, like the White House (which did appear briefly in *Return to Zork*'s opening cutscene), G.U.E. Tech, Flood Control Dam #3 (which you even get to blow up!), and of course, Port Foozle. The puzzles are well-designed, without being ridiculously fiendish... well, usually. In true *Zork* fashion, there are a few puzzles that are quite mean. Watch out for the Lottery Ticket Scratch-Off Maze, opening Yannick's locker at G.U.E. Tech, and a few others.

Probably the best part about it though, is how close in style to and how appreciative it is of the original games. *Zork Nemesis* had a few in-jokes related to the rest of the series, but *Grand Inquisitor* is absolutely loaded with them. It is quite obvious that the designers were huge fans of (or did a lot of research on) the original games by Infocom. It is an amazing love letter to them in that it is both highly respectful of the series, but incredibly memorable in its own right. Despite the fact that *Nemesis* was originally released on three CDs while *Grand Inquisitor* was released on two (except for the DVD version, which contained both games on a single DVD), *Grand Inquisitor* feels longer and more involved than *Nemesis*. It also has more locations, and more to do in each of them.

There are only a couple of complaints – one is that there are so many wonderful characters, but you never see enough of some of them. The Inquisitor is only seen in the intro and in a few cinemas near the end, for example, and Antharia Jack's appearances are similarly sparse. In fact, the story in general doesn't feel quite as involved as *Nemesis*, where you were always finding some strange clue as to what was going on. Here, you are once again, for the most part, stumbling around to find all the magic knick-knacks you need to win. Still, most adventure games feel this way, even as late as 1997, so it's hard to hold this problem against *Zork* in particular. In the end, these criticisms don't matter. The game has a climax and ending that more than makes up for the lack of in-game story, and is incredibly satisfying. In any case, it is most definitely the best of the series' graphic adventures. It's funny, engaging, clever, and most

important, amazingly fun both in the context of the series and on its own. *Zork: Grand Inquisitor* delivers with flying colors.

Miscellaneous Zork Titles / Spinoffs:



ZorkQuest: Assault on Egreth Castle

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: IBM PC / Commodore 64
Designer(s): Elizabeth Langosy
Developer: Tom Snyder Productions

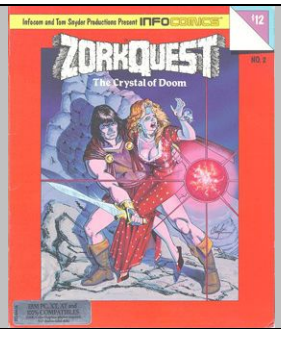
After Infocom's purchase by Activision, the new overlords started up a new line of products called "Infocomics". They aren't quite games because you don't actually control them – rather, a story unfolds automatically, with visuals on the top of the screen and text on the bottom. During certain points, you can change perspectives to a different character, allowing you to see different plot threads. They were released as budget products, with incredibly weak graphics that might actually be worse than the average early '80s text adventures. The PC releases are stuck with 4 color CGA, and while the Commodore 64 releases look better, the only thing that keeps them from being entirely embarrassing are some cool animation techniques. While some tied in with Infocom properties, most were made without involvement of the original teams. Only four were released: *Gamma Force in Pit of a Thousand Screams* was an original property, *Lane Mastodon vs. the Blubbermen* was loosely based off a character from the *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* manual, and the remaining two titles were both based on *Zork*, dubbed *ZorkQuest*.



Some of the artwork in the Infocomics games is good for a laugh.

The story of *ZorkQuest* largely focuses on four adventurers: dumpy merchant Gurthark, elderly wizard Frobwit, naive young lass Acia, and beefy scout Ryker. During their trip, they come across Egreth Castle, which is now controlled by the Evil Wizard Radnor. They defeat him, and that's pretty much the whole story. Even with the various routes to the end, you can probably see the whole thing in about half an hour.

The writing, as in all of the Infocomics, is very basic, and seemed to be aimed towards the pre-adolescent crowd, making it seem something like *Zork Jr.* Outside of a few references to *Zork* lore, it doesn't tie in with any of the previous games. There's not even much of a sense of humor about it – the funniest thing, other than the hilariously appalling graphics, is the scene where a group of night gaunts, under the control of Radnor, ransack the adventurers' goods, and one of them tries on a bra. The branching paths allows for at least one intriguing moment, where you can choose to follow one of the more intelligent night gaunts and learn of their plight beneath their cruel leader. Of course, he gets killed no matter what you do, but it's about the only part of the story that's even remotely interesting.



ZorkQuest: Crystal of Doom

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: IBM PC / Commodore 64
Designer(s): Elizabeth Langosy
Developer: Tom Snyder Productions

The second *ZorkQuest* picks up right where the last game left off. Radnor has been destroyed, but his soul is contained in a crystal ball unwittingly picked up by Gurthark. They continue their journey onward, but a young miscreant named Moog has stolen a book of powerful spells, and intends to release the Evil Wizard from his prison. And again, that's pretty much the whole story. Granted, it's a bit longer and more interesting than its predecessor – Gurthark ends up falling madly in love with an elven princess somehow, while Frobwit meets up with Slye, who is secretly in cahoots with Moog but begins to worry about her growing insanity. The story ends with Radnor's resurrection, with a promise of continuation in *ZorkQuest 3*, which never happened due to the commercial failure of the whole Infocomics line. No big loss, really.



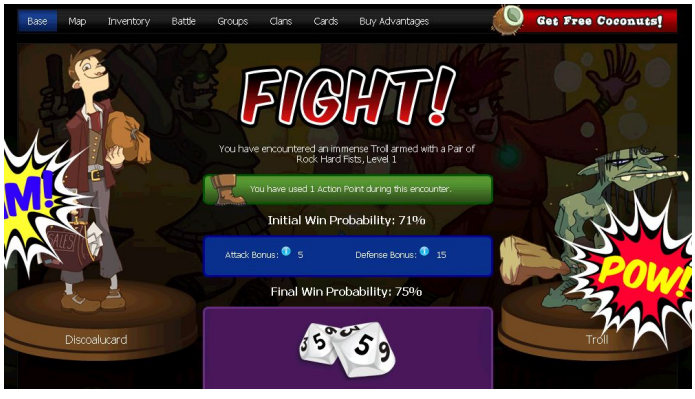
Legends of Zork

Initial Release Date: 2008
Platforms: Browser-based
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Jolt Online Gaming

Zork Grand Inquisitor was the last title in the series for over a decade, until Activision decided to resurrect the property as a PBB CMMORPG ("Persistent Browser Based Casual Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game"). It was an odd decision, to say the least.

As the story goes, FrobozzCo International has begun a massive layoff of its sales force. With nothing else to do, these former employees take on the mantle of adventurers, exploring the Great Underground Empire and finding great fortune. Really, though, this mostly just involves clicking on things and watching numbers go up. You can click on various different areas on the map, but there's no actual exploration – you just fight and fight and fight until you either exit or run out of health. Combat is entirely automated as you watch a random number

generator roll out your attacks, with small pictures of the combatants on opposite ends of the screen. When you return to base, you'll sell off your loot automatically, and then can buy new combat equipment. You also gain experience, which can then allow you to visit other areas. You can fight other human characters in the arena, and even join clans with other players too.



Fighting is extremely... what's the opposite of enthralling? Oh, right, boring. And that's the whole game.

Although *Legends of Zork* is technically free to play, it is not only supported by ads, but also by the nefarious business scheme known as the microtransaction. You're only allowed a certain number of actions in a day – a day meaning "one calendar day" in the real world – before you're forced to quit and come back after the clock has rolled over. Unless you buy a special item, that is, which can only be purchased by coconuts, which can (mostly) only be obtained by paying real money. At certain times you can also sign up for promotions with various advertising partners, if you want to avoid paying directly for things. Certain other items can also only be obtained by coconuts as well. It is incredibly stupid.

Granted, the designers paid some level of attention to *Zork* lore. You begin the game at the legendary white house, and the map of the Empire looks much as it should, with a number of familiar sounding locations. Your currency takes the form of zorkmids, and you can even find Double Fanucci cards, which enhance various skills, although sadly there's no game to play with them like *Zork Zero*. The character artwork is colorful and cartoony, with some resemblance to the web comic *Penny Arcade*, and there's a bit of steampunk influence in some of the art. While text is sparse, the descriptions, the FAQs, and even the welcome letter from the developers have the same tone as the original manuals. Clearly someone had their heart in the right place.

But who was this game even aimed towards? *Zork* fans will be appalled that it's a time wasting grindfest. The types of people who play these social games are unlikely to have heard of *Zork* to begin with. And everyone else would probably be better off playing the similar *Kingdom of Loathing*, which has a cheekier, more self-aware sense of humor that acknowledges that, yes, you are indeed totally wasting your time on something entirely pointless. At any rate, the whole thing was shut down in May 2011, so it's not possible to play anymore anyway.

Miscellaneous Zork Stuff

Avon Books published a number of books based on Infocom properties, most of them *Zork* related. These include *The Zork Chronicles* by George Alec Effinger, *Enchanter* and *The Lost City of Zork* by Robin W. Bailey, and *Wishbringer* by Craig Shaw Gardner. There are also four *Choose Your Own Adventure*-style books – *The Forces of Krill, The Malifestro Quest*, *The Cavern of Doom,* and *Conquest at Quendor*. These were all written by Steve Meretzky, a veteran Infocom Implementor

who also created *Zork Zero*, giving them a level of authenticity not felt by most other *Zork* spinoffs.

Parodies: Pork

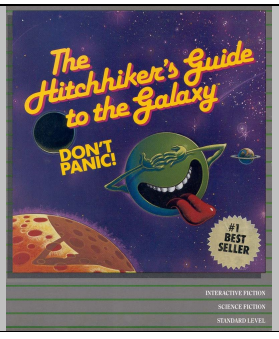
There were scores of amateur text adventures being developed in the '80s, and it's natural that some parodies would be among them. *Pork 1: The Great Underground Sewer System* and *Pork 2: The Gizzard of Showbiz* were two creations that poked fun at some of the more frustrating aspects of the *Zork* games while still showing some level of admiration. *Pork 1* starts off very similarly to the original, but familiar elements are altered in goofy ways. For example, the first troll you meet has been replaced by a giant sumo wrestler. *Pork 2* is a bit less overt in its parody but still has some similar aspects. Here, instead of a wizard you're terrorized by a gigantic chicken. The first was an anonymously created BASIC program later expanded by David Malmberg in 1988, while the second was developed by Bill Larkins and published in 1989.

The Final Score: Zork Today

Zork is not the greatest overall series in the history of gaming, but it's safe to say it is definitely one of the most important. As a franchise, it's had its share of ups and downs – some products were good, and some were amazingly awful, just like any prolific series. Some people may say that *Zork*'s time (as well as that of all adventure games) has come and gone, but the impact it had and its importance on the gaming world is still all around us, even to this day. The formula of text adventures may not be very prevalent anymore (at least on a large commercial level), but the ideas of the genre, like large, exciting worlds to explore, puzzles that push your mind to its limit, strange creatures, characters and villains, and many others, are not only still popular in today's games, but have proved to be everlastingly important to games and even stories in general.

Zork is also still remembered fondly today by those who have enjoyed it. For many, it was probably the first computer game they ever played, and may have even turned them on to them, and some are even trying to teach younger gamers about its importance to gaming as a whole today. In *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, there is an Easter egg that allows you to play the original *Zork I*, in all of its text-only glory, exciting old gamers and confusing younger ones to no end.

Malinche Entertainment is a company that sells new, modern text adventures in an attempt to reignite interest in the genre. Their fantasy franchise, *Pentari*, is heavily inspired by *Zork*, and they're not the only ones still interested in text adventures. There is a large online community of people who discuss, write and enjoy interactive fiction today, even holding competitions on who can write the best games. They have even made tools to make writing IF easier than ever before. There has even been a documentary made about the interactive fiction genre dubbed *Get Lamp*, which is absolutely essential watching for anyone interested in the subject.



The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Initial Release Date: 1984
Platforms: Amiga / Amstrad CPC / Apple II / Atari 8-bit /Atari ST /Browser / Commodore 128 / Commodore 64 / IBM PC / Macintosh / TI-99/4A / TRS-80
Designer(s): Douglas Adams, Steve Meretzky
Developer: Infocom

Beginning as a radio show in 1978 and eventually evolving into books, television shows and a Hollywood motion picture, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is one of the most well-known science fiction comedies in the English language. Written by British author Douglas Adams, the story focuses on a hapless everyman named Arthur Dent, who discovers that his friend Ford Prefect is actually an alien and escapes the destruction of Earth at the hands of a band of intergalactic bureaucrats. Their adventures continue as they meet Zaphod Beeblebrox, the two-headed president of the Universe; Trillian, his gal pal, and along with Arthur, one of the only surviving Earthlings; and Marvin, an incredibly intelligent but perpetually morose android. Together they explore the galaxy in the Heart of Gold, a ship powered by the Infinite Improbability Drive, which is more or less an excuse for the story to devolve into ludicrous situations at a moment's notice.

There are lot of reasons why the series is as well loved as it is, the least of which are the bizarre situations that our heroes find themselves in. Much of it has to do with Douglas Adams' writing style, which is stupefying brilliant at creating eminently quotable lines, many revolving around dry witticisms regarding the soul-crushing experience that is human existence, mixed with some immensely silly sci-fi technobabble. It also has to do with the eponymous Hitchhiker's Guide, an electronic device that holds all information in the known universe. It's basically a prototype to Wikipedia, except written by actual journalists instead of random crazy people. The Guide, at least in the radio and TV series, is essentially the narrator. Regardless of the medium, it also helpfully interjects information about the universe at large, mostly in the form of humorous tangents which may or may not go anywhere. The series has seen numerous permutations across different mediums, and while the setup and characters are the same, each offers a unique experience, with different storylines and such. This allowed for a perfect rationale to adapt the series into a text adventure, released by Infocom in 1984. Developed by wizard Implementor Steve Meretzky, and aided by Douglas Adams himself, the game puts the player in the shoes of Arthur Dent, and makes his insane journey yours.

The story begin as your house is about to be destroyed by a bulldozer. It's just as well, because the Earth is about to be similarly demolished anyway. After curing yourself of a hangover, the events play out mostly the same as they do in any other adaptation – you stop the bulldozer by lying down in front of it, you meet up with Ford for a few pints down at the local pub, and you escape the destruction of the planet by hitching a ride on the destructor fleet. The aliens blowing up Earth are known as Vogons, and they are none too keen on this. Once they find you, they eventually kick you off, where you're saved by the Heart of Gold and its crew. From here the story uniquely branches off from the various *Hitchhiker* adaptations and becomes slightly less restrictive, as you're no longer attempting to escape from dangerous scenarios.

While attempting to get the Infinite Improbability Drive working, you'll go through a number of different scenarios, from the perspective of the other characters in random order: as Arthur, you'll face off against the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal, a beast so stupid that, if you can't see it, it assumes that it can't see you and leaves you alone; as Trillian, you'll be at a party back on Earth; as Ford, you'll replay the opening segment from his perspective; as

Zaphod, you'll hijack the Heart of Gold; and again as Arthur, as you emerge in the middle of a tiny intergalactic war. After properly getting the ship working (and getting a decent cup of tea), you'll eventually end up inside a of sperm whale, which is suspended in the stratosphere and plummeting towards the ground, before finally making it to the end of the game. The story finishes as the group sets foot on the planet of Magrathea, which is about 2/3rds of the way through the first book, and two episodes into the TV and radio series.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy game is in a weird spot, because very little of that will make any sense to someone who's not already familiar with it, and many puzzles require at least some foreknowledge of the events. The Guide can be referenced for useful (and, at times, essential) information, though that's not always enough. But if you follow the book/radio/TV show too literally, you'll get screwed over with consistency. For example, *Hitchhiker* fans know that towels are one of the most useful and important items in the universe. When you first meet Ford and he offers you a towel, one would assume that you should take it. But don't! It's a trap, because if you do, he'll decide to walk off, leaving you to die. If you pass this part correctly, you'll end up on a trip to the pub for a few beers (as a muscle relaxant for the teleportation process), and you're supposed to buy a cheese sandwich and feed it to the dog outside. If you don't, it will eat a microscopic meet of invading aliens and screw you up near the end the game. (To be fair, you can fix this when you replay the segment from Ford's view, but it's still really strange.)

And then there's the legendary Babel fish puzzle. The Babel fish is a curious little creature, a tiny little fish which is inserted directly into one's ear and allows one to immediately understand any language in the universe ever. When you board the Vogon ship, they'll eventually capture you and subject you to the terrors of their poetry (the third worst poetry in the universe and an action equivalent to torture), before tossing you out the airlock. You cannot avoid this. There is, however, a case containing a device that will signal your rescue, but it is locked, and can only be opened by a secret keyword, which also happens to be one of the lines of the Vogon poem. You need the Babel fish to translate it – luckily, there happens to be a dispenser nearby.

It is not as simple as taking one, though, as they do in the book/TV series/radio drama. The machine has a button that, when pushed, will send a Babel fish flying through the air and into hole in the wall. You need to hang your gown on a hook to block it, but then it falls into a drain right beneath. You then need the block the drain, but then a cleaning robot will sweep it up, who then leaves through a small panel. You can block the panel and the robot will toss the fish into the air, where it is then captured by a second cleaning robot, which also needs to be dealt with. If you've properly set up everything, then the fish, when dispensed, will bounce off the contraptions you've set up and wind up flying into your ear. This is the sort of puzzle that would have been almost reasonable if the room was rendered with graphics. But when communicated entirely in text, one needs to picture the visuals of the entire situation, which isn't terribly easy to do. The situation is exacerbated because the machine has limited fish – dispense too many of them, and it will run out, forcing you to reload a saved game. Because repeatedly dispensing fish is required in order to see where it bounces, it's actually impossible to figure out this puzzle on the first go.

Dead ends are practically everywhere, along with numerous ways to get yourself killed. These are all in good fun though, and many are quite entertaining. If you let your house get knocked down before you reach the pub, a stray brick will knock you in the head, killing you instantly. You still have control over the text parser, although you'll be told "stay out of this, you're dead!" as it continues to describe the process of rigor mortis. Most other deaths go on similar, playful tangents.

Both Adams and Meretzky seemed to love playing pranks, which goes beyond the obtuse puzzles and wacky death scenes. The narrator will occasionally lie and screw with the player, telling them of an exit in one direction where none exists. When trying to enter the engine room in the Heart of Gold, it will refuse to let you in, insisting that there's no point to go in there.

After much persistence, it will let you enter, only to tell you that it's empty. Except that it isn't – again, after more inquisitions, it will finally relent and describe the room. When you awaken at the beginning, it lists "splitting headache" as an inventory item. It also lists "no tea", a completely baffling classification, since you're technically holding an abstract concept. (This must be dealt with later in the game, when you find some tea. However, you can't have "tea" and "no tea" at the same time, until you literally enter your own brain and remove your common sense.)There are numerous other fun things throughout too. After a certain amount of time, if you type in something the interpreter doesn't understand, these words end up falling through a black hole and end up in a different part of the galaxy, inadvertently bringing about a bloody war between two civilizations. It's a joke from other versions of the story, reworked for the interactive fiction medium.

And so, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* occupies a contradictory state on the annals of computer gaming history. It's full of incredibly frustrating situations explicitly designed to infuriate you, yet they're so intensely creative that it's impossible to not admire it. It is also ridiculously funny, which is only why all of its transgressions are even remotely forgivable.



The BBC web version has some graphics and other niceties.

After its original 1984 publication, the game was re-released in 1987 using an improved interpreter with a hint function. It can also be played online in various forms, although most of these are simply browser-based ports of the original game. However, in 2004, the BBC website put up an enhanced version of the game with added visuals. It has graphical representations of all of your inventory items, a compass which notes all exits, and of course, a central display which shows the room you're in. The graphics were done by Rod Lord, who had done the Guide illustrations in the television series twenty years earlier. They are not particularly high tech, obviously, and don't add a whole lot, but at least they're somewhat consistent with the look and feel that fans have associated with the series. There are two different versions on the website, both of which mostly use Lord's visuals, although the rest were supplied by various contest winners. The game is played entirely online, and it keeps a copy of the saved game on the web side servers. Hilariously, if your browser loses connection for too long a period of time, it will say "Don't Panic!", the slogan for the series. Ironic, then, that losing your connection is the same as being killed, because your progress isn't saved, and you need to restore a prior save game, giving some damn good reason to panic.

In 2010, two dedicated fans, James Spados and Kevin Hanley, remade *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* as a point-and-click graphical adventure using Adventure Game Studio. Naturally, purists will dismiss it outright, although those will give it a fair shot will find a number of pros and cons. It was primarily made for those with an aversion to text adventures. There's also an

easy mode which loosens some of the inventory restrictions. It also will stop you from getting into dead end situations. These actual puzzles aren't removed, though, as instead it will just kill you right after you mess something up, seemingly for no reason, unless you're familiar with the original game. The interface does make it much easier to browse the Guide's database, and also lets you type in search queries to find hidden stuff. Of course, without the text input, it ends up ruining some of the jokes, although at least the Babel fish puzzle makes a little bit more sense. It also looks remarkably ugly, even for an indie adventure game. It's not an altogether terrible remake, especially considering that it's free, but outside of making it more approachable, it certainly does nothing to make the text adventure obsolete.



The fan-made remake looks terrible, although otherwise it integrates the story pretty well.

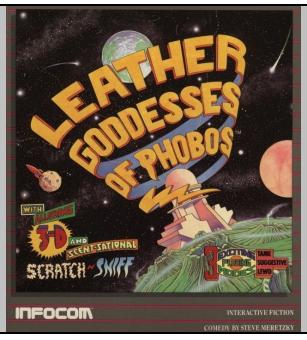
In spite of its legendary status as one of Infocom's most difficult games, it was the company's second best selling product after *Zork*, and a sequel was eventually planned. *Milliways: The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (tying in with the second novel) was put into preproduction, but a number of factors, including Adams' busy schedule and propensity for missing deadlines, kept it from getting underway. The early designs show that the game would continue through the events on Magrathea, on to the Restaurant at the End of the Universe, and end up back on Earth, covering the rest the second book, and the first radio/TV series

Rip-offs

Before Infocom published *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* game, an unofficial adaptation was made for Commodore computers under the name *HitchHiker-64*. Written by Bob Chappell and published by SuperSoft, it's an incredibly simplistic treasure hunt with a strict two word parser and sparse writing. The goal is to hunt down five artifacts and drop them at the inn at the beginning of the game. Although you are not specifically Arthur Dent, like the Infocom game, you will run into familiar characters and items, like the infamous Pangalactic Gargleblaster drink. In addition to the British village on Earth, you also get to visit Betelgeuse, Ford's home world, as well as Kakrafoon, a planet which wasn't even mentioned until the second book.

Obviously this was copyright infringement, though, so eventually the game was recalled. However, it was renamed *Cosmic Capers* and redistributed, this time with all of the offending references changed. Sure, Vogons are now Verrucans, and the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal is now the Barbaric Binge Beast of Bongo, but they're so transparent that it's easy to see what they originally were. Like most really early text adventures that weren't made by Infocom, it's not really a good game by any standards, although it remains an interesting bit of trivia for fans.

Leather Goddesses of Phobos



Leather Goddesses of Phobos

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: IBM PC / Atari 8-bit / Amiga / Apple II / Apple Macintosh / Atari ST, Commodore 64
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Infocom

One of Infocom's most popular text adventures, *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* (often shortened as *LGOP*) began as a joke title that eventually morphed into its own game, and just happens to be one of the company's funniest. As an innocent earthling in a small bar in Upper Sandusky, Ohio in 1938, you are abducted by the (apparently) evil Leather Goddesses of Phobos, who wish to take over the Earth and use it as their own pleasure dome. Despite this being a not-so-bad fate, you are tasked with stopping them.

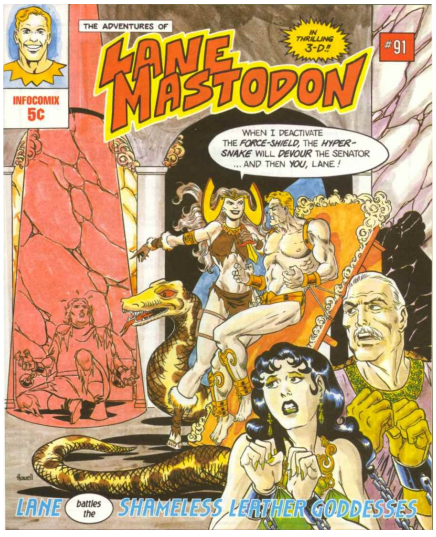
The game is unique in that it offers the ability to play as a male or female. However, your gender is not explicitly chosen, but is rather determined for you depending on which bathroom you enter at the beginning of the game. The differences between playing as a male or female are minimal, as the choice mostly changes a bit of dialogue and determines the gender of certain other characters – your companion, Trent or Tiffany, will be the same sex as the player, while the various potential sexual conquests will always be the opposite gender. A modern view would criticize this for forcing heterosexuality, but the fact that it even tries to accommodate female gamers at all already puts it several steps ahead of the adventure game pack.

Your ultimate goal is to construct a Super-Duper Anti-Leather Goddesses of Phobos Attack Machine, a concoction haphazardly advised by your partner, but naturally, they don't have any of the necessary tools. These include a rubber hose, a picture of Douglas Fairbanks (or Jean Harlow), some cotton balls, a blender, an eighty-two degree angle, a headlight from a 1933 Ford, a white mouse, and a Cleveland phone book. After escaping from prison with your partner, your quest involves exploring the jungles of Venus, the canals of Mars, and the alleys of Cleveland to find each of these incredibly arbitrary artifacts.

Connecting each of these disparate locations are black circles, which act as portals between the areas. As such, the game isn't entirely linear, and allows you to explore the bizarre world which Steve Meretzky created, before the final confrontation with the Goddesses. There are a few possible dead end situations, and while the black holes are technically one-way, you can keep exploring and finding new ones, which will eventually loop you back to a previous location. The worst of the puzzles is a maze which, despite being entirely mapped out with a document enclosed in the packaging, requires that you take specific actions every few turns or else some baddie will screw you over.

The packaging includes a comic book dubbed *The Adventures of Lane Mastodon: Lane Battles the Shameless Leather Goddesses,* a kitschy look at the battles against the Leather Goddesses in the distant year of 1988. The original release has this comic in 3D and includes a pair of 3D glasses. It's a fun little read, and also provides a few necessary hints to beat the game. However, it might give the impression that the actual game is one huge *Buck Rogers* parody, when it really isn't. There are at least a few references to goofy '50s sci-fi, like a situation involving a mad scientist sticking you in the body of a gorilla, but it's much more of a random screwball sci-fi comedy than anything else.

In one of the castles on Mars, you learn of the horribly tragic story of King Mitre – similar to King Midas, except when he touches of people, they turn into forty-five degree angles. Throughout the course of the game, your companion will die in increasingly ridiculous manners, only to show up unscratched shortly thereafter with brief, increasingly far-fetched stories behind his/her continued existence. One of the items you get is a machine called a "Tee Remover", which removes the "T"s from any item you have. (For fun, try turning the rabbit into a rabbi.) Much of the text is written with the wit typical of Infocom (and famed Implementor Steve Meretzky in particular), either in amusingly understated ways ("You feel uneasy as the mad scientist locks the door behind you and dissolves the key in a vat of acid.") or incredibly silly ones (upon returning an opponent's sword after knocking it out of their hands: "As Thorbala accepts the sword, she realizes that such a gesture is the final proof that you are the good guy, and therefore she hasn't got a chance of winning. Being a practical person, Thorbala saves both of you a lot of time and aggravation by goring herself on her own blade.")



The Lane Mastodon comic book is all kinds of intentionally kitsch.

But the most novel aspect is the way *LGOP* treats its more "mature" elements. There are three different levels of raciness – Tame, Suggestive and Lewd. The manual equates these to the movie ratings G, PG, and R, but given the lack of pictures, even the Lewd level isn't all that explicit, although the writing is substantially better than Sierra's *Softporn Adventure*. But it's worth it to save the game before any randy encounters, then reload and switch to Tame mode, just to see how the game handles them. During your first run-in with a harem, instead of letting you get down and dirty in a paragraph of relatively ribald prose, it provokes you into having a discussion with your potential partner about the merits of Jules Verne. The parser will occasionally feign ignorance, innocently proclaiming that it "doesn't know the F-word" if you try anything. Given all of the warnings in the intro text about potentially offending the Moral Majority, it's not nearly as randy as it wants to be, at least by modern standards, but it is pretty damn funny. This same basic idea was also implemented in Legend Entertainment's *Spellcasting* series, also designed and written by Meretzky.

A number of other gimmicks round out the feature list. In addition to the comic, the box also includes a scratch and sniff card – at various portions of the game, it'll prompt you to take it out and have a whiff. These smells are thankfully not too offensive, as they include pizza, chocolate, perfume, garlic, and, of course, leather. *LGOP* does use the same Boss Key function as *Leisure Suit Larry*, which will bring up a screen that looks like *Cornerstone*, Infocom's database

software. Of course, the data elements look slightly suspicious upon close examination, like inflatable milkmen and peanut butter spatulas. And in a move which was undoubtedly designed to infuriate text adventure veterans, each task gives a randomized amount of points, and the game continually changes the maximum score, refusing to give the player any real sense of numerical progress.

It's an innovative, silly and weird little game, and while its closing moments promised a sequel, it didn't show up for another six years, and disappointed more or less everyone.



Leather Goddesses of Phobos 2: Gas Pump Girls Meet the Pulsating Inconvenience from Planet X!

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Activision

After the purchase of Infocom by Activision, text adventure development slowed to a crawl before dying completely. Legend Entertainment picked up the slack for a while, but a number of graphic adventures were still released by Activision, using the Infocom label. Most of these were *Zork* related, but they also managed to release a sequel to *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*. Relegated to obscurity, this second game, subtitled *Gas Pump Girls Meet the Pulsating Inconvenience from Planet X!* (complete with exclamation point) is a first person icon-based game with scanned, hand-drawn graphics, similar to Dynamix's *Rise of the Dragon*. Like its text-based predecessor, it relies heavily on homages to '50s movies, which are more fully realized here due to the sound and visuals, but it ends up faltering in a number of other unfortunate ways.



There are copious amounts of mammaries in this game, as Barth describes them.

The year is 1958, and scientists have discovered a new planet on the edge of our solar system – the mysterious Planet X. Unfortunately, it's also been subject to invasion by the ravenous Leather Goddesses, having suffered a bit of humiliation after their defeat in the last game. One of its inhabitants, a little green monstrosity with eyestalks and tentacles named Barth, flees into space, but crash lands on Earth in the sleepy town of Atom City, Nevada. Earth is

next on the Leather Goddesses' subjection list, so two earthlings must team up with the ugly little creature and save the planet once again.

The game offers the choice of three characters: Zeke and Lydia, the two earthlings, and Barth, the alien. Zeke and Lydia function as the male/female roles like in the first game – their quests are more or less identical, with some minor differences in dialogue. Their main goal is to sneak into the local military base and find some way to steal a radioactive isotope. Then, you team up with Barth for some brief jaunts to Planet X and Phobos, whose segments are so short and easy that they feel like cutscenes. Then the game's over. As Barth, you need to explore the town to find eight different objects – weird stuff like billiard balls and such – to fix your ship; afterward, the later portion plays out the same way as with the humans.



To defeat the Leather Goddesses, you just sit and listen to them. That's it.

The whole experience gleefully rolls around in references to cheesy '50s sci-fi, far more so than its predecessor – you can visibly see the strings on the planetary models – and the characters run the gamut of stock tropes and homages. Lydia's little brother is an excitable nerd with freckles, taped glasses, and copious amounts of conveniently useful scientific knowledge. Her father is a renowned wheelchair-bound scientist with a number of bizarre gadgets in his basement. The town sheriff is basically Barney Fife. There are tons of more explicit references too, many involving *Dr. Strangelove* – the sign outside of the General's house says "No Preverts" and one of the computer terminals speaks of "purity of essence". But while there's a lot of genuine enthusiasm for the subject material, it's no replacement for quality writing, which is in curiously short supply. Simply put, the game just isn't very funny. Sure, the name of the movie in the theater is *It Came on the Desert*, and the road through the town is the not-so-hilarious Route 69 – but that's about as witty as the game gets.

Of course, it doesn't help that the quest is bafflingly short. The town of Atom City is fairly expansive, with a number of locations – a bar, a diner, a whorehouse, a movie theater, and so forth – but there's nothing to do in most of them except maybe grab an essential item and trade some inconsequential dialogue with the inhabitants. Most of them barely have half a dozen lines, leaving them largely as caricatures rather than characters. It's oddly disappointing that the eponymous Gas Pump Girls have no actual bearing on the plot and only stand around looking pretty. The multiple player characters were supposed to improve replayability, but it's still not enough, as you can play through all three paths in maybe two or three hours, tops.

Like the first game, one of the big draws is the purported "naughtiness". As Zeke or Lydia, you can hook up with certain members of the opposite gender by talking to them once, which will then reveal a "Screw" icon. This will play a brief video of suggestive black and white stock footage – trains going into tunnels, missiles being launched, etc. – and then things continue as normal. You can do it as many times as you want, but it has no real effect in the relationship

between Zeke and Lydia, who, strangely enough, cannot hook up with each other at any point. Other than some scant clothing, ample cleavages and noticeably perky nipples, there's no real nudity either, leaving the whole feature as little more than near-meaningless sight gags that make *Leisure Suit Larry* seem intelligent by comparison. There are no differing maturity levels here either, although purportedly what was released was toned down a bit from its original drafts.

Beyond this silliness, *LGOP2* is notable for featuring fully-voiced dialogue. This was done in the past on a few occasions through speech synthesizers, but the voices here are all digitized actors and actresses. This was before the proliferation of CD-ROM, so the game comes on seventeen disks and takes up 14 MB of hard disk space, roughly twice the amount of similar games of the time. It's painful to listen to, given that it's incredibly compressed, and the acting is predictably amateur. And most of the exposition is revealed through Barth, who has the most aggravating voice of all. It seems like a waste that all of these resources went into the voice acting, seemingly at the expense of the rest of the game.

The manual makes note of evil agents that steal games and release them before they're finished, a self-effacing admission that, yeah, clearly this game is incomplete. If the game was substantially longer, or the locations and characters were more fleshed out, perhaps on the scale of the original, then this might've been a pretty good game, but instead it stands as evidence of a text adventure that couldn't properly make the transition to a new age.



Lane Mastodon vs. The Blubbermen

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: Commodore 64 / IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Tom Snyder Productions

By 1988, text adventures were on their way out. Infocom kept hacking it at, but their overlords at Activision realized they needed to try a different route. Instead of developing graphic adventures, though, their first idea was to create a new type of product they called "Infocomics". They were not actually games, but rather animated stories with minimal player interaction, being cheap to develop and released at budget prices.

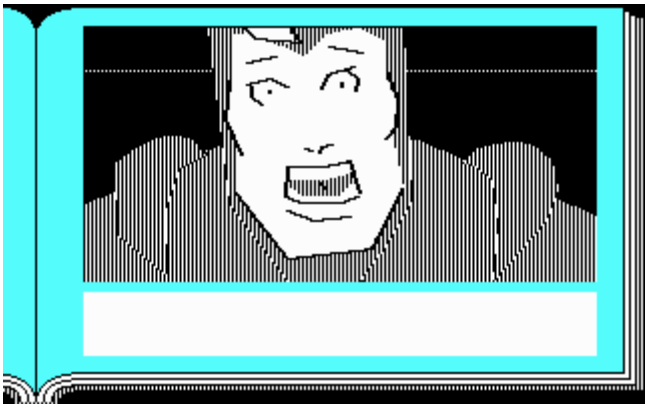


The quality of the illustrations is lacking, to be blunt.

The releases were met with equal amounts of apathy from consumers and derision from critics, and as such, there were only four released. Two were based off *Zork*, one (*Gamma Force*) was based on an original property, and one was based on Lane Mastodon, the '50s sci-fi TV serial homage featured in the comic book included with *LGOP*. They were not actually developed by Infocom, but instead outsourced to a group called Tom Snyder Productions, which may explain their terrible quality. Beyond sharing the Lane Mastodon character, there is nothing else to connect this game to the *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* series.

As the story begins, random animals are being enlarged to gigantic proportions by a mysterious ray from space, causing mayhem around all of the planet's landmarks. The perpetrators are the nefarious Blubbermen – fat, shape shifting monstrosities with a taste for world domination. The only one who can stop them is Lane Mastodon, who's out on vacation and stranded in the middle of nowhere. After running into two kids on a seemingly derelict vessel – the genius 13-year old boy Lambert Edison and his attractive older sister Ivory – the trio returns to Earth to face off in a climactic duel against the treacherous Blubbermen.

So, for the most part, all you do is sit back and watch the story unfold. The only interaction comes when you can choose to follow the plot threads of different characters. Watching all of these divergences is necessary to fully understand the story, so at any time you can choose to fast forward or rewind, skipping stuff you've already seen or backing up to choose a different branch.



I'd look this terrified if I were in this game, too.

It's an interesting idea, but for all of the grandstanding about creating a new form of media, it completely falters because it looks awful. Developed for the Commodore 64 and CGA-era IBM PCs, the artwork is abysmally simplistic, looking pathetic compared to Sierra's AGI games, which, by 1988, were pretty dated themselves. There's some cool scaling and panning trickery, and occasionally bits of animation, so you're not just watching static frames, but that doesn't excuse how incredibly sketchy it all looks. The IBM PC version has a higher resolution than the Commodore 64 version, but the latter has better coloring. To top it off, the writing is terrible. It's supposed to be a cheesy comic, but it comes off more like a kindergartener's picture book. Meretzky was apparently involved in the production, but the text shows none of his wit. Its humor is also pretty dull, other than a few amusing allusions – Lambert wields a sonic hammer, a take on *Doctor Who*'s Sonic Screwdriver, and there are a few fourth wall breakages which show the story being viewed by a pair of Siskel & Ebert caricatures. But it's a far, far cry from real Infocom games, and its reputation as a disaster is completely justified.

ICOM MacVentures

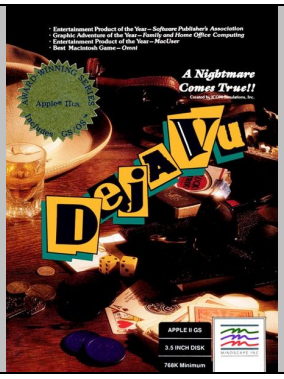
The text adventure was one of video gaming's earliest genres, starting with *Colossal Cave*, eventually moving on to the birth of Infocom and *Zork*, then to Sierra and *Mystery House*, and even further. While many computer users were enamored with the sense of freedom they provided, by nature, they could only target a fairly small audience. The average person, however interested they may be in the subject matter, is going to get hung up in one way or another, whether it be the frustration that comes in struggling with a poor parser, or the lack of typing skills, much less dealing with the stark-to-nonexistent visuals they provide. Early computers in general were very intimidating, especially IBM PCs, relying on a dark, unfriendly screen with the arcane DOS interface.

Usability was a huge factor with the introduction of the Apple Macintosh in 1984, which not only implemented a unique visual operating system, but also popularized the means to navigate it – the mouse. Not only did this make boring tasks like word processing or spreadsheet creation much easier, but it also opened up a whole new avenue for gaming, especially when it came to evolving the text adventure. And thus were born the MacVentures.

Developed by ICOM Simulations, who had previously developed other applications for the Macintosh, the MacVentures games were completely integrated into the Macintosh window interface, and were navigated entirely using the mouse. Fundamentally, they're written and structured exactly the same way as a typical text adventure, but the new interface makes playing them much breezier. When their first title, *Déjà Vu*, was released in 1985, graphics were not new to adventure games, but they let the player directly interact with the visuals, clicking to open doors or travel between locations, or picking up and dropping items by dragging them with the cursor. Although most actions are context sensitive, a series of commands at the top of the screen can be used for other commands, including hitting objects or consuming items. The graphics inhabit a small window in the middle of the screen, with another window for inventory, the text description window at the bottom, a box with all possible exits, and an extra icon on the right side to allow the player to use items on their character. Although inventory space is limited, and can indeed get a bit cluttered, certain items can also be opened and used to store other items, opening up a new window for each. You can, for example, keep track of a plethora of coins simply by sticking them all in your wallet.

Apart from the great innovations in popularizing a fully point-and click-based interface, the MacVentures are devastatingly well written, on par with even Infocom's better games. Although each of the four games has a fairly serious plotline, the second person voice always has a vaguely snide sense of humor, whether it comes from the dry observation of the various locales or the snarky tone it takes whenever you get killed. The MacVentures grew a reputation for all of the elaborate ways in which your character could be disposed of, often described in a grisly, darkly humorous tone. Some elements have not aged particularly well – many death scenes are quite sudden and force a reloading of an earlier saved game, and all of them have some kind of built-in time limit, usually to counteract the fact that they're all pretty short.

There are four games total in the MacVenture line: *Déjà Vu*, *Uninvited*, *Shadowgate*, and *Déjà Vu II: Lost in Las Vegas*. Like many computer games at the time, they were ported to competing platforms with various degrees of success, although obviously under different labels, like AmigaVentures, PCVentures, and WinVentures. Most of their lasting popularity came with their ports to the Nintendo Entertainment System, which, despite some alterations made due to the limitations of the console, managed to maintain the spirit of its computer forbearers remarkably well. *Shadowgate* was the most popular of all of these, having been the first released on the platform in North America, and has earned a place in the hall of classic NES titles. In response, ICOM continued the line with two more sequels for the Turbografx-16 and Nintendo 64, although neither bore much resemblance to the original game.



Déjà Vu: A Nightmare Comes True!!

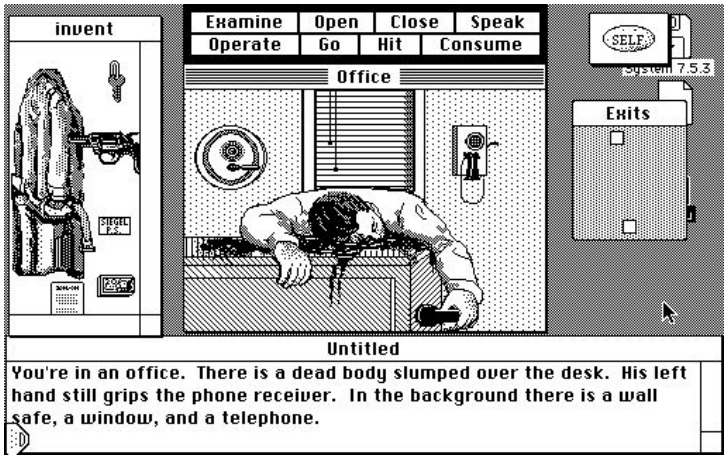
Initial Release Date: 1985
Platforms: Macintosh / Commodore 64 / Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC / Apple IIGS / NES / Windows / Game Boy Color / PocketPC
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: ICOM Simulations

You are waking from a stupor that feels like a chronic hangover after a week in Vegas. There is a throbbing bump on the back of your head, big enough to make your hat size look like an Olympic record. You notice your right palm is covered with dried blood, but you neither see nor feel any open wounds on your body. You see yourself reflected in the mirror. The face stares back at you as though it belonged to a stranger. You realize with horror that you can't remember who you are!

ICOM's inaugural game pulls the oldest trick in the book – amnesia – as a way of driving forward the story. Although terribly overdone in literature, as a narrative mechanic for a video game in 1985, they pulled it off remarkably well. Here, you wake up in a dilapidated bathroom stall, with a handful of your personal effects and one helluva headache. Upon exploring, you find yourself in a bar, one that happens to be deserted. Except for the bullet-riddled body on the second floor, anyway. And the BMW parked outside, with a bomb under its hood and a fat, unconscious woman in the trunk. Things certainly look fishy. Of course, you can't go to the police with any of this, because all of the evidence implicates you as the prime suspect. Your only hope at redemption is by finding the real criminals, gathering evidence, and clearing your name.

As you stumble around, you'll eventually trigger memories of your identity and your surroundings – this is Chicago in 1939, and you are Ace Harding, formerly a boxer, now a private eye. As such, exploring and piecing together the facts plays a huge role in the game. There is very little actual puzzle solving, at least in the traditional sense. Most of your quest requires being carefully meticulous, reading all of the notes you can find, and uncovering keys to unlock new locations. Although a good chunk of your investigation takes place at Joe's Bar and the surrounding area, you'll also discover several addresses of other locations around Chicago, which can be accessed by taking a taxi cab. Money is important, mostly because you need it to pay the cab drivers, and the only source of cash is from the slot machine hidden in the basement of the bar. There are at least enough fail safes to keep you from getting stuck – there's always some loose change to find if you run out, and one of the taxis will even give you a free ride if you find yourself stranded.

It's pretty strange that, given your current state as a wanted criminal, the police aren't actively chasing after you, although they will apprehend you if you happen to walk through their front door. The biggest threat is the drugs flowing in your system, which will slowly kill you, unless you discover the antidote. This hard time limit is plenty annoying, but since the game isn't terribly long, it's not a huge deal to play it through again more efficiently if you die. As you explore the streets, you'll also be ambushed by bums, hookers, and a particularly persistent mugger. These folks can be dealt with by either slugging them in the face or giving them some cash. Of course, any good private eye carries a firearm, although it's more used to break down doors than kill people. If you try to shoot someone, they'll either beat you to the draw, or the police will immediately show up to put a damper on your day. In keeping with the pulp detective vibe, every time you hit someone, the words "SOCKO" fill the screen.



Stumble out of the bathroom, and this dead body is one of the first things you see.

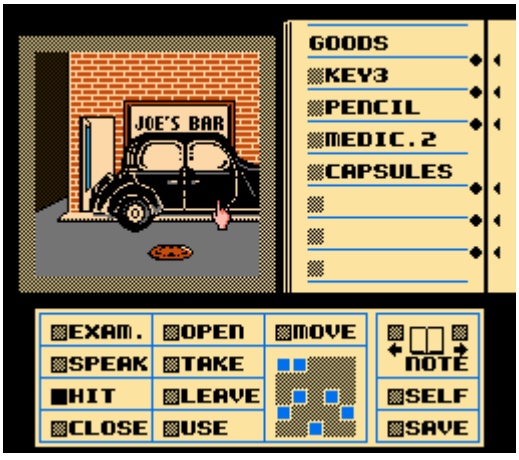
In its brevity, there's no doubt that *Déjà Vu* feels a tiny bit insubstantial, but the plot is well told for what it is, and the writing is surprisingly funny. "One could admire the quality of this chair for hours on end." the narrator replies dryly when checking out a random piece of furniture. "This table has four legs." he astutely observes in another. Try examining yourself and you're told that "You surely need an examination the way you play this game." It's pretty clever how the game manages to balance the humor with all of the murder going on around you.

The computers ports are very similar to each other. The original Macintosh version runs in a relatively high-resolution window and is completely integrated with the system interface, using the same dialogue boxes and fonts. However, the visuals are entirely in black and white, although they're quite attractive in their minimalism. The Atari ST, Apple IIGS and Amiga versions have color graphics, which are different from the original Mac visuals, and while they technically look better, the rest of the interface isn't as crisp, since it runs at a lower resolution. However, in these versions, there are some sluggish load times between every action. The DOS version is by far the worst, taking the graphics of these color versions but downgrading them to eye-piercing four-color CGA graphics. This version also does not allow you to resize or move the windows. The Commodore 64 version has unique graphics as well, and while they're quite pixellated, they're still a bit better than the DOS version. However, this version lacks mouse support and is troublesome to navigate. The PC-88 version was ported and published in Japan by Pack-In Video, and is similar to the Amiga version, although the graphics have been reduced to 16 colors.

The Windows version, published in 1996, over ten years after its initial release, is fully integrated into the Windows interface, like the original Mac version. The visuals have been completely redrawn once again, with crisper and more colorful graphics than any other release. Despite the technical improvement, the art style is pretty gaudy, and most of the characters, Ace in particular, look remarkably ugly. This version was used as the basis for the PocketPC port, released in 2002. There's no real music in any of these versions, as the game is played almost entirely in silence. Most have some digitized sound effects, at least, the quality of which also varies amongst ports. Naturally, they sound horrible coming through the PC speaker.

The NES conversion, published by Kemco/Seika, however, differs substantially in many ways. The basic storyline, locations, text and puzzles are the same, but all have had slight tweaks. The 16-color graphics are completely unique, although similar in style to the Amiga version. The interface introduces some niceties that add to the atmosphere. It uses a warping effect, complete with sound effects, to transition between rooms, while all of the text is displayed as if it was typed by a typewriter. The interface has been altered to remove the drag and drop inventory

system, instead adding "Take" and "Leave" verbs, and getting rid of the "Consume" action. (You instead just "Use" items on yourself.) Your inventory now shows up as text on the right side of the screen rather than visual icons. The "Leave" action is almost entirely useless since you can only drop items in a specific place instead of leaving them randomly strewn around, but since you have unlimited inventory space in this version, this is never an issue. While you can still save your game at any time, getting killed will simply rewind time and send you back to the prior screen. It's much friendlier than the PC versions, which constantly forced you to save and reload.



The NES version of Déjà Vu is probably the most well known.

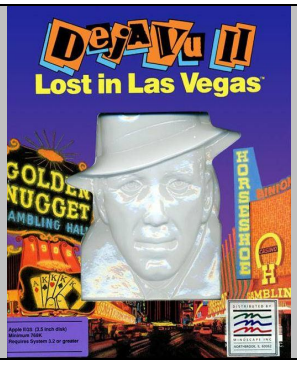
On the downside, navigation is something of a pain. Moving the cursor with the controller is sluggish compared to the mouse. Furthermore, the computer versions let you open doors, look at items, or move simply by double clicking on the screen. The NES interface is not context sensitive at all, so you need to select from the verb window for every single action, making the whole game feel much slower.

The computer versions had several instances where you needed to discover and remember addresses to give to taxi drivers, which needed to be typed in. Since the NES does not have a keyboard, these have been simplified into an "Address" page in your inventory, where addresses are automatically recorded when you learn them. While much of the text maintains the same flavor as the PC version, the writing had to be simplified and edited to save ROM space. It also falls victim to Nintendo's censorship policies. Instead of a shot glass of gin and a pack of cigarettes, you'll find a glass of seltzer and a pack of chewing gum. Instead of a syringe to administer drugs, you need to use medicine capsules. Of course, this causes an inconsistency with the intro text, which still says that you have puncture marks from a needle.

Some scenes have also been taken out, too. In the original version, when you beat up the hooker (who, to be fair, was going to shoot you if you don't act first), if you try to hit her again when she's down, you get a flashback of your priest warning you not to do terrible things. In the NES version, it just displays a generic "you can't do that" message. The NES version also never explicitly refers to her as a hooker – she's just some random lady. When you die in the computer versions, you either get a shot of a morgue, with a close-up on your toe tag, or pictures of creepy ghosts. This was perhaps a bit too morbid, so it was changed to a tombstone with an "RIP Ace Harding" message on it. It doesn't quite make sense at certain points, since you can technically get killed before you ever learn your name. The death text is also amusing – "From the beginning the odds were against you. It was only a matter of time until you reached the end. You're history!!" Certain actions are required in order to force the plot to progress – you can't

even leave the bathroom in the beginning until you've looked in the mirror first. All of the computer versions also greeted you based on its internal clock (i.e. "Good afternoon, welcome to a nightmare come true"), which was removed from the NES version of *Déjà Vu*, as well as all the other ICOM games. The Japanese version suffers from a bit less censorship – the Game Over screen is a creepy skull with the words "Rest in Peace" below it, closer to the original Mac version, and the dead guy in the bar is soaked in blood, where he is clean in the NES version. The seltzer is also now ramune soda.

Déjà Vu was also re-released several years down in the line for the Game Boy Color, where it was bundled with its sequel. It's similar to the Game Boy port of *Shadowgate*, although the interface has been slightly altered to use icons for the commands rather than text, saving valuable screen real estate. While the Game Boy version of *Shadowgate* used the NES graphics as a basis, the visuals here appear to be completely new, and actually look quite a bit better. However, it is not backwards compatible with the original Game Boy. The music is mostly the same as the NES version, although the drums aren't quite as crisp. The text is almost entirely identical, although the inconsistency about the puncture wounds in the opening has been fixed, and the bar is now referred to as "Joe's Place" rather than "Joe's Bar".



Déjà Vu II: Lost in Las Vegas

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: Macintosh / Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC / Apple IIGS / Windows / Game Boy Color
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: ICOM Simulations

You wake up from a stupor that feels like a chronic hangover after a wild week in Vegas. There is a throbbing bump on the back of your head... As you come out of the fog, you breathe a sigh of relief as you realize that you still know your own moniker, Ace Harding. With that, the events of the previous 48 hours start to float back...

Ace Harding cleared his name at the end of the first *Déjà Vu*, but as this sequel explains, he's hardly out of trouble. It turns out that Siegel, the dead guy in the bar in the first game, had been running some cash for the mob, and a sizable sum has gone missing. Seeing that Ace was the last person in contact with Siegel, the mafia figures he must've done something with it. Being that these mafia folks aren't exactly the understanding type, they send a very specific message to Ace – find our money, or you'll be wearing cement shoes.

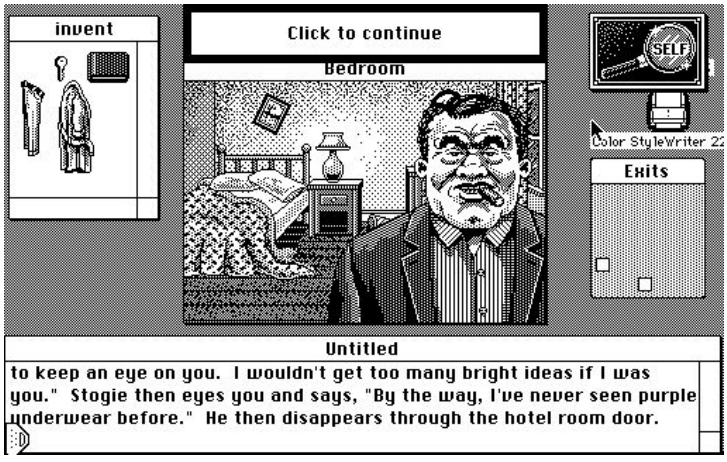
Ace starts the adventure in Las Vegas, where he must get together some cash to take a train back to Chicago. There he revisits Joe's Bar to hunt for clues before returning to Las Vegas to deal with the mob. Unlike the first game, the cops are of little use for saving your ass. Instead, Ace needs to frame another mobster by planting all of the evidence on him, causing the two factions to kill each other and leave Ace in the free and clear. If you take too long, the mob will make good on their promise of disposing of you, making this yet another ICOM game with a set time limit. It's a short game, though, roughly around the same size as its predecessor.

The events lead to a pretty clever twist on the events of the first game, but still, *Déjà Vu II* just doesn't feel quite as compelling. Ace has full possession of his faculties this time around, which means that unfolding the mystery of the stolen money just doesn't draw you in on a personal level without the amnesia gimmick. Still, it is pretty cool to muck around Joe's Bar

again, and it heralds the return of the hooker from the first game, giving her a real name this time – Sugar Shack.

There's still a bit of gambling to be done in Las Vegas, although you need to do something to tilt the odds in your favor. Once you get to Chicago, you're still ferried around by a taxi, although it's completely free this time. You get to visit Ace's own apartment, too. Like the first game, most of the puzzles are barely puzzles, so long as you explore, pick up, and open everything you find, and most obstacles can be passed by using your trusty pen knife.

There really aren't too many ways to get yourself killed besides running out of time, or doing something stupid like getting lost in the desert (which you only ever need to venture to if you run out of money) but you can get accosted or even arrested by taking off your pants in public. In the alleyway of Joe's Bar you'll also randomly run into a crazy lady who spouts all sorts of crazy nonsense ("SAVE THE FURNITURE!"), including some references to famous movies like *Soylent Green* and *Dr. Strangelove*. The game takes place in 1939, substantially before any of these were released, but it's all in good silliness. Plus, the text descriptions are still as funny as before. Trying eating random objects and you'll be met with lines like, "The chair would probably give you gas pains."

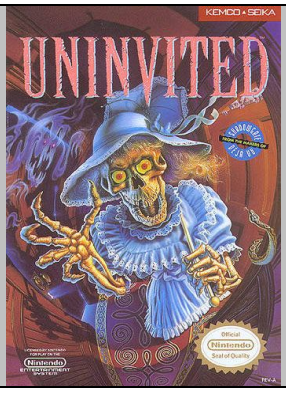


Lucky proves to be a persistent pain throughout the entire adventure.

Like all of the other MacVenture games, *Déjà Vu II* was released on the usual home computer platforms. Unlike the previous releases, the IBM PC version is substantially better than the Amiga versions, finally graduating out of awful CGA in favor of 256 color VGA. *Déjà Vu I* and *II* were bundled together for the Windows re-release. An NES version was planned, and copies were previewed in magazines around 1992 or so. However, it was never released, perhaps due to the waning popularity of the NES. Prototypes are said to exist, but none are currently available on the Internet.

However, *Déjà Vu II* did end up on the Game Boy Color, on the same cartridge as the first game. This version is most likely based on, to some degree, the unreleased NES version. It's hard to tell exactly – the graphics in the Game Boy Color game don't match up to the prerelease NES shots – but then again, the first game's visuals were almost entirely redone for the GBC release too. The revamped blackjack minigame seems to match the screenshots of the NES game though – in the computer version, it was very simplistic and never showed up a close-up view of the cards. The interface works the same way as the other GBC ICOM releases, and includes an "ADDRESS" section, much like the first game, to give to the taxi driver. This was probably unnecessary, but it does make things consistent with the NES version of the first game. In the computer versions, the taxi driver was supposed to be deaf, so you didn't need to

type in the destinations anyway. Instead, you would just show the item that had the address, and he'd take you there. (The train schedule to go to the train station, for example, or your driver's license to get to your apartment.) In the GBC version, you can just look at the item, and the address is automatically remembered. Other than these small changes, the GBC game is very faithful to the computer releases. The cigarettes are changed to gum, and "Joe's Bar" is once again "Joe's Place", but otherwise it remains mostly uncensored. It shares much of its soundtrack with the first game, although the new music, played in the Las Vegas areas, is mostly forgettable.



Uninvited

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: Macintosh / Commodore 64 / Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC / Apple IIGS / NES / Windows / PocketPC
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: ICOM Simulations

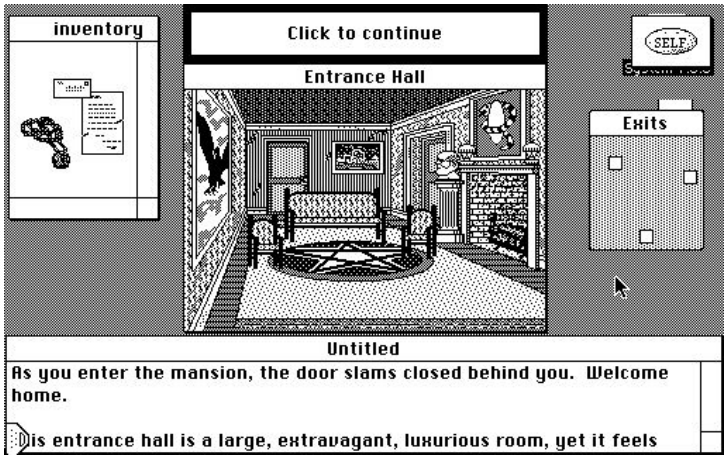
LOOK OUT! The last thing that you remember before the darkness rushed up to claim is your brother's startled cry. You managed to swerve around the shadowy figure that appeared in the roadway, but lost control as the car jumped the shoulder and plunged headlong into this tree.

And so begins *Uninvited*, as you wake up in the driver's seat of a wrecked car, in front of a spooky mansion. The car explodes, and, assuming you make it out in time, leaves you quite stranded. Your sibling, however, has completely disappeared, presumably having wandered inside of the house. With nowhere else to go, you open to front door and step inside, only to have the door suddenly slam shut behind you. The only option is to find your sibling and get out alive by delving into the underground caves beneath the mansion and destroying the sealed body of the wizard Dracan, who, despite being kept in a near-permanent sleep, can apparently still cause quite a bit of trouble.

The mansion in *Uninvited* consists of about a dozen rooms, along with a backyard, which holds a chapel, a greenhouse and a magistratum. Like the other MacVentures, it's not a terribly long game, nor is it particularly difficult. It's the only ICOM game to have a maze sequence, but it's pretty easy, as far as mazes go. As can be expected, the house is quite haunted, filled with specters and other various monsters, all remnants of some kind of horrible circumstances from years prior. Most of the plot is related through the letters strewn about the mansion, as well as told by the ghosts themselves, who will occasionally show up to taunt you, and if you screw things up, enlist you to dwell amongst their ranks. So, when that ghost appears from behind the jail cell? Don't open it and follow him in unless you want to get trapped forever. Despite all of the insta-kill situations found herein (and other ICOM games) there's a single location where you can attempt to enter a pit, and the game will warn you several times of a giant spider. If you keep insisting, you'll eventually climb down and... well, what do you know. It's a giant spider.

The most infamous ghoul in *Uninvited*, featured on the cover of the NES version, is the lady dressed like Scarlett O'Hara, encountered in the opening moments of the game. She seems innocuous enough when viewed from behind, until she turns around and reveals a face totally devoid of flesh, and then summarily begins ripping you apart with her bare hands. It's here where the text-based nature of the game is really effective, sending unnerving images down your

spine without actually showing any of it to you. That being said, while you won't see yourself being mutilated, you will see close-ups of whatever horrible being is doing the killing. The later creatures are quite creepy too – you'll run into zombies, several kinds of ghosts, and a particularly strange creature which appears to be a giant, grinning tomato. On a less dangerous note, you'll also find a grinning, dancing red goblin running around, a being so silly looking that the narrator begins to question their sanity.



The pentacle on the floor might suggest that something weird is up with this place.

There's a sense of general spookiness from exploring the mansion. It seems plain enough, filled with fairly mundane rooms with an old fashioned decor. Yet there's always the sense that there's something worse lying beneath it all, and of course, there is. Although there is a "Speak" action, it's really only to chant magic spells, as there's no one to actually converse with. It's an isolating experience, and it's these moments which earn *Uninvited* its rank next to Infocom's *The Lurking Horror* as one of adventure gaming's earliest horror games, paving the way for *Alone in the Dark* and *Silent Hill* years later.

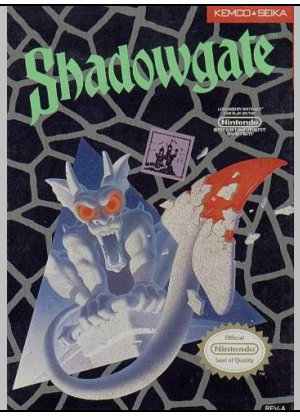
The quality of the home computer ports is the same as *Déjà Vu*, since they all use the same interface on their respective platforms. The Mac, Atari ST, Amiga and Windows versions use sound effects here and there, including an amusing "I've Got You!!" voice sample whenever you're killed.

The NES version of *Uninvited* was the third NES port to be released, after *Shadowgate* and *Déjà Vu*. Again, it uses the same interface, and has a very similar style to the others. This time the text is spelled out by a crawling spider. In the computer versions you would occasionally find magic words to call upon spells, like the address book in *Déjà Vu*. Specifically, you needed to combine several words together to make a full sentence, and thus a full chant. This feature has been completely simplified into a "Spell" page in your inventory, which is automatically populated when you read a scroll. Most of the magic words have been given new, rather weird names, and some of the puzzles are slightly altered to accommodate this. For instance, in the computer versions, you only need to "Speak" to the doll to converse with it. In the NES version, you need to read a scroll to learn the "DOLLDOLL" spell. There's also an additional spell which can be used to teleport outside the maze, saving some rather annoying backtracking.

The computer versions of *Uninvited* have a hard time limit, so you need to beat the game in a certain number of moves or else you'll become possessed by the evilness of the house. In the NES version, this only happens if you grab the ruby, which must be discarded after a certain number of turns in a specific spot and serves no functional purpose besides killing you. If you do manage to grab it, the game will also never specifically tell you what killed you, which is quite

frustrating if you're not in the know. The NES version is the only version to have a full soundtrack too. It's pretty good, although not as catchy as the music in *Shadowgate* or *Déjà Vu*. For a neat Easter egg, play the Victrola in the parlor and you'll hear the first few notes of the *Shadowgate* theme.

The sibling you need to rescue was changed from an older brother to a younger sister. A cross was changed into a goblet, due to Nintendo's censorship policies. The mail was formerly addressed to one "Master Crowley, 666 Blackwell Road, Loch Ness, Scotland". In the NES version, the address and location was removed, although it still keeps the reference to Master Crowley, an allusion to occultist Aleister Crowley (and Ozzy Osbourne's associated song). In the tower, you'll also find a ghost who holds his decapitated head in his arms. The head was reattached for the NES version. The coloring of the pentacle on the floor in the living room was also altered to look more like a standard five-pointed star. You also cannot enter the mansion until you open the mailbox and get the pendant, which is required to beat the game. This isn't mandatory in the computer versions, and thus allows you to enter into an unwinnable situation mere seconds into the journey.



Shadowgate

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: Macintosh / Commodore 64 / Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC / Apple IIGS / NES / Windows / PocketPC
Designer(s): David Marsh, Karl Roelofs
Developer: ICOM Simulations

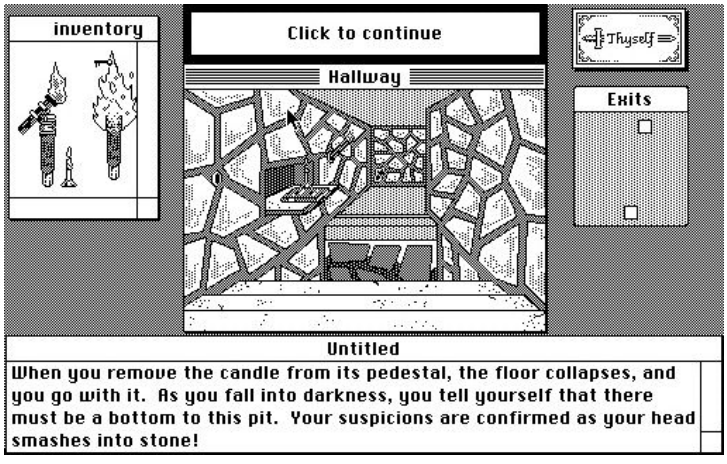
The last thing you remember is standing before the wizard Lakmir as he gestured wildly and chanted in an archaic tongue. Now you find yourself staring in an entryway which lies at the edge of a forest. The Druid's words still ring in your ears: "Within the walls of the Castle Shadowgate lies your quest. If the prophecies hold true, the dreaded Warlock Lord will use his dark magic to raise the Behemoth, the deadliest of the Titans, from the depths of the earth. You are the seed of prophecy, the last of the line of kings, and only you can stop the Warlock Lord from darkening our world FOREVER. Fare thee well.

That's about all of the story you get in *Shadowgate*, but that's all you need – explore a castle, find an ultimate weapon, kill the bad guy, and save the world. Structurally, *Shadowgate* is most similar to *Uninvited*, except it takes place in a medieval setting, replacing the haunted mansion with a haunted castle. Despite the similarities, *Shadowgate* more closely emulates the feeling of crawling further into a dungeon, as the structure is more linear, whereas *Uninvited* gave you almost free run of the house from the outset. However, there is one spot in *Shadowgate* where you need to backtrack in order to enter a previously inaccessible area, creating a more unified game world.

There are dozens of obstacles and monsters to overcome, and just as many ways to die. *Déjà Vu* and *Uninvited* had plenty of these, but *Shadowgate* outdoes both of them. Right at the beginning, you will find a book. If you go by your adventure gaming instinct and try to take it, a trap door will open up and send you plummeting to your death. Oops. Instead, you're supposed to open it and find a key inside. There are tons of tricks and strange oddities littered throughout.

There is a cave with a lake, and a skeleton in the middle, holding a key. There is also a shark there. Why a shark? That doesn't even make sense, them being saltwater dwellers and all.

Later on you'll find a corridor lined with coffins. Open the wrong one and green ooze will spill over the floor, melting you if you step forward. (Thankfully there's a way around it.) In one room, you come across three mirrors, one of which hides the door to the next room. Hit the wrong one and you'll be sucked through a portal into outer space (??) and suffocate. And those aren't even counting the methods to commit suicide. Try using the torch on yourself, using the axe (or any weapon) on yourself, or stumbling out of any window. The game will let you do most of these, with fairly morbid consequences. The Grim Reaper and his greetings upon your death – "It's a sad thing that your adventures have ended here!!" – have obtained near legendary status amongst NES fans, who grew frustrated as much as they laughed at the goofiness of it all. The abundant overuse of exclamation points – why use one when you can use two? – makes the writing all the sillier. And despite the appearance of fantasy clichés like ghosts, goblins, dragons and Cyclopes, there's enough random weirdness that the Castle Shadowgate presents itself as an eclectic funhouse of horrors, filled with bizarre occurrences at nearly every turn.



Shadowgate harbors some crazy tricks and traps right at the third screen.

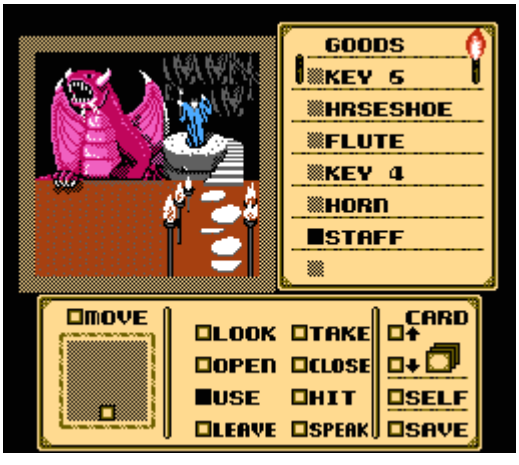
It's the strength of the setting that makes *Shadowgate* as memorable as it is. At one spot, you can try to climb up a ledge to an opening, only to have the ledge crumble. There is no way to reach that door, ever. There are at least a few other locations where exits appear on the map, but there's no way to actually access them. And when you discover the first dragon, it only appears as a set of blinking eyes at the end of dark hallway, letting out bursts of flame that will roast you if you're improperly protected. There are many items to be found, and not all of them are useful. There's a sense of mystery surrounding all of this, the kind that used to provoke awed whispers around the schoolyard. How do you reach that dragon? What does it look like? How do you kill it? How do you actually climb up that broken ledge? The actual answer is, none of it is relevant to your quest, but it makes the castle feel open and real, instead of just some place that exists solely for you to conquer.

Although these aspects make *Shadowgate* the best of the MacVentures, it still has one particularly annoying issue – torch management. You start the game with a single lit torch, and more are found as you progress. After a certain number of turns, your torch will begin to flicker, and you quickly need to light another one before it goes out completely. If you're too late, or you're out of torches, you'll be lost in the dark and almost immediately killed. (You're not eaten by a grue, though that would've been a fun homage – you just end up stumbling around and breaking your neck, according to the text.)

Beyond this, and the extraordinarily numerous insta-deaths, *Shadowgate* isn't terribly difficult. Most of it involves finding and using weapons, or figuring out what to do with stones or talismans, and other puzzles are quite logical. For instance, there's an item suspended inside of an acid fountain. To reach in, simply put on the gauntlet and take the item. To get the boatman who looks suspiciously like Charon to take you across the river, simply give him a coin. Wanna know how to beat the Hellhound? Throw holy water at it. Some solutions are a bit arbitrary – why do you need to use the spear to kill the troll, when the sword should have worked just as well? – but they rarely get too hard. There's even one part of the game where you must solve a Sphinx's riddle by bringing him certain items. The general strangeness of the castle, along with the overwhelmingly silly ways to meet the reaper, have elevated *Shadowgate* to the level of a classic.

Like the previous MacVenture games, *Shadowgate* was also ported to the Amiga, Atari ST, IBM PC, and Windows, although there was no Commodore 64 version. The conversions are the same as the others – the Mac version is entirely black and white, the Amiga and Atari ST have full color, the DOS version has awful CGA, and the Windows version is the most modern. Certain versions also let you print out a certificate to prove that you mastered the game. What a cool touch.

Shadowgate was the first MacVenture to be released for the NES in North America. As a huge departure from the usual library of action games known to the audience, the game was an immediate hit. Again, it features 16 color graphics and uses the same interface as *Déjà Vu* and *Uninvited*. The text is displayed as if written by a feather quill, a quaint little touch. The writing is a bit simplified, although still relatively violent, and it's amazing what they were able to sneak past the censors. It even uses the word "hell" a few times – they got away with murder compared to the cuts *Maniac Mansion* went through a couple of years later. The whole game has an excellent soundtrack, which changes based on your location, and most of it is remarkably catchy – the main theme is undoubtedly one of the most recognizable themes in the NES library. The music even changes when your torch is about to run out, which induces a sense of panic and also helps keep you alive. It's way too easy to the overlook the cautionary messages in the computer versions.



In spite of its clunkiness, the soundtrack in the NES port makes it the best version.

Like *Uninvited*, *Shadowgate* utilizes a "Spell" book to keep track of magic words, which are entered via a text parser in the computer versions. The NES port will also start you back at the prior screen when you die. This is important, because it will also re-light your torch automatically, allowing you to explore for several more turns in hopes that you can find a new

one. Although it may result in times where you're constantly stumbling around and dying, at least you can't get permanently stuck like in the computer versions.

While most of the puzzles and locations are the same, there are some minor differences. One stems from the lack of a visual inventory – in the computer versions, the "special" torch you need to defeat the wraith is a different color, glows green, and can be lit at anytime. In the NES version, it is simply defined as a "torch", which for some reason is separated out from all of the normal torches, which are all lumped together in the same slot with a number indicating how many you have. It cannot be lit until you meet the Wraith, so you don't need to worry about having it burn out. The NES version also introduces one of the funniest death scenes. In the room with the three mirrors, if you use the hammer on the mirror on the left, it will shatter and the glass shards will kill you. (Why this happens to this mirror and not the others, who knows.) In the computer versions, it will crack a tiny bit and leave you unharmed, but destroy the hammer in the process, sticking you in an unwinnable situation. There was also a location removed from the NES version – an armory, found about halfway through the game, after the Cyclops and across the hallway from the library. This room is filled with goblins and serves no real purpose other than getting you killed, if you dawdle around. It was most likely cut for cartridge space. When you first enter the castle, the eyes of the Warlock Lord appear and taunt you for a bit. This only happens once in the NES version, but happens several times during the course of the adventure in the computer versions.

In 1999, *Shadowgate* was published on the Game Boy Color, under the name *Shadowgate Classic* in North America and Europe, and *Shadowgate Returns* in Japan. It offers support for both the standard Game Boy and the Game Boy Color, and both versions have slightly different graphics. It's based on the NES version, using the same text, music and puzzles, although the visuals in the Game Boy Color mode are more detailed and colorful. The text window will block the graphic window due to the small size of the screen, and you need to scroll down to select commands or access your inventory.

A version was also released for mobile phones in 2005 by Vatical Entertainment. Although it uses the title of *Shadowgate Classic*, it uses entirely new graphics once again. The script is adapted too, being more detailed than the NES and Game Boy versions but still missing some stuff from the computer releases. Most of the versions of *Shadowgate* have identical puzzles and locations, but the mobile version switches things up a bit, removing and adding various things. A number of the monsters, like the troll, the Cyclops, and the sphinx, are completely gone. Therefore, instead of finding a sword and a sling in the closet at the beginning (items needed to kill the Cyclops), there's a series of levers which controls the water flow in the castle. You need to use this to get through the waterfall, which you could previously walk right through. One of the underground rooms is now a sewer – the one where you needed to cast a spell on the rope to exit – and instead you need to raise the water to get out. There are a few elemental creatures scattered throughout too. It seems like these are reactions to some of the overdone elements of the original game, although the changes don't really make this port better, just different.

The Famicom version of *Shadowgate* is well known amongst the Japanese retro gaming community for its rather silly writing. While the English version was written in the second person, like most text adventures, the Japanese version is written in the first person, which sounds pretty ridiculous. Take, for instance, the death message. In English it reads "It's a sad thing that your adventures have ended here!!", while in Japanese, it's something like "How unfortunate! My adventure has ended here!!" It was sort of cool in English since the Grim Reaper was supposed to be taunting you, but in Japanese it sounds like some crazy dead guy is lamenting pointlessly to himself. That translation was pretty close, at least – many of the overwrought death messages were rewritten to sound even more absurd than they originally were.

(After using your torch on yourself three times):
English: You finally set your hair on fire. The rest of your body soon follows!!

Japanese: Yaagghh!! My hair, my hair!! It's burning!! The burns spread across my body!! I writhe in pain as I breathe my last.
(After using your sword on yourself):
English: You thrust sword [sic] into your chest!! Blood begins to flow!! Suicide won't help in your quest!! The Warlock Lord will surely triumph now!!
Japanese: I thrust the sword's blade into my left breast. ... Blood pours out of the wound!! Ahhh!! How could I be so foolish? I took my own life, with my own hand!! ... The world will surely be cloaked in darkness after I die...

(After attempting to defeat a Cyclops with your bare hands):
English: A battle cry dies in your throat, as the Cyclops crushes your skull with his club.
Japanese: Quicker than I could attack, the club descends upon my head!! My head has been cracked open!!

(After jumping out many of the game's windows):
English: With a cry you jump to your death!! It takes only a couple of seconds before you hit the bottom with a thud.
Japanese: I scream in vain as my body floats in the air!! As I spin, various disconnected thoughts pass through my mind. The last thing I saw was a twinkling star, shining its eerie light in the midst of darkness.

(After awakening the chained female werewolf):
English: With a loud roar, the wolf pounces on you, taking your life!! The wolfs [sic] powerful jaws rip your throat out!!
Japanese: Agghh!! The woman transformed instantly into a wild, ferocious wolf. It's angry!! It's attacking!! Ahhh!! I'm done for!! Arrghh!! The wolf's fangs glint in the light, and at that instant, I became the werewolf's latest meal.



Beyond Shadowgate

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: Turbografx-16 CD
Designer(s): Doug Snook
Developer: ICOM Simulations

Since *Shadowgate* found most of its success due to its NES incarnation, it made sense that it would stay in the console realm for its sequel. What didn't quite make sense is how ICOM ended up producing the game for the Turbografx-16, a system with not only low market penetration, but very few non-Japanese developed titles. (ICOM developed a few other games for the system, mostly notably the sidescroller *Shape Shifter* and the embarrassingly '90s skater action game *Yo, Bro.*)

The intro recounts the ending of the first *Shadowgate*, wherein the Warlock King is defeated and cast into the depths of the Earth. It then fast-forwards to the hero's descendents, the King Adam and his son Prince Erik. The Prince leaves for a journey, and expects a warm welcome home... only to discover that his father has been murdered, and he is the prime suspect. Erik must escape from prison, explore the land, and make his way back to Castle Shadowgate to confront the King's true killer, and save the land from darkness.

Since *Beyond Shadowgate* was developed specifically for the console audience, the first person perspective has been ditched in favor of a more traditional third person perspective. You control Prince Erik directly with the controller and hit the Select button to bring up icons to examine, use, or talk to various people. While still an adventure game at heart, it also introduces some action elements, once again probably to suit the audience. This means that most enemies are killed by attacking them directly rather than using any items. Prince Erik moves very slowly, and can only punch and duck. It's remarkably clumsy, although most enemies can be beaten by simple exploits, like approaching them from a specific angle, putting on the autofire, and smacking them until they die. There is no health bar on screen, but you can only take a few hits before keeling over dead. Thankfully, your health is replenished whenever you leave the screen, and you can save at any point.

After escaping from the dungeon and working your way out of the caverns beneath it, you're free to roam the land, doing good by saving fairy princesses or freeing a burning town from an onslaught of invading demons. In this section of the game, you can explore the land to find gems or take on other quests which can earn you cash to buy important items. Some of these quests or items aren't essential to beat the game, but there are three different minor variations on the ending, depending on which items you've obtained. Although the expansive land and freeform exploration lend a welcome sense of adventure, the world is perhaps a little bit too big and empty... or maybe it's just that Erik walks so damned slow. There's a lot of backtracking to be done, and it's annoying to have him slog so slowly through scene after scene of empty forests. It is also technically possible to screw yourself over by missing certain items, or killing an essential NPC.



There's a lot of monster punching going on in this game.

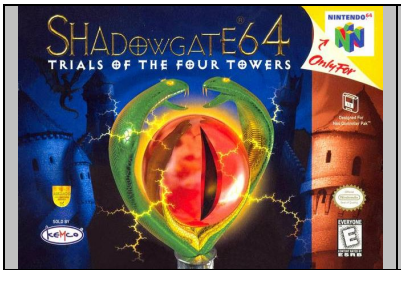
At least it's an excellent-looking game. The animation is extremely fluid, and the 256-color scanned backgrounds, while dithered, rival the Sierra games of the time, which were only available on computers. It's one of the few titles that make use of the Turbografx-16's expanded resolution, running in 336x224 rather than 256x224. The CD format is put to use with redbook music, which lacks the dramatic flair of the NES game but is appropriately moody. All of the dialogue is voiced as well, and while it's not particularly noteworthy, it's also not completely embarrassing. The intro and ending are all done with painted stills in a standard Western fantasy style, which is a welcome change from the usual anime cinemas found on the system.

While it has its ups and downs, the biggest fault is that it just doesn't feel like a successor to *Shadowgate*. Part of its essence revolved around its inspiration from text adventures, and without the off kilter descriptions, it feels fairly generic. What little writing there is comes off flavorless, although there are random scattered bits of humor. The invading demons attack with weapons that look like bagpipes, for some reason or another. And in addition to defeating the final boss with either an enchanted sword or the Staff of Ages – the same item used in the first game – you can also use a simple old paddle ball toy.

There was never much of a backstory to *Shadowgate* to begin with, and what this game does supply is largely uninventive. Sure, there are a few references to show that the developers were aware of its source material. In the original *Shadowgate*, one of the rooms made mention of the bricks being carved from stone from the dwarven mines, which you get to visit in this game. You also meet the wizard Lakmir, the one that's mentioned in the intro text as giving you your mission. There's also a twist on an old scenario – early on, you find a woman chained to a wall in the dungeon. In the original game, this woman would turn into a werewolf and kill you if you set it free. In *Beyond Shadowgate*, it will also turn into a demon... except it will run away and save your butt later on down the line.

If there's any major aspect that's actually carried over, it's the obsession with death scenes. In addition to getting killed in combat, there are numerous other insta-death scenarios, including getting devoured by a man-eating plant, skewered by a wyvern, chomped by poisonous mushrooms, and demolished by falling boulders. Many of these are quite gruesome – when a rock falls on your head, you can visibly see your eyeballs flying out – but without the descriptive text, they lose a bit of flavor.

So, as a successor to *Shadowgate*, its sequel comes up a bit short. It's too meandering, and its action elements are mostly unwelcome. Still, visually and aurally, it stands well next to PC titles of the time, and is certainly a much better technical achievement than the adventure game ports on the Sega CD, which were plagued with crappy visuals and long loading times. It's an incredibly rare title to get a hold of, although it's an interesting curiosity for fans of the old MacVentures.



Shadowgate 64: Trials of the Four Towers

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: Nintendo 64
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: TNS Co

Released for the Nintendo 64 by Infinite Ventures, the successor to ICOM Simulations, the third and final *Shadowgate* is in some ways a return to form after the widely ignored *Beyond Shadowgate*. It brings back the first person perspective, this time rendered fully in 3D, and refocuses on exploring a castle instead of wandering through the countryside. However, that's about where the similarities end, as it completely ditches the point-and-click mechanics in favor of real time movement. Despite initial appearances, it is mostly definitely not a first person shooter. There's no fighting, and barely anything in the way of action.

The story picks up ages after the original games, as the Castle Shadowgate has been largely abandoned by all of the monsters, leaving only a group of unseemly thieves. The hero, Del Cottenwood, is a halfling who's been captured and tossed in their dungeon. During his escape, he stumbles upon a terrible secret – Belzar, whom you may remember as the guy who framed Prince Erik back in *Beyond Shadowgate*, is working to resurrect the evil Talimar, also known as the Warlock King from the first game. Only by channeling the spirit of the original hero, here named Lord Jair, can Del prevent darkness from once again ruling the land. There are four towers to conquer – hence the subtitle – as well as a village full of thieves. Like *Beyond Shadowgate*, the ties to the original game are minimal, outside of some of the names. The ghost of Lakmir the wizard pops up several times to advise you, and you'll once again use the Staff of Ages to defeat the Warlock King, but that's about the extent of the connections.

Indeed, the years have not been kind to Castle Shadowgate. Where it used to hold a mysterious labyrinth filled with monsters and traps and all manner of bizarre happenings, its

new incarnation is distressingly dull. Its rooms and corridors have devolved into a generic medieval castle, filled with caves, dungeons, libraries, and dozens of dreary, empty rooms. The color palette is almost remarkably drab, and it's hard to even look at the game without getting vaguely depressed. The general mood of the adventure feels almost like a survival horror game like *Silent Hill* or *Fatal Frame*, except there's never anything to actually be scared of. There are no real monsters, and the only real danger comes from falling off cliffs or running into the occasional trap. (Some of the death messages are amusing, channeling the spirit of the original games, but they're actually quite scarce. They're also completely devoid of the silliness of *Beyond Shadowgate*.) The lack of an interface outside of the inventory and map screens does a good job of involving you in the environment, but it doesn't make up for its general emptiness.



What an incredibly boring game, in every possible aspect.

Most of your exploration is spent with your head slightly cocked downward, so you don't miss a valuable item. The majority of the stuff you find includes books and scrolls, which relate the background story. This isn't just flavor text though, as they provide clues or solutions to many puzzles, and in a couple of cases, you're outright quizzed on your readings. The solutions themselves are rarely difficult; it's more of a matter of getting stuck because you overlooked an item stuck in some dark, dreary corner, and are left trudging around slowly to find it. Expect a few other fairly typical puzzles involving a bit of trial and error, including a musical puzzle and a maze filled with teleportation points.

There is little worthwhile in *Shadowgate 64*. The pacing is incredibly slow, the castle is far too large and empty, and the writing, while occasionally a bit clever, is far too sparse to be interesting. The whole experience is obviously trying to be atmospheric, but it really just comes off as soulless instead.

Novelization – Before Shadowgate

The Worlds of Power books were junior novelizations of popular Nintendo games, including *Mega Man 2*, *Castlevania II*, *Ninja Gaiden*, and a number of others. Unlike most of them, which tried their bests to translate an 8-bit video game into an actual book, *Before Shadowgate*, as the title implies, actually acts a prequel to the NES game.

This may not have been the best idea. The original game had very little backstory, which in turn makes this book feel extremely disconnected. It focuses on a young boy named Jairen, as he teams up with a "fenling" (elf) named Fezlyn Quickfoot and a brutal fighter named Hawk to travel across the land to Castle Shadowgate, encountering trolls and other baddies along the

way. It really just feels like any old young adult fantasy novel which happens to feature some of the names in the game, like the good wizard Lakmir and the evil Warlock King. It's all rather childish, which makes sense given the audience, but without the kitsch that made all of the other titles amusing, this one just comes across as really boring.

What is somewhat interesting is that *Before Shadowgate*'s storyline was eventually canonized to some extent. The hero's name, Jairen, later slightly changed to Lord Jair for *Shadowgate 64*. The name of the land where the games take place, Kal Torlin, was first introduced here, and later also reused in *Shadowgate 64*. Infinite Ventures even put the whole story up on their website, when they were still around.

While the Worlds of Power books all featured the same covers as the games they were based off of, they had the nasty tendency of airbrushing out anything remotely offensive, like getting rid of the guns in the artwork of *Mega Man 2*, *Bionic Commando* and *Metal Gear*. With *Before Shadowgate*, they fixed the gargoyle's tail to look more rounded, and got rid of the horns, perhaps to make the image look less like a devil.

Cancelled Games – Shadowgate Rising

Infinite Ventures clearly had great plans for the *Shadowgate* license. After publishing *Shadowgate 64* and *Shadowgate Classic*, they began work on two other games: *Shadowgate Rising* and *Lands of Shadowgate*. *Shadowgate Rising* was to be a sequel to *Shadowgate 64*, starring a red-haired heroine named Raven. From the web page:

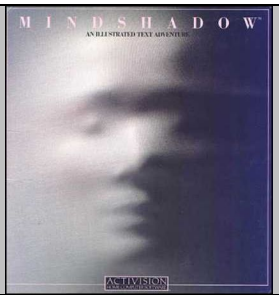
"Infinite Ventures is proud to present stories from the world of *Shadowgate*. Our first offering follows the adventures of Raven – a young woman with remarkable powers in a world that has forgotten the ancient magics of yesterday. Set in the far future, the story of Raven begins in a time when the Dreamers have risen to prominence. These Dreamers oppose anything having to do with magic and will stop at nothing to eradicate the last vestige of the druids and the legacy of Castle Shadowgate."

Their official website went so far as to produce a twenty page comic based on Raven, but other than a handful of screenshots, little is known about the actual game. By the looks of it, it was most likely going to play just like *Shadowgate 64*, which is strange given the generally negative reaction to that game. *Shadowgate Rising* was said to have been cancelled due to the impending release of the GameCube. Infinite Ventures had plans to release the game on the PC, but that also fell through.

Cancelled Games – Lands of Shadowgate

During this same period, Infinite Ventures was actively promoting the ports of its games to mobile platforms. One of their mobile titles was a completely new game called *Lands of Shadowgate*, which appeared to be some kind of strategy game. From the web page:

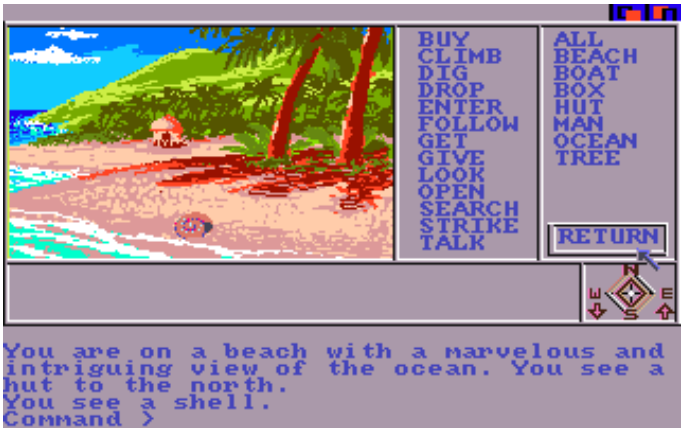
"The Lands of Shadowgate are in turmoil. Kingdom rises against kingdom. Princes fight with pretenders to the throne. Alliances are forged and quickly broken as leaders of men vie for dominance over one another. *Lands of Shadowgate* is a turn-based strategy game where players create units, deploy troops, and attempt to conquer the castles of other players. In order to do this, players need the use of special buildings. These structures allow counselors to create and train different types of troops. Careful consideration concerning strategies needs to be taken before choosing counselors and creating the buildings they use. Additional building projects allow players to upgrade the defenses of their castles. It utilizes Infinite Venture's unique proprietary Play-by-Sync technology allowing PDA and Smartphone owners, including Pocket PC and PalmOS 5, to compete against each other."



Mindshadow

Initial Release Date: 1984
Platforms: Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Apple II, Atari 8-bit, Atari ST, Commodore 64, IBM PC, Macintosh, ZX Spectrum
Designer(s): Brian Fargo
Developer: Interplay

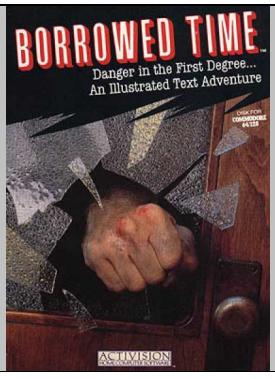
The first game developed by Interplay and available across several platforms, *Mindshadow* starts you off on a deserted island with absolutely no memory. Once you find your way back to civilization (but only after navigating a particularly irritating quicksand maze and dealing with some pirates), you find yourself the target of assassins. Only by piecing together the many disparate clues can you discover your true identity.



You wake up in the middle of nowhere without any explanation. (Amiga version)

Mindshadow might be one of the first games (but certainly not the last) to put you in the role of an amnesiac (developer Brian Fargo admitted being inspired by Robert Ludlum's *Bourne* novels). The goal is simply to come across a number of keywords, and use the "REMEMBER" command to piece together your past. Once you've found and remembered all of them, your memory comes flooding back to you and then the game ends abruptly, without any real resolution. *Mindshadow* is, of course, a bit confusing, but that's obviously the point, and it pulls off the whole "what the hell is going on?" thing very well. At first it's not even clear what time period events takes place in – it seems to be approximately the 1920s. At one point you leave your hat at the front desk of a café. When you retrieve it, you'll find a mysterious note inside cluing you in on a secret meeting. But why? And who wrote it? There's only one way to find out. Although it is a difficult game, there is a "HINT" command which allows a limited number of clues to piece things together.

In its initial release on the Commodore 64, IBM PC, Apple II and Atari 8-bit computers, *Mindshadow* was a graphical text adventure. However, the Amiga and Atari ST versions featured not only drastically improved visuals, but also a list of commands on the side of the screen. You can use the mouse to piece these together or use the on screen compass to navigate. You can also interact in a very limited fashion by clicking on the graphical window.



Borrowed Time (US) / Time to Die (UK)

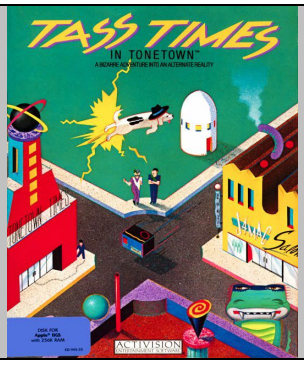
Initial Release Date: 1985
Platforms: Amiga, Atari ST, Commodore 64, IBM PC, Macintosh
Designer(s): Brian Fargo, Michael Cranford
Developer: Interplay

Interplay's second graphic adventure uses the same engine as *Mindshadow* and takes after pulp detective novels. As private investigator Sam Harlow, you receive a threatening phone call mentioning your impending death. Before you can even properly leave your office, you're accosted by some goons who shoot first and ask questions later. After a series of telegraphed events to escape the thugs – which requires quite a bit of trial and error – you're eventually allowed free roam of the city. In addition to trying to find the people who put a hit on you, you're also on the case to hunt down your kidnapped ex-wife, as well as figure out how to take down the local mob boss.



The interface should be familiar to those who played Mindshadow. (Amiga version)

Borrowed Time has a lot in common with ICOM's *Déjà Vu*, minus the amnesiac angle (that was already played out in *Mindshadow*). In addition to playing as private detectives, your primary goal in both is to hunt around town and gather evidence to present to the police. You're also randomly (and annoyingly) attacked by thugs. *Déjà Vu* is undoubtedly the superior game, mostly because its interface is easier to use, and its writing quality is much better. However, the similarities are most likely coincidental, considering they were released in the same year. Interestingly, the game was written by Subway Software, the team founded by Bill Kunkel, Arnold Katz and Joyce Worley, known as the first electronic game journalists in America.



Tass Times in Tonetown

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: Apple IIGS / Amiga / Apple II / Atari ST, Commodore 64 / IBM PC
Designer(s): Michael Berlyn, Muffy McClung Berlyn
Developer: Brainwave Creations / Interplay

Tass Times in Tonetown was destined to become a cult classic. Set in a bizarre alternate universe rooted in '80s pop culture, it stood out in a time when adventure games rarely strayed from fantasy, science fiction, or mystery. Above all, it's a curiosity: a game written like a standard text adventure, but with a heavily visual emphasis. (As a side note, "tass" is a made up slang word meaning "cool". There is much similarly goofy lingo throughout.)

The setting is considerably more important than the plot, which nudges you out on a mission to find your missing grandfather. Starting your search in his cabin, you quickly enter a portal into the upside-down world of Tonetown. There, a dog is a newspaper reporter, everyone dresses in garish '80s new-wave clothing, and a sinister real estate tycoon/monstrous animal hybrid named Franklin Snarl is terrorizing the town by setting up uncool housing developments.



This game's original title was "Ennio: The Legend Begins". (Amiga version)

As the first commercial title available for Apple's IIGS, the game is built to the strengths of the hardware, and looks fantastic. The color palette is limited but bright, and the images for each scene are well drawn and peppered with small animations. With such a boldly imagined world, the only shame is that Tonetown quickly exhausts itself. The world it tries to create is intriguing but ultimately feels strangely empty. Once you've gone through the few buildings around town and interacted with the very scant amount of people and objects, you're left to wander through the screens of generic wilderness that make up half of the game's map.

The interface is a refined version of the same one seen in *Mindshadow* and *Borrowed Time*. *Tass Times* trades a clickable list of written action verbs for a fewer number of visual icons that represent actions. The eight icons are easy to interpret – an eye for "look", an open mouth for "talk", etc. Clicking one and then a hotspot on the image automatically enters an action into the text parser. Unfortunately, most of the actions represented by icons have little use. Some, like

"tell me about", only have a few descriptions written for them and require extra input at the text parser anyway, making them more trouble than they're worth. The only truly useful action is "look", which automatically occurs when clicking hotspots without previously clicking an icon.

The mouse-based gameplay is hit or miss, but a bigger issue is that the text parser takes up a paltry bottom quarter of the screen. Like a text adventure, a description of each scene occurs as you move from place to place, but since the text area is so small, there are often multiple pages of description go flip through. This gets old very quickly, making movement through the game feel like drudgery.

Tass Times further squashes the potential of the icon-based section of the interface with awkward puzzle design. Some of the more simple puzzles are basic "verb object" type, doable with the mouse, but others rely heavily on figuring out what to type in the text parser. Because the game is written to play like a text adventure, players need to come up with wordy, unintuitive action combinations, like "hit chain with zagtone" or "throw mushroom at eye". It also commits just about every irritating design error of '80s adventure games. Adding everything in sight to your inventory is a necessity, but limited room means "drop and retrieve" missions are inevitable. Hitting a dead end because you missed picking up an item in a place that's no longer accessible is easy to do. You're required to have certain objects to travel through some areas for no discernable reason. And certain sections of the game set you up in a situation where you only have a limited number of actions to retrieve a crucial item or else it's game over. There's just not enough information given to the player to be able to solve these puzzles, making the whole affair feel very arbitrary.



This game is so '80s it hurts. (Amiga version)

Although notable for its treading new ground in a fledgling genre, from a modern perspective, *Tass Times* is a chore to play. Considered individually, the game design flaws are annoying, but added up over the course of the game, they feel egregious. As such, it's more of a growing pain than a milestone in the evolution of the graphic adventure.

Tass Times in Tonetown was ported to the Amiga, Apple II, Atari ST, Commodore 64, and PC. The Atari ST port is visually the most faithful, while the Amiga version uses slightly upscaled versions of the IIGS graphics with a slightly different color palette. The other ports have completely redrawn graphics that look terrible in comparison, but compensate with some extra animation. The sparse sound and music is mostly identical across platforms.



Neuromancer

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: Amiga, Apple II, Apple IIGS, Commodore 64, IBM PC
Designer(s): Bruce J. Balfour, Brian Fargo, Troy A. Miles, Michael A. Stackpole
Developer: Interplay

An unintentionally entertaining aspect of science fiction – now that some important works' timestamps have begun to expire – is getting to see how all the futuristic, pi-in-the-sky predictions pan out. It's to be expected that far-flung sci-fi like *Star Trek* is still light years away from materializing. On the other hand, sci-fi that gazes into the less distant future has a slim chance of coming true during our lifetimes – or being swept aside by advancing technology.

William Gibson's seminal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* paints the bleak, crime-ridden future of a technology-dependent society that is suspended between two worlds: the physical world and a virtual one. The novel addresses traditional sci-fi themes – such as the fusion of flesh and machinery, and the autonomy of artificial intelligence – but with a twist. At the crux of its yarn is an all-entwining information system known as cyberspace. Gibson foresaw the emergence of a world-wide network at a time when only technophiles, college students, and the military had access to anything close to resembling the internet.

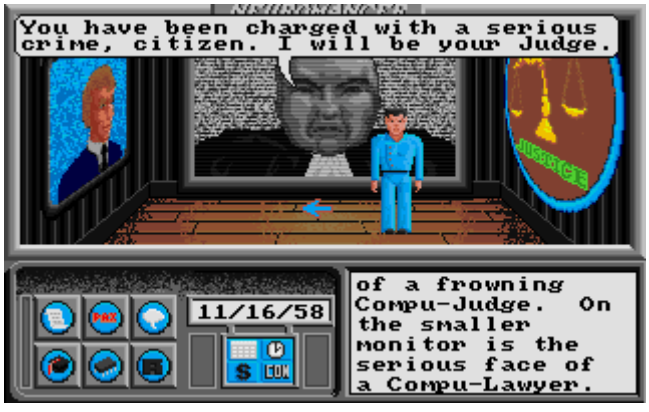
While the novel remains fresh over a quarter of a century later, *Neuromancer* the game must have felt dated within a few years of its release, and booting it up some twenty odd years later is like opening a time capsule too soon. Its contents aren't old enough to be a curiosity. That this was once cutting edge is slightly embarrassing – especially considering the game is based on one of the most forward-thinking literary works of its time.

Neuromancer didn't come to fruition until 1988, four years after the book was originally published. The history of the project is hard to pin down, obscured by the fact that no one has cared about it for two decades. An unreferenced statement from the oft erroneous Wikipedia claims that acid guru Timothy Leary held the rights for the video game version of *Neuromancer* and teamed up with Interplay to bring the project to life. The story checks out. First of all, Leary was given special thanks in the instruction manual, "for all his help and inspiration." Then, there are several quotes from old magazines that further shed light on his involvement with the production. According to a 1986 Business Week article, Leary was working with iconic text adventure developer Infocom on *Neuromancer*. However, this was the first of many failed, unrealized, or underdeveloped partnerships for Leary and *Neuromancer*. A story in People magazine reported that Leary collaborated with New York graffiti artist Keith Haring to create the concept art for the game. Whether Haring's concepts had any influence whatsoever on the finished product is highly unlikely, but the brightly colored, levitating heads of the AIs in the matrix resemble something out of a Haring mural.

It's apparent Leary's vision underwent numerous substantial revisions. At different points in time, he had claimed that William S. Burroughs, photographer Helmut Newton, and Devo had all signed on to the project. At least Devo's contribution – the track "Some Things Never Change" from their maligned album *Total Devo* – made it into the game. In fact, the soundtrack consists of this song entirely. It abruptly and startlingly kicks in at boot up, then proceeds to fade into long periods of silence, resuming intermittently throughout the game.

The novel's self-indulgent and often excessive descriptions of cyberspace are the sort of thing that no motion picture could hope to do justice, much less a late '80s adventure game. *The Matrix*, which borrows fundamental ideas – and its name – from *Neuromancer*, doesn't hold a candle to Gibson's imagery. The images evoked by his writing make *Tron* seem like a videotape

of a blinking LCD alarm clock. Then again, literary works always lose something in translation. Rudimentary graphics could've been forgiven had *Neuromancer* succeeded at capturing the book's essence. Unfortunately, none of the speed-fueled tension of life in ultramodern Chiba City survives. The game crawls to a start. Rather than taking on the role of Henry Dorsett Case, the protagonist from the novel, the main character is someone totally different, as the story merely takes place in the same universe. He isn't a washed-up hacker with a death wish. There are no hallucinatory sex scenes, no drugs, little crime (unless you count getting arrested for failing to pay for dinner), and no violence.



The Amiga version's graphics are the best of the various computer releases. (Amiga version)

Instead, *Neuromancer* – a game based on a book esteemed for imagining future technologies – opens with a device so outdated that people born a few years prior to the game's release likely would have no idea what it is. The first thing you do in this advanced, futuristic world is log-in to a Bulletin Board System. Just to clarify, so that no one will mistake it for a pioneer in online gaming, *Neuromancer* isn't played over a dial-up modem connected to a network run by some mega-geek across town. The first thing you do is log-in to a simulation of a BBS, so that you can pretend to be connected to a network ran by the geek across town in Chiba City.

Bulletin Board Systems are a huge part of *Neuromancer*, especially early on. Menu upon menu of text is posted on these systems – mostly messages sent between fictitious BBS users. The messages serve two purposes. They vaguely hint at what you should be doing, and they provide some semblance of a story. These purely text-based systems can be accessed from terminals scattered throughout Chiba City. The city consists of shops, a hotel, offices, a bar, and a lot of other places you'd expect to find in a graphic adventure, along with a few legitimately curious places, like the body parts shop – where organs can be pawned for cash – and the headquarters of a cult who worships, of all things, *Pong*. Half of this stage of the game is spent bartering for items and information in the city, and the other half, digging through the logs of obsolete BBS mock-ups.

The player is thrown into this world and given little direction. There's no narrative to drive the action. This omission is a serious flaw, not because the player has no choice but to wander around aimlessly until stumbling over the first hook – that's par for the course in early graphic adventures – but because whoever wrote the plot for the game apparently read the blurb on the back of the book and ran with it without integrating many of its most prominent elements.

Molly, the sexy, cybernetically-enhanced hired killer, not to mention the anti-hero's main love interest in the book, is missing in action. Armitage, the shattered shell of an ex-war general whose terminally wounded body was reconstructed by a rogue AI to be used as its puppet, appears but once. Wintermute, the mutinous artificial intelligence who orchestrates the entire plot of the novel by manipulating the main characters into breaking it out of its machine, has

been reduced to what amounts to a mini-boss. The core conflict – of deciding to aid a self-aware computer program and betray mankind – has been excised. Cognizant programs still exist, but now you simply blast the darn things.



Exploring the matrix in-game can't compare to the vision of the book. (IBM PC version)

That comes later though. First, you'll need to get to cyberspace, which is also known as the matrix. An expensive piece of hardware is required for this, and your character starts out almost broke, so he does whatever it takes to get there: hack into private networks, commit identity fraud, hawk his vital organs, participate in biomedical research and, um, chat over BBSs.

Thus, the long chain of puzzles that eventually leads to the endgame begins. The puzzles in *Neuromancer* don't function like the ones found in typical adventure games, where the player accumulates a large inventory of items and then figures out what to do with them. *Neuromancer* is much more binary. There are some items to collect, but usually characters will flat out ask you for the item they need. Other puzzles merely involve repeating a keyword. For instance, the software dealer may have a crucial upgrade, but he won't sell it unless you mention it by name. The point-and-click interface, in the ports that support it, is extremely basic and clumsy.

Information is usually collected in BBS databases. However, accessing a database is a chore in itself. To do so, the player needs to know both its access number and its password. Of course, this information is distributed piecemeal. One database might contain the access code to another database, but the password will be located on still another database, which requires an access number and password of its own. Learning the codes is a tedious process that involves a lot of note-taking, but eventually it'll lead you to the software and hardware necessary to infiltrate cyberspace.

Gibson's vision of cyberspace is much more advanced than the internet as it exists today. His cyberspace is immersive – something in-between a communications system and a sensory deprivation tank. He describes it as, "A consensual hallucination... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding."

Given the limitations of bygone hardware, *Neuromancer*'s development team reproduced his vision the best they could. That is to say, not very well. Cyberspace looks like the standard depiction of virtual reality from the '80s – a simple grid-like environment similar to the holodeck or the lightcycle track in *Tron*. The grid is barren except for some levitating polygons, which mark the coordinates of databases. These bases are protected by a force field of Ice – a fictionalized version of what we'd call a firewall and anti-virus software. Some of the bases contain AIs, which manifest themselves as giant disembodied heads looming over the horizon. The change in scenery accompanies an overall change in the direction of the game. When our

unnamed protagonist learns that AIs have been attacking hackers in the matrix, he resolves to put an end to their oppression. The only problem is that AIs are extremely powerful beings. This discrepancy leads to a cycle of monotonous grinding, through which your character obtains sufficient viruses and warez (yes, pirated software is used as ammo) to take them out.

The cyberspace segments play vastly different than the rest of the game, and many other games, for that matter. The objective is to hack into databases and download stronger software, which in turn can be used to hack into more secure databases as you track down AIs. Cyberspace bases are equipped with defense systems, though, meaning you'll have to fight your way through them to get inside.

Battles are unremarkable except for their general bizarreness. Engagement is an odd mixture of active-time battle rules from RPGs and a game of *Battle Tank* in which neither tank can move. To sum it up elegantly: the player selects commands from a menu as fast as possible. It's a strange setup that requires neither skill nor strategy. The combat is predictable. Fire the warez that slow down the system's rate of attack. Fire a virus, which eats away at the system's defense. Then, start hitting it with your best warez, praying you disable it before it flatlines you. AIs will emerge from certain bases after the security system has been disabled. Special skills are required to defeat an AI, but in truth referring to these entities as AIs is a huge misnomer, since they know only one behavior: shoot constantly.

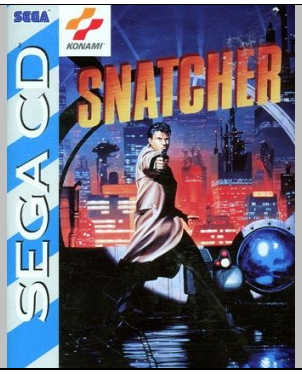
The irony lies in the fact that this crude algorithm represents the most sophisticated intelligent agents ever created. Even within the neutered fiction of the game, AIs can perform impressive feats such as playing chess, communicating with others, and imprisoning sentient beings in virtual worlds. The novel takes things a step further, where AIs are capable of transcending their mechanical bodies and becoming something akin to gods. Yet all that video games could muster – four years after *Neuromancer* was written – was a graphic of a floating head that gradually drains the player's health. It seems as if basing an early computer game on *Neuromancer* wasn't a good idea, as the tech of the day just couldn't do it justice.

The final showdown is with an AI named Neuromancer, who beams your character to a virtual representation of a deserted beach located inside the matrix – a scene plucked straight from the novel. The beach is a prison. Escaping it is the final puzzle. Once you do, you'll fight Neuromancer and find he's just as dumb as the lot of them. His attack barely qualifies as a pattern, and it's laughable to think that this was once passed off as intelligence.

Despite the staleness of *Neuromancer's* interactive incarnation, the game has a fair amount of intriguing asides – as long as they are taken outside the context of the game. *Neuromancer* is a classic example of the game that's more fun to talk about than it is to play. Take the game's chess tournament for example. Nothing of the sort can be found in the novel, and it was likely a nod towards Interplay's concurrent release *Battle Chess*. The chess matches in the game aren't played by the entrants themselves. Instead, players upload algorithms to clash against other algorithms. This minigame of chess has the potential to spark a compelling conversation about the state of computer chess AI, or wunderkind turned grandmaster Garry Kasparov's numerous showdowns against computers. Yet playing it is repetitive, joyless, and involves a single keystroke. That's the type of game *Neuromancer* is, fueled by the eccentric ideas of an ex-mad scientist turned counter-culture spiritual advisor and based upon a wildly imaginative and ambitious work of literature, and it winds up being excruciatingly dull, binary, and poorly written. Certainly, Leary must have been disappointed by the end result.

Of the four different versions, the Amiga port is by far the most attractive with the IBM PC version downgraded to ugly, miscolored CGA graphics, and the others being quite blocky and unattractive. The C64's soundtrack is superlative. The song is sampled and passed through a number of abrasive filters to produce an eerie, industrial sounding remix, which even outclasses the studio cut of the song. The soundtracks to the other versions – Apple II, Amiga, and DOS – aren't nearly as aurally pleasing.

Snatcher



Snatcher

Initial Release Date: 1988
Platforms: PC-88 / MSX2 / PC Engine Super CD / Sega CD / PlayStation / Saturn
Designer(s): Hideo Kojima
Developer: Konami

Sega CD fans never had much to be happy about, unless you caught some sort of rare virus allowing you to enjoy such Digital Pictures gems as *Sewer Shark* and *Double Switch*. In the waning days of the Sega CD, Konami decided to create an exclusive port of their classic cyberpunk adventure *Snatcher* in hopes that American audiences would dig up the extraordinarily cool characters and storyline. Popular in Japan, *Snatcher* was helmed by *Metal Gear* creator Hideo Kojima, but rather than being an action-stealth adventure like his more well known series, it's more in line with a PC-style adventure game. Unfortunately, when it finally came out, it was saddled with no exposure and carried a Mature ESRB rating – something retailers were not happy with after *Mortal Kombat* and other violent games got notice in Senate hearings. As such, the game flopped miserably, and it only remains in the hearts of the hardcore. But despite its rather linear nature, *Snatcher* remains one of the most engrossing video games ever created.

Snatcher begins on a depressing note – one third of the world's population has been wiped out due to the outbreak of a mysterious virus. Fifty years have passed and now a strange life form mysteriously appears out of nowhere in the city of Neo Kobe. These robotic beings, which look like the exoskeletons from the *Terminator* movies, disguise themselves as humans and kidnap (known as "snatching") high-ranking people, taking their place in society. An operation known as JUNKER is set up to combat the Snatchers, to find out where they came from, what their ultimate purpose is, and how it connects to the global catastrophe that destroyed so much of the Earth's populace.

Around this time, two humans are found frozen in cryogenic sleep in Siberia. The husband and wife are identified as Gillian and Jamie Seed, although neither can remember anything from before their extended nap. Although they attempt to resume life together, they regard each other as little more than strangers, and eventually separate. Gillian only has vague memories of the word "Snatcher", spurring him to join the JUNKER cause in hopes of triggering his memory.

When Gillian arrives at JUNKER HQ, you finally get to take control of the action. After getting introduced to your co-workers and issued your gun, you get assigned a cute little robot navigator named Metal Gear Mk.2, a miniaturized version of the Metal Gear robot from Kojima's other series. While this miniature robot doesn't have any weapons, it acts as a storage unit for graphical data, operates as a video phone, and also saves your game.

After being shown around, you receive an emergency call from fellow JUNKER Jean Jack Gibson, who thinks he has found some bad guys in a deserted factory. Gillian arrives there just in time to find poor Jean with his head twisted off. Following the leads left behind by his dead predecessor, Gillian attempts to uncover the Snatchers and their undoubtedly horrible secret. The whole story unfolds over the total of three acts.

Rather than the point-and-click interface of many adventure games, everything in *Snatcher* is operated through menus, like many Japanese adventure games. Basic commands such as

"Look", "Investigate" and "Move" are almost always available, plus you can go into your Possessions menu to use various items. It eliminates the pixel-hunting usually associated with games like this, but it brings up another awkward problem – you usually have to continuously select different options until you trigger a plot event. If you have a door in front of you, you can't just try to open it. You have to look at it, investigate it, knock on it, and shout until your characters actually decide to do something. There isn't even a "pick up" command – you get objects by repeatedly looking at/investigating them until Gillian decides to take it. There aren't even very many puzzles in the game, just lots of investigating.



This screen of Jean-Jack's decapitated corpse was heavily used to promote how edgy this game is.

Of course, there's a reason for this – *Snatcher* is closer to a "visual novel" as opposed to a typical Western adventure game like something from LucasArts or Sierra. (The subtitle for the Japanese PC Engine version is "CDROMantic", whatever that means.) The differences goes deeper than just the interface – many visual novels are quite linear and either have very simple puzzles or lack them entirely, because the emphasis is more on experiencing a story rather than actually playing a game. On the good side, it's rare to actually get stuck or lose. On the bad side, they're often quite brief, and some might say, insubstantial. For a long time, *Snatcher* was one of the only visual novel-style game released in America, although the popularity of similar games like *Hotel Dusk: Room 215* and *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* for the DS, released more than a decade after *Snatcher*, helped push the genre in America.

Like much of Kojima's work, *Snatcher* takes inspiration from several sci-fi movies. The city and basic plotline is straight out of *Blade Runner* (the intro even includes flames shooting out of buildings), the design of the Snatchers is obviously straight out of *The Terminator*, and there's obviously a huge influence from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Plus, bounty hunter Random Hajile looks astoundingly similar to both Sting's Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen from *Dune*, and Rutger Hauer's Roy Batty from *Blade Runner*. The Snatcher's ability to shoot projectiles from its mouth also seems to have been lifted from the classic anime series *Bubblegum Crisis*.

Snatcher tells an interesting story, despite its obvious rip-offs and contrivances, and it's all largely forgivable due to how well everything is presented. The fantastic graphics, the consistently marvelous soundtrack, and the high quality writing and voice acting, all work together to create an enthralling experience.

Part of what makes the game so interesting is the chemistry between Gillian and Metal Gear. While Gillian is mostly prone to fooling around as Metal Gear remains focused on business, they get into amusing arguments and random tangents during their investigation. Gillian is a bit of a lech, and it's mostly Metal Gear's job to keep him straight. Their banter is

not only highly amusing, but goes so far as to make them seem real. It also keeps the game from getting too dull, as Gillian is a much livelier character than the sullen protagonist of *Blade Runner*. Just as well illustrated is the relationship between Gillian and Jamie. You can call her up at any time to converse, but even as Gillian jokingly flirts with her, you can detect his sorrow as he awkwardly tries to be involved the woman he apparently once loved. Additional characters include Benson Cunningham, the boss of JUNKER; Katrina Gibson, Jean-Jack's nearly orphaned daughter; Napoleon, an eccentric informant; and Harry Benson, JUNKER's alcoholic mechanic.

It's not only the characters, but it's the atmosphere where *Snatcher* truly excels, as Neo Kobe City and its characters are all astoundingly well realized. While each location is rarely more than a simple static screen with some minor animations, the writing brings everything to life – each little nook and cranny will uncover something new and interesting about this future. The background of the world is further fleshed out by reading all of the historical documents found in the JUNKER supercomputer, which shows how much effort was put into making *Snatcher* a truly engrossing experience.

Snatcher also has elements of a long lost art form – the radio drama. Since so much of the game consists of still graphics, much of the emotion is conveyed through the voice acting and sound effects. Of course, the main reason all of this comes off so well is that Konami really put forward one of the best localizations in video game history. The text is extremely well written and is surprisingly well-tailored to English. And while so many American companies were using talentless hacks for their voice work, Konami hired some outstanding actors for every character in the game. When Gillian and Metal Gear attempt to enter an apartment, then Metal's sirens start blaring (easily one of the most striking sound effects in a video game), and the awesome "danger" music ("Pleasure of Tension") cuts in, and the two share a few quick words before bursting into the scene. It really gets the blood pumping, and it's impressive just because how low tech it is – this all consists of a few still visuals and some well timed sound work.

Of course, there are some odd things with the plot you just have to forgive. For example, if the Snatcher menace is so huge, then why is Gillian the only active JUNKER through the entire game? Furthermore, one of the game's most crucial plot points is kind of ruined when the game is played in English – it's much more obfuscated in Japanese lettering, which is something that probably should've been altered during localization. And of course, you have to be willing to forgive Kojima for using the old "amnesiac" trope to create a backstory, and while parts of it are predictable, others still remaining genuinely surprising.

In an attempt to add a bit of action, there are a few shooting scenes interspersed throughout. Playing with the control pad is very easy, as there is a 3x3 grid for you to target your cursor. The real fun starts if you're playing the Sega CD version and have the Justifier light gun that came with *Lethal Enforcers*. It really adds to the intensity when you get into a dangerous area, have to throw down your controller, and pick up the Justifier to shoot at whatever baddies may approach.

Other than the interface, and perhaps the inability to skip through the voiced dialogue segments, the only problem may be its length and lack of difficulty. Since there isn't really much in the way of traditional puzzles, you can get through the game without any help in about six hours. Furthermore, the linear nature doesn't exactly lend itself to replayability, but like a good novel or movie, it's worth revisiting over and over down the road.

Snatcher was originally released in 1988 on disk format for both the MSX2 and PC-8801. The MSX2 version was fan translated into Portuguese and English. The visuals occupy a small window less than a quarter of the size of the screen, limited to 16 colors. The commands appear to the right, and are activated by hitting numbers. The interface is a bit of a pain, because it's inconsistent and riddled with useless commands. Both versions are essentially identical, although the MSX2 version gives the option for either PSG sound, or enhanced music with the SCC cartridge, while the PC-88 version uses FM synth. It's the only version where the characters' lips

actually move when they talk. In the other versions, they're just static faces, probably to avoid the problem of lip synching any dubbed voices.

There are actually some interesting elements in these computer versions that are missing from the console ports. For instance, when trying to uncover important files, you find that Jean Jack Gibson's computer is password protected. The note you find on his body, which says "Search the House", is interpreted as investigating the model home in his dining room, at least in the console versions. In the PC versions, that's the clue to his password – it actually means hitting the "Home" key on your keyboard. Additionally, there's an option to crash the computer, which gives you a fake Game Over message. (Metal Gear chides you and offers to repair it, so you don't actually need to load a saved game.) Metal Gear also breaks the fourth wall during disk changes – for example, he'll state "The location data for Gillian's House is on Disk 2."

In 1992, *Snatcher* was ported to the PC Engine Super CD. All of the graphics have been enhanced to take advantage of the higher resolution. The interface is entirely menu driven by picking selection with the controller, and the script has been greatly expanded. All of the important cutscenes are voiced, and many songs feature CD audio music, which were taken from the previously released *Snatcher Zoom Tracks* arranged album. But the big addition is that it actually finishes up the story. The MSX2 and PC-88 versions ended at Act 2, on a rather painful cliffhanger. The PC Engine version adds Act 3, as Gillian and Jamie learn the truth behind their pasts, as well as the origin of the Snatchers. It's mostly non-interactive, with only a few investigation sequences and one shooting gallery, foreshadowing Kojima's taste for overly long cinemas. Still, it's a spectacular ending, even if it leaves room for a sequel that has yet to appear.



Richard Decker... errr... Gillian Seed meets up with Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen... errr, Random Hajile.

The Sega CD port is the only version released in English, and only in North America and Europe, with no Japanese publication. It's based off the PC Engine CD version, with a few extra scenes. The visuals are practically identical, because the redrawn graphics from the PC Engine version didn't use many colors to begin with, so they could easily fit in the Sega CD's limited color palette. There's an extended introduction with alternate shots of Neo Kobe City and a short scene with Gillian telling his wife that he's become a JUNKER. Similarly, the final act of the Sega CD version has been extended with a bit of exploration and a few more action scenes, giving a little more interaction. And JUNKER originally stood for "Judgment Uninfected Naked Kind & Execute Ranger" in the Japanese version, but it was changed to "Japanese Undercover Neuro Kinetic Elimination Ranger".

Despite the outcries against violence in video games at the time, very little of the gore has been censored. The only part missing are the twitching guts when you discover a dead dog. Various magazines printed a code that was supposed to uncensor the game (enter "KONAMI" in the Jordan computer) but in the end, it doesn't actually do anything. Some names have been changed – the computer Gaudi is now Jordan, the Tricycle is now called a Turbocycle, Alta Mila is called Alton Plaza, and the black market store Joy Division is now Plato's Cavern. Some minor aspects are changed for cultural reasons – in the Japanese versions, the food found in Gibson's stomach is whale meat, which became buffalo meat in English. In Alton Plaza, there's a sign that says "GREAT MEALS", but the neon lights are dimmed on some letters, so it reads "EAT ME". In the Japanese version, there's a sign that reads "PACHINKO", but only the letters "CHINKO" are lit ("chinko" is slang for "penis"). In a weird cultural alteration, Harry has a picture of Marilyn Monroe in all versions except the Sega CD, where he seems to have a portrait of Madonna. Katrina Gibson's age was changed from 14 to 18, and her quiz questions (which she administers before she lets you in the door to her house) have been changed from asking her three size measurements to the type of birthmark on her thigh. The design of the Snatcher has also been slightly changed, removing the glowing red eye so it looks a bit less like a Terminator.

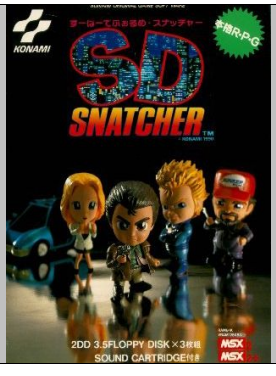
There's also a bit of nudity in the PC Engine version – when you kill a suspect named Lisa, her breasts fly out of her dress, and you can walk in on Katrina in the shower. You can also snatch her underwear (temporarily) in the PC Engine version. Gillian can also make lots of creepy advances towards Katrina, who is a bit on the young side. While Gillian can still hit on all of the females in the game, some of the racier aspects have been toned down (originally, when Katrina asks you to see your ID, one of your choices is "proof of manhood"). There's also a porno video you can find in Plato's Cavern that you can watch – there's no video, but there are plenty of sound effects. Gillian drools and Metal Gear freaks out. Still, a lot has been added, especially staff biographies, jokes, and a rather hilarious conversation with a sex line operator, all exclusive to this version. Most are accessed by either looking them up in JORDAN or calling up various numbers on Metal Gear's video phone.

A few years later, *Snatcher* was also ported to the PlayStation and Saturn, although both were only released in Japan. The visuals have also been "enhanced" to add more color and detail, and slightly redrawn in a few places, but aesthetically speaking, it actually looks a bit worse than the PC Engine and Sega CD versions. Both versions are also slightly censored – all of the nudity is gone, you can't see the dog's guts anymore, and Gibson's head now lies a few feet from his body, so you only see it for a split second before the view pans upward. The PlayStation version actually grays the screen to obscure some of the gore. It also puts a mosaic over a maggot covered body later on. These bits of censorship are not present in the Saturn version, but otherwise they're essentially the same. Both also feature two CG rendered videos that play at the title screen – one with Gillian chasing a Snatcher, and the other with Gillian meeting his wife and taking off in a Turbocycle, although it's missing the dialogue from the Sega CD version. These both reek of early '90s CG work and look terrible. There's also a new maze sequence when you're escaping from the Queen laboratory, although it's nothing particularly complicated or worthwhile. It was, however, mentioned in the original design documents, but was never implemented until this version.

Some of the more blatant American culture references were removed in the later versions. In the initial computer released, one of the masks you can buy at Joy Division is a *Predator* mask, which was changed into a generic mummy in later releases. Each also has different costumers at a bar named Outer Heaven. The computer versions and PC Engine version have various sci-fi and manga characters, like the alien from *Aliens*, Cornelius from *Planet of the Apes*, and Kamen Rider from, well, *Kamen Rider*. The Sega CD version replaces these with various Konami characters, like Simon and Dracula from *Castlevania*, Bill Rizer from *Contra*, and Sparkster from *Rocket Knight Adventures*. The Saturn and PlayStation versions stick with the Konami theme, but changes a few of them, like sticking in the cutesy baseball player from *Jikkyou Power Pro Baseball*.

There are actually many variations in the soundtrack between the different versions. Despite the occasional redbook audio song, the PC Engine version is similar to the PC-88 and MSX2 versions, despite the slightly different synth. However, there's a brand new intro song – the PC versions use a somber song called "Twilight in Neo Kobe City" while the console version use a jazzier theme called "One Night in Neo Kobe City".

The Sega CD version features the same arranged music, although the chiptunes sound different (and a bit better) than the other versions. However, several themes have been replaced with totally new pieces of music, including a song for Gillian's apartment. The PlayStation and Saturn version again uses most of the same arranged music during cutscenes, but the in-game soundtrack is almost completely new, and most of it pales in comparison to the original music. It's still moody, but it lacks the character of the original music. It's also too electronic, and in some places, a bit too weird, especially the exposition theme music that sounds like it uses bagpipes.



SD Snatcher

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: MSX2
Designer(s): Hideo Kojima
Developer: Konami

The original computer releases of *Snatcher* ended on a horrible cliffhanger, undoubtedly frustrating many gamers at the time. And yet, instead of continuing the storyline and making a sequel, Kojima decided the reboot the storyline in the form of *SD* (Super Deformed) *Snatcher*, a cutesy RPG. Even back then, the man was full of surprises.

The intro starts off mostly the same, as Gillian enrolls in JUNKER to hunt down Snatchers and learn about his past in the process. It hits a lot of the same major plot points as the original game – the death of Jean Jack Gibson, visiting Outer Heaven, meeting Napoleon, discovering the Queen Laboratory – but it's all done with substantial twists. You actually team up with Gibson for the first mission – it's only when you get separated that he meets with his untimely death. When you're following up on leads, you need to discover the identity of Napoleon, who apparently works in the movie biz. You need to run a small fetch quest to buy a movie ticket and some 3D glasses, then attend a movie theater, to learn his identity.

But other than key moments of the story, *SD Snatcher* greatly changes up the locations and events. There's a huge plot thread devoted to a cult that worships Snatchers, during which Gillian is framed for killing a human and kicked out of JUNKER. Furthermore, the Snatchers' secret laboratory is actually hidden underneath an amusement park. You need to track a Snatcher with a balloon on its head, making your way through various exhibits and fighting other Snatchers in silly costumes. Most importantly, it actually finishes off the story this time. The finale plays out similarly to Act 3 found in the later CD-ROM versions of the original game, but there are plenty of details that are different. Certain characters also play different or expanded roles. Harry still gives you Metal Gear (here a tiny, handled version called Metal Gear Petit) and also acts as a store to sell weapons and ammo. Jamie also works for JUNKER as a medic, acting as the game's hospital. Random plays a much larger role in the story, as Gillian meets up with him several times over the course of the game.

Of course, the basic framework has been completely changed from a visual novel to a Japanese RPG. The graphic style is similar to Falcom's early *Legend of Heroes* games, with tiny sprites moving rather choppily around the screen. However, *SD Snatcher* avoids many of the standard tropes, primarily by eliminating random battles. Enemies are plainly visible on the field, although given their erratic movements and the narrow passages, it's usually pretty hard to avoid combat.

When attacking an enemy, you enter a first-person combat mode. All of the enemies are robotic, usually variations on the Insector robots found in the original game. You can aim at different parts of the robot, thereby disabling various functions – take out the feet (or wheels) and its agility drops, or destroy its weapon to reduce its strength. Alternatively, you can just hammer away at its weak point for a potentially quicker victory. There are a dozen types of guns (of which you can carry three at once), each with different abilities and targeting ranges, in addition to special weapons like grenades and rocket launchers. Each weapon has limited ammunition, which can be bought either at JUNKER HQ from Harry, or obtained at any of the Joy Division stores found throughout. Sometimes you can find spare ammo during the dungeon crawls, but it's very possible to end up in a situation where you're complete unarmed. Occasionally you fight battles where an enemy takes a hostage, and accidentally shooting an innocent will result in an instant Game Over.



Gibson's horrifying death is now strangely hilarious.

It's an extremely innovative battle system, especially for 1989, and there hasn't been any game that's used anything quite like it. But in spite of its freshness, it still quickly grows tedious, especially since you only control a single character in combat. There's an auto-battle feature, where Metal Gear takes over the fighting for you, but it still feels like a slog at points. It doesn't help that the game is quite unbalanced and even a bit buggy, and there are often multiple dungeons right after another with little plot progression.

While the field graphics are alright, the mechanical designs of the enemies really stands out, as there are a bunch of extremely cool robotic baddies to destroy. When you fight against Snatchers, their skin and muscles are slowly carved away, revealing the metal skeleton beneath. Much of the game's humor comes from the extreme violence contrasted with the silly looking characters and otherwise light-hearted demeanor.

Like the original *Snatcher, SD Snatcher* was shipped on floppy disks, and the package includes an SCC cartridge for improved sound. Other than a few themes, most of the soundtrack is all new and the style is a bit more upbeat. Overall the music isn't particularly notable, but there are a few standout themes, particularly the intro theme, "Difficult Move" and the ending theme, "Coda".

Unlike the original *Snatcher*, *SD Snatcher* was only released for the MSX2, and only in Japan. In 1993, Dutch hacker group Oasis translated the game into English, making it one of the first documented cases of fan translations. The English isn't great – they even admitted they had to cut out a good chunk of the text to get it to fit – but it's easy to get the gist of everything.



Policenauts

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: PC-9821 / 3DO / PlayStation / Saturn
Designer(s): Hideo Kojima
Developer: Konami

For the longest time, *Policenauts* was considered Hideo Kojima's lost masterpiece. Although initially released in 1994 for the Japanese PC-9821 home computer, it was eventually ported to the 3DO, PlayStation and Saturn over the next few years. None of these were ever released outside of Japan. It wasn't until 2009 that a group of determined fan translators at Policenauts.net hacked the PlayStation version and released an English language patch, to the elation of thousands of fans around the world.

Why all the hype? At the time of its release, *Policenauts* was advertised as "The Next Generation of *Snatcher*". Released in English for the Sega CD, *Snatcher* had gained a cult audience in America and Europe, although the sales were beyond dismal, mostly due to it being released at the tail end of the system's lifespan. It wasn't until 1998 that Kojima's name entered the video gaming world with the release of *Metal Gear Solid*, which not only revived interest in the old 8-bit series, but in Kojima's other works as well. The price of *Snatcher* in the aftermarket shot up, and gamers everywhere wondered: just what the heck was that *Policenauts* thing?

The story begins on Earth, now called HOME, in Old Los Angeles in the year 2040. Jonathan Ingram is a private detective with a bit of an odd past. Thirty years ago, he was one of the five elite policemen chosen to serve aboard a brand new space colony called Beyond Coast – they were dubbed Policenauts. During a routine spacewalk his suit goes haywire and sends him flying off into the yonder. Assumed dead, he actually enters a state of hypersleep, suspended in time and floating through outer space. Fast forward to the present, and Jonathan is miraculously rescued, not having aged at all during his hibernation. The world has, however, left him behind (the resemblance to the tale of Taro Urashima, a fisherman who went underwater for three days and returned to the surface, finding that three hundred years had passed, is noted several times). His wife, Lorraine, had given up on him and moved on. The space colony had grown into its own nation, with its own culture and industry. With everyone having abandoned him, Jonathan takes up a job tracking down kidnappers, junkies and bail jumpers. It's far from glorious work, and pretty boring... until his ex-wife visits him with a case.

Lorraine stands in the dark, having aged while Jonathan has not, ashamed of what she's become and what she did to him. But she has no one else to turn to. Her new husband, Kenzo Hojo, has mysteriously disappeared. Her only clues are a pair of capsules, a leaf, and mention of the world "Plato". Jonathan is too stunned to take the case, but as soon as Lorraine leaves, her car explodes in a fiery blaze, leaving her to die in her old love's arms. Unable to come to terms with his past and intrigued by an obvious conspiracy, Jonathan leaves Old LA to follow the few leads – back onto Beyond Coast.

His first order of business is to visit his pal Ed Brown, himself an ex-Policenaut. Ed is stuck working in the basement of the Beyond Coast Police Department, an old relic ticking down the days until retirement. His fires are lit once his old friend Jonathan pops into town, and is determined to solve the same mystery. Naturally, once Ed shows Jonathan around the colony,

things seem more than a little bit fishy. Karen's ex-husband Kenzo was an employee of the Tokugawa Corporation, run by Joseph Sadaoki Tokugawa, another ex-Policenaut. Jonathan obviously suspects his old friend of corruption on multiple levels, but without any hard proof, there's little he can do. Piece by piece, Jonathan and Ed must put together the conspiracy, locate Kenzo Hojo, avenge Lorraine's death, and take down the Tokugawa conglomerate. Quite a tall order for two men, one of whom is, quite clearly, "getting too old for this shit". Complicating issues is Karen Hojo, Lorraine's daughter to her second husband. She's the spitting image of Lorraine in her youth, causing Jonathan a bit of confusion.



Jonathan and Ed muse about the many dangers of outer space.

There are a handful of other supporting characters as well. Meryl Silverburgh is one the squad members under Ed, a Terrestrial (a human born on Earth) who was previously a member of military unit FOXHOUND and has tried to put her experience to use in the police. However, the department is far more interested in utilizing the Advanced Police (or AP, officers in mechanized flying suits), so she ends up feeling useless. The character was later reused in *Metal Gear Solid*, since Kojima liked her so much, but in *Policenauts* she's a much more battle hardened veteran. Jonathan and Ed also have several run-ins with Tony Redwood, a member of the AP on Beyond Coast. Tony's a Frozener, a manufactured human designed specifically to work under the harsh conditions of outer space. As a result, he looks a bit like a creepy zombie. The rest of the original Policenauts, including the chief Gates Baker and Tokugawa lackey Salvatore Toscanini, also play minor roles.

Policenauts is structured much the same way as *Snatcher*, with the main difference being the interface. Instead of picking selections from a menu, you move a cursor around the screen, examining and interacting with objects by clicking on them. Like its spiritual predecessor, it's more of an interactive comic book than a game – there are very few puzzles, and progress revolves around searching as many objects as possible until the game lets you go forward. And again, there are first person shooting segments that break up the investigation portions and provide a bit of tension. Unlike the simplistic 3x3 grid from *Snatcher*, you can aim anywhere on the screen, and the fights are not only longer, but quite a bit more difficult too.

One of the tensest moments of the story is when Jonathan and Ed are charged with finding and defusing a bomb, located in a purse in the middle of a trendy boutique. Nearly all of the purses are bootlegs, but the bomb is hidden in an authentic one. Jonathan and Ed know what the real purse looks like, so it's up to them (and you) to examine and identify the fake purses by comparing images. It's nerve-wracking but also a bit silly that one of the only major puzzles is

on the same level as a children's magazine. After discovering the bomb, you naturally have to defuse it, as you follow very specific directions and use extremely steady coordination to take it down safely. It's one of the best moments in the game, if mostly because it shows Jonathan and Ed at their best. It's something of a ludicrous (if familiar) situation, and they trade barbs and various fourth-wall-breaking jokes when they fail (thankfully, a continue option prevents this sequence from becoming too frustrating).

Hideo Kojima has long been enthused by Hollywood movies, as evidenced by pretty much every single work he's ever done, ranging from the influence of *Blade Runner* in *Snatcher*, to the likenesses of several famous actors unofficially used in *Metal Gear 2*. Jonathan bears an astounding resemblance to Mel Gibson's character Martin Riggs from *Lethal Weapon*, complete with shaggy mullet (albeit with blue hair) and baseball jacket, while Ed Brown is a mirror of Danny Glover's Roger Murtagh. The homage to *Lethal Weapon* is obvious, but the relationship is more than skin deep. There's the liberal use of the saxophone in the soundtrack, usually accompanying both shocking and hilarious moments. There's Ed's hot daughter that flirts with Jonathan, complete with a jovial family dinner with terrible food. And Ed, wouldn't you know, can't bring himself to fire his gun due to a traumatic incident in his past (this isn't quite *Lethal Weapon*, but it's still a well known trope). There are tons upon tons of cop movies clichés here, but it pulls off the buddy cop thing extremely well, and there are plenty of humorous moments throughout, even though they mostly highlight how hilariously incompetent (and irresponsible) the heroes are. Jonathan is not only a hothead, but a bit of pervert, rudely commenting and hitting on every girl he meets, and occasionally finds ways to cop a feel, complete with boob jiggle (there's actually a whole person, a woman no less, devoted to these animations, according to the credits).

Still, even though *Policenauts* is an almost perfectly successful homage, something about its story seems empty. *Snatcher* is a cyberpunk detective story, with tons of mysteries and plenty of suspense. That, combined with the intensely elaborate *Metal Gear Solid*, has earned Kojima a reputation for creating mind-blowing twists and screwing intensely with the player's head. *Policenauts* is, on the other hand, merely a buddy cop movie with some sci-fi elements. It's a much more straightforward crime story, complete with evil corporations, corrupt police departments, and drug smuggling. And while it has an amazing setup, the story never really pays off, especially since the overall plot can easily be guessed by playing through the first Act. Furthermore, the game goes to great lengths to show how awesome the police mobile suits (dubbed "EMPS") are, but you certainly never get to pilot them. They just end up as enemies you fight in a few sequences near the end. What a missed opportunity.

Other small problems crop up too. There's absolutely no way to skip through any of the voiced dialogue. *Snatcher* didn't let you do this either, but it also had a lot less of it. And, like most Kojima games (and a lot of Japanese games in general), the script is detailed but overwritten. Plus, most of the actual detective work takes place in the first few Acts. There are technically seven chapters altogether, plus the Prologue, but the first two are by far the longest, and the rest consist mostly of cutscenes and shooting segments, much like the final act of *Snatcher*. And there are too many roadblocks, where you find progress halted because you forgot to exhaust all conversation options or missed something in the scenery. It's fantastic that there's so much depth in the game world, but after you start clicking through the same text over and over to find what you missed, it quickly grows annoying. It's even worse than *Snatcher* because the hotspots in the scenery aren't always visible or apparent. At least it's a bit longer, as an average play will take approximately 10 hours or so.

Still, even if it can be exhausting at times, *Policenauts* has an amazingly well realized world. Space, as it turns out, is pretty inhospitable for humans, creating a whole scheme of new diseases that must be dealt with. The best thing about *Policenauts* is the way it examines how humanity can survive in space – not only on a medical level, but a cultural level too. People born and bred on Beyond Coast are taught to act differently than their terrestrial brethren, and this plays out in the game. For example, each group speaks with a "Home" or "Beyond" accent –

and Beyonds are told to speak in a calmer, more thorough manner, while Homes speak louder and more emotionally. There are more than a few discussions about how the isolation of the colony affects things like crime, drug use, sex tourism and even the insurance industry. It's also pretty interesting that the colony was developed by a Japanese corporation, and there's lots of commentary towards the pros and cons of their work ethics – pretty interesting given that the characters are technically gaijin (or non-Japanese people). Of course, just as *Metal Gear Solid* was screaming "NUKES ARE BAD" at the top of its lungs, the prevailing theme in *Policenauts* is "SPACE IS BAD", which is pounded into your head on several occasions.

Policenauts also benefits from an excellent soundtrack, composed mostly by longtime Konami stalwart (and excellent guitarist) Motoaki Furukawa, along with Tappi Iwase, who would later go on to compose *Metal Gear Solid*. The main theme relies on a spooky, 14 note composition which should sound familiar to anyone who also played *Metal Gear Solid*, since it plays during the Konami logo sequence. It's a bit jazzy and funky, with lots of moody saxophone and guitar work, and much of it sounds like a Hollywood flick. Still, amidst all of the excellent music, some of the themes during the investigation sequences loop too quickly, and grow annoyingly repetitive, especially if you're stuck.



It wouldn't be a Kojima game without some kind of sexual harassment, would it?

Like many Japanese adventure games, *Policenauts* suffers a bit from its linearity, and its story may be somewhat disappointing for those expecting more off-the-wall fare. But its restraint is also one of its greatest assets, because it's not nearly as messy nor as convoluted as some of Kojima's other games, and it's got an extremely likable leading duo plus an immensely satisfying game world. It might not be a complete masterpiece, but it's still more than essential for adventure gamers and Kojima fans alike.

The fan translators did a fantastic job in not only localizing the text – which contains tons of medical and scientific terms, not exactly everyday reading – but keeping all of the (occasionally rather dirty) humor. They even went to great extents to fix some bugs and make some of the name spellings more consistent. The voiced dialogue is obviously left in Japanese, which is naturally for the best, because fandubs never, ever work. As of current, only the PlayStation version is translated, but the hackers are looking into the other versions, if technically feasible.

Nobody really has a solid idea why *Policenauts* was never translated in the first place. The Saturn version initially appeared on retail release lists, and there was even a promotional box mockup, but it dropped off pretty quickly. Kojima had once said in an interview that translation

work had started, but he wasn't happy with the lip synching in the cutscenes due to timing issues – a strange, idiosyncratic reason to deny an overseas release. It may have just been the fact that *Snatcher* for the Sega CD was a huge failure, and Konami didn't want to risk sinking huge amounts of money into translation and dubbing, only to get a small return, especially in a world marketplace that was looking for 3D action games, which *Policenauts* was not. After the release of *Metal Gear Solid*, Kojima was asked several times by the Western press about an English translation of *Policenauts*, but he shirked them all off, essentially saying that they should look forward to his new games and forget his old ones.

The original PC-9821 version differs substantially from the console releases. Although all versions come on CD, the console versions use full motion video for certain important cutscenes, while the PC version just uses animated stills, similar to *Snatcher*. The visuals in the PC version are all high resolution 640x400 static bitmaps with 16 colors, looking remarkably crisp and surprisingly colorful, despite the dithering. The console versions consist of scanned cels, with much higher color count and detail, but at a lower 320x240 resolution. For example, the scientist Victor has an AI named Gorby to help him analyze samples. In the PC-9821 version, he looks like a polygonal Mikhail Gorbachev, as he should, but it's made completely generic in the console versions. The bomb defusing sequence is much harder in the PC-9821 version, because the maze you have to guide the block through is viewed at a slight angle, making it difficult to see the edges. The viewpoint was changed in the console versions.

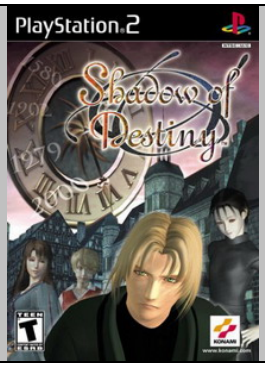
The character designs are slightly different, with the console version using the redesigns that animation studio AIC created for the cutscenes. Most of the scenes look approximately the same, but a few were completely redrawn, especially the biomort storage facility. The PC-9821 version looks heavily inspired by the 1982 thriller *Coma*, with suspended bodies in mid-air, but perhaps it was too graphic for the consoles. The PC-9821 version also features little portraits at the bottom of the screen during voiced dialogue, without subtitles, just like *Snatcher*. These were removed for the console versions, although it adds in text.

The PC-9821 version also has a longer script, with some events that play out slightly differently. For example, during the bomb search sequence, Ed's daughter arrives on the scene with an "authentic" purse, before her dad confesses that it's fake. In the console versions, she's nowhere to be found, and Ed just confides to Jonathan about his grievous error. There's nothing really major that was removed, so it's not like console gamers are missing huge chunks of the story. The console versions also introduce story summary screens, which bring the player up to speed upon reloading a saved game, an element carried forward to *Metal Gear Solid*.

The opening is a bit different too. The console versions start with a flashback that shows Jonathan's accident, before moving onto the opening credits. The PC version doesn't have this and it moves straight to the credits, allowing the player to determine the backstory through the news clippings in Jonathan's office. The opening theme is also completely different – the PC version uses the (outstanding) track titled "Old LA 2040", while the other versions use a variation on the main theme "End of the Dark". "Old LA 2040" can only be heard in the console versions on Hojo's CD rack, which acts as an in-game sound test.

There are also slight differences between the console versions. The first release was the 3DO version, oddly enough, which used some crappy compression for the video cutscenes. There's also a promotional retail release called *Policenauts Pilot Disc*, which has a short demo along with tons of artwork and storyboards, documentation from the designers, and a full database containing a glossary of all important terms. The second release was the PlayStation version, which has the best looking videos, but these only run at a rather choppy 15 FPS. A supplementary release called the *Policenauts Private Collection* was later released, which includes nearly all of the goodies from the *Pilot Disc*, plus the script and storyboard. Since the *Pilot Disc* was meant to be a demo it dances around spoilers, but the *Private Collection* has no problem revealing the entire game. The Saturn version is the final release, and comes in a 3 CD package with a hardcover art booklet. The video looks slightly worse than the PlayStation version, but it's also a bit smoother. On the Saturn *Policenauts* also contains a few extra scenes and slightly

modified story elements, plus light gun support for the shooting segments, making it the most comprehensive of the console releases. Finally, it also has most of the goodies from the *Private Collection*, including the ability to look up any term in the glossary via hyperlinks.



Shadow of Destiny (US) / Shadow of Memories (Europe/Japan)

Initial Release Date: 2001
Platforms: PlayStation 2 / Xbox / IBM PC / PSP
Designer(s): Junko Kawano
Developer: Konami

Time travel stories hold a universal appeal. When it comes to video and computer games, the text adventures *Time Zone* and *Timequest* send you through various time periods, either collecting artifacts or correcting historical happenstances. *Chrono Trigger*, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, and *Onimusha 3*, all follow the basic concept of manipulating persons or objects in the past to achieve your goals in the present. By far the most interesting example of gameplay-relevant time travel for a long time was delivered by LucasArts' comedy adventure *Maniac Mansion: Day of The Tentacle*. The main drive around most of the puzzles was to change something in the past, so that problems would be solved in the future. *Day of the Tentacle* would stay the king of time travel in games for a whole eight years, until Konami released *Shadow of Destiny* (known as *Shadow of Memories* in Japan and Europe) for the PlayStation 2 in 2001.

The story of *Shadow of Destiny* opens with a murder – your own. After dozing off while having a cup of coffee, the protagonist, Eike Kusch, gets assaulted as soon as he leaves the cafe, knowing neither who killed him nor why. However, instead of resting in peace for eternity, Eike finds himself in a surreal room, summoned by the androgynous Homunculus, who grants him the opportunity to go back in time to prevent his untimely demise. After avoiding the immediate threat, he soon realizes that there's a major force after his life, and he seems to be destined to die. Therefore, he heads on to a journey through four time periods, going as far back as 1580, to change his eternal fate.

Generally, *Shadow of Destiny* can be considered an adventure game, in that there are no action elements and you're supposed to solve problems using your head. However, most of the tasks consist only of talking to the right person at the right time. Sometimes you are required to use the right item or give a proper dialogue response, but almost all of those puzzles – if they even can be called that – are overly simple, hardly imposing any challenge. While such adventure games are still popular in Japan, usually taking the form of visual or sound novels, the genre was considered poison in North America, especially in the console market. The 3D graphics and the Western setting are probably the only things that made overseas publishing possible.

So, most of the time, you're just walking between places to gather hints, talk to people, and find the occasional item. A map and a compass guide you through the town, and if you still get lost, Eike also keeps a notebook so that you can check your current objective. The game's specialty comes into place when you notice that it's just not the right time to solve your problem. Here, you use your ability to shift time, a power that Homunculus has bestowed on you in form of the "digipad", a pocket-sized device that lets you select the time period you want to travel to. Obviously, you can't travel to any old time period. Rather, you need to have some kind of "personal connection" to the time. For example, you can only travel to a certain character's ancestor's time after you find an old photograph of him.

You have to take care not to spend too much time in the past, though. Your "present" time is constantly passing, and if you fail to get back before your "fated hour" – that is, the time you're supposed to die according to fate – you'll vanish into oblivion (this is where the game's model of time travel can be criticized for inconsistency, as "San Dimas Time", named after Bill and Ted's hometown in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*, usually doesn't make any sense). This is also the only way to truly disappear – after every "normal" death, Homunculus resurrects you to his strange room in the void between time, not without mocking you for your failures, but also giving valuable hints as to what you did wrong.

Seconds are normally ticking by in real time, but cutscenes and dialogues have a set amount of time they're supposed to take. This gets added to your clock afterwards, even if you should choose to skip the scene, which only becomes possible in later playthroughs. But the clock isn't everything you have to pay attention to – your time machine also consumes one of ten energy units for each travel. So you have to look out for new units lying around every once in a while, lest you run out of charges, and are stuck in your current time period until you find some more. However, the biggest puzzles in *Shadow of Destiny* lie in your influencing the present by changing the past. The question of "what if" usually provides the answer to your problems. One of your very first assassinations is executed from an ambush behind a tree. If it weren't for that tree, the murderer couldn't have assaulted you. So what do you do?



The environments are well-designed, although the visuals do show their age.

Sometimes you can make choices as to how exactly you're manipulating the past. Most of them don't have any effect, while some can lead to your repeated death. There are, however, a few major choices that determine the outcome of your adventure. But don't worry, the game makes it clear when you're making an important decision. All in all, there are six different endings (plus variants of some), each of which unveils its own fragment of the truth to the greater mystery (in the PC version, voice-over files have also been discovered for one more ending that isn't accessible in the final game). So to really learn what's going on, you need to see all of them, multiplying the time it takes to truly complete the game. The initial playthrough barely takes any more than 3 to 4 hours, and when you're able to skip cutscenes later on the whole story can be finished in far less time. Many of the minor choices also lead to quite a few encounters and cutscenes you can miss. The game actually keeps track of every single sequence, and after it's finished once, presents a total percentage of scenes seen per chapter, so completionists will probably have to invest quite a lot of time before they can feel satisfied.

Music is kind of a rare commodity. Most of the time, you'll walk in silence, to the ticking of a clock, or to a pretty low-key standard melody. The sound effects resonate artificially, while the voices are fitting if not always quite convincingly acted. Homunculus sounds especially creepy,

and is voiced by Charles Martinet, of all people, in the original English release, whom most should know from the immortal phrase "It's a me! Mario!" from the Nintendo 64 days. Eike sounds a bit like a wuss, though. As an interesting note, the "voices" of the cats in the game are done by Junko Kawano, the designer and producer of the game.

In the end, it's hard to explain why *Shadow of Destiny* is such a great game. It's short, it's not very polished, and there's no such thing as a challenge, either to your reflexes or your brain. Its strengths clearly lie in the atmosphere. While the story and characters are already heavily inspired by Goethe's works, Lebensbaum (literally "Life Tree"), the town where it takes place, is depicted as a typical German old towne. In fact, the developers' inspiration can be clearly traced back to Rothenburg ob der Tauber. Its marketplace with the city hall, and especially the Plönlein, one of the most famous road partings in the world, are more than hinted at.

Furthermore, the intriguing, complex storyline is rarely equaled amongst video games. Part of this is certainly thanks to inspiration from classical literature (a working title for the game even translated to "Night and Day of Walpurgis", referencing an event in Goethe's *Faust*), from which it borrows the themes of fate and the artificial creation of life, but the modern time travel elements give the themes covered a whole new twist. However, by no means can it be called plagiarism. Knowing *Faust* might foreshadow some of the plot twists, but that only helps to enhance the experience, since not everything plays out like you'd expect.

Shadow of Destiny first appeared on the PlayStation 2 when developers had just barely managed to make the games look better than the Dreamcast. The characters, while sporting a comparably high polygon count, can't escape that certain plastic doll look that was rather common at the time. The surroundings are even more of a mixed bag. While most of the few interiors feel authentic to each respective time period, outdoor objects like houses, cars and trees are composed of noticeably fewer polygons, and the textures range from astonishingly high-res to utter garbage. Each time period is indicated by its own color scheme. In medieval times everything has a sepia tone, 1902 is black and white, and the 1970s are just a little bit pale, while Eike remains the same color in all, which makes for a unique artistic style.

In 2002, the game was ported to PC which, other than obviously higher resolutions and a few (underwhelming) additional graphical effects, doesn't add much. Later that year, an Xbox version was released exclusively in Europe which, rather than improving the visuals, brought new problems, like a less stable framerate and occasional disjointed textures, making it look almost worse than the PS2 version. It also lacks some promotional videos that could be unlocked on the PS2.

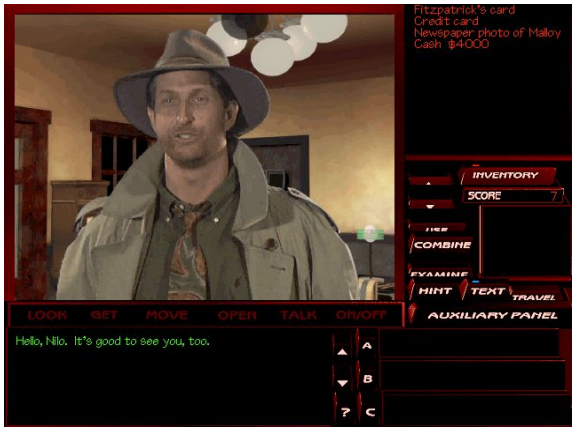
Shadow of Destiny seemed all but forgotten until 2009, when suddenly Konami announced a new port for the PSP. This handheld version looks great, almost on par with the PS2 game. The framerate doesn't quite keep up when walking around town, and purists may count missing polygons in the interiors, but it's quite impressive how Konami's programmers pushed the PSP. Surprisingly, the entire game was even re-dubbed. The new voices sound similar enough, and the text is slightly polished, but in turn it sacrifices quite a bit of the original's cheesy value without being really that much of an improvement. Otherwise it remains mostly the same, with the only additions being a new FMV introduction and some annoying tutorials.

In 2008, Konami published *Time Hollow*, a visual novel for the DS based around time travel, also written by Junko Kawano. Many thought it would be a follow-up to *Shadow of Destiny*, but the games have little in common beyond using time travel as a plot device. Instead of a literature-inspired setting, we get a stereotypical anime story, complete with a whole bunch of teenagers and their everyday problems. The plot, revolving around the disappearance of the main character's parents, is actually more akin to *The Butterfly Effect*, in that it deals with your actions not having the expected consequences, so that you have to correct your doings again and again. It's also much more linear, and the gameplay consists of little more than clicking all over until the next interesting story portion, reading all the irrelevant banter that pops up. It's not awful, but it certainly isn't what you'd expect from a game that is referred to as a "spiritual successor" to *Shadow of Destiny*.

Tex Murphy Mysteries

Back in the '90s, Access Software was largely known for its popular *Links* series of golf games. But their other big entries into the annals of computer gaming history are the *Tex Murphy* series of detective adventure games. You wouldn't know it offhand, though, because it wasn't until the fifth and final game that they even branded them as such. There are five titles in the *Tex Murphy* series – *Mean Streets*, *Martian Memorandum*, *Under a Killing Moon*, *The Pandora Directive*, and *Overseer*.

All of the *Tex Murphy* games take place in San Francisco in the early 21st century. World War III has caused significant devastation to both the city and the world at large, with the radioactive after effects causing mutations amongst the general populace. Although Tex and many others are immune, the less fortunate are not, resulting in a population of mutants. The prejudice against the mutant inhabitants, along with the associated class struggle, often plays a large role in the stories, although Tex is firmly on their side, seeing how he's usually destitute and lives on their side of town. Like most dystopias, the San Francisco of the future is vaguely inspired by the world of *Blade Runner*, complete with hovercars and other bits of technology. Despite its setting, it has a very classic noir feel to it, clearly inspired by both Raymond Chandler and Phillip K. Dick novels, as well as '50s detective films, complete with wordy internal monologues and jazzy soundtracks. However, they don't entirely play it straight – all of the *Tex Murphy* games have a somewhat unique sense of humor, in the way that they lovingly parody detective noir while still keeping within its conventions. You wouldn't exactly know this from looking at the covers, though, which appear to be entirely serious.



Tex Murphy, Ace Investigator! But not really – he's kind of a screw up.

Since its inception, the series has consistently pushed technological boundaries. *Mean Streets*, released in 1990, features 256 color graphics, as well as digitized graphics and speech, even on lousy DOS-based PCs. *Martian Memorandum* upped the ante by using selected bits of full motion video. The third game, *Under a Killing Moon*, where the series really comes into its own, is a full multi-CD adventure with tons of live action footage.

One thing that has been kept consistent is the focus on digitized characters and voices, all utilizing real actors. Although Tex only appears briefly in close-ups in the first two games, he's played by the same actor, designer/accountant Chris Jones, as the later FMV games. It's cool that Access kept this the same through the series, although this doesn't apply to some of the other recurring characters. It's interesting to see how the series evolved from a boundary pushing action/adventure/flight sim combo, to a C-grade adventure game, to a high profile multimedia game designed specifically to compete with big name titles like *Wing Commander*.



Mean Streets

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: IBM PC / Commodore 64 / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Brent Erickson, Brian Ferguson, Chris Jones
Developer: Access Software

Mean Streets (no connection to the Scorsese movie) begins with Tex accepting a case from a classy looking dame named Sylvia Linsky. Her father Carl Linsky, a professor at the University of San Francisco, was found dead after having leapt off the Golden Gate Bridge. The police ruled it a suicide – Sylvia thinks it's murder, and it's up to Tex to investigate. As Tex gets further into the mystery, he realizes that Carl's death is in some way related to his research in neuroscience, and it's up to him to stop a plot that could fry the brains of everyone in the city.

Mean Streets tries to combine several different genres into one, including a flight sim, an adventure game and an action game. When you begin, you're given a vague explanation of your mission, as well as some tips to "read the manual" for all of your leads. In order to get from place to place, you hop in your hover car, which you must pilot from a first person perspective. There are a whole bunch of awkward controls to use – using + and – keys to accelerate and decelerate, for example – but thankfully there's a navigational computer, which lets you input specific codes to get to various places. All you need to do is type them in and set it on autopilot. Once you reach your destination, you still need to land, which is thankfully pretty easy considering it's impossible to crash. Once you get out of your vehicle, you'll either meet with the person in question and interrogate them, or break into the facility to investigate.



The investigation sequences are horribly ugly, especially in the IBM PC version (pictured above).

When questioning suspects, you need to type in your inquiries, which is a bit unnecessary, considering most of the topics are already listed in the manual. Sometimes you need to threaten or bribe people to cooperate. Sometimes you can also get kicked out if you act inappropriately, but it's easy enough to come back to the conversation as if nothing happened. Your secretary Vanessa and informant Lee are also available at any time for additional information.

Whenever you break into a location, the game changes to a third-person view, where you (awkwardly) control Tex with the arrow keys. Whenever you walk next to something you can

interact with, a menu pops up with a variety of commands. The whole thing is remarkably unintuitive. Once you begin to poke around, you'll invariably set off a security alarm, which gives you limited time to search the premises to find some way to shut it off.

At a few points in the game, including bounty hunting missions to get more cash, you'll enter side scrolling action sequences. These are all remarkably simple, as you simply walk to the right, shoot your gun, and duck under enemy fire. For some reason, the enemies shatter like glass when killed, which shows some of the odd humor the series eventually became known for.

All of the character portraits are digitized faces with limited animation. The PC version supports 256 color VGA graphics, which was impressive for when it was released. It also utilizes technology called "RealSound", which allows for speech to be played without any extra hardware. It's decent enough, especially for the IBM PC speaker, considering how ear scratchingly painful it usually is, although it still doesn't touch the quality of an actual sound card.

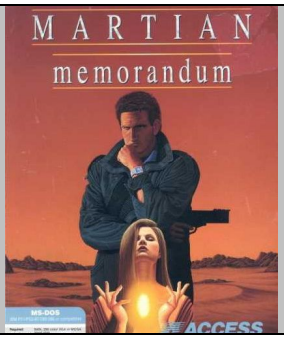
Mean Streets' major flaw is that it's just far too overdone. It's like someone said, "Wouldn't it be awesome if you could play as a private investigator, except it'd be totally realistic, in that you can pilot your ship anywhere, and interrogate people, and break into places and solve puzzles, and even shoot people!" And maybe that could've worked out, but in reality, none of these aspects are really all that impressive. The flying is slow, complicated, and ultimately made redundant by the autopilot anyway. The adventure scenes are horribly low grade, and the action scenes are amateurish. Most of the investigation just amounts to a long fetch quest, as you slowly saunter from location to location, talking to people and trying to uncover eight missing passcards to stop Linsky's project, and grab the necessary items to find them.



One of the flight sim sections of Mean Streets. (IBM PC version)

So yes, it is quite tedious, but that's mostly just because it hasn't aged very well. When it came out, with its ambitious design and high-tech graphics, it was lauded by both critics and gamers, winning the Best Adventure Game award of 1990 by Video Games and Computer Entertainment magazine, and even appearing on the Top 150 PC Games of All Time in a 1996 issue of Computer Gaming World. Taken in that perspective, it's a halfway remarkable game, if mostly more in principle than execution. Since the story was eventually remade into *Overseer* (the fifth and last *Tex Murphy* game), there's really no reason to play this outside of the novelty.

Mean Streets was published for the IBM PC, Commodore 64, Amiga and Atari ST. The Commodore version is obviously the weakest of the bunch, because it really can't handle the digitized graphics at all. The IBM version has the best looking digitized graphics, but all of the sprites in third person sequences look completely ghastly. The Atari ST and Amiga versions are essentially identical, and while the digitized portraits aren't quite as nice, the rest of the graphics are quite a bit better than the PC version.



Martian Memorandum

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Brent Erickson, Chris Jones
Developer: Access Software

Taking place a few years after the events of *Mean Streets*, Tex is once again contracted to find a missing person. This time, he's employed by Marshall Alexander, a billionaire mogul, to find his daughter Alexis. Mr. Alexander is the head of a company called Terraform, which is in the business of colonizing Mars. Tex eventually discovers that Alexis has knowledge of a mystical object called the Oracle Stone, which is somehow related to a long lost Martian civilization. Only by traveling to the red planet and investigating its seedy underground can Tex not only recover Alexis, but save Mars as well.



Big Dick's Casino, eh? The humor isn't exactly high caliber.

All of the flight sim and action portions from *Mean Streets* have thankfully been cut out, leaving the developers to focus on the core adventure aspects. It was definitely the right move, because it's a much more focused game, but it still feels pretty amateurish when compared to LucasArts or Sierra games. The graphics, while 256 color VGA, are remarkably ugly.

The interface is now largely mouse driven but it's remarkably clunky. Tex is hard to control, since there's no pathfinding, and he can only walk, slowly, in straight lines. The only sounds for most of the game are Tex's loud footsteps, since there's no music. In order to go from room to room, you need to select the "Go To" command and then point at the exit. Thankfully, there's a quick "Travel" button that lets you teleport to most of the major locations. There are tons of items that are maybe a pixel or two in size, making it easy to pass over items, but at least a built-in Hint function will advise you of all of the objects in the room and how to interact with them. The puzzles themselves aren't terribly difficult, other than a few annoying trial-and-error segments, and a maze set in a series of air ducts.

Interrogating people still plays a large role, which has been a bit streamlined. Nearly everyone you meet is hostile at first, requiring that you navigate a series of multiple choice responses to get them to cooperate. If you screw up and they kick you out, no biggie – just

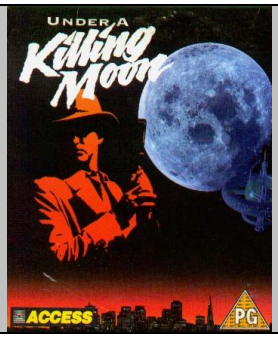
reenter the area and they'll act as if nothing happened. Most of the characters speak through digitized video and speech, using the same RealSound technology as *Mean Streets*. There's quite a bit more of it here, making it notable for a disk based game from 1991. Of course, the acting and dialogue is awful, but that's to be expected. Not all of the characters are voiced, though, and once you pass the initial series of responses, the rest of the interrogation is all text based.



The digitized graphics show that the game doesn't take itself too seriously.

Despite all of its issues, at least Access managed to flesh out the setting. Post apocalyptic San Francisco is an interesting place to set a mystery, especially when you stick in all of the mutants. Some of them have strange growths sticking out of them while others just look like animals. The comedy of the later games still isn't quite apparent, apart from some of the ridiculous death scenes, which combines digitized actors with cartoonish violence. Some of the characters you interrogate are pretty silly, like the blond trophy wife who's very clearly a hairy dude in drag. The writing is overwrought, but not in a good way, and seems like it was done by a high schooler who'd just read *The Maltese Falcon* and thought it was the most amazing thing ever.

Martian Memorandum is hardly one of the stand-out games of the era, although that's mostly attributed to the terrible interface and low production values. But its unique story makes it somewhat worthwhile if you can tolerate it, especially if you've played Tex's later games and want to play catchup.



Under a Killing Moon

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Aaron Conners, Chris Jones
Developer: Access Software

Tex Murphy disappeared from the gaming world for three years, only to resurface unexpectedly at the end in 1994 in *Under a Killing Moon*. Of course, three years is forever in the computer world, with sound cards, CD-ROM drives, and SVGA graphics becoming standard since the dark old days of *Martian Memorandum*. With this vastly improved technology, Access helped realize their vision started with the first two titles. FMV games were certainly not new to the

market, but *Under a Killing Moon*, along with Origin's *Wing Commander III* and Sierra's *Phantasmagoria*, sought to advance the genre beyond mere shooting galleries or choose-your-own-adventures.

The game begins with the disembodied voice of the "Big P.I. in the Sky" (played by James Earl Jones) as he laments to his Smithers-esque partner that Tex Murphy is prophesized to save the world. (Spade? Marlowe? Sorry, both dead.) Tex is, of course, down on his luck, and living in a pathetic excuse for an office. He's just about to hit rock bottom until he solves a mystery at the local pawn shop. With a renewed sense of confidence (and the cash to actually purchase a fax machine), Tex is quickly contacted by a mysterious client, who wishes him to steal a very particular statue. Tex doesn't realize it, but this job soon involves him with a cult obsessed with genetic purity, and their plans to destroy billions of people via an orbiting space station. And naturally, Tex is the only one that can stop them. The story takes place over six days, although two of the days focus primarily on secondary mysteries that have little to do with the main plot.

Looking at the cover, you'd never know it was part of the series – the box never made any mention of it, and it's not until you begin the game that Tex makes some references to his past cases. A few characters make reappearances too, like the snarky cop Mac Malden and the rather unhinged Lowell Percival, as well as a few brief appearances by Sylvia (from *Mean Streets*), who married (and quickly divorced) Tex, leaving him particularly jaded towards women. The game introduces several new characters whom are friends of Tex. These include Rook Garner, the cranky pawn store owner; Chelsee Bando, the cute newspaper saleswoman; and Louie LaMintz, the owner of the local diner. Tex spends much of the early chapters exploring the slums of Old San Francisco where his office is located, and chatting with the locals for clues.

All exploration is done in the first person perspective, with fully 3D movement, in what Access dubbed the "Virtual World" engine. The amount of control is unparalleled compared to any of the first person shooters at the time, and even substantially more detailed than *Ultima Underworld*, its closest equivalent. And it looks monumentally better, on several orders of magnitude. The detail put into each and every room is unparalleled for any game at the time, and looks remarkably crisp due to the high resolution. By default it takes place in the small onscreen window, but you can modify it to run smaller (in case you had a slow system back in the day) or make it run almost full screen, which causes the interface to disappear every time you move. There are numerous places you can point out issues, like the occasional 2D bitmap instead of a 3D model, or the texture warping when looking up or down, but these are more than forgivable given the era.

You switch between "Investigation" and "Movement" modes via the space bar. In Investigation mode, you stand still and control the cursor to interact with the environment. In Movement mode, you use the mouse to walk around, and use the keyboard to look around. It's a bit awkward, especially for anyone used to FPS controls, but it's only really a problem in the one section where you infiltrate an office, and need to avoid the constant patrols of security robots. There's also a quick-travel option, which lets you visit almost any accessible area instantly, provided you aren't in a dangerous situation.

The biggest problem is one found in most adventure games but taken to an extreme – instead of combing a few simple 2D screens hunting for objects, here you're stumbling around for a few steps, sweeping the screen, then walking again, repeating until you've fully explored the area. Most of the puzzles really aren't that difficult, but there are lots of sticking points because you just simply can't find the required objects. Thankfully, the cursor will automatically highlight items you can pick up or use, so you don't just have to click everywhere.

Under a Killing Moon also realizes that its potential audience – people with new PCs that wanted to show off the CD-ROM FMV technology – might not necessary be into the actual puzzling solving aspect of the game. Therefore, there's an extremely nice hint system built-in, which keeps tracks of your current progress and will give you direction towards your next step. Every hint will deduct from your score, but there's rarely a shortage of points, so it's reliable as long as you don't use it haphazardly. If that weren't enough, the game comes preloaded with an

"Easy" profile, which includes save games for every chapter. Although it's certainly not the best way to play the game, at least it lets you skip some of the more annoying segments (the office infiltration, the shell game) if you just want to get on with the story.



By default, the main exploration window is only part of the screen, but it can be enlarged.

The dialogue events are handled very similarly to *Martian Memorandum*. Whenever you meet a new character, you need to complete a dialogue sequence before you can interrogate them. Instead of displaying your exact dialogue choices, though, you're given one of three "attitudes" that determine how you will respond, all of which change given the situation. Like *Martian Memorandum*, a lot of these just come down to guessing the correct responses, and retrying from scratch until you stumble upon the right order, but they're rarely too obtuse.

The full motion video looks remarkably decent too, especially when other FMV games tended to suffer from dithering, compression artifacts, or annoying interlacing. It's a little choppy, but it's also remarkably crisp, because the actors are independent from the background. Like a lot of FMV games, there aren't any physical sets and all of the scenes are computer rendered, which looks cool in real time but perhaps a bit dated in stills.

But one of the greatest strengths is that the developers knew not to go overboard with the video. In *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery* (released over a year later), there are whole conversations that go on for five straight minutes, with little interaction other than occasionally clicking new topics. *Under a Killing Moon* makes sure its movies are direct and to the point, and thankfully lets you skip through dialogue line by line, where a lot of other games either made you watch the whole scene, or skip it in its entirety.

It's far more than just the technology that makes *Under a Killing Moon* so intriguing and it's mostly because Tex's personality is far more fleshed out. You got hints of his voice from the lengthy monologues before each location in the earlier games, but here he's a jaded, sarcastic, slightly goofy yet remarkably likable protagonist. A lot of this has to do with Chris Jones' portrayal of Tex – it's pretty clear that he's not a professional actor, and can't really pull off the whole "tough guy" act. But he brings the subtle swagger of someone who really wishes he were a tough guy, and that's the whole part of his charm. His internal monologues, spoken with an echo, are routinely hilarious, even when commenting on the most mundane objects.

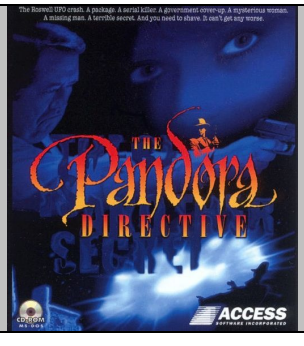
There are tons of details in each room, and like most adventure games, part of the fun is just looking at everything and seeing what kind of silly comments you can elicit. Look at a fire extinguisher and Tex reveals that it's actually painted on by the cheapass landlord to fool the one-eyed building inspector. Check out the chair in his office for a brief flashback of Sylvia awkwardly trying to seduce the upholstery repairman, and failing rather hilariously (all right in front of Tex, too). Look at a piano and see him pathetically try to tap out a tune.



Tex deals with many suspicious characters in his investigations.

Most of the actors are played by unknowns, with the "big talent" names consisting of Brian Keith, Margot Kidder, and Russell Means playing minor roles. (This isn't including James Earl Jones' voiceovers, which are brief but funny.) The weird thing is, they actually do a pretty decent job. If the whole thing had been played straight, it would've been a disaster, but since everyone involved seemed to realize that it's essentially a C-level production, they ended up having a lot of fun, and it's mostly missing cringeworthy acting that tends to plague FMV games.

Since the game came out on four CDs, there's lots of annoying disc swapping whenever you jet from location to location. Thankfully, Access built in functionality for people with multiple CD drives, which was practically unheard of in 1994. With today's massive amounts of hard drive space, though, you can just copy your CDs to a local drive and then map them in DOSBox, eliminating the need for any swapping. Very handy!



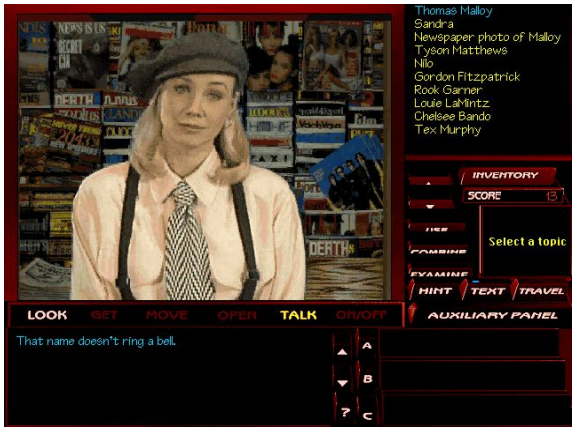
The Pandora Directive

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Aaron Conners, Chris Jones
Developer: Access Software

Two years after the release of *Under a Killing Moon*, which proved to be a critical and financial success, Access released its sequel, *The Pandora Directive*. Taking place just a few months after the events of the previous game, Tex hasn't exactly found fame and fortune after saving the planet, but his name has caught the attention of one Gordon Fitzpatrick. Played by Kevin McCarthy, Gordon contracts Tex to hunt down a missing person named Thomas Malloy, which seems simple enough... until you eventually learn that Mr. Malloy is involved with the aftermath of the Roswell Crash and the various technologies salvaged from the alien ship. In addition to becoming entangled with an NSA cover-up, Tex becomes involved with Malloy's daughter to find several puzzle boxes which supposedly unlock the mystery of this "Pandora Device".

In 1996, the whole "Area 51" theme hadn't been beaten into the ground with various other elements of pop culture (as seen in TV shows like *The X-Files*, or games like *Perfect Dark* and

Deus Ex), so its exploration of the myth was novel for the time, but wasn't so heavily ingrained in conspiracy lore that it becomes clichéd or boring. The game also highlights Tex's rocky relationship with Chelsee Bando, the comely newspaper saleswoman from *Under a Killing Moon*.



The sympathetic mutant Chelsee is Tex's love interest through most of the series.

Since only a few months have passed since *Under a Killing Moon*, many of the locations and characters are more or less the same. Tex now has a larger office and can explore a few areas of his apartment building, while the surrounding area of San Francisco has a few new tenants, including a fancy (if seedy) nightclub and a chocolate bar opened by Clint the bum from the last game. Since *The Pandora Directive* runs on the same engine, it might seem cheap to reuse the same assets, but it's almost like returning to a place you've been on vacation to, just wandering around familiar areas to see what's changed, or catching up with familiar faces.

Plus, while you still spend a lot of time in this area, the scope of the game has drastically widened. *The Pandora Directive* does everything a sequel should – it's a much longer game, with a more intricate, focused plot (which also cuts back on some of the slapstick from the previous game – either a pro or a con, depending on your perspective). There are now nine chapters as opposed to six, and the entire game comes on six CD-ROMs. (The multiple drive mapping returns, thankfully.) There are more locations, more puzzles, and of course, many more cutscenes. Unfortunately, many of them are the kind that you need to watch from beginning to end without skipping them, and some of them can get relatively long. Still, it's hard to complain since practically everything has been improved so much despite using the same technology.

The game's advertising makes a huge deal about the three different paths through the adventure. "Mission Street", as it's termed, has Tex taking the high road and playing the good guy, which eventually leads to one of three happy endings. "The Boulevard of Broken Dreams" is where Tex acts like a morally reprehensible jerk, leading to one of four endings. And "Lombard Street" is the middle road, leading to two endings. A lot of this is a bit misleading, because it makes it seem like there are drastically different routes through the story. There aren't. The events are pretty much the same most of the way through the game, but you may find some secondary characters being killed off if you're on the worst path.

All of this is affected by the conversation system – instead of simply having to retry every dialogue when you choose the wrong selection, it'll instead reflect on Tex as a character if you keep picking the jerkass responses. Your status is also affected by other small actions, like whether you pay back your debts or return missing objects to their owners. The only way to see which path you're traveling is through a cheat code.



The exploration scenes are pretty much exactly the same as its predecessor.

The game also features two difficulty modes, similar to *Monkey Island 2*. "Entertainment" simplifies (or cuts out) many of the more difficult puzzles, removes a few locations, and allows access to a hint system, similar to the first game. "Game Players" features the full game, but restricts the hint system (it'll automatically drop you into "Entertainment" if you try). The chapter skipping saves from *Under a Killing Moon* are gone. Entertainment mode offers a total of 1500 points while Game Players has a max of 4000, but the content changes between the two modes are not nearly as significant as those numbers would imply. Unfortunately, James Earl Jones didn't return, and thus The Big P.I. in the Sky is gone. Instead, each death is accompanied by a close-up of a grave, with Tex Murphy's ghost turning to the audience, giving an "oh well" shrug, and giving a brief description as to what went wrong. So while *The Pandora Directive* isn't quite as campy as its predecessor – an aspect which is actually kind of missed – it's definitely the better game overall.



Tex Murphy: Overseer

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Aaron Conners, Chris Jones
Developer: Access Software

The fifth and final adventure, *Tex Murphy: Overseer* (the only installment to actually feature our hero's name in the title) isn't quite a whole new story – it's actually a remake of *Mean Streets*, which was Tex's first case as an independent private investigator. The events are framed around Tex relating the events to Chelsee, who's concerned about his past relationship with Sylvia. All of the major plot points feature commentary by the two, including Tex often lamenting how naive he was during his younger years.

Obviously, since *Mean Streets* was so freeform, *Overseer*'s story needed to be drastically restructured to fit into the mold of a traditional adventure game. The plot is much more linear, even compared to some of the prior games, particularly because there's no more Old San Francisco or similar area to explore. The basics are still the same, of course – Tex is hired by

Sylvia Linsky to investigate her father's apparent suicide, which she believes is murder. Chris Jones obviously returns as Tex, as does Suzanne Barnes as Chelsea, with the most notable actor being Michael York (Logan from *Logan's Run*, Basil Exposition from the *Austin Powers* movies) playing the role of Gideon, a rather evil businessman.



Tex and his eventual ex-wife Sylvia, before their falling out.

Many of the characters are the same, although with entirely new actors and altered roles, and you visit many of the same locations. For instance, instead of being a newspaper reporter, Felicia now works for a public service organization named CAPRICORN (briefly mentioned in *Under a Killing Moon*), who was investigating into Carl Linsky's shifty research. Many of the extraneous characters have been cut, some of the sillier ones have been toned down, and some have actually changed genders to make the cast more balanced. The secretary and informant are gone, instead replaced with an online data research system. A few elements from the other *Tex Murphy* games, like Tex's mentor, The Colonel, are also integrated. At its core, you still end up doing the same basic things – collecting all eight hidden keycards and using them in the central computer in Alcatraz. There's actually a fun little throwback in the form of a *Mean Streets* arcade cabinet, which lets you play one of the action sequences from the original game. There are still two difficulty modes, but other than the added points in the "Gamer" mode, there's no real difference between the two.



The visual fidelity has improved quite a bit with Overseer.

Since the whole story is essentially a flashback, the way player deaths are handled is also pretty cool in principal. Whenever you do something that would get you killed, it returns to the

frame story with Tex saying something like "Well, it would've been stupid if I'd done that!" Yet, as much as it would make logical sense for you to return a few moments before your "death", you still end up having to reload a saved game, which almost defeats the point.

Overseer utilizes an enhanced version of the Virtual World engine, one that not only looks better than the previous two games, but controls better too. The visuals are full screen by default during exploration mode, with an improved interface that lets you look and walk around without having to switch between modes. The video scenes are in widescreen and are now much smoother. The textures are much higher quality, and it runs in 16-bit color, a huge step above the mere 256 SVGA graphics of the other games. The biggest improvement, though, is that the game comes on both 5 CDs and a single DVD. The DVD version obviously removes the need for disc swapping, but it also provides immensely improved video. The irony is that the higher quality ends up highlighting the flaws of the cheap production, mostly the fact that it looks to have been shot on video tape. The game was also developed for Windows 95, and there are some issues trying to get the game to run on newer systems.

Even though *Overseer* is a nice improvement from a technological standpoint, it doesn't quite stack up to *The Pandora Directive*, or even *Under a Killing Moon*. The story isn't quite as compelling, and neither are the characters. Most of the acting isn't campy so much as it is just plain bad. Still, even though it is technically a retread, it mixes things up enough so that it doesn't feel like a lazy cash-in, so much as an opportunity to give a new generation of gamers the experience of Tex's origins, without having to put up with the archaic *Mean Streets*.

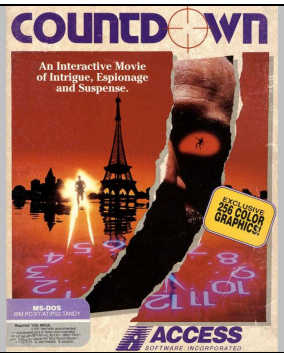
It also feels a bit shorter than *The Pandora Directive*, and is completely missing its multiple paths and endings. Apparently the development was a bit rushed – it was produced in conjunction with Intel, who was going to tie it in with one of their hardware products. However, despite bankrolling the entire game, they ended up backing out, and Access finished it themselves as a standalone release.

Novels

There were two novels published, based on *Under a Killing Moon* and *The Pandora Directive*. Both were written by Aaron Conners, the screenplay writer for the games. They're both quite good, although naturally some things have been altered, condensed, or cut out entirely to fit the book. For instance, the *Under a Killing Moon* novel starts on the equivalent the game's third chapter, and large chunks of the plot are pretty different. Due to some of the changes, they're both decent reads even if you've played through the games. *The Pandora Directive* is cheap and easy to find. *Under a Killing Moon,* not so much. There were also early talks for an *Under a Killing Moon* movie, although it never made it into production.

Tex Murphy Radio Series

Unfortunately for fans of Tex Murphy, *Overseer* ends with a cliffhanger, as Tex and Chelsee (in the present day) are attacked by an unknown assailant. It was obviously meant to be a setup for a sequel, of which at least two – *Chance*, and *Polarity* – were planned. Access was since bought by Microsoft, eventually sold to Take-Two Interactive, and subsequently closed. Chris Jones and Aaron Conners, obviously devoted to both their character and their fanbase, released six radio dramas, each approximately ten minutes in length continuing the story, and released them for free online. Alas, this appears to be the end of Tex Murphy's adventures.



Countdown

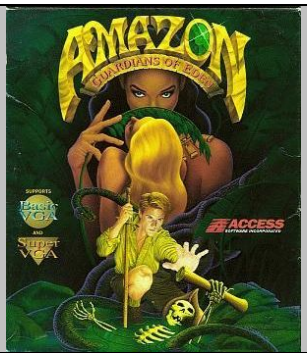
Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Chris Jones, Brent Erickson
Developer: Access Software

Access Software was ahead of its competitors when it came to multimedia productions, with their games featuring digitized actors and sound, which could even be played on a PC speaker. *Countdown* was the first game to use the adventure game engine later seen in *Martian Memorandum* (the second *Tex Murphy* game) and *Amazon: Guardians of Eden*. You play as secret agent Mason Powers, who has 96 hours to solve the murder of his boss and uncover a terrorist plot to assassinate the president. Unfortunately, you've lost your memory, and the plot is pieced together through the use of flashbacks.



This is the first screen, in the insane asylum. You restart here after dying, which happens a lot.

Countdown starts in an insane asylum, which Mason must escape from. It's an incredibly difficult segment, filled with trial and error gameplay and awful stealth sequences. These are viewed from an overhead perspective, and you can barely see more than an inch in front of you. Many times it's impossible to avoid getting caught, resulting in you getting lobotomized over and over. Most gamers are likely to give up here, which is understandable, and it's not like the rest of the game has anything worthwhile. The plot is standard spy movie dreck, the interface is a huge pain to deal with, and the sole sound of Mason's clonking footsteps will likely drive one mad. It gets easier once you leave the asylum (bar the finale, when you need to defuse a bomb) but the time limit quickly drains as you travel back and forth across Europe, which can easily lead to a doomed scenario if you dawdle. The other Access games were self-aware of their low budget and played up to it – the digitized actors here look silly but there's not enough humor to keep it going, other than the absurd fact that Mason Powers, in his polo shirt and slacks, more closely resembles an accountant than a secret agent. Still, the animated cutscenes are remarkable for a game from 1990, and the intro theme song bleeds '80s, in an awesome kind of way.



Amazon Guardians of Eden

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Chris Jones, Kevin L. Jones
Developer: Access Software

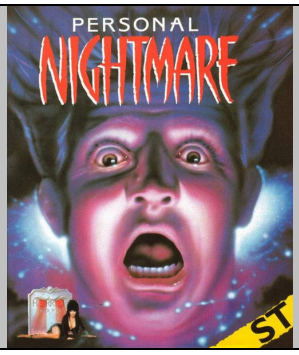
Built using the same engine as *Martian Memorandum* and *Countdown*, Access Software's *Amazon: Guardians of Eden* puts you in the role of Jason, whose older brother Allen has mysteriously disappeared in the South American jungle. While it takes awhile to get off the ground, Jason eventually meets up with a beautiful young explorer named Maya and becomes entangled with the native's struggle over some emeralds brought over by Hernando Cortez centuries before.

The story is presented like a '50s TV serial, complete with black and white projector countdown slides when you boot it up. There are twelve chapters, each ending with a melodramatic cliffhanger and featuring silly little title cards. Like Access' other titles, the plot takes itself relatively seriously despite being very silly – a Tor Johnson look-a-like bully is taken down with hot peppers, and guards are distracted with love potion laden darts. Everyone is afraid of communists, and radiation is mutating bugs left and right. The highlights are the digitized actors and the full motion video clips, which are rarely more than a few seconds long but often hilarious, especially when they involve death scenes. Watch as an explosion with four frames of animation takes out the evil Colonel Sanchez! Or laugh the dramatic tension of Allen's sacrifice on the bridge of death is totally ruined by the hilarious digitized yells and Wile E. Coyote scaling effects!



The Bridge of Death scene is immensely difficult to beat, but is also one of the funniest.

Unfortunately like Access' other early games the interface is unresponsive, which proves incredibly frustrating during the numerous timed action sequences. Combined with the dead ends, it makes an otherwise amusing title borderline unplayable. Still, while *Martian Memorandum* is more noteworthy due to its affiliation with the Tex Murphy games, *Amazon: Guardians of Eden* is probably more memorable.



Personal Nightmare

Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC
Designer(s): Alan Bridgman, Alan Cox, Michael Woodroffe, Keith Wadhamsa
Developer: Horrorsoft

Bad things are going down in the small village in *Personal Nightmare*, the first game from Horrorsoft, with the town being overrun by sinners. In addition to digging through the townspeople's houses to find evidence and report their crimes to the police, you'll also need to kill a witch, murder a vampire, and eventually take down Satan himself. Unfortunately, it's a total mess (one might even say a nightmare) to actually play. It's basically a graphical text adventure with a barebones point-and-click interface grafted on, which is both unresponsive and cumbersome. Most item interaction takes place on separate subscreens rather than the main graphical window. Furthermore, navigation is a headache, because the town is laid out in an incomprehensible manner. The game runs in real time, and like most similar titles, you can miss important events without knowing it. You might not know much of anything because there's no real direction and the puzzle design is inscrutable. It has an uncomfortable atmosphere, but for a horror game, it's not even particularly scary, and the gore is reserved for the numerous Game Over sequences, which are all customized for the nature of your demise. Beyond this and occasional moments of amusement, like the lightning strike that burns your father and turns him into the devil, there's not much to see here, because the game itself is essentially unplayable.



You need to react quickly, or this werewolf will scratch you to death.

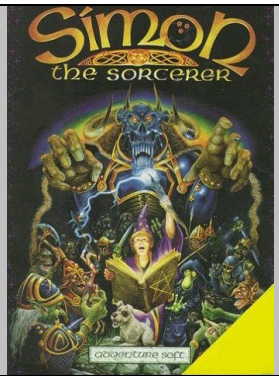
TV personality Elvira was basically Horrorsoft's mascot, appearing on this game's cover and starring (sort of) in two more titles, *Elvira*, and *Elvira II: Jaws of Cerberus*. Their final game, *Waxworks*, is similar but lacks the vampy, buxom female host. While they are all descendents of *Personal Nightmare*, they focus heavily on combat and statistics, putting them closer to the RPG side of the spectrum. They are also all infuriating, for similar reasons, but they certainly don't skimp on the gore either.

Simon the Sorcerer

For quite awhile, the adventure gaming scene was dominated by American companies like LucasArts and Sierra. That didn't stop numerous other European outfits from trying their hands at things, and some of the better entries rival the quality of games from the other side of the pond. Adventure Soft's *Simon the Sorcerer* is one such series.

It's a bit of a weird situation – since the series' inception, the *Simon the Sorcerer* games have been quite popular in their homeland of Great Britain, as well as the rest of Europe, but they never remotely caught on in North America. It's not that the humor doesn't translate – people all over still appreciate British classics like *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *Fawlty Towers*, or more recent series like *The Office* and *The IT Crowd*. It's probably just a result of them not finding proper distribution, because any fan of British humour will find a lot to like in the *Simon* series.

It all began with Simon and Mike Woodroffe in the early '80s, owners of a computer shop in Birmingham. Although they initially worked on porting Scott Adams' text adventures to British micros, they eventually formed Horrorsoft and created a few games based on the horror hostess Elvira. After tiring of working on horror themed games, their name was changed to Adventure Soft, and they tried to obtain the license for *Discworld*, a series of comedic fantasy novels by Terry Pratchett. They weren't able to, so they created their own fantasy universe in a similar style, and thus was born *Simon the Sorcerer*. (Another developer a few years down the line was able to secure the *Discworld* license for its own series of games, which turned out alright, although *Simon* is distinct enough to stand apart from its obvious inspiration.)



Simon the Sorcerer

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Simon Woodroffe
Developer: Adventure Soft

Simon the Sorcerer begins in the house of an average British teenager, whose dog wanders into the attic and disappears into a chest. Just a bit bewildered, Simon follows him, only to end up in a medieval realm called the Magic Kingdom. His quest, detailed by a note left on the table, is to rescue the good wizard Calypso, who has been kidnapped by the bad wizard Sordid. Although he wears a garish purple wizard outfit, complete with a goofy hat, Simon actually isn't very skilled at magic... at least, at first. After wandering around the game world – which includes a small town and a fairly expansive forest – Simon will pick up a bit of skill to give him a fighting chance against the nefarious Sordid.

On the surface, *Simon the Sorcerer* also shares more than a few similarities with *Monkey Island*, which the Woodroffes acknowledge as an obvious inspiration. The menu bar is almost exactly the same, with a few verbs added in like "Wear" and "Consume". Unfortunately it lacks the right-click context sensitive actions of LucasArts games, but the interface can highlight all of the hotspots on the screen, an extremely useful feature that also carried forward to most of the future games. If the interface design wasn't a tip off, the quest starts off in much the same way – a young kid sets off on a simple quest through a fantasy environment, filled with bizarre and

quirky characters. Even right at the beginning of the game you can walk into a bar, talk with some folks, and accomplish a few tasks to become a wizard.



They're certainly a bit shameless with these references.

Beyond that, though, the tone is actually quite a bit different, and that largely lies with the main character. In the first two *Monkey Island* games, Guybrush is a bit naive, maybe a bit of a troublemaker, and occasionally a bit sarcastic. By comparison, Simon is much, much snarkier. He doesn't really want to be a wizard, and he certainly doesn't want to save to kingdom; he just wants to get on with the whole spiel and find his way home. Nearly every character can be greeted with an insult and the rest of the conversations can be continued down much the same road. It might seem initially that Simon comes off a bit snotty, but to be fair, most of the other characters in the world are, in their own ways, stupid and annoying too, so they pretty much deserve any verbal beatdowns they have coming to them. It's a very distinct character of British humour, and while it can be off-putting to some, it does give the game a fairly unique voice, even if initial appearances might prove otherwise. There's also quite a bit of fourth wall breakage, not only with Simon turning to the screen and commenting, but with very explicit mentions about being in an adventure game.

Even though most of the characters you meet fall between "slightly odd" and "downright weird", there's some level of charm to most of them. Many parody well-known fantasy or fairy tale characters, so there's usually something familiar but still a bit off about them. Near the beginning of the game Simon will come across what appears to be a talking tree stump, but is actually the home of a colony of woodworms, a species with a helium-pitched squeak and fine taste in mahogany. Another fisherman bears a suspicious resemblance to Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings*, but is in fact just a Tolkien fan wearing an elaborate costume. At the end of the game, you need to outwit a pair of evil looking demons named Gerard and Max who aren't so much nefarious as just plain lazy (and also unhappy with their current employer). And then there's the Swampling, a sad pathetic green Muppet-like creature with a lovingly overbearing demeanor who claims Simon as his bestest friend from the minute he walks in the door, and insists on feeding him his horrible, horrible swamp stew. No matter how many times you ditch his stew and run out the door when he's not looking, he's still just as happy to see you every time you revisit. Since the plot itself is so thin, all of the secondary cast really make up the core of the experience, and many have become recurring characters in later games.

A lot of the personality is sold through the voice acting, which is shockingly good for a CD-ROM game from the early '90s. Chris Barrie (mostly known as the hologram humanoid Rimmer from the comedy sci-fi show *Red Dwarf*) supplies the voice of Simon, and although some of his readings sound a bit off, he still perfectly encapsulates the prankish and slightly bastardish nature of the character. The rest of the characters are pulled off pretty well too, even

if some of the voice modulation makes them occasionally hard to understand. The only real downer is that there's no way to enable subtitles in the CD-ROM version. If you want text, you'll need to stick with the disk version, which naturally doesn't contain any voice acting at all.

Your actual goals are somewhat vague, and there's very little direction throughout. The game world is also quite large, with much of it contained within a forest in the middle of the map. The beginning of the game is quite tedious as you slog around, checking through different routes and discovering new areas, but you do have a magic map that lets you warp to major areas. It doesn't allow you quick access to every screen, though, which still means you'll need to do a bit of walking regardless. And Simon doesn't walk so much as slog. Thankfully, if you're using ScummVM, you can turn on the "fast" mode option to greatly speed things up, even though it screws up the timing of a few non-interactive events.

Due to the non-linear nature of the world, it can often be confusing to figure out your next goal, much less how to solve it. Sometimes it'll make a bit of sense. At one point, you need to knock over a tree to get across a canyon. Simon can't do it himself, but as luck has it, there's a sleeping giant nearby. He's snoozing too soundly for Simon to wake him up on his own, but if you've been exploring, you've probably come across the massively incompetent bard causing a cacophonous ruckus with a sousaphone. (The sound effects for this are simultaneously aggravating and hilarious.) Naturally, you need to figure out some way to steal it and use it, causing the giant to momentarily snap and knock over the tree.



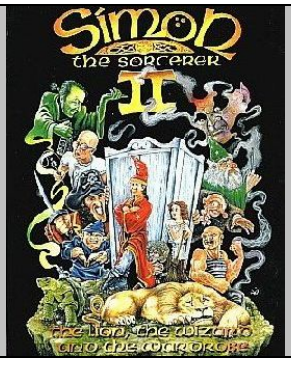
This is the Tower of Doom, in case you didn't notice.

Others are far, far more nebulous. In the screen after the giant, you come across a series of climbing pins, except one is missing. The game never tells you this, but it's located in the house of a woodkeeper, which you access by giving him an axe, which is made of a non-copyright-infringing mineral called milrith, which can only be found by tricking an archaeologist into digging in a specific spot, which can only be found if you have the metal detector, which you get by... you get the point. As a result, you end up aimlessly running around, running fetch quests and solving puzzles for the various inhabitants until you stumble across the proper items to let you proceed.

Still, even if there's way too much lumbering around, at least there's some gorgeous scenery. Unlike many other 256-color adventure games of the era, which relied on painted and scanned backgrounds, *Simon the Sorcerer* is pure 100% pixel artwork goodness, with lush green forests and mountainous terrain, all filled with animated niceties like scurrying woodland animals. The music is also fairly good, although there are only a few songs which quickly grow repetitive.

All and all it's a nice bit of a classic, and definitely worthwhile material for retro gaming fans. The only true bummer is the somewhat rushed and unsatisfying ending. The game was

released in North America via Activision's Infocom label (the actual text adventure company had long been gutted by this point) but failed to gain much of any traction, sadly enough.



Simon the Sorcerer II: The Lion, the Wizard and the Wardrobe

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Simon Woodroffe
Developer: Adventure Soft

Simon the Sorcerer II opens up with a young boy named Runt, who wants nothing more than to become an evil magician. During this learning process, he decides to resurrect Sordid, who is still none too pleased with being killed in the last game. Now with a robotic body, Sordid sends a wardrobe back into the real world, with the hope of capturing Simon and taking his revenge. Things get screwed up when Simon ends up at Calypso's house instead of Sordid's fortress. Unaware of what's going on, Simon begins searching for a can of Mucusade (a play off the Lucozade energy drink) to recharge the wardrobe and return home. Much of the game is spent searching for this drink, only for Simon to find that Sordid has kidnapped Calypso's daughter, Alix. Simon, not exactly thrilled with the prospect of doing any more work than he really has to, sets off to find her anyway.



Simon deals with more idiots.

The first half of the game takes place in a rather large city. For those sick of all of the forest wandering in the first game, nearly all navigation is done through a map screen, alleviating one the bigger headaches of the original. The interface is a bit different, dropping a few verbs and implementing an icon-based command system, although it's a bit hard to understand at first. (The magnet grabbing the nail is "pick up", the hammer hitting the nail is "use" – they make sense but it's not as immediately obvious as it should be.) The structure is much the same, as you wander around town searching for various items, and eventually stumbling upon puzzles where they're required. The formerly all fantasy/medieval game world now has a number of anachronistic elements, most notably a McDonalds-esque fast food chain. Eventually Simon

gets kidnapped by pirates and ends up on a (not quite) deserted island, before taking off for Sordid's fortress.

Simon is a bit older in this installment, having grown a ponytail and wearing a somewhat less purple wizard's robe, which becomes his primary outfit for the rest of the series. His voice is now provided by Brian Bowles (Chris Barrie had become a bit too popular in the meantime and his asking price was too high), and while some fans aren't too happy with his delivery, it still keeps the spirit of the character. Barrie's voice is fairly similar to his predecessor's, just a bit deeper. The snottier elements of Simon's personality are played up a bit more, so those who found him abrasive in the first game will find his sarcasm even more unlikable here.

But like the previous game, even if you don't care for the main character, it's the supporting cast that really makes the game. Right at the start, you meet the Three Bears, who live in constant paranoia of Goldilocks, who is, in fact, a professional thief. One of the prisoners you meet on the pirate ship bears an explicit resemblance to Mr. T. Later on you'll meet the three witches from Macbeth, each of whom is disabled in some manner. All throughout the game you'll find a little hedgehog boy wandering through the scenery, occasionally getting into mischief. His purpose is never even remotely explained – he seems to exist just to be weird. You'll meet a genie with a bad hangover, who, despite attempting to grant your wishes, will accidentally end up teleporting you into some sort of ridiculous situation, including a ride aboard a spacecraft a la *Life of Brian*. A handful of characters from the first game make an appearance too, including Gerard and Max, the guard demons (who are also quite displeased with Simon) and the woodworms. Most amusing is the Swampling, who somehow ended up as the corporate chairman of a restaurant chain called MucSwamplings. The rest of the corporation has revised his swamp stew formula into something vaguely edible but completely removing its homebrew essence, causing the Swampling much consternation. It's such a wacky character arc that it's hard not to be amused by its absurdity.

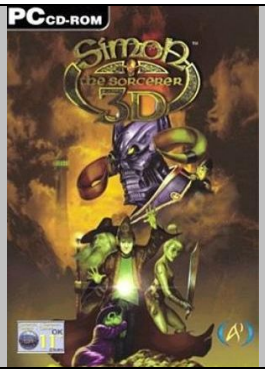


The eponymous lion makes its brief appearance.

But perhaps the funniest moments come from the roleplayers. Since they already live in a fantasy world filled with dungeons and dragons, they find their escape in Apartments and Accountants, which emulates the mundane minutiae of British life. There's a remarkable amount of detail put into these guys – you can sit and listen to their ridiculous game for several minutes, and each of the players plays off some kind of nerd cliché, the most amusing one being the techie geek who can't stop talking about computers. At one point you can join in, during which you need to defeat an interior decorator with a pair of loaded dice.

Visually, *Simon II* is about on par with its predecessor. The backgrounds aren't quite as colorful, but they're still well detailed. For some reason, nearly all of the character sprites (outside of Simon) are drawn with large, deformed heads, which looks more nasty than funny.

Many fans seem to prefer the first *Simon*, mostly because it's a bit less snarky, but for the most part, *Simon II* fixes nearly every complaint from its predecessor. It still ends on yet another cliffhanger, but at least it's longer and more involved than the last game.



Simon the Sorcerer 3D

Initial Release Date: 2002
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Simon Woodroffe
Developer: Headfirst Production

After *Simon the Sorcerer II*, Adventure Soft took a break with *The Feeble Files*, another humorous adventure game, this time focusing on science fiction. After that more or less failed, they formed Headfirst Productions and returned to Simon, deciding to take him into the third dimension.

The canon of video game history shows a number of 2D franchises which totally screwed up their transitions to 3D. This evolution was particularly unkind to the adventure game genre, but while games like *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon* and *Escape from Monkey Island* aren't exactly the pinnacles of their respective series, they're at least still pretty good. The same can't be said of *Simon the Sorcerer 3D*.

First, the graphics. They're beyond horrible. The character models are very boxy and extremely low quality. All of the environments are totally 3D too, but they're pasted with the same textures ad nauseam. This was typical of early 3D, but that is no excuse for *Simon 3D*, which was released in 2002. If it wasn't for the higher resolution, it would look like a PlayStation game from at least five years prior – and not a particularly good one at that. It doesn't help that the 3D renders on the covers of the *Puzzle Pack* released in the seven year gap between the second and third games set some measure of expectations, which were missed entirely.

The world design suffers from the same problem as many early 3D games – it's just simply way too big and empty, and it takes forever to traverse, even when you're running. (Later in the game you can transport around a map via a *Doctor Who*-style telephone booth, but even that's limited.) It feels padded, tedious, and overly long, because it takes forever to go anywhere or do anything. The world is bright and colorful, but that's about the best thing to say about it.

The mouse controls have been ditched for direct keyboard control, which is far from great. Most of the time the camera is pointed directly behind Simon, but in indoor segments, it tends to change to a static angle. It rarely works well, especially when it erratically swings around while running down narrow corridors. The interface is cumbersome, requiring that you either cycle through your entire inventory or access the submenu, which, thankfully, is at least controlled with the mouse. There's no gamepad support either, unless you use a third party program. And for some reason, the developers thought that the controls were functional enough for action sequences, which the game completely fails at. It's the first *Simon* game where you can actually get killed, although there are "respawn tiles" where you will resurrect (similar to those JRPG games, Simon remarks). You also can no longer skip through any of the dialogue. And that's not including all of the glitches, crashes, and other technical issues. In short, this game is a mess.

It's actually a huge shame, because at its core, it's still an amusing *Simon* game. The last title ended with Simon and Sordid switching bodies. Well, Sordid got sick of being a human and his plans to conquer the "real world" just didn't work out, so his apprentice Runt has created yet

another new body for him. With the help of Calypso, Simon's soul is reunited with his body, and it's once again up to him to stop Sordid from ruling the whole universe.

The writing and sense of humor, as well as the voice acting, is generally on par with at least the second game. There are a number of returning characters, including the Swampling, who's now become an eco-terrorist after his homeland is threatened. The woodworm, the role players, Goldilocks, and the demons also make appearances again, as well as Sordid's apprentice Runt, who only had a minor role in the second game. The second half of the adventure involves assembling a group of four legendary warriors: the buxom, scantily clad lady warrior Melissa Leg, the somewhat dead Jar Nin, the largely daft Coneman the Barabrain, and the transmogrified Prince Brave, who's stuck as frog. The unfortunate circumstance is that Simon had pissed off nearly all of these people earlier in his journey, which is naturally a bit awkward for him. Simon also has his own fairy godmother, although she's not particularly funny and mostly acts as a tutorial guide.



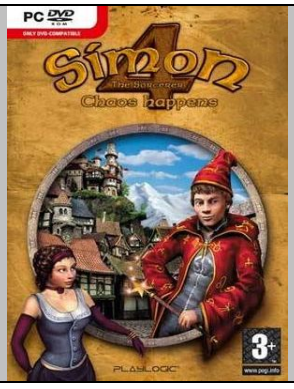
Arrrgghhhh my eyes!

At one point, Simon comes across a warehouse filled with unsold copies of *The Feeble Files*, which he muses would make good coasters. Given that Hasbro Interactive was originally going to be the publisher, there are also a few random, tongue-in-cheek endorsements of their board games. In a particularly trippy, fourth-wall-breaking bit, the final puzzle requires that you eject a CD-ROM for a computer. The problem is, there's no eject button in the game. Like Sega's *X-Men* game for the Genesis, which required that you push the Reset button on the console to get past a certain point, the solution is to actually eject the drive on your own computer. It's a vaguely clever idea, ruined by some level of technical limitations, because Windows needs to be set up properly for it to work at all.

But that really encapsulates all of the major problems with the game. It's still fairly clever, but it's mired beneath a game that borders on unplayability. Apparently Adventure Soft had originally planned the game for 2D, similar to *The Feeble Files*, but ditched all of their previous work when they realized that such a product would never get published in the marketplace. But their hastily assembled substitute didn't do them any favors either, especially at the time of its release. (To be fair, the game was apparently finished in 2000, but due to various logistical issues, wasn't actually published until two years later.) If there's any modern adventure game that's clamoring for a demake – that is, a return to beautiful point-and-click VGA – it's this one.

At any rate, after *Simon 3D*, Headfirst went on to create *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth,* a fairly decent first person shooter/adventure game for the Xbox and PC, which

unfortunately flopped and essentially put them out of business, leaving others to pick up the reins for future *Simon* titles.



Simon the Sorcerer 4: Chaos Happens

Initial Release Date: 2007
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Stefan Hoffmann, Petra Rudolf, Csongor Baranyai, Florian Faller, Anja Rudlaff
Developer: Silver Style Entertainment

The crappiness of *Simon 3D*, combined with the generally lousy state of adventure gaming in the early 21st century, seemed to be the final nail in Simon's coffin. That is, until 2008, when it was pried open by a German development team called Silver Style. It was probably produced to capitalize on the popularity of *Harry Potter*, despite them being largely dissimilar outside of the concept. The fourth *Simon* game was developed almost specifically to avoid the pitfalls of the previous game.



The character graphics aren't awful, all things considered.

The point-and-click interface is back, using a single icon like most modern adventure games. The map allows for easy travel, and you can instantly change locations by double clicking on an exit. The static camera angle thankfully returns, with 3D characters on top of some beautiful high res 2D backgrounds that almost perfectly emulate the feel of the first game on a higher technical level. The character modeling is actually quite good too, even if it looks a bit too realistic given the series' usual cartooniness, and some of the animations are somewhat off. The music, while generally subdued, is also quite excellent. It might've come five years late, but on the surface, this looks like what the third game should've been.

The story begins with Simon stepping over to the magical realm after having a dream about Alix, Calypso's daughter. Simon's clone from the last game has escaped from the Nexus, and has started living in the Magic Kingdom, assuming the identity of the real Simon. He's clean,

neat, and a generally affable guy – in other words, the complete opposite of the real Simon. Upon some investigation, the clone Simon is found to be working with the evil Calaba, a mustachioed midget who wants to kill the king and assume the throne for his own. While trying to save the king, Simon and his double end up screwing up the whole process, resulting in the duo, along with the king, getting vaporized and tossed into the Realm of the Dead. The second half of the game involves them working together to escape from the underworld, restore the king to the throne, and save the day once again.

This sounds like the makings of a decent adventure. Unfortunately, it just isn't very funny. Right at the outset there are a few issues. The running joke of the series is that Simon never actually cared about the Magic Kingdom – he just wanted to get home, and if he ended up saving the day in the process, so be it. (There's also no real explanation as to how Simon escaped back to the real world at the end of *Simon 3D*.) Here, he's genuinely concerned about the kingdom, which seems remarkably out of character. And why would he care about Alix to begin with, considering he previously regarded her with nothing less than antipathy?



Well, it certainly looks better than Simon 3D. Pity it isn't any funny.

Beyond this curiosity, *Simon 4* isn't all bad, as the storyline and situations actually aren't that much different from the previous games. Beyond Alix and Calypso (who apparently died along the way and is now a ghost with Alzheimer's), you'll run into Goldilocks again, who's still locked up in prison, as well as Swampy, who seems to be duped into thinking that the duplicate Simon has created a fan club for him. At the beginning of the game, you meet Little Red Riding Hood, who's an obnoxious, skateboard-riding, backwards-baseball-cap wearing brat. In order to steal her skateboard to solve another puzzle, you need to get her eaten by a big bad wolf... except the only wolf in town is a pathetic washed-up drunk who needs to be gently coerced into the job. The Realm of the Dead features many classic Greek mythological characters, and it's a bit fun to taunt Sisyphus just for the heck of it. The whole place is mired in bureaucracy, as you're required to run errands for the overworked Hades, who sits at a desk overflowing with paperwork and is your sole ticket back to the mortal world. A lot of these events are amusing, but the core of Simon's comedy has usually been the dialogue, and here, it's a complete wreck.

Almost all of the writing is awkwardly translated from German into English, resulting in long-winded conversations that feel like they're trying to be funny, but end up totally getting lost. Worst yet, the voice acting is total rubbish. *Simon the Sorcerer* has always been a quintessentially British series, but here they chose to give American accents to everyone, Simon included. All of the dry wit that drew the fans to the series to begin with? Completely gone. Simon himself completely lacks any sense of sarcasm and meanders through most lines

sounding somewhat confused. Simon's double talks exactly like him, but slower. And forget the original voice of Swampy – here, it's just some incredibly high-pitched squealing.

The puzzles, too, tend to be a bit uninspired. None of them are particularly difficult or frustrating, although the game has an occasional tendency to hide objects until they're needed, at which point they pop up across the game world out of nowhere. At least Simon's journal acts as an in-game hint guide to provide some direction.

These puzzles are really the least of the game's problems, though – it's definitely the lack of humour that brings this one down. One could easily place the blame on the localizers, but according to some German reviews, apparently the writing wasn't even funny in its native language. Regardless, *Simon 4* totally loses its identity, and comes across as vaguely comical but largely generic adventure game. Simon and Mike Woodroffe are credited as consultants, but it definitely would've benefited from their larger involvement.



Simon the Sorcerer: Who'd Even Want Contact?

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Eric Jannot, Fred Metger, Angela Hoffmann, Johanna Jacob, Chris Mosel
Developer: Silver Style

In the fifth *Simon* game, the Magic World has been invaded by a group of aliens called Nihonians, not only stirring up trouble but also kidnapping Alix. Before Simon can properly take off after her, he's accosted by two talking moles in trenchcoats and whisked away to a tropical island prison, purportedly for his safety. But paradise can't keep him down long, as Simon eventually heads to the skies to take down the otherworldly visitors.

Simon the Sorcerer: Who'd Even Want Contact? uses the same interface as its predecessor. It looks mostly the same, although the character models are much brighter and cartoonier. The advertising claims this is "cel-shading", but it really isn't – they're just regular textures colored to make them look more like classic cartoons. It's a suitable style that makes it more distinct.

Other than the graphics, though, not much else has improved. The same horrendous voice actors from *Chaos Happens* return to fill their voice roles, and the dialogue is just as dire as ever. Some old characters return, but they're mostly the ones Silver Style made for the last game. The bratty Little Red Riding Hood was cute for just a second before, but she's practically unbearable now that she's devolved into an obnoxious straw feminist. The cowardly Wolf returns too, and you can even play as him for a bit. The Genie from *Simon the Sorcerer II* (who probably no one would recognize if Simon didn't bring it up himself) also makes a return, here having taken on the guise of a Freud-like psychoanalyst. Swampy returns too, and his voice actor should be shot, or at least tortured a little.

The new characters aren't that much better. There's a pretentious talking mechanical bird who follows you around. There's a crazy doctor who talks to the sock puppet on his hand as if it were alive, a joke *South Park* did nearly fifteen years prior. Then there's Captain Narrow, a play off of Captain Sparrow from *Pirates of the Caribbean*. His thing is that he's really gay.

Yet for how bad most of it this, it's still a vague improvement. The shipwrecked boat on the island, the beautiful underground mushroom cave, the city of the moles, and the Nihonian spaceship are all way more interesting locales than the boring city that encompassed the first part of *Chaos Happens*. Plus, some of the puzzles are actually kind of funny. In order to steal Red

Riding Hood's backpack, you need to distract a fierce-looking crab that's guarding it. You find a regular crab on the beach, but if you unite the two, the lesser one just gets scared away. Instead you need to dress it up with a makeup kit to give it lipstick and eyelashes, properly distracting the guard crab. It's just crazy enough that it almost excuses the previous puzzle, a daft bit where you need eat some chalk to make your voice sound more feminine.



Were Men in Black parodies ever amusing?

Saying that *Who'd Even Want Contact?* is a better game than its predecessor is technically correct, but is also giving it too much credit – it is merely more tolerable. It would probably be better for the franchise if they just let it die, though, or at least put it in the hands of someone more competent.

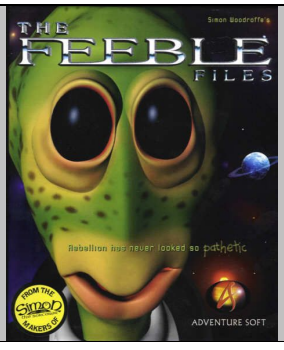
Spin-offs:
Simon the Sorcerer Puzzle Pack / Game Pack

To fill the gap between the second and third games, Adventure Soft released two spin-off titles featuring Simon and various other characters. The first of these is the *Puzzle Pack*. The headline title is *Swampy's Adventures*, an overhead puzzle game vaguely similar to *Sokoban* or *Adventures of Lolo*, where Swampy must rescue his kidnapped children from Sordid. As one might expect, there's lot of block pushing and logic puzzles to solve in order to get the keys and move on.

The rest of the features are pretty thin. There are four scrambled puzzles, two using FMV featuring Gerald and Max (presumably) and Swampy, the other two from *The Feeble Files*. There are also a few variations of solitaire with cards illustrated with various Simon characters. Finally, there's *DIMP*, or *Demon In My Pocket*, a *Tamagotchi*-style virtual pet application where you beat and torture a demon to make it happy. None of the titles on here are really anything more than vague diversions and are mostly worthless beyond their novelty value.

Simon the Sorcerer Pinball

The other *Simon* cash-in is just a quickie pinball game. It's set up on a single static screen with an isometric perspective, looking like a classic table with a dot matrix score display. There's only a single board and, like most licensed pinball bits, the links to Simon are quite tenuous. (Knock down Calypso! Find the Hedgehog Boy! Hit all of the letters to spell out "SWAMPY"!) Obviously, like the *Puzzle Pack*, it's not particularly worthwhile.



The Feeble Files

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Simon Woodroffe
Developer: Adventure Soft

The Feeble Files, developed by the same folks as the *Simon the Sorcerer* series, starts off cleverly enough. Feeble is an alien who lives in an otherworldly society ruled by a presence known as the OmniBrain. It's a cheerily totalitarian society, where everyone is either forced into happiness via brainwashing or medication, or otherwise plainly killed. Laws are arbitrarily passed by the ruthless bureaucracy, and government-sponsored confession booths offer "prizes" to those who would spill their guts for the greater good. Feeble, of course, is quite happy, him being something of a pushover. His disposition in his profile is listed as "dumpy", with an expendability rating of 94%, and he is consciously aware that his name means weak and pathetic. He mindlessly toils at his appointed job, but his little life is flung into disarray when he's blamed for an accident at his job, which is tantamount to treason and causes him to be shipped off to a prison colony. Feeble hasn't quite realized it yet, but he's been recruited as part of The Freedom Fighters, a rebel group that seeks to liberate society from the grips of the OmniBrain. He's not exactly the best choice for the situation, but he'll apparently have to do, as he attempts to liberate his people from oppression.

There's quite a bit of George Orwell's *1984* in there, which makes sense coming from Britain, mixed with a little bit of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* for good measure. Compared to the *Simon* games, which were largely about a snotty teenager belittling fairy tale archetypes, *The Feeble Files* is a bit more mature, a satirical story that takes on a very different tone. Feeble's a likable, sad little chap, regrettably accepting of his terrible fate once he's arrested, and his journey from weenie to hero is quite endearing. His voice is provided by Robert Llewellyn, known as the android Kryten from the sci-fi TV series *Red Dwarf,* who provides a sense of politely earnest bewilderment. The real star of the show, though, is SAM, a violently psychotic robot with the head of a '70s *Battlestar Galactica* Cylon, who rolls around on tank treads and wields both a rocket launcher and a gigantic buzzsaw. He speaks in a gruff albeit overly polite manner, joyfully requesting when and where his skills of destruction are most appropriate.

But while the game is funny, parts of it still feel lacking. Outside of SAM, there aren't very many interesting secondary characters, the low number of hotspots means there's less stuff for Feeble to comment on, and the dialogue trees are oddly short. The background information is instead supplied by Oracle, a wrist watch with the stately voice of Peter Tuddenham, the computer from *Blake's 7*. There's a full encyclopedia of the society, as well as a running tally of all of Feeble's apparently criminal misdeeds, numbering near a hundred by the end of the game and including "Unnecessary flamboyance when starting a space bike", "Making advances to a member of the opposite gender without a Hot Love Permit", and "Attempting to use female charms without being female". It's a great feature, but it probably would've been better had it been integrated into the game world instead of what amounts to a fancy inventory screen.

The quality of the writing can't redeem *The Feeble Files* from its biggest flaw – its extraordinary difficult and very tedious puzzles. At the outset, you're forced to jump through a number of obnoxious hoops just to visit your boss. You can't get past his secretary, so you need to charm her by taking some pills. You can't get the pills because the shipment is held up. You can't finalize the delivery because you need a permit. You can't get the permit because the

trucker won't give it to you. The worst of it is, when you finally do get past the secretary, you're not allowed in his office because you're not in your work uniform. It's not simple enough to just fly back home and change. No, for some reason, Feeble can only do it Superman-style inside of a phone booth. And the only phone booths are both occupied, leading to more puzzles.

All of these situations are quite obnoxious, but there also are a number of puzzles which, while not exactly nonsensical, are excruciatingly complicated. In one, you need to study a whole chemistry textbook to determine the combinations of colors, as well as the temperatures to heat them, needed to produce a solution. In another, you need to study several encyclopedia entries, museum exhibits, and star charts to obtain the numbers necessarily to decipher a code. These are the types of puzzles that longtime fans will undoubtedly love, because you really need to sit down with a pen and paper to sort it all out. But for everyone else, they're remarkably toilsome.



SAM provides quite a bit of comedy, although he's somewhat underutilized.

The interface is similarly annoying. For example, instead of a standard "Use" command, it breaks it up into "Use" and "Use With". Why did they break up this standard command into two separate ones? Who knows, but it's frustrating because it's hard to tell the icons apart, and years of instinctively selecting one will result in lots of "that doesn't work" type comments. The inventory screen is slow and overdesigned. Why does the text crawl so slowly that you need to right click through every message to get it to speed up? Why does the item immediately default back to your inventory if you click on the wrong spot, forcing you to sort through it again?

Like Simon, Feeble walks incredibly slowly, and there's no fast travel option to speed his butt up. ScummVM lets you speed up the action, at least, which is the only way to make it even remotely tolerable. The actual game also doesn't feature any subtitles, only speech, a stupid mistake made by the first *Simon* game. ScummVM lets you activate subtitles anyway, although since they were only half-implemented, it only works part of the time.

At least a lot of work went into the visuals. The graphics are almost entirely prerendered CG but don't look too bad. Feeble is technically quite ugly, but his large mournful eyes and taste in Earth clothing give him a relatable appeal, and even the most disgusting robotic or monstrous creature has a sense of cuteness to it. Meanwhile, the backgrounds are quite garish throughout, with the city of Metro Prime contrasting the usual futuristic metals with bright greens and reds. It's unique, if not exactly attractive. There are numerous animated sequences, even for fairly minor events, which explains why the game shipped on 4 CDs.

There are a lot of things wrong with *The Feeble Files*, much of which could've been fixed with a better interface and gentler puzzles, or at very least, an Easy mode. Feeble is a great character, the story is quite good and there are numerous laughs, but you need an exceptionally high fortitude to really appreciate it.



Circuit's Edge

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): George Alec Effinger, Michael Legg, Michael E. Moore
Developer: Westwood Studios

Circuit's Edge is an interesting adventure/RPG hybrid published by Activision under their Infocom label, and developed by Westwood Studios. Based on George Alec Effinger's 1987 book *When Gravity Falls*, it takes place in a dystopic cyberpunk future which, like most of the sort, owes a tremendous debt to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. The major difference is that instead of the world being overtaken by the Japanese, it's instead been influenced by Islamic culture. Otherwise it's the same dank pisshole we've come to expect; save for the few rich everyone else lives in the slums, with their only satisfactions being gambling, drugs, and prostitutes.

You control Marid Audra who, per usual pulp standards, is a down-on-his luck detective who has resorted to running goods for his pals. During a seemingly innocuous delivery you find your client dead, presumably murdered. The police arrive at the exact wrong moment and you are implicated in his murder, but thankfully the powerful mafia ruler Friedlander Bey gets you off the hook. In exchange for his aid he gives you a case: the murdered man is his assistant, and his death seems to be an attack against the city's rulership. And so you set off on an investigation into the seedy underground of a city known only as the "Budayeen".



The Budayeen consists largely of bars, bordellos and black market stores. It really piles on the grit.

The storyline in *Circuit's Edge* isn't particularly compelling – it's decent enough, but still a fairly run-of-the-mill pot boiler. The gameplay isn't all that enthralling either. This aspect leans more towards the RPG end of the spectrum, as real puzzles are sparse and most of the time is simply spent running to different cafes and bars, talking to people, and finding leads. You need to keep yourself adequately fed and rested as well. You'll also end up gambling, beating up punks and selling junk to get enough money to buy cybernetic modifications called "moddies", which can be equipped to improve various skills, like combat and hacking. You can be randomly

attacked by muggers, but winning these fights usually just requires that you've installed the proper equipment. There are a handful of hacking segments, but they're more realistic than the virtual reality depictions seen in the *Neuromancer* game.

The interface is cluttered, with a small graphical window showing your location, another smaller window showing either your face or the face of the person you're talking too, a Windows-style menu bar at the top, a mini-map in the lower right, and a cramped space for the narrative text. Although you can use a mouse for various functions, you can't actually interact with anything by clicking on it, instead requiring that you pick actions from the menu bar. Movement is handled similar to a first person dungeon crawler, with the sprawling city set up like a gigantic grid and the arrow keys used to turn or move block by block. Although there is a map function it's mostly useless since nothing is labeled, instead requiring that you refer to the manual to figure out where everything in the city is. Not all of the events are linear, making it relatively freeform compared to a standard adventure game. The game runs in real-time, meaning certain people are at certain places during certain times (strangely, most businesses are closed during the day) and it is entirely possible to miss stuff if you take too long. More annoyingly you can only save your game in your apartment, and there is only a single save slot.

But while the story is standard and the interface is a pain, *Circuit's Edge* really nails the atmosphere. The 16-color graphics are perfect to depict the city's grittiness, and the music, while sparse, is appropriately moody. It's quite progressive for a game from 1990 – there's quite a bit of nudity, many of the females (including your quasi-girlfriend Yasmin) are "sexchanges", and you can sleep with practically anything or even light up. (The game's taxi driver has his lungs replaced with a device that makes him permanently stoned.) However, if you kill someone unnecessarily or partake in drugs, your benefactor will have no problem with taking your hide.



Conversations are sparsely interactive, but amusing nonetheless.

There are over 60 locations in The Budayeen, not counting the places you can get to by cab. You can easily spend the first few hours trawling the bars, chatting with the proprietors, trying to pick up hookers, gambling and watching holo peep shows, just taking in the game world. Sure, the visual depictions tend to repeat after awhile, but each location has its own unique description and background, and the writing is easily on par with Infocom's better games, even possessing the same wry sense of humor. (Try watching the porno about the touching story of a Turkish girl and her camel.) While the interaction is somewhat limited – conversation is restricted to randomly chosen responses and inquiries for plot-related keywords, which need to be typed in – but there's enough depth to the hellhole that is the Budayeen to make *Circuit's Edge* worthwhile, even decades later. It also holds up better than Interplay's version of *Neuromancer*. As a whole, *Circuit's Edge* flounders as an RPG but succeeds as a work of interactive fiction.

The Legend of Kyrandia

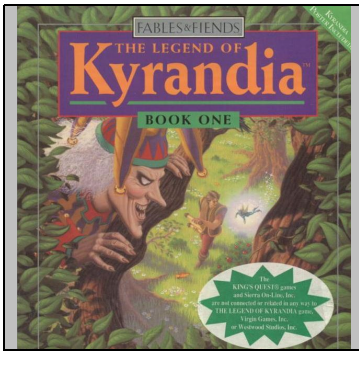
History will remember Westwood Studios as the guys who invented the modern real time strategy genre, introduced with the groundbreaking *Dune 2* and refined with *Command and Conquer*. Yet their talents spread far wider than their reputation one might lead one to believe, with the fairly decent RPG series *Lands of Lore*, and their adventure game series *The Legend of Kyrandia*.

The Legend of Kyrandia games sprang from the mind of Brett Sperry, one of the heads of Westwood Studios. The name sprung from a MUD that him and his friends used to play, called *Kyrandia: Fantasy World of Legends*. It is no longer around, obviously, although it doesn't appear that much substance was derived from it beyond the name.

At first look, the world of *Kyrandia* seems to be a typical adventure game setting, filled with fantasy clichés and wistful fairy tale stylings. And, to be fair, the first game really doesn't stray far from any stereotypes. Still, it tends not to take itself too seriously, which helps give it some identity. But its personality grew with each sequel, introducing weirder characters and expanding the bizarre kingdom of Kyrandia. By the third game, the finale of the series, the series had crafted such an imaginative and crazy world that it would give hallmarks like *Monkey Island* and *Day of the Tentacle* the proverbial run for their money.

Each of the three games share some commonalities, notably the gorgeous background graphics and immensely catchy soundtracks. Each also has a fairly straightforward, single icon interface. Items are manipulated by clicking on them, and then either dropped into the inventory window or used on something on the screen. Since inventory space is limited, items can also be dropped practically anywhere and retrieved at a later time.

Despite the change in tone amongst the games, from normal to weird to even weirder, there's a consistent amount of world building, especially through the characters. The initial entry introduces us to the mystics of Kyrandia, who control all of the magic in the kingdom. Brandon, the hero of the first game, regards them with the greatest of reverence. The second game puts you in the shoes of Zanthia, a mystic herself, who regards her fellow magicians with occasional bits of cattiness. The third game puts you in the role of Malcolm, the villain, who regards the group as nothing but a bunch of pompous jerks. There's a well written sense of continuity amongst all three games, as there are a number of recurring characters, and it creates a fully-realized land that's a joy to inhabit.



Fables and Fiends: The Legend of Kyrandia: Book One

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Macintosh / FM Towns / PC98
Designer(s): Michael Legg, Rick Parks, Paul S. Mudra
Developer: Westwood Studios

Malcolm isn't your typical jester, the kind who smiles and laughs and trips over things for the amusement of other people. No, he's a psychotic nutjob who's taken a few notes from the Joker, the famous *Batman* villain. He's an immensely powerful magician and uses his powers to murder the king and queen of Kyrandia in hopes of ruling it himself. He is captured, but soon proves too powerful and breaks free, wandering the country and taking vengeance on those who imprisoned him.



Malcolm doubts Brandon's suitability as a hero, as do we all.

Brandon is the grandson of a royal mystic named Kallak, who is turned to stone by Malcolm in the opening sequence. (Malcolm, being the magnificent bastard he is, leaves Kallak's eyes open, so he may gaze forever on the terrors Malcolm will cause.) This is Brandon's motivation to take up arms, but he's hardly qualified for it. He's affable, but his attempts at humor often fall flat, and he's missing most of the elements that make a compelling protagonist. More often than not, he comes off as a bit of a weenie.

There are a few other interesting characters, at least. Some of the most charismatic include the pin-headed wizard Darm and his sarcastic pet dragon Brandywine, and the sassy sorceress Zanthia, who went on to star in the sequel. However, the plot never really evolves beyond the "save the land/defeat the bad guy" premise, so it's hard to get too involved. At least Malcolm proves to be an appropriately despicable villain. You need to be careful in each encounter with him, because despite his jocular demeanor, he will kill Brandon in cold blood without hesitation.



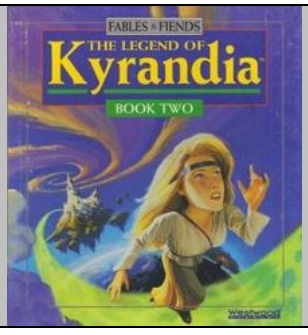
This stupid maze almost ruins the whole game.

The land of Kyrandia isn't necessarily huge, but it feels that way due to the extraordinarily repetitive scenery – you'll see the same "generic forest screen" several times before you reach the end, and it's one of the few modern adventure games where you might actually need to make a map. The puzzles are hardly inspiring either. One of the early ones revolves wandering around and collecting gems randomly strewn throughout the land – hardly the most compelling of tasks. As you progress through the game, you'll also find four different magic spells, activated

through an amulet on the bottom of the screen, but it's not used for anything particularly interesting either.

Far more frustrating is a cavernous maze about a third of the way into the story. Like most caves, it is shrouded in darkness, but at certain points there are Fireberry bushes, whose fruit can provide some light. The fruit can only last for three screens while in Brandon's inventory, but they'll stay permanently lit if they're dropped on the ground. Beyond the fact that this doesn't make sense, you'll find yourself dropping berries, backtracking to pick up more, venturing a little bit further, returning, and doing this over and over, all while trying not to get lost. There's some trial and error involved too, because if you wander into a screen without a Fireberry bush and your lights go out, you're instantly devoured by the monsters within. It's not difficult, all things considered, but it is incredibly tedious.

Despite the repetitive backgrounds, the graphics are quite nice, detailing Kyrandia as a lush world full of vibrant greens, and the music is quite good too. The CD-ROM version features full voice acting, and most of it far better than any other adventure game of the time. Despite its annoyances, it's a pleasant game, although hardly a classic.



Fables and Fiends: The Legend of Kyrandia: Book Two: The Hand of Fate

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / FM Towns / PC98
Designer(s): Rick Gush
Developer: Westwood Studios

At first glance, the second *Kyrandia* game – *The Hand of Fate* – might seem identical to its predecessor, as it runs on the same engine, and looks extremely similar. But the change in development staff marked a different direction for the series, one which embraces a quirkier sense of humor, and creates a far more interesting game world.



The visual design is hugely improved, as this strange little town shows plenty of imagination.

As King Brandon narrates in the intro, the land of Kyrandia is mysteriously disappearing into thin air, piece by piece, and all of the royal mystics are baffled. Conveniently, Marco the magician has just been joined by a human sized hand (think of a larger version of Thing from

The Addams Family) who's devised a plan to find an important artifact in the core of the planet. Zanthia, one of the more colorful characters from the first game and a skilled magician, is chosen for this undertaking, only to find her house robbed of all of her magical items. And so her quest begins to retrieve her stuff, and save the land.

From the get-go, Zanthia proves to be a more compelling character from Brandon. Right outside her house is a giant monstrosity that pops out of the mud to devour her. In a Sierra game, this would have been a solve-it-quick-or-you're-dead puzzle, but here, without hesitation, Zanthia just grabs its tongue, ties it into a knot, and leaves it to sink embarrassingly into the swamp from whence it came. She's cheery, if a bit exasperated by the situation, and remarkably resourceful, with a keen fashion sense too. Her outfit is always ruined upon reaching a new location, forcing a change of clothes with each area. She starts off in a hippie-ish blouse and skirt, eventually graduating to tropical dresses and ski outfits when reaching different climates.

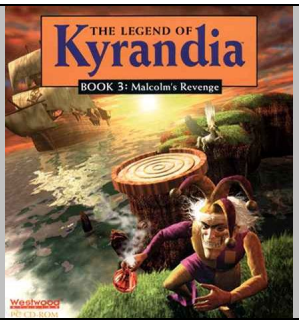
Outside of Zanthia's swamp, the world is much more fascinating. Her journeys take to her a rough-and-tumble pirate bar, where even the manliest men share their feelings with heartfelt poetry. (Zanthia herself delivers a stirring to ode to seasickness.) The entrance to the Center of the Earth is a strangely sleazy tourist trap, filled with sham guides and other such cheesiness. The core of the earth is filled with dinosaurs, and the final area resembles something of a modern ski resort. The backgrounds are brightly colored and gorgeous, again preferring pixel art over scanned backgrounds like LucasArts and Sierra titles.



The Hand is pretty evil for being, you know, nothing more than a gigantic walking glove.

There are also some running jokes regarding The Hand and his master, the incompetent Marco the Magician. It's clear from the get-go that The Hand is the one behind this whole mess, but everyone is completely oblivious to it, despite the copious amounts of evidence. Marco himself is a doofus which an obvious crush on Zanthia, who reluctantly rushes to his aid on more than couple of occasions.

The puzzle design is also much, much better. As Zanthia is a master of potions, the amulet from the first game is replaced with a magic cauldron to mix ingredients. Zanthia's spellbook lays out all of the necessary ingredients for everything you might need, but taking a note from the second act of *The Secret of Monkey Island*, you'll need to do a bit of lateral thinking to find everything. One recipe calls for a toadstool – well, you won't find any mushrooms, but you do run into a gigantic toad, who also happens to own a stool, so that'll work. Most of the potions are pretty silly too, like the Sandwich Potion and the Teddy Bear Potion. Your inventory is also much larger, reducing the need for all of the item juggling from the last game. There's still some annoying stuff, like the Tower of Hanoi puzzle at the game's end, but otherwise it's all fairly straightforward, and proves to be an immensely enjoyable experience worthy of a place amongst the adventure game greats.



The Legend of Kyrandia: Book 3: Malcolm's Revenge

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Rick Gush
Developer: Westwood Studios

At the end of the first game, Malcolm the jester was imprisoned in stone, putting an end to his reign of terror for good. Or so Kyrandia thought, until an errant lightning bolt hits the statue, freeing the jester from his prison and leaving him to roam free once again. But your task isn't to stop him – no, in a unique twist, you're put into the shoes of Malcolm himself. As it turns out, he was framed for the murder of the King and Queen, but no one believes him, so he must put together the pieces of a royal conspiracy that set him up to take a fall. This is all a bit weird if you've played the first game – he was clearly a hideous bastard who had no problems killing Brandon in cold blood, and his reformation from a psychotic lunatic into a mere mischievous jerk is clearly a retcon. But while it's only halfway believable, it does provide a unique setup, and the developers expand on the offbeat sense of humor from the last installment, making for an even more interesting game.

The first chapter of *Malcolm's Revenge* might be one of the most brilliant segments in adventure gaming history. The residents of Kyrandia – Brandon and Zanthia included – are none too pleased that Malcolm has awakened, and have ordered him into exile. They apparently don't have the resources to actually kick him out, though, so it's up to Malcolm to find his way out the kingdom. There are half a dozen different ways to accomplish this, each with wildly varying solutions. You can try digging up ingredients to create a Pegasus Potion, morph into a flying horse and simply jet off the island, similar to a quest from the first Kyrandia game. Or you can learn to juggle or become a mime, and hitch a ride on the ship of the local circus troupe. You can take the easy route and simply create a magic portal, or follow a bizarre ritual by clicking two eels together. (No, that is not a misspelling.) Perhaps the most amusing simply involves becoming an escaped convict. If you're captured at any point, you're sentenced to some menial community service (making doilies, etc.) before being freed. You can carry out your sentence if you want, but you can also get creative and figure out ways to escape. After each continual break-out, you'll be given new tasks, and eventually joined by your incompetent prison guard (and potential love interest, of all things). Keep weaseling out of these situations, and eventually you'll find yourself in the next chapter.

Whatever route you choose, it's a brilliant example of freeform design, the kind that gives you several alternatives, ranging from easy to obtuse, and lets you choose which one to take. While it has no bearing on the rest of the game, it also adds quite a bit of replay value, because there are whole segments of the game that you'll miss unless you explore every possible path.

Unfortunately, once you leave Kyrandia, it's almost all downhill from there.

The second act takes place on the Isle of Cats, where the mystical feline population has been overrun by a group of oppressive dogs. All of the locations are connected with a tediously confusing jungle, which is extremely easy to get lost in until you memorize all of the directions. It also brings back some of the dreaded gem puzzles from the first game. They're all buried underground, and the only way to retrieve them is to get one of the dogs to dig them up by giving them a bone. But their locations are randomized, requiring that you continually save and reload until they dig up all of the proper jewels.



The Isle of Cats is full of mysterious feline ruins.

The next area, The End of the World, is a series of waterfalls. There's a very specific route down these cliffs, all requiring bizarre items like umbrellas and inner tubes, but it's almost all determined by trial and error, forcing you to restart (or at least, reload) until you've found the correct path. At the end of the line is Limbo, which is an undersea kingdom ruled by a horrific fish queen. The items you need to escape this area are, again, randomly generated, requiring that you leave and return multiple times before they'll appear. Worse, Malcolm is enslaved by the Queen, and will routinely call for his presence to play stupid games of Tic-tac-toe, dragging you away from your quest.

After escaping, Malcolm thinks he's found peace in the Underworld, which more closely resembles a vacation spa than the usual fire and brimstone image that Hell usually conjures up. It seems to be the only place he can find happiness, before being thrust back to Kyrandia to find some closure. The island is much the same as the first chapter, except it's nighttime, and you can take all of the steps to gather evidence and clear Malcolm's name once and for all. Again like the first chapter, there are multiple ways to tackle the situation. As the intro relates, Malcolm used to have two guardian angels – the good Stuart and the evil Gunther. Stuart was knocked out a long time ago, leaving Gunther as Malcolm's sole voice of guidance. Due to Malcolm's spiritual journey, Stuart awakens for the final chapter. Malcolm can choose who to follow, or accept both of the voices, leading to three different paths to the end game.

The final chapter practically redeems the whole middle section of the game – the tedious puzzles are gone, and it's much more in line with the beginning. It also brings some differing viewpoints on elements from the previous games in the series. The earlier games presented Kallak, Brandon's grandfather, as a kind-hearted wise man. Malcolm, on the other hand, has always viewed him as a weasel – his perusal through the royal picture book is one of the most amusing parts of the game – and the final segments cleverly flip some of the purported truths established since the beginning.

While the quality of the puzzles is severely inconsistent, the writing and sense of humor further establish Kyrandia as an extremely weird place. In the first chapter, Malcolm is constantly harassed by a weird backwards-talking kid, and the most popular snack in the land seems to be fish cream sandwiches. The game includes a studio audience, which laughs blindly at anything being said. And while there still aren't any dialogue trees, you can choose how Malcolm approaches the other characters through the use of the Mood-o-Meter. You can switch his demeanor to Nice, Normal (i.e. sarcastic) or Lying, depending on how manipulative you want to be.

This is also the only *Kyrandia* game that keeps a running score, which increases when solving puzzles or finding Easter eggs. The real purpose of this is that every accomplished task has some kind of humorous moniker. Combining two disparate items to create a completely

new one will yield MacGyver Points, while picking a lock with a rusty nail will give Common Thug points.

The designers also know that it's sadistically fun to see your character get killed, so they not-so-subtly warn you every time you're in a dangerous situation – and even if you do get killed, you can choose to resurrect right before Malcolm's death. After all, there aren't too many games out there with deadly squirrels or killer mimes. Most of these scenes are pretty silly, except for one so absurdly gory that that game asks if you're old enough to view them. (*Malcolm's Revenge* was released before the days of ESRB ratings, but this single scene features such extraordinary amounts of cartoonish blood that it alone would've earned it a Mature rating, despite the disclaimer.)



Malcolm finds himself a beloved celebrity in the Underworld.

There's a different feel to the graphics this time around. While all of the sprites look similar to the other two games, the backgrounds here are computer rendered, and unlike most CG from the time, they've aged pretty well. Some may miss the classic pixel look of the first two games, but the artistry exudes colorful imagination. The rendered cutscenes don't fare quite as well, especially due to their heavy compression. The inventory bar is hidden most of the time, allowing for the visuals to take up most of the screen, and only pops up when necessary. The music is also all digitally streamed, allowing for a much higher quality soundtrack. The *Kyrandia* games have always had excellent music, but this game's soundtrack is undoubtedly the best, as it allows composer Frank Klepacki and his sound team to move away from the militant marches of *Command and Conquer* and create something more lighthearted. Although the voice actor has changed for Malcolm (and is far superior to his original incarnation), former vocal cast members have returned for the likes of Brandon and Zanthia.

Malcolm's Revenge is pretty hit or miss overall – it's bookended by some fantastic segments, but the whole mid-game is borderline dreadful. But its sense of humor, bright visuals and excellent music help keep up the spirits even through the lousiest segments, enough that it's worth seeing through to the end.



Blade Runner

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): David Leary, James Walls, David Yorkin
Developer: Westwood Studios

An acclaimed science-fiction writer with a strong cult following, Philip K. Dick is recognized as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. In 1968 he published *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,* telling the story of Rick Decker, a special policeman in charge of hunting down and killing androids. There was immediate interest in turning the novel into a film, but the process took nearly fifteen years. The film was released in 1982, shortly after Dick's death. Directed by Ridley Scott and starring Harrison Ford, the adaptation was entitled *Blade Runner*. It divided critics upon its release and was not initially a financial success. However, the film achieved a cult following of its own, and it popularized the genre of future noir.

Blade Runner's iconic status has led to its adaptation in various media. There were several written sequels, multiple comic books, and two video games. The first, released in 1985 for various home computers, is an interesting but forgettable action game. The second, however, is an adventure game, and manages to be an exceptional example of both the genre and of licensed games in general. It was developed by Westwood Studios, which used its resources to create a game as true to the source material as possible, succeeding brilliantly.

The year is 2019. The location: a bleak neon-lit Los Angeles, with an ever-present pollution problem and a smiling geisha winking from every advertising blimp. In this dystopian future, a special unit of LAPD detectives called "Blade Runners" sweeps the streets of rogue "replicants": bioengineered soldiers and servants of off-world space colonies, possessing the intelligence and aesthetic attributes of a human, but with all the extraordinary strength and agility endowed by their artificial insides, balanced out by a built-in four-year lifespan. Produced by the Tyrell Corporation, the Nexus-6 models of these colloquially-named "skinjobs" have developed an arguably larger lust for life than their human creators, along with a tendency for escaping their designated posts and attempting to blend in with "normal" society on Earth. This desperate rebellion is deemed illegal and is grounds for execution – officially referred to as "retirement".

While Westwood's *Blade Runner* doesn't give players the chance to wear the weathered trenchcoat of Harrison Ford's Rick Deckard, its events take place along a parallel timeframe, and in some cases, within areas and beside characters from the film. As one of Los Angeles' freshest Blade Runners, it's up to Ray McCoy to hunt and retire another group of four replicants who have hijacked a moonbus, escaped back to Earth, and commemorated their return by harming the increasingly rare and non-synthetic members of LA's domestic animal kingdom. The "pet detective" premise of Westwood's *Blade Runner* sounds underwhelming when compared to the film's opening scene of a deadly replicant's escape from discovery. However, the symbolic importance of animals in future LA's society is a central theme from the original story that was glossed over in the film, and demonstrates the holes in the *Blade Runner* world Westwood attempted to fill in to enrich its context and setting.

The script (co-written by David Yorkin, son of the film's co-producer Bud Yorkin) includes stopping the source of terrorist attacks made upon the Tyrell Corporation; discovering corruption among the ranks of the police department; and ultimately clearing McCoy's name after being framed for murder. At some point in the process, players will have to also define Ray's humanity, and in turn, realize the fates of the replicants McCoy is hunting are tied with his

own. Ray is also accompanied by Crystal Steele, a hotshot police officer in the LAPD Blade Runner unit, and McCoy's would-be partner or competition in the investigation, depending on how well the player takes to her condescending "advice". Crystal's disposition toward replicants is appropriately far clearer than McCoy's, bordering on an obsessive need for android genocide. Needless to say, if the player decides to show sympathy for the skinjobs, Steele will lose what little respect she shows for McCoy. Her trigger finger works on a similar scale of morality. Additional supporting characters include Clovis, the leader of the suspected animal-killing group of replicants, who bears a resemblance to Roy Batty from the movie; Lt. Edison Guzza, Ray's boss, whose sleazy outgoing persona doesn't do much to dissuade players of his possible ulterior motives; and Lucy Devlin, a 14-year old orphan who is implicated in being in league with the replicants, which confuses her already deep-seated self-doubts regarding her identity.

Under the direction of executive producer/art director Louis Castle and lead artist Aaron E. Powell, the game's art design is spot on as well, capturing the visual style of the film perfectly. The Los Angeles of 2019 is a dark, dirty version of our future. Walking through – or, via McCoy's genuine police-issued spinner, fast-travelling to – every familiar building and location from the film flawlessly supports the immersive believability of the game's license. Other elements, such as the spinner vehicles and the glowing umbrellas, further immerse you in the film's familiar world. The game was advertised as the first "real-time" adventure game, and this might be taken as meaning the passage of time strongly affects the game, like in *The Last Express*. But this is not the case, and instead refers to the way that the characters are rendered in real-time, using a method called "Voxel Plus" which created the illusion of three-dimensions. The game's native resolution of 640x480 is an unfortunate victim of the future proof-less nature of classic PC games, and does little to compliment the efforts of Westwood's backdrop artists. Worse yet, the already crude character models – a side-effect of the then processor-intensive requirements of rendering voxels – unsurprisingly look best at a distance, but slowly show their blurry, pixellated, low detail features and animations when placed closer to the foreground.



The authentic backgrounds are clad in a near perpetual night, illuminated by neon glow.

Unable to use the film's original soundtrack by Vangelis, Westwood composer Frank Klepacki recorded a duplicate of the score as well as original tracks done in its style. Between the rain beating down outside, and the familiar cues of "Blade Runner Blues" heard as looking out onto the city from McCoy's balcony, the faithfulness is overwhelming. Several actors returned to their roles for the game, including Sean Young (Rachel), William Sanderson (J. F.

Sebastian), and Joe Turkel (Eldon Tyrell). The rest of the voice work is well-cast, with talent such as Lisa Edelstein (*House, M.D.*), Mark Rolston (*Aliens*), and Pauley Perrette (*NCIS*).

The gameplay has a simple point-and-click interface. You click on a spot to have McCoy walk there, double click to have him run. The story is divided into acts, and you can complete the steps necessary to conclude each act in almost any order you choose. The game doesn't allow itself to become unwinnable, but it will kill you in a random fashion just often enough to keep you on your toes. Unlike most adventure games, *Blade Runner* concentrates much more on solving the overall crimes than it does on solving smaller puzzles. In fact, there are hardly any typical puzzles in the game at all, as almost every obstacle is solved through conversation or exploration. The rare moments where you have to employ methods from other adventure games are unexpected and therefore strangely difficult. You also lack a traditional inventory, and instead have access to a database of clues gathered from crime scenes, interviews, photographs and more. The clue database, dubbed KIA, is sortable and extremely helpful in deciding what to do next. The game is fairly difficult as it is; without the KIA, it would be almost impossible.

Conversation is handled in an interesting manner, where you pick "tones" rather than specific lines of dialogue. **C**hoosing "Polite" will see McCoy lack an investigative spine, to the point where he never pressures suspects, and goes out of his way to warn replicants of Crystal Steele's approaches. Conversely, "Surly" McCoy suspects almost everybody, showing a low tolerance for replicants and as such is practically Steele's best friend. Unsurprisingly, "Normal" is the most balanced and arguably dull mode, with McCoy towing his behavior between "Polite" and "Surly". Players selecting "Erratic" however, will have McCoy's displaying borderline multiple personalities, with his words and investigative techniques chosen at random with every situation, despite any established predilections.

The mood and dialogue that McCoy dishes out are only as significant as the responses he receives from non-player characters. Finding these characters is a variable quest in itself, as they possess their own schedules and "lives", and will not necessarily be always standing around where the player first encounters them. For example, the portly Lieutenant Guzza is found more often than not at the L.A.P.D.'s cylindrical skyscraper sitting behind the desk in his office. On the chance it's empty, McCoy may bump into him, under more suspicious circumstances, on the streets of LA. The schedules of NPCs can also leave an impression on the environments: regardless of the competitive Crystal Steele having her own case to worry about, the remains of her favorite brand of cigarette can sometimes be found at a crime scene. Used as a foreshadowing reminder that she is one step ahead of the player's efforts, such environmental clues are cleverly subtle plot devices, and sell the illusion that the world still moves, even without McCoy's input. For the astute clue collector, it's possible to hear references to and even spot a glimpse of Deckard.

Many aspects of the movie are featured in interactive form: the Esper machines and the Voight-Kampff tests. The Esper is an odd machine that allows the user to examine a photograph in a way that seems impossible. When you insert an image you are somehow able to view the face of someone photographed from behind, or clearly see a person standing around a corner. It's scientifically improbable, both in the film and here, but cool to use.

The Voight-Kampff tests, used to determine whether the subject is replicant, are an engaging mini-game in themselves; a cinematic suspenseful balance between asking the right questions and making sure not to aggravate the suspect, thereby terminating the test. In any event, after confirming the identity of a replicant, McCoy can share the results of the test with the suspect, and subsequently decide whether to calm them down, "retire" them, allow them to flee, warn them of Crystal Steele's approaches, or even join them in their rebellious cause. The randomization of NPCs plays an important role here also; along with the VK test sometimes proving inconclusive, the questions McCoy can ask and the responses characters give change with every playthrough. As such, players can never predict how a VK test will turn out or what ramification it holds for the narrative. This randomization constantly affects the player's perception of certain NPCs, instilling that sense of uncertainty the film relied upon. For

example, players will be led to believe that the young and defenseless Lucy, the target of so much suspicion, is actually a replicant. Yet in one instance, Lucy may openly volunteer for a VK test, with the results "proving" she is human. In another playthrough, Lucy may refuse to take the VK test and instead tries to escape McCoy's questioning, forcing him to take drastic action in a scene that pays homage to the film's Deckard "retiring" the fleeing exotic dancer, Zhora.



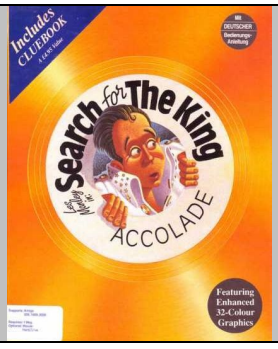
You'll find characters similar to the ones in the film, like this punk girl who resembles Pris.

You can actually complete the game without retiring a single replicant. Who you kill in the game is a major factor in how other characters treat you, and strongly affects the final outcome. Much like the film however, none of the game's endings explicitly suggest whether Ray is a replicant or not. Westwood went to extensive lengths to make sure the ambiguity remained intact. Certain important pieces of dialogue with key characters throughout the game were intentionally written to be neutrally interpreted; even the harshest of accusations against McCoy are sometimes met with an indeterminate response.

The experience is not without its problems. There are frantic instances of hunt-the-pixel gameplay, where you have to click absolutely everywhere to avoid missing important items. This is sometimes at a crime scene that you are investigating, which is quite understandable, but at other times McCoy might just be walking down the street. And while the game pays huge respect to the original movie, sometimes it's just too faithful. Not only are *Blade Runner* enthusiasts expected to believe that two separate groups of fugitive replicants have stolen and escaped via two separate moonbus' during the same period of time, but that both these groups use the dilapidated Bradbury Building as a hideout; a hideout which sees both Deckard and McCoy escaping to its rooftops by climbing up dressers to reach openings in the ceiling, naturally. Most curious of all is the appearance of the esteemed cop and enigmatic advisor Gaff. His role in the game is nearly identical to his cinematic counterpart: leading the protagonist with vague statements and leaving behind suggestive miniature paper animals in his abrupt wakes. Which only makes one wonder how he manages to keep an eye on two different Blade Runners and find the time to construct separate sets of ambiguously meaningful origami.

Blade Runner is that rare licensed game that manages to maintain the feel of its source material yet still stand on its own. The various departures from your average adventure game are refreshing, and everything about its production is first rate. Westwood's *Blade Runner* may be commercially lost in time but, short of making an analogy involving tears and rain, at least the moments of playing the game will not be forgotten by its vocal fans.

Les Manley



Les Manley in: Search for the King

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: Amiga / IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Cartwright
Developer: Accolade

Les Manley so desperately wants to be Leisure Suit Larry. He's a nerdy loser with a humiliating outfit, a white shirt and a red bow tie. He completely fails with the opposite sex, although his games feature lots of attractive women. He's an ace computer programmer but life is always kicking him in the groin. His first game, *Search for the King*, even uses an engine that's almost functionally identical to Sierra's SCI0 interpreter. But beyond its obvious inspiration, one which is acknowledged many, many times, Les Manley actually has his own style and sense of humor, which keeps it from becoming too shameless.

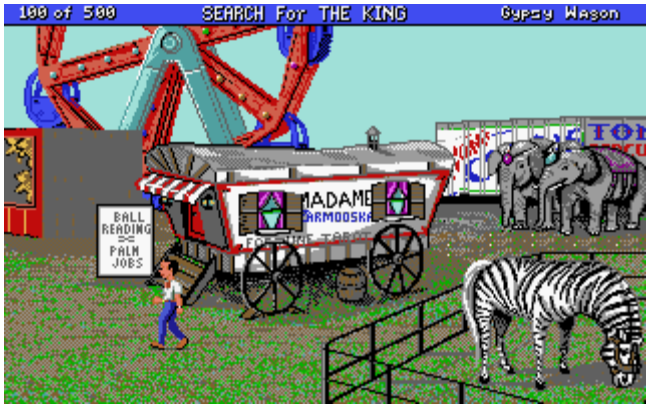
So, Les is a low level employee at a failing television network. His boss, ever a moron, decides to run a contest offering a million dollars to whoever can get a real picture of Elvis Presley. It's impossible, they believe, but it'd a good way to drum up some PR. Les, eager for the respect of the attractive blond secretary, decides he's up for the task and sets off on a journey that takes him to the local circus, to a resort in Las Vegas, and to "The Kingdom" in Tennessee, a not-so-veiled parody of Graceland. The overall plan is to run around and obtain various bits of Elvis memorabilia, put on a stage show, get killed by stampeding fans, take a picture of The King in the afterlife, and wake up to reality thanks to a Resurrection Ticket that Les obtains from a mysterious fortune teller.



The game openly acknowledges how gratuitous this scene is.

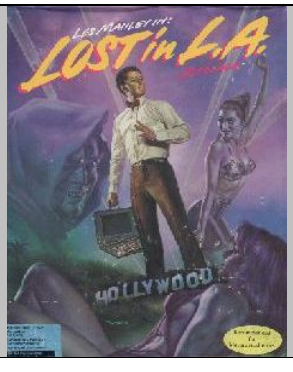
There's a lot about *Search for the King* that's patently absurd. Two of the puzzles revolve around the use of Helmut Bean, the World's Tiniest Man, who can be used to fish stuff out of drains. Despite the presence of a bus station in his hometown of New York City, Les travels to Las Vegas by standing on one of those "Test Your Strength" circus attractions and getting flung

across the country. To convince Helmut to join your cause, you need to steal a "dream" from a sleeping security guard, which is an awfully abstract concept.



Ball reading? Palm jobs? The humor is obviously not high brow.

Since *Search for the King* uses a text parser, trying to figure out some of these solutions can be awfully harrowing if you're not used to text adventures. And despite the obvious similarities to *Leisure Suit Larry*, most of it isn't particularly dirty. Sure, there are gratuitous close-ups of the female characters, sometimes salaciously rendered in all of their limited palette glory, but there's no actual sex, and beyond a few off-color jokes and a completely random set of bare nipples (which you are warned about before hand), it never really goes beyond PG-level. It's far from original, but it's entertaining enough on its own. Released on both the Amiga and IBM PC, the Amiga version is actually a bit better. It doubles the color count from 16 in the PC version to 32, resulting in much more colorful and detailed visuals.



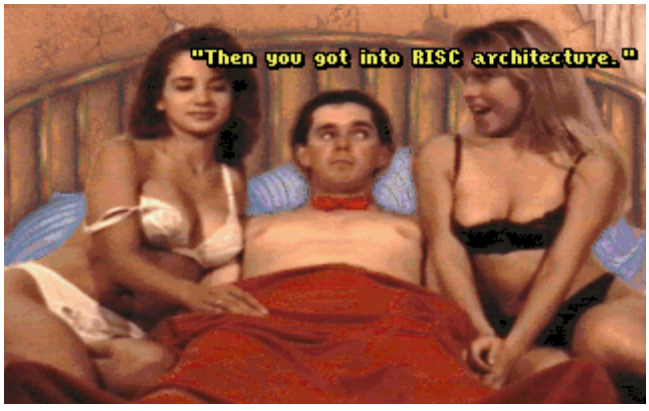
Les Manley in: Lost in LA

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Cartwright
Developer: Accolade

While Les ended up becoming CEO of his company in the last game, his buddy Helmut Bean ended up making it in Hollywood. However, a stalker has been kidnapping celebrities, including Bean and his extravagant girlfriend LaFonda Turner. Concerned with the wellbeing of his pal, Les takes a trip to Los Angeles to unravel the mystery.

Lost in LA uses a more advanced interpreter than its predecessor, utilizing 256 color VGA graphics, again making it look remarkably like Sierra titles at the time. There are, however, a couple of major differences. The interface only uses a single icon, where clicking on something will bring up a sub-menu allowing you to interact with it, which makes puzzle solving much easier. Since the whole game is focused on a handful of famous areas in Los Angeles – Hollywood Boulevard, Venice Beach, the corner of Sunset and Vine, and a movie studio parody

called Paramounds Studio – it's a little bit more open-ended than *Search for the King*, plus a lot of puzzles simply revolve around exhausting conversation options to trigger new events.

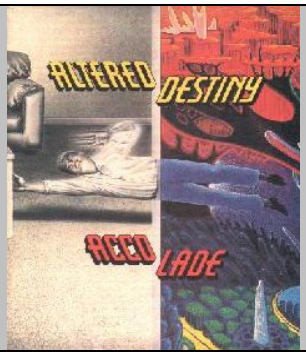


Yes, tell us more about the inherent sexiness of MS-DOS 5.0, Les.

While most of the game uses painted backgrounds and pixel-rendered sprites, the close-ups are all digitized photographs of actors and actresses. Besides the dweeby Les, most of these are bikini-clad girls, giving the whole affair a low budget porn atmosphere. There's an obsession with both built, muscular women and mud-wrestling, so expect lots of pandering to those particular fetishes. That being said, much like its predecessor, it's not nearly as naughty as it pretends to be, and you can find dirtier pictures in a swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated.

The humor is slightly more down to earth than *Search for the King*. Les isn't exactly an exemplary protagonist – although that's probably the point – but some of the secondary characters are amusing, like the street thugs known as The Boyz. They hang around shifty street corners and position themselves as the next great gangsta rappers, but they can't rhyme for anything and they're really just poseur street thugs that are driven around in their dad's Lexus. Owing to the evolution in interface, there's more conversation and characterization, though much of it is hit or miss.

There's a lot of obvious Hollywood humor, the type that thinks it's clever by poking fun at the propensity for numerous movie sequels. (Of course, back in 1991, *Terminator 3* hadn't actually come out yet, which sort of makes it funnier in retrospect, if you look at as a time capsule.) What other bits of humor are funny, but are clearly ripped off from other games. So Les impresses two mud wrestlers/strippers with his extensive knowledge of computer programming... except Larry did the exact same thing with a group of islanders at the end of *LSL2*. When Les tells a tourist company that he starred in a computer game and they rattle off an increasingly ludicrous series of better-known titles ("Were you one of the really important looking pirates in *Monkey Island*? The 1985 Atari XE/XL version of *Fooblitzky*? The 3-D scratch 'n sniff Macintosh version of *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*?"), it's worth a laugh or two, except both *Space Quest III* and *Leisure Suit Larry III* both were far more daring in breaking the fourth wall. And while it might seem clever that a character calls the Accolade help desk for some hints, Guybrush Threepwood did the exact same thing in *Monkey Island 2*. Due to all of this, *Lost in LA* has a harder time shaking off the fact that it's just an alright game riding on the coattails of more popular titles.

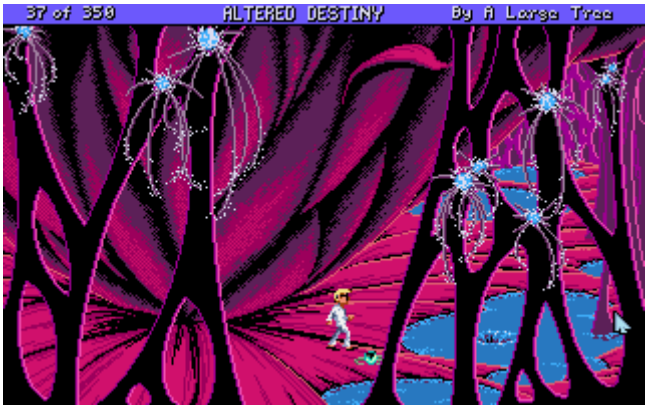


Altered Destiny

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Michael Berlyn
Developer: Accolade

P. J. Barrett is just an average guy, looking forward to spending the night watching television with his sweetheart. His plans go slightly amuck when his TV is mistakenly switched at the repair shop, and the new set causes him to be teleported into another world. With only his wits, P. J. is charged with saving the land from Helmar, a powerful wizard who's been terrorizing the kingdom with an artifact known as the Jewel of Light.

The whole "regular guy gets transported to alternate dimension and ends up becoming its savior" trope is practically as old as fantasy fiction itself, and *Altered Destiny* does little to shake things up. But it does have some absolutely fantastic visual design, with graphics that push the 16-color (if you're playing on a PC) or 32-color (if you're on an Amiga) limit to its breaking point. The game runs on the same engine as *Les Manley in: Search for the King*, which means it's practically identical to the SCI0 interpreter Sierra used for the likes of *King's Quest IV* and *Space Quest III* – artistically *Altered Destiny* is not only on par with these titles but perhaps bests them. The world of Daltere is less swords and sorcery fantasy and more fantastical sci-fi, filled with strange alien-like beings and resplendent with indigenous flora and fauna.



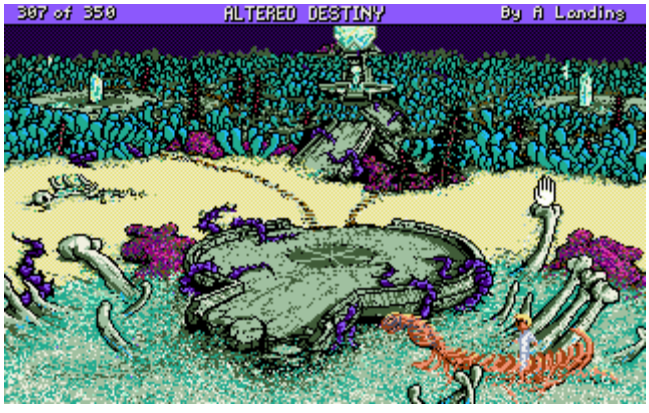
One of the locations in Daltere is a gigantic living tree.

The primary colors through most of the game are pink, purple and green, and there's a unique otherworldly feel to it, not too dissimilar to Delphine International's *Out of this World*, another title with a similar theme, although one far more oppressive. That game had tentacles that would drag you underwater within the first five seconds of gameplay, and slugs who could instantly kill you with a scrape on the knee. In contrast, *Altered Destiny* has forests with dancing pink plants, green foxes with tails shaped like gigantic leaves, and flying jellyfish-things called 'floaters', which can be used as makeshift elevators to transport P.J. to the temples in the sky above. There's also a dreamlike quality to certain scenarios, as you take an astral walk to the

dream plane to solve puzzles and enter a bizarre hallucination to track down JonQuah, the twin brother of the elusive Helmar.

That's not to say the world isn't dangerous – an innocuous looking spring called a Hoppa will sprinkle you with dust, which slowly turns you into a plant if you're not careful, and the land surrounding Helmar's castle is filled with poisonous plants and nasty enemies waiting in the shadows. By far the most frustrating is the Canyon of Fear, a winding series of narrow platforms where a single pixel of imprecision will send you plummeting to your death. It's just as bad as any of Sierra's 'arcade' sequences, if not worse, because half the time the pathway is obscured by the scenery in the foreground.

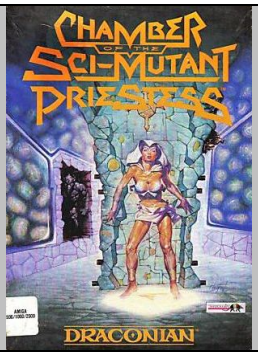
While the folks at Accolade have painted an intensely creative world, it's stymied by the usual adventure game issues of the era: an annoying interface and frustrating design. Unlike Sierra games your inventory is limited, requiring that you drop off unneeded items at the world's hub area before venturing on. But you're never given any indication of which items you'll need on the adventure or, worse yet, which ones you won't, potentially leading to unnecessary backtracking. There are also a few trick puzzles where you can use multiple items to solve it, but only one is correct – for example, popcorn can be used to trap a bird, but you should be using a jar of pigment instead. The popcorn is needed for a totally different puzzle much later on, and if wasted it's time to reload.



The island surrounding Helmar's castle is filled with danger.

The text input parser isn't quite up to task either, which is partially the fault of the graphics. There are so many indescribable sights and sounds that it's sometimes impossible to find the right word to interact with them. During one point you need to give an item to a rodent-like thing, but the game won't accept 'mouse', 'rat' or anything of the like. Instead, you need to look at the screen and be told that, oh, that strange little thing is actually called a 'kaylef'. Around the time of release many old-school adventure game designers lamented the death of the text parser in lieu on an icon-based one, but *Altered Destiny* is definitely a game that could've benefitted from a more modern design.

While parts of it are antiquated, there's still a gorgeous world to be found in *Altered Destiny*, and one that's worth exploring. It may not be immediately appreciable by anyone who grew up on modern graphics, but those with an affinity for low color artwork, the kind that forces artists to be creative under extremely limited circumstances, will find one of the most aesthetically impressive titles of the era.



KULT: The Temple of Flying Saucers (Europe)/ Chamber of the Sci-Mutant Priestess (USA)

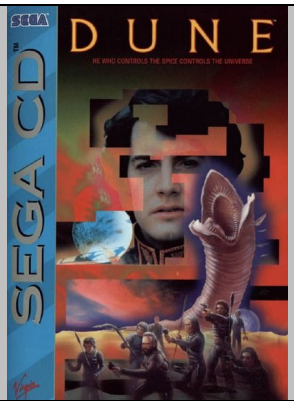
Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC
Designer(s): Johan Robson (as Arbeit von Spacekraft)
Developer: Exxos

KULT: The Temple of Flying Saucers (sold in the US as *Chamber of the Sci-Mutant Priestess*), developed by Exxos, who would later become Cryo Interactive, is set in an interesting post-apocalyptic world, where you play a man trying to rescue his girlfriend from a temple full of mutants. Fortunately, you are a Tuner, meaning you possess a variety of psychic abilities. The adventure centers on exploration and puzzle solving, with some light RPG elements – there is combat, but it consists of choosing to attack and then being told whether or not you were successful or you were killed. The game has an unusual point-and-click interface. When you find a clickable spot, a brain pops up with menu options (it looks like one of the game controllers from David Cronenberg's *eXisteZ*). Unfortunately, most of the options are useless and uninteresting and some are ambiguously worded, making it somewhat frustrating. There is interaction with characters, but it is fairly limited. Navigation can be a chore as well. It's played like a first person dungeon crawler, and it's easy to get lost in the mazes.



A word of advice: Do not go to mommy.

There are also multiple paths to victory, and with it, multiple endings. You can defeat the game by taking the obvious route, but it is also possible to bypass large sections and make your way straight to the final scene. The graphics do a great job of portraying a dirty, disgusting world filled with danger and biological machinery. Everything and everyone looks ugly, even the women who are meant to look beautiful; it's like a pixilated Richard Corben painting. There's even a bizarre fetus onscreen that provides commentary. It's a weirdly ambitious game with interesting design elements. For those willing to look past its shortcomings, it's worth a look.



Dune

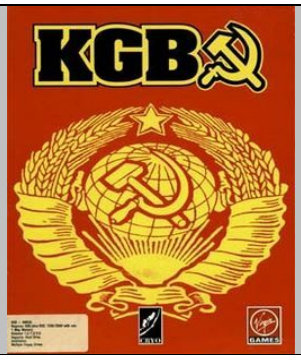
Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Sega CD
Designer(s): Rémi Herbulot, Didier Bouchon
Developer: Cryo Interactive

Based on David Lynch's 1984 movie, which was in turn based on Frank Herbert's 1965 novel, *Dune* tells the story of the desert planet of Arrakis. While extremely inhospitable, it's the sole source of the spice Melange, which has the power to bend space and time. Such a valuable resource commands much conflict, and the royal family of Atreides is appointed the leader of the spice mining operations, in opposition to the ruthless house Harkonnen. However, the Atreides son, Paul, learns that it is his destiny to free the Fremen, the indigenous people of Arrakis, from the lives of slavery they have been saddled with.



Some of the characters are based off the actors' likenesses from the David Lynch movie.

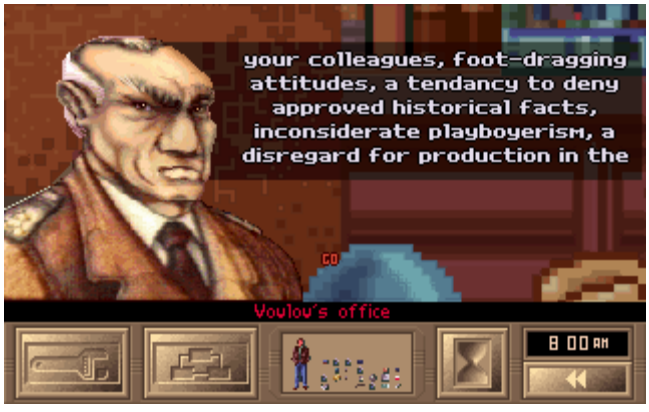
Cryo's computer game adaptation of *Dune* (not to be confused with *Dune 2*, Westwood's RTS) isn't quite an adventure game, but it sure feels like one. It uses a first person point-and-click interface, similar to their other games, but there is no inventory, and any "puzzles" are usually solved merely by bringing along certain party members and talking to them. Instead, you spend much of the time flying around the desert, speaking with the Fremen leaders, and giving them orders, which feels a bit more like a strategy game. It's heavily story-based though – there are various sub-quests to obtain equipment and such, and there's a time limit to reach certain goals, which progresses the plot. Sometimes it's hard to tell what you're supposed to be doing, but it's hypnotically addictive. The graphic design is excellent, as is the music. The CD-ROM version, released for both the PC and Sega CD, features voice acting for all of the characters, as well as some FMV footage. Cryo later made a regrettable action-adventure hybrid based on the Sci-Fi Channel miniseries airing in 2000 before going out of business.



KGB (Initial disk release) / Conspiracy: Starring Donald Sutherland (CD-ROM rerelease)

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Johan K. Robson
Developer: Cryo Interactive

Cryo's *KGB* is a unique time capsule. Published in 1992 and taking place shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, *KGB* puts you in the shoes of one Captain Maksim Rukov, a former Spetnaz agent assigned to the Soviet secret service headquarters in Moscow. It's your first day in Department P, whose job it is to stamp out corruption in the organization. Naturally, everyone else more or less hates you, because said corruption infests practically every layer. Your initial assignment is to investigate the murder of a private eye, whose previous ties with the KGB may have had something to do with his unfortunate demise. After infiltrating the ranks of the local mafia, you stumble upon an operation trafficking both snuff tapes and drugs, and become further embroiled in a mass conspiracy involving the CIA, a mysterious organization known as "New Birth", and a plan to stage a coup against Premier Gorbachev... all of which somehow ties in with the eventual downfall of Soviet Communism.



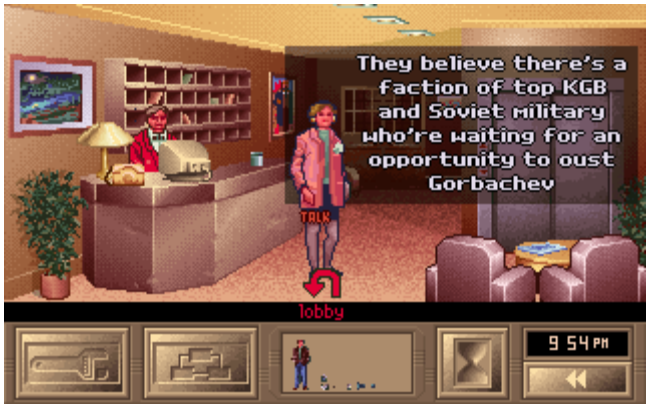
Even when you succeed in your goals, your direct superior will reprimand you.

The graphic adventure gaming canon is filled with games featuring instant deaths and dead end situations, but perhaps none are so unrelenting as *KGB*. There are countless ways to screw up your mission, either resulting in you getting killed, or perhaps worse, demoted and shipped off to some crappy job out in the middle of nowhere. Say the wrong thing in a conversation tree, it's over. Get in a fight and pick the wrong person to attack, it's over. Use unnecessary force, get taken off the case, and then it's over. Some of these fail states are sudden, but the ways to fix them is usually obvious – more painful are the ones that aren't so easily telegraphed. In the first chapter, you're supposed to intercept a drug transaction, but you're never told this unless you stumble upon it. If you missed it, it'll come back to bite you in the ass later. The game also runs on a timer, as the minutes tick down when you run from location to location. If you miss an event, then, again, it's over. It's even strict when it comes down to completely silly

things – you only have a limited supply of matches used to illuminate dark areas, and if you use them up too early, you are similarly screwed. At one point you are told to find a bathroom, but at least the game is kind enough to let you keep going if you accidentally piss yourself.

Traditional puzzles are sparse – beyond decoding messages or finding clever ways to dispose of dead bodies, most of the time is spent simply interrogating, trailing, or spying on other people. Gathering information is more important than gathering items, and at various points in the game you're quizzed on what you've learned. If you don't have the answer or answer incorrectly – well, you can probably guess what happens there, too. Most of the game can be navigated with a simple smart cursor, but an additional command menu will let you interact further, to move items between screens or hide behind scenery.

You are at least granted some level of leeway. There is an "undo" command when you die, but it only takes you back a little bit, potentially not far enough to have any real consequence. Most skilled adventure gamers get around this through save scumming, but there's but a mere four save slots. And while you can elect to restart the game at the beginning of any of the four chapters rather than starting from scratch, the first two chapters are quite long, so you'll still need to retrace a lot of ground. Everything about *KGB* is remarkably cold and calculating to the point where it simply exudes hostility. While insanely frustrating, it does a fascinating job of invoking the kind of paranoia within the Soviet Union or any oppressive government, where an off-color anti-government joke could send you to a stint in the gulag.



You'll need to cooperate with American spies for your mission, but can they be trusted?

The dialogue is similarly frigid. Everyone talks in a very blunt, straightforward manner, perhaps to communicate how English speakers hear Russians, without resorting to goofy Yakov Smirnoff speech. The font is the same as the one used in LucasArts games, its friendliness betraying the harshness of the words. Many characters are non-essential but can be spoken to regarding important topics such as the political and economical situations, or less important dealings like information on the local nightlife and the attractiveness of the local female population. They all have their own opinions, some afraid of the destructive values of Western society, others wary of political upheaval, still others finding ways to rationalize their criminal deeds. You can ask practically everyone for a drink or a cigarette – in turn, you can admonish some of your fellow workers for their opulence. Functionally, very little of it matters – different dialogue choices can have the same exact outcome, or potentially no outcome at all – but it does lend to the illusion of a richly populated game world. Some of it is also a bit tongue-in-cheek, like the propaganda phrases you spout if you attempt to talk to yourself. "Strive strenuously for historic upswings!" "Root out parasitic negativism!" "Toil unerringly in line with correct norms!" Try to shoot yourself, and you're told "This is outrageous! Are you determined to liquidate a state official without the necessary authorisation?" You can then choose from the

options, "You waste a human resource." or "You wait for official authorisation." The former is a quick way to the Game Over screen, of course. Such off-color gags relax the atmosphere, slightly, and are quite welcome.

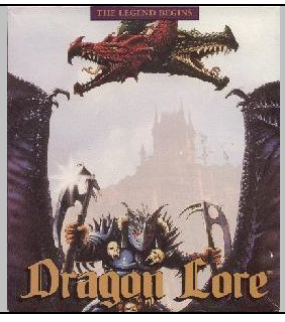
KGB presents a dense, complicated mystery – there are at least a dozen characters central to the plot, and numerous others. Some are members of the KGB, CIA, various mafia factions, or are simply civilians. Since there are so many of them with various allegiances, it gets tough to sort them all out, especially with all of the Russian surnames. The game also assumes you have some knowledge of the political climate at the time – in other words, you'd best understand what perestroika, glasnost, and chekists are, or else you might find yourself somewhat confused. The climax doesn't quite pay off as well as it should because the ending is somewhat hurried, but there are few games – outside of perhaps *Gabriel Knight* or *The Longest Journey*, both released years after *KGB* – that present this type of depth. The work is, of course, entirely fictional, and shouldn't be taken too seriously as any type of political statement. It was, after all, developed in France rather than in Russia itself, but that does not undermine the rest of its qualities.

Stéphane Picq, who worked on Cryo's other games, provides the electronica soundtrack, which is completely and utterly fantastic. Alternatively eerie and exciting, darkly moody and eminently danceable, it has no right to work given the intensely serious setting, but it somehow comes together. There are approximately six songs that simply play on loop throughout the whole game – in other words, the music doesn't change based on the setting – but each track is excellent nonetheless. The Amiga version has the slight edge when it comes to sound quality, but the Adlib FM soundtrack in the PC version is surprisingly well adapted. Combined with the idiosyncrasies of the game's visual and interface design – the creepy way characters warp in and out of rooms, the strange, hand drawn character portraits that clash with the pixel artwork backgrounds, the general cesspool that comprises the underground elements of Moscow and Leningrad, the fact that there's a portrait of Lenin in practically every room – *KGB* creates an uniquely entrancing atmosphere, one that works in tandem with the daunting expectations of both the plot and the gameplay.

KGB is also subject to the most bizarre CD-ROM port ever made. Unlike most other similar games, they did not add any voices or redbook music – perhaps there was too much dialogue, anyway. Instead, they drafted actor Donald Sutherland, dressed him up as a Soviet, and cast him as the ghost of your character's father. Effectively acting as a hint system, you can call him up at any time to get a bit of advice.

It's a fundamentally ridiculous concept, not only because the FMV completely clashes with the rest of the aesthetics (and is extremely low resolution video blown up to full screen) but because it's a strangely supernatural function in a game otherwise grounded in reality. They even changed the name, from *KGB* to *Conspiracy: Starring Donald Sutherland.* Despite the fact that it's tacked on and terribly inappropriate, it actually does end up helping the game in the long run, because the guidance is practically necessary to get anywhere without an external walkthrough. Sometimes he'll give some hints, sometimes he'll spell out a solution completely, and he's even kind enough to let you know if you've entered a walking dead situation. It's clearly a poorly thought out bandage applied to an obtusely complicated game, but in the end, it kind of works.

Dragon Lore



Dragon Lore

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / 3DO
Designer(s): Fabrice Bernard, François Marcela Froideval, Johan K. Robson
Developer: Cryo Interactive

In the early '80s, computer rendered graphics were all the rage, ignited by fancy effects in 3D movies and carried by the burgeoning popularity of the CD-ROM. French development studio Cryo, who had previously worked on oddball adventure games like *KGB* and *Dune*, was one of the early adopters of the technology and used it consistently up until their closure in 2002. One of their first attempts was a full motion video racing game called *MegaRace*; their next was an adventure game called *Dragon Lore*.

The story is generic fantasy tripe and takes place in a world where humans and dragons coexist. Werner, the infant son of the von Wallenrod clan, is nearly kidnapped by the evil Haagen von Diakonov, and whisked away to live a life of anonymity as a farmboy. Upon reaching adulthood, he is informed of his heritage and sets off on a quest to be inducted into The Order of Dragon Knights. This is accomplished by exploring the land and winning the favor of the sixteen Dragon Knights by running quests, as well as taking vengeance on the man who killed your father.



This is not an attractive game.

Like Cryo's other adventure games, *Dragon Lore* is played from the first person perspective, although the interface has been reduced to a single icon for movement and interaction as you click frame by frame through the world. While ostensibly shallow, the game makes up for it with its relatively expansive game world. Compared to the likes of *The 7th Guest*, *Myst* or *The Journeyman Project*, *Dragon Lore* has many, many more frames and a substantial amount of animated transitions. While movement is still restricted along very particular paths, it makes the world feel less like a series of narrow corridors and more like an actual world.

In order to render this many frames, it's clear that sacrifices had to be made, affecting the quality of the artwork. Not only are the screens boring in design, but the texture work is positively ugly, and the boxy, poorly animated character models are laughable. The entire game is displayed in low resolution VGA as well, which means it was quite speedy on the slower computers of the time, but also results in a game that looks like a drunken, blurry mess.

There is little else going in *Dragon Lore's* favor. The plot is sparse and dull, with the first half being an adventure across the land to reach your opponent's castle and the second half encompassing the castle itself. The puzzles are rarely anything more than scavenger hunts, with the only other focus being the combat. In addition to the usual inventory items, you can equip various manners of weapons and armor to do battle with a variety of foes. This might sound like an exciting change of pace, but it's executed about as awkwardly as you'd expect. It's strange to see animated sprites moving in a 3D space over a 2D image, and the perception of depth never quite feels right. Actually fighting enemies involves little more than right-clicking furiously and hoping the enemy doesn't get close enough to land any hits. There are no hit points or any other stats, leaving you to guess at your health. And given the node-by-node movement, you can technically just click your way past enemies anyway, even though they'll usually catch up to you at some point. The only real advantage any of this offers is that there are usually peaceful and violent solutions to various problems. Early on there's a dog-monster-thing in your way, and you can beat it to death if you like, but the proper solution is to give it a bone. Your bloodlust will affect the votes of the other Dragon Knights in both positive and negative ways, since some are crazy enough to approve of your wanton cruelty.

The expansive, immersive 3D world is really the only thing *Dragon Lore* has going for it. While there was a point in time when that was enough, it has long passed, marking *Dragon Lore* as a relic of its time and little more. Initially released on 2 CDs for the IBM PC, it was later ported to the 3DO console as well. A later re-release called *Dragon Lore Gold* adds several short cutscenes, substantially more music tracks and sound effects, and numerous bug fixes.



Dragon Lore II: Heart of the Dragon Man

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Bruno Martin
Developer: Cryo Interactive

So technically Werner got inducted into the Dragon Knights at the end of the first game, but that hasn't been quite enough. The shifty Duke Carichand has opposed your induction, requiring that you not only enlist in a joust tournament to prove your honor, but also track down Mighty Maraach, the long missing fire dragon, to get him to sponsor your rank.

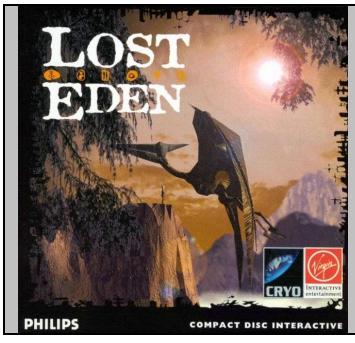
At first glance, *Dragon Lore II* seems to be a remarkable improvement over its predecessor. The quality of the graphics has improved immensely and the game now runs in SVGA. The still screens are gone, replaced entirely with full motion transitions (which can conveniently be sped up with the space bar), and even the scenery is animated when you're standing still. While the visuals no longer take up the whole screen, there's an actual health meter and inventory bar. The story is better integrated, with multiple dialogue trees and more cutscenes. The RPG elements have been improved, offering a wider variety of weapons, and the game runs in real time, with

day and night cycles. And yet despite all of these improvements, *Dragon Lore II* is a substantially worse game.



Your first dragon, Loplop, takes to the skies before getting killed almost immediately.

The navigation, for starters, is terribly confusing. Instead of just moving step by step, you turn and weave through various paths. The first terrain you explore is a mazey swamp, and it's incredibly difficult to maintain your bearings. Indeed, most of the adventure seems to be spent wandering aimlessly in circles. You can no longer move at all once engaged in combat, so the only thing you can do is stand your ground and keep clicking. The fighting was brain dead in the first game, but at least it was easy – here, not only are these scenes drawn out but you'll always end up taking damage, too. There are numerous ways to instantly get killed, as well as walking dead situations, which were practically banned across all other adventure games when this game was released in 1996. The real-time elements are stupidly implemented, since they just involve waiting around or wandering in circles until day or night comes, and also requires that you manage your ever-depleting strength by eating food and resting at inns. The game comes on three discs and asks you to swap them constantly. There are a couple of very badly implemented jousting segments, which are equally are stupid as the combat. And the story is still incredibly trite. While the first *Dragon Lore* was daft at the time of its release and is incredibly dated now, at least it's playable. The same can't be said of this sequel.



Lost Eden

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / 3DO / Amiga CD32 / Phillips CDi / PC-98
Designer(s):
Developer: Cryo Interactive

Released in early 1995, *Lost Eden* is an adventure game by Cryo (makers of the incredible *Dune*; the quasi-adventure game, not the real time strategy title by Westwood), with input from famed Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks author and Lionhead co-founder Steve Jackson. It has a strong emphasis on computer generated visuals and was released for numerous platforms.

The story revolves around silent protagonist Adam in an alternate reality Earth called Eden (later on you meet a woman called Eve). It's a world where sentient dinosaurs live alongside tribes of humans and apemen. All are being wiped out by the evil Moorkus Rex and his army of tyrannical Tyrannosaurus (called Tyranns – get it?). It wasn't always like this though: Adam's great-grandfather, Priam, had built giant citadels to keep the Tyranns at bay. Unfortunately his son, Vangor, was hungry for power and so destroyed the citadels (save one which has become their home), along with the knowledge of how to construct them. Next in line to the throne was Adam's father, Gregor, who in the game is a feeble old man afraid of conflict. Adam now carries the sins of his forefathers, but is determined to stop Moorkus Rex. He realizes that to do this he must rediscover how Priam built the ancient citadels – and the first part of the game is some rudimentary puzzle solving whereupon you end up in the remaining Citadel's basement to find that dinosaurs worked together with humans in the past, with Priam commanding them to build citadels via a magical flute. So off Adam goes to unite the land.



Lost Eden has some fantastic artwork and a great atmosphere, but not much else.

Anyone familiar with *Dune* may see some slight similarities here, though *Lost Eden* doesn't include any kind of strategy elements like *Dune* had. Once outside of Adam's home Citadel, which plays like a stereotypical adventure for 20 minutes, the game shifts to a series of five maps you need to unlock. Each is made from a grid measuring 4 by 12 for a total of 48 positions, each represented by a static CG landscape image. You click the cursor to move in one of four compass directions and the CG image changes. Those set over water can't be accessed, so some

maps have closer to 40 positions, and certain areas such as beaches and forests will have items (gold, apples, mushrooms, bird nests) which need to be collected ad nauseam.

This forms the bulk of the game – you randomly wander the maps (actually, astute players should start in one corner and systematically travel in horizontal lines) collecting items while on occasion bumping into dinosaurs and humanoids. The humanoids tend to be in fixed locations, but the dinosaurs move around randomly and there's no way to tell where they are, so you need to scan all 48 positions, sometimes repeatedly. You feed the brontosaurus mushrooms and then play a flute, after which they start building a citadel. Later on raptors must be given gold to fight the Tyranns, and triceratops given bird nests to strengthen the citadels. Apples must be dropped in a body of water to lure a dinosaur that reveals which special weapon must be used in that area (these weapons are acquired as part of the story later).

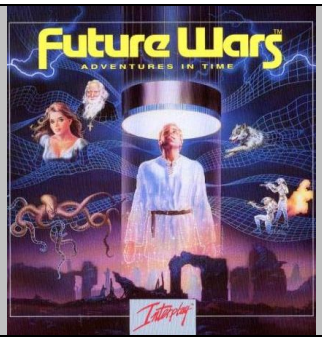
Exploration is reminiscent of *Myst*, but whereas *Myst* had fantastical CG locations, *Lost Eden*'s are a series of generic, poorly rendered landscapes, none of which have any bearing on the gameplay. It's akin to playing hide-and-seek using a deck of playing cards, but not the fun kind with bare naked ladies on them, rather the kind with pictures of nondescript lawns.

How much influence Steve Jackson had is debatable (the credits say "special participation of"), but this what he said in the manual:

"These days the quest is on for the ultimate Adventure Game – the Interactive Movie. In this respect, *Lost Eden* is something of a milestone. Cryo's painstaking design and programming work has created nothing short of an Adventure Gaming masterpiece. The action is full-screen. The animations are stunningly realistic. Game control – the Interface – is unobtrusive. And in no other game that I have played have the game characters been developed so carefully. The result is an Adventure Game with a unique feel to it. [...] I have thoroughly enjoyed being involved with its development. And I'm sure you will share my enthusiasm when you immerse yourself in the adventure plot."

The majority of what he says is demonstrably incorrect. For starters, the joints of some dinosaurs are stunningly unrealistic in the CG videos, and almost throughout the game feels unfinished. A seasoned and determined adventurer could easily complete it in less than a Sunday. The Shell of Tau gives clues to the few puzzles which exist, none of which are remotely taxing (the best is a three question quiz, where the answers are quite obviously items representing the sun, moon and earth). Otherwise there are no dialogue trees, making conversations brief and linear. For the most part you'll be collecting mushrooms and gold to start citadels, occasionally being given a key item once completed, until near the end where you're tasked with traipsing back over all the maps to find triceratops.

All of the game's challenge comes from randomization and sheer luck during exploration. A key item, the Sun Stone, is hidden in a cave in the upper left of one map – there's never a clue you need to visit this area, but considering that the dinosaurs move randomly, the easiest way to progress is to explore every single area. There's an inevitability to the game, where not only can you not lose, but winning doesn't require much thought. Which is unfortunate, since it had great potential. *Lost Eden*'s strongest points are how utterly balls-to-wall strange it is and the ingenious music throughout (it has an ethnic vibe to it, with tribal chants and cries). Characters are bizarre (one tribe look like Maori heads, others appear made of shell), the ever-present CG is of a surreal quality found only in games from the early '80s, and all the dialogue replete with absurd fantasy names is voiced with absolute seriousness. Steve Jackson is correct in saying the game's premise and atmosphere is unique, but the actual gameplay seems determined to prevent you from enjoying it. Those curious of Cryo's ability are better off seeking out *KGB* or *Dune*; *Lost Eden* is merely a strange curio. It is, at least, infinitely more interesting the incredibly drab *Dragon Lore*, released the year prior and at least a fair stretch better than the middling CG adventure game affairs that typified Cryo's output until their closure in 2002.



Future Wars: Time Travelers (Europe) / Future Wars: Adventures in Time (US)

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / PC-98
Designer(s): Paul Cuisset
Developer: Delphine Software

French development studio Delphine Software gained recognition through their two cinematic action games, *Out of This World* and *Flashback*. Prior to these successes, they had developed a trilogy of adventure games using their Cinematique engine, which, while met with some degree of success in Europe, went largely unnoticed in North America.

Future Wars, their first such game, begins innocuously enough. As a lowly window washer, your mundane existence soon becomes substantially more exciting as you stumble upon a device that mysteriously transports you back to medieval times. Further exploration reveals some bizarre anachronisms, such as an order of monks who seem to have access to technology which has no place in the middle ages. You soon stumble upon Lear and his beautiful daughter Lo'Ann, who reveal themselves as time travelers from the distant future. In the year 4315, humanity is at war with alien invaders known as the Crughons. Their fight is at a standstill, however, so the Crughons travelled back in time to plant bombs and alter the course of human history. With no real way home – and nothing better to do, anyway – you accompany Lo'Ann and aid the human resistance in the fight for the future.



The wreckage of Paris II in 4315 feels a bit like Out of This World.

From a technical standpoint, Cinematique is at a mid-point between Sierra's SCI0 and SCI1 systems. It supports 256 color graphics, although the visual depth isn't quite on the level of Sierra's scanned artwork. And while the interface is completely mouse driven, the pathfinding is extremely basic. It also takes the absolute worst design aspects of Sierra's older games, and somehow exacerbates them.

Unlike some other games that share the theme, the time traveling is merely a plot device – there are no puzzles that actually require using it, and progression is quite linear. A good chunk of the puzzles boil down to this: did you happen to grab that one nearly invisible item from three screens back? No? You can't go back and get it, so time to reload. Not only are vital items

nearly impossible to see, but trying to interact with them causes extraordinary amounts of headaches. You often need to be within a few pixels before your character can do something; otherwise, the game will tell you to move closer. Such taunts are maddening when dealing with dangerous monsters that you need to use an item on. "Go a little closer." "Go a little closer". Oops, too close. There are also a few screens, including a climatic dash through a maze, that require precise or quick movements, and it's too sketchy to ever work properly.

The puzzles that are there are pretty dumb too. Right at the beginning, you're yelled at by your boss. You go through the window and enter a lobby, with two doors. One door is the boss' office, and the other door you're supposed to enter, but the game won't let you. Instead, you're supposed to pull a prank on your superior by filling your paint bucket with water and then sticking it above the boss' door. When he comes out angry, you'll automatically run to the other door, and thus into the chamber which holds the time travel device. It's a terrible opening puzzle because you're not given any suggestion at all that you're supposed to be exacting some kind of juvenile vengeance.

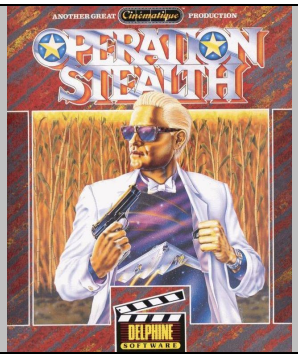
Most of the story is dealt out in chunks during a handful of relatively lengthy cutscenes, although character interaction outside of these segments is minimal. The writing is adequate, with some bits of amusingly awkward humor. Your character repeatedly mishears "Crughons" as "Croutons". One character wishes you good luck with a *Star Wars* reference. As a plot point, you're subjected to a mind implantation which subconsciously gives you necessary information as needed. Right before an arcade sequence, this impromptu education kicks in and acts as a brief tutorial, breaking the forth wall and telling you to use your mouse to shoot enemies, something which *Metal Gear* auteur Hideo Kojima would be quite proud of. Overall, the plot is serviceable, even though the basic set up is a bit too close to *The Terminator*.



In medieval times, our stressed hero takes a nap in a tree.

Regardless of its many issues, *Future Wars* is still interesting in a historical context. The visuals were done by Eric Chahi, who also masterminded *Out of This World*. You can see some similarities in the artwork, such as the way the projectile blasts disintegrate their targets, or the gloomy, war-ravaged landscapes. Paul Cuisset also designed most of Delphine's other games, including *Flashback*. There are some thematic elements which bear some vague resemblance, like the futuristic train station, or the hibernation device in one of the spaceships. But otherwise, the fiddly interface has resulted in a game that has aged extremely poorly.

Interplay also published the IBM PC version of *Future Wars* on CD-ROM. While the disk versions were almost entirely silent, the CD version has redbook audio playing throughout the adventure. It's cheap early '90s synth, and not in that awesome power rock PC Engine kind of way. As such, it adds nothing of value.



Operation Stealth (Europe)/ James Bond: The Stealth Affair (US)

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Paul Cuisset, Philippe Chastel
Developer: Delphine Software

A top secret jet fighter known as the Stealth has been captured by a mysterious enemy. Intelligence pinpoints its last known location in the (fictional) Latin American country of Santa Paragua. The only one who can save the world is secret agent Bond, James Bond... or John Glames, depending on which version you're playing.

Operation Stealth is a weird game, in that it was developed to be a huge Bond rip-off (or homage, depending on your level of cynicism). However, when it was released in America, the publisher Interplay acquired the actual 007 license, and thus changed the game ever-so-slightly. Some of the dialogue has been amended to fit a little better, mostly to add in familiar names. But otherwise both *Operation Stealth* and *James Bond: The Stealth Affair* are essentially the same game. Oh, and kindly disregard the Max Headroom look-a-like on the cover of *Operation Stealth* – in-game, it's clear who the hero is meant to be.



Your first rendezvous with the requisite chick doesn't exactly go down well.

It's definitely got all of the major components of a Bond film – the technological gadgets, the exotic locations, the femme fatale, the arch villain with his own island and army of goons. But it definitely all feels like more of a parody than anything else. The lady pal, Julia, walks with an absurdly exaggerated swagger. The dialogue, while not particularly well written, has an air of cheekiness about it. The nemesis is named Doctor Why. It's not exactly a comedy, but it's not really played straight either. It all actually comes off better when you're the Bond clone, Glames. As a part of the official 007 canon, it doesn't quite fit. (Then again, the same could be said of the some of the movies.)

But it does beg the question – is James Bond even an appropriate license for an adventure game? He gets to use cool gadgets but doesn't actually do much brainwork, and he's much more of an action hero than a detective. As such, most of the puzzles are heavily contrived. The very

first task involves checking the coin slot of a vending machine, then using that money to purchase something. This event was directly lifted from *Future Wars*, and the narration text even makes a vague reference to it, but is this kind of thing James Bond does – rummage for change?

The rest of the opening segment, which takes place in an airport as you falsify passports and steal various bits of luggage, is remarkably mundane. (And also ridiculous – if you give the customs official the wrong passport, you're immediately jailed.) The rest of the early parts are spent doing exhilarating things like exchanging currency (twice!) and buying flowers. When you take your elevator to the top floor of a hotel, your path is blocked by a housekeeper who just refuses to move. Instead, you need to take the elevator to the floor below, walk up the steps and saunter around her.

Eventually *Operation Stealth* realizes that Bond movies are really all about action. And that, unfortunately, is where it stumbles even more. Action sequences in adventure games are usually terrible, and this game does nothing to disprove that rule. The first involves swimming through a series of dangerous rock formations while your air meter precariously drops. Two others are overhead maze sequences – one dodging guards in the back stage of a theatre, another swimming to avoid dangerous piranhas. And there's a 3D chase sequence aboard jet skis. None of them control well, and all of them are intensely frustrating.



James (err... John) gets captured but escapes when the bad guys leave the room, in typical fashion.

Operation Stealth was designed using the same Cinematique technology as *Future Wars*. It has been slightly improved so Bond/Glames will walk to an object if he's not close enough. And there are less pixel hunting issues, although it's still quite possible (and probable) to get stuck in dead ends. In one particularly frustrating bit, you get captured and get to listen to your enemy prattle on, like any good old Bond foe. You're supposed to activate something in your inventory (if you found it earlier, anyway), but there's no indication you can access any of your items, as it appears to be a standard noninteractive cutscene.

The Amiga version of *Operation Stealth* has an interesting feature. If the user has enough RAM and the proper operating system, it can use the computer's speech synthesis libraries to read all of the lines aloud. Given how basic the technology was in 1990, it's all done in the same monotone Stephen Hawking voice, and it constantly (and humorously) mispronounces words, because the writing was not redone to account for its defects. It's also extremely buggy and is liable to crash the system. Points for effort, though.



Cruise for a Corpse

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Paul Cuisset, Denis Mercier, Philippe Chastel
Developer: Delphine Software

Delphine's third and final adventure game is a murder mystery, one heavily inspired by the works of Agatha Christie. The wealthy businessman Niklos Karaboudjan is hosting a party on his luxurious cruise liner. He is brutally murdered, but luckily enough for him, he happened to have invited French inspector Raoul Dusentier, who takes it upon himself to investigate the killing.

Cruise for a Corpse is so very desperately patterned after Sierra's *The Colonel's Bequest*. Not only does it draw from the same sources, but it borrows the exact same structure. You've got free run of the boat, but the game is divided into "time blocks", causing the clock to move forward whenever certain actions are taken. At each time block, characters change locations, and are potentially willing to talk about new subjects.

But *The Colonel's Bequest* was designed to be a relatively easy game for non-adventure gamers – you could aimlessly wander around and accidentally move the plot forward without having any idea what you were doing, and at the same time not really worry about solving any puzzles. *Cruise for a Corpse* feels like an antidote to that, as it's clearly meant for gamers who actually like to investigate. It's much more deliberate, requiring that you talk to a specific person about a specific subject, or find one particular piece of evidence, before the game moves forward. In some ways, it works pretty well, because you never need to worry about missing any part of the story. But it's also poorly implemented, as there's absolutely no rhyme or reason behind the triggers beyond the game's internal logic, nor any real guidance. Every time you move the clock forward, you know you've done something right, but where to take the next step is never clear. The only recourse is to investigate every room and talk to every person again and again, or re-examine rooms for clues. Necessary items will magically appear between time blocks without any reason or suggestion that they were put there. It's all quite maddening.

Just the very act of investigation induces headaches. As a trained member of the police force, Raoul Dusentier is an absolutely terrible inspector. He categorically refuses to search when he thinks it isn't relevant, to the point where his arrogance grows tiresome. You may not think that drawer is useful, Inspector, but at least give the player the courtesy of looking in it instead of shooting down every single suggestion given. Of course, this being developed by Delphine, whose *Future Wars* practically redefined the frustration of pixel hunting, most of the important items are tiny and blend in with the scenery. Furthermore, as you progress through the mystery, you eventually gain a long list of conversation topics. It never highlights the ones you've already discussed though, making it difficult to pick out new lines of inquiry without just barreling through the whole list until you find the topic that will progress the time.

It's just as well, because there aren't too many items to find, nor very many puzzles to solve. Instead, most of the investigation is simply spent interrogating the rest of the boat's guests. There's nothing actually wrong with this in concept, but in execution it falls completely on its face because the writing just isn't very good. There are nearly a dozen characters, each with their own backgrounds, quirks and motivations, but outside of the strange butler who looks like a circus muscleman, none of them have any real personality. Perhaps this was the result of a poor translation, evidence of which can even be seen in the title. Maybe the original

French title, *Croisière pour un cadaver*, sounds okay, but *Cruise for a Corpse* sounds patently ridiculous in English, and conjures a sense of cheesiness which isn't actually found within the game itself. It is, however, absolutely filled with lines of dialogue that just don't sound right.

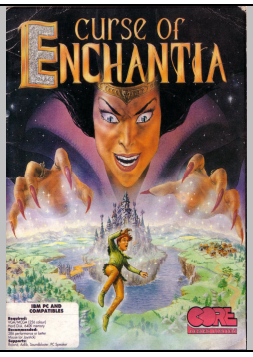


Inspector Dusentier fruitlessly searches one of the cabins.

One character, when questioned about his background, casually implies that he may have raped someone. ("Oh, nothing serious Inspector. Youth's foolishness. I was seeing a young waitress, she lead me on. I was young and hot headed. The long lady had to be hospitalized and I was sent to prison.") Another makes a reference to Donald Trump, apparently forgetting that the story is set in 1927 and the noted billionaire wouldn't be born for another twenty years. When the improbably named Dick Shmock is inquired about the illness of another female guest, he simply responds "huh??? Maybe menopause?" (The grammatical issues have been preserved to stress its sloppiness.) Technically, the translation isn't any worse than Delphine's other games, but those weren't nearly so reliant on text either.

It's a shame, because there's actually a pretty decent story behind the poor writing. It's got all of the ingredients of a classic thriller, complete with numerous intertwining dramas – arranged marriages, illegitimate children, substance addictions, illicit affairs, inheritance disputes, secret identities. It's nothing innovative, but it's classically done, and the climax is certainly much more compelling than *The Colonel's Bequest*.

Digging through the mess to get to that story isn't really worth it, though. Beyond that, *Cruise for a Corpse* is really only known for its rotoscoped character graphics, the kind which Delphine would reuse for *Out of This World* and *Flashback*. The sprites are large and the animation is extremely smooth, sometimes distractingly so. There are only a couple of scenes where the backgrounds are set to take advantage of it, though. Certain backgrounds are positioned so Dusentier walks directly towards or away from the camera, which looks impressive, except when his crotch ends up walking right in the center of the monitor. The close-ups during dialogue are done with standard bitmaps, since they are much more detailed but are barely animated. The only time the game really takes advantage of the technology is with the ending, which, cinematically, is very similar to the intro of *Out of This World* (without the particle accelerator and alien world, obviously). Like the rest of Delphine's output, it's cool to see the influence upon their later, better titles, but as a standalone product there isn't a whole lot worthwhile about *Cruise for a Corpse*.



Curse of Enchantia

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Rob Toone, Ian Sabine
Developer: Core Design

In *Curse of Enchantia*, you control a young boy named Brad, who's been whisked away to the magical land of Enchantia by an evil witch. Without reading the manual it's not entirely clear why, because there is no real dialogue, or any writing at all. All communication is done entirely through the backgrounds or thought balloons, which lends a cutesy atmosphere to this fairy tale universe. (It's certainly much more lighthearted than *Out of this World*, one of the only games that tried something similar.) The world is full of dangerous obstacles and strange monsters, but you can't actually die – there's just some comically slapstick animation and then you're back on your feet. You lose points for this, but this can be increased by picking up the otherwise useless jewels scattered about. The score is functionally useless, however, beyond placating your ego.



Curse of Enchantia's excellent art and light-hearted atmosphere is the best thing it has going for it.

The high points include the beautiful backgrounds and the silly animal characters you'll meet, like Sally See-all, the fortune telling seal, and a Beatles-esque band called "The Slugs". The low points include most of the puzzles and the horrendous interface. You can't interact directly with anything on the screen, instead everything has to be handled through icons in the command bar. It's all kludgy and stupid, partially because it's never clear if you can interact with something until you're standing right next to it, and partially because there are way more verbs than necessary, most buried in a sub-menu, and it's not always clear which is the right one. Furthermore, one of the early puzzles involves scavenging through a large cave to obtain dozens of rocks, and the challenge comes from separating the obtainable objects from the ones that are merely part of the scenery, tediously requiring that you walk next to each and every one to test them. *Curse of Enchantia* has its charms, but they're mired in overcomplicated stupidity like this.



Universe

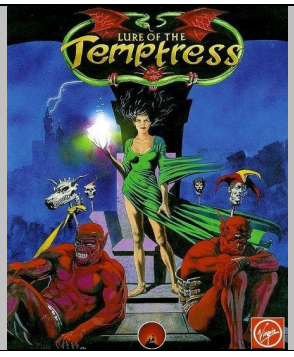
Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Amiga CD32
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Core Design

Universe is essentially the sci-fi cousin of *Curse of Enchantia*. You control a young man named Boris Verne (relation to Jules probably intended), who is sucked into an alternate dimension after fiddling with some weird device in his uncle's house. Emperor-King Neiamises, the not-so-pleasant ruler of this alternate dimension, has determined that you are a threat due to a prophetic warning, and sets out to have you eliminated. Your goal is to venture through the cosmos and return home with your life intact.



These statue things sure do look cool.

The interface is similar to *Curse of Enchantia*, although improved so you can actually interact with stuff on the screen. It's still unresponsive, though; furthermore, the hotspots aren't indicated clearly enough, and there are still too many verbs – when prying something with a crowbar, why is "INSERT" accepted while "USE" is just greeted with a thumbs-down? Too much time is spent with the overcomplicated controls of your interplanetary cruiser as well, especially in the early portions, and there are also numerous bugs. There's actual dialogue here now too, and the writing is alright, if not particularly inspired. Boris is a lousy every-protagonist, and his attempts at wisecracks during the dialogue are pretty awful. But like *Enchantia*, *Universe's* strengths lay in its fantastic art design, which is easily on par with, if not better than, Sierra's. The barren planets you start off on are boring, but soon you're exploring fantastic alien cities like the Wheelworld (a pretty obvious take on the *Ringworld* novels), and they're quite good looking for 256 color graphics. Still, it's missing the whimsy of its predecessor – this game's idea of humor is having your character note that a small alien looks suspiciously like something out of *Star Wars*. The whole thing is sort of like *Space Quest*, but without the funny.



Lure of the Temptress

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Charles Cecil, Dave Cummins
Developer: Revolution Software

The city of Turnvale has been invaded by an orc-like race called the Skorl, who are led by a cryptically gorgeous enchantress named Selena. The royals have been slain or captured, and caught amongst the chaos is a peasant named Diermot, the player character. After escaping from prison with the help of a court jester named Ratpouch, the unlikely duo is tasked with bringing together the town's resistance movement and driving out the horrible creatures that have overrun their city.



Cluttered screens like this one are common occurrences in Lure of the Temptress.

Lure of the Temptress is the first game developed by Revolution Software, who would later go on to bigger and better things with the *Broken Sword* series. Everyone has to start somewhere, of course, and their first product is almost more of a tech demo than an actual game. It's the inception of their Virtual Theater engine, which allows for the many NPCs to wander freely around town, entirely separate from the actions of the player. It does a fine job of creating a bustling, living town, yes, but it's a pain when you find someone specific to talk to, which either means bumbling around until you bump into them, or finding a place they frequent and hanging out for a bit. The repetitive, labyrinthine nature of Turnvale doesn't help matters, as it's easy to get lost until you've got a grip on the layout. But this is all pretty much the entirety of your quest – finding people, talking to them, trading items, and occasionally using them in some way to solve a simple puzzle. Technically it's not a long game, but all of this stalking pads it out considerably. A majority of the game takes place in the city, too, leaving this adventure feeling strangely constricted, and the generic medieval setting does little to liven up things up.

While interesting from a technological standpoint, beneath the surface, the Virtual Theater engine just doesn't work very well. One of its most prominent elements is the ability to order Ratpouch to carry about various commands, as his skills are needed for certain tasks, like

pushing bricks or picking locks. He'll usually follow you around, but you can also tell him to walk to anywhere in town, and off he'll go. You can string together several verbs and nouns into relatively complicated sentences and watch him carry them out. This is all in theory, of course. In reality, the sketchy pathfinding and erratic movement of the other NPCs create situations wherein everyone bumps into each other chaotically until they all forget what they were supposed to be doing. Other townspeople constantly get in your way, causing your character to stop, and lots of secondary conversations happen directly over your dialogues, devolving many situations into massively cluttered headaches.

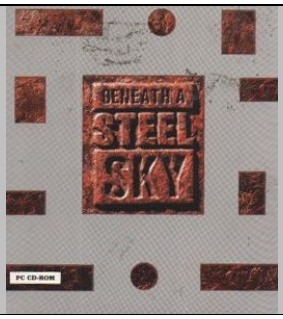


Diermot briefly assumes the role of the temptress Selena in order to rescue the lady Goewin.

At least the game's got a good sense of humor. The animated cinema of the Skorl punching poor Diermot right in the face is a never ending source of amusement. And while Ratpouch isn't the swiftest of companions, he's willing to chime in with goofy non sequiturs ("I've never trusted blacksmiths, not since my sister went to have her teeth pulled.") and stupid jokes ("What do you give a Skorl with diarrhea? Plenty of room!") He'll occasionally egg you on to drop this whole questing bit and just go get wasted, or have an elaborate conversation with a dimwitted barbarian about his lifestyle choice. Some other dialogues amuse – watch as a Skorl wanders into a restaurant and causes a scene when he learns they are all out of squirrels – but such scenes are the only savior in an otherwise incredibly dull adventure.



POW! Right in the kisser!



Beneath a Steel Sky

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / iOS
Designer(s): Charles Cecil, Dave Cummins, Dave Gibbons, Daniel Marchant
Developer: Revolution Software

Revolution Software was founded by Charles Cecil, Tony Warriner, David Sykes and Noirin Carmody in England in 1990 as a reaction to Sierra's adventure games. Their reasoning was simple enough – they thought they could do better. Their first game, *Lure of the Temptress*, failed to light many fires, but their second game, *Beneath a Steel Sky*, quickly became a cult favorite, and time eventually recognized it as a true classic of the point-and-click genre.

Beneath a Steel Sky takes place in futuristic Australia, with most of the population living in huge, corporate-run cities, with a small group of outliers living in the wilderness known as The Gap. The intro, told in comic book-style panels with artwork by artist David Gibbons (*The Watchmen*), who also drew all of the backgrounds, tells the story of a young boy whose helicopter crashes in The Gap and is raised by the aboriginals. Remembering only his first name, Robert, they give him the surname "Foster", after a beer can they find (a joke lost on American audiences due to some changes to avoid trademark infringement – the beer brand became "SS IPM RAW" or "Warm Piss" spelled backwards). Foster is a bright boy, and manages to create a robotic friend named Joey to keep him company. Soon, he grows into adulthood, when a helicopter kidnaps him and takes him back to the expansive urban jungle known as Union City. Things get further complicated when his transport crashes yet again and Foster is left as the only survivor. If that trauma wasn't enough, the local police have classified him as a terrorist and begin hunting him down. Foster gets even more confused when the policeman sent to apprehend him is fried right before his eyes, as if some unseen force was protecting him. With nowhere to go but down, Foster descends through the towers of the city to find some answers.

Union City is socially stratified into various different levels, with the poor, blue collar workers practically living in factories at the top level and the rich upper class living at the bottom in fancy apartments. The whole of the city is controlled by LINC, a computer which not only monitors every aspect of life, but has apparently also taken on a consciousness of its own after melding minds with one of its creators. Foster himself is subjected to quite a bit of culture shock, both due to the excessive governmental control and the weird folks he runs into.

Much of the story of Union City is told by its inhabitants. At the top are the shop workers, like the slightly disgruntled Hobbins, who doesn't really care who you are as long as you don't mess with his stuff. (This being an adventure game, it's naturally something you need to do.) In other areas, you'll find more bored and apathetic employees, enamored with seemingly inane minutiae like their clipboards and uninterested of the workings outside of their own immediate circle. At the top of this bureaucracy sits the game's most amusing character, a boorish plant supervisor named Gilbert Lamb, who trots around in a garish fur coat ("made from the last ten beavers in the world!", he brags) while his lowly workers toil in grey jumpsuits. He's so fat that you can actually see his double chins rendered in glorious low-res VGA. He also knows little, nor cares, about what his factory actually does, but enjoys the status that his job title provides despite the fact that it's not entirely clear how he got there. It's a fun little satire of corporate culture, which works to tie in how closely Union City's dystopic world is to our own reality. At any rate, messing with Lamb is probably the most fun part of the game, as you can drain his bank account and demote his social status, much to his chagrin. One of the game's only real faults is that there isn't more of him.

There are a number of other quirky characters. In true cyberpunk fashion, in order to interface with LINC, you need to get an operation to get a port installed in your head. This is done by one Dr. Burke, a deranged maniac who huffs his own anesthetics. He has a patient in his office with a gaping hole in his chest, which he routinely fiddles with. (You can talk to the bed-ridden man, who's still conscious – apparently he doesn't mind at all.) You can only afford the operation by donating organs, but since you spent your life in the wilderness, free of urban pollution, you're simply far too healthy and your body parts would fetch far too much money. In return, you have no choice but to donate your testicles – which, the doctor politely informs you, are thankfully harvested after your death.



Foster and Joey have a loveably weird bond.

Further down the line, you accidentally end up as a defense attorney in court case for Hobbins, who has been ineptly framed due to some of your earlier mishaps. The judge seems to think the whole thing is sort of game show, further convincing Foster that everyone has gone mad. You also need to request the aid of one Mrs. Piermont, the richest (and fattest) woman in the city. Revolution Software apparently felt the character was so amusing that she (or perhaps a long lost, distant relative) shows up as another minor character in their next game, *Broken Sword*.

And of course, there's Joey, your robotic companion. You escape from The Gap with his circuit board, which you can place in various different shells throughout the course of the adventure. He's initially quite disappointed – and suitably sarcastic – when you stick him in a dumpy little cleaning model, but gets considerably more excited when inhabiting a welding robot, where he does his best Dalek impression. ("EX-TER-MI-NATE!") He's easily one of the best lil' buddy robot companions since the lovable Floyd from Infocom's *Planetfall*/*Stationfall* text adventures.

Most of the characters are brought to life by the excellent voice acting in the CD-ROM version. Foster has a cool voice, although some of his line readings are a bit awkward – perhaps intentionally so, to illustrate his naiveté. It still doesn't explain how he has an American accent, or why everyone else has various British accents rather than anything Australian, but even extremely minor characters, like the goofy cops Sam and Norbert, remain memorable. If anything, a lot of the characters feel underwritten, and dialogue options are exhausted before you feel like you're done talking with them. And much like comics books, which tend to bold certain words for emphasis, *Beneath a Steel Sky* capitalizes them in the subtitles. This, of course, looks a little bit odd.

The game's all a bit on the silly side, despite its oppressive atmosphere – even the music is a bit jaunty – but things get a bit more serious once you infiltrate the long abandoned subway tunnels to uncover the mysteries of LINC. In addition to reading news at the local terminals, you can also jack into the system and walk around cyberspace. Here, Foster is represented by a

blue avatar, and all of the inventory objects are replaced with various commands, programs and documents. You need to jack into this space a few times, each using different ID cards to decompress and decrypt various files that you find.

Beneath a Steel Sky uses an enhanced version of the Virtual Theatre engine used in *Lure of the Temptress*. The NPCs are given simple scripts that determine their patterns, so they walk around rather than sitting in one place. It was immensely awkward in *Lure of the Temptress*, but here it's used for an appropriate amount of realism, and it's never too tough to track someone down, because they're never more than a few screens away. The interface is quite simple, with left clicks looking at objects and right clicks interacting with them.



Hilariously self important bureaucrat Gilbert Lamb desperately needs his own game.

The game's not terribly long or terribly difficult, although a number of puzzles involve timed elements, absolutely requiring that you bring up the status menu and set the speed to the absolute lowest setting in order to get things done. There are a few cases where you can yourself killed – including one right at the beginning if you're not careful – but generally death only comes if you're not careful enough to avoid the warning signs. For example, when wandering in the sewers, there's a foreboding crack in the wall. Walk past it, and some kind of horrible creature grabs you and pulls you to your death. It's almost better to save just to see this, because you never see the monster other than its claws and eyes, nor is it ever referenced at any other point in the game. It brings you to wonder – just what kind of crazy experiments is LINC doing?

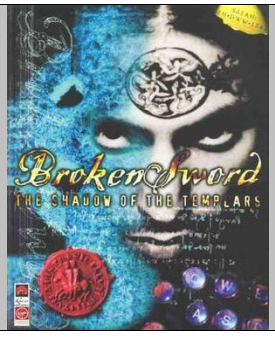
Other than those nitpicks, there's not much to complain about, and a whole lot to praise, especially the writing. This delicate balance between humorous writing and serious storytelling carried over to the *Broken Sword* games, the series which Revolution Software primarily concentrated on. Charles Cecil has stated that he'd like to do a sequel, which would be excellent, especially considering there's enough backstory involving the war between the corporate cities to tell an interesting tale. For now, we'll have to do with the slightly enhanced iOS version, released in 2009, which cleans up some sound and adds some new artwork in the cutscenes, also drawn by Dave Gibbons. It's a good port and includes a hint function, but is sadly missing the speed controls of the initial release. The original version of the game has been made freely available, and can easily be played via ScummVM.

Broken Sword

Developed by British studio Revolution Software, the folks behind *Lure of the Temptress* and *Beneath a Steel Sky*, *Broken Sword* is one of the most brilliant series in adventure gaming. Throughout four games (and one particularly decent fan work), the heroes – American lawyer George Stobbart and French photojournalist Nico Collard – find themselves investigating murders and becoming involved with huge global conspiracies. Many of them revolve around ancient and mythical artifacts – the series is particularly enamored with the Knights Templar, an ancient foundation created during The Crusades. Although technically disbanded centuries ago, some believe the organization still exists, and fight to control their lost treasures. Other mythical elements integrated into the stories are the Voynich Manuscript and the Ark of the Covenant. Many elements of fact and fiction are interwoven into the stories, often with tremendous depth. The only adventure game with the same attention to detail is Sierra's *Gabriel Knight* series. But while *Gabriel Knight* is closer to Stephen King or Anne Rice, *Broken Sword* feels more like *Indiana Jones*, and exudes much of the same appeal.



Nico and George, the heroes of Broken Sword, look on in shock and awe.

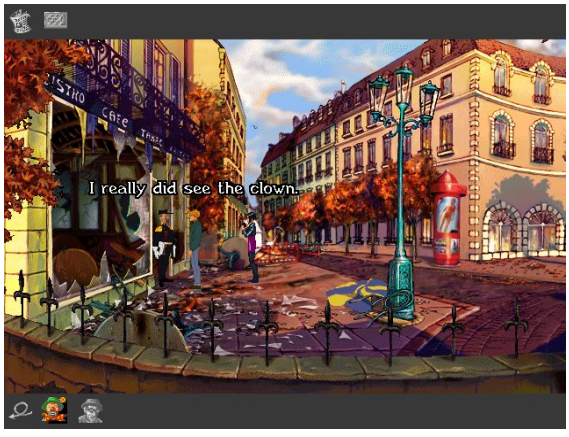


Circle of Blood (US) /
Broken Sword: The Shadow of the Templars (UK)

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation / Game Boy Advance / Nintendo DS / Wii / iOS
Designer(s): Charles Cecil
Developer: Revolution Software

Broken Sword begins with our hero, George Stobbart, relaxing on vacation outside of a small cafe in Paris. He's slightly unnerved by the sight of a clown that enters the cafe, who then proceeds to blow it up, killing a mysterious man with a briefcase. Disturbed with how closely he skirted with death, and equally baffled at the extraordinarily bizarre situation, George sets to track down the killer and solve the mystery himself.

One of the first people George meets is Nicole "Nico" Collard, a native French photojournalist who begins to cover the case. She is sassy and likeable. ("You speak very good English for a French girl." George comments. "Thanks. You speak very good English for an American." she quips.) Through their work together, George obtains a manuscript from the purported killer with several cryptic images. In conducting more research, they learn of the Knights Templar, an organization from medieval Europe that was disbanded long ago... or so they say. A new group of people, called the Neo-Templars, have banded together to uncover the mystical Sword of Baphomet (the "broken sword" referenced in the title) to rule the world from the shadows. In their quest to solve the murders and stop the Neo-Templars, George travels around Europe and the Middle East, investigating a castle in a small Irish village, a cave out in Syria, and the mansion of an aging Spanish countess.



The demolished Parisian café marks the beginning of George Stobbart's adventures.

Despite the serious subject matter, *Broken Sword* still has a somewhat light hearted tone. Part of this can be attributed to the absolutely gorgeous graphics. While the full screen cinematics are rare, the art style and animation recalls Don Bluth's better films, something that looks mature and not too cutesy. The in-game graphics are rendered in SVGA, with gorgeously painted backdrops and exquisitely animated cel-style sprites. While not as advanced as LucasArts' *The Curse of Monkey Island* (released a year later in 1997), it still looks extremely impressive in motion. The downside is, in order to keep some sense of realism, there is no speedup function. That means you need to watch George slowly trot over the screen every time you need to do something, which gets especially exasperating on areas you tread through several times, like Nico's apartment. *Broken Sword* is already a bit of a slow paced game, with tons and tons of dialogue, and the glacial action speed doesn't really help.

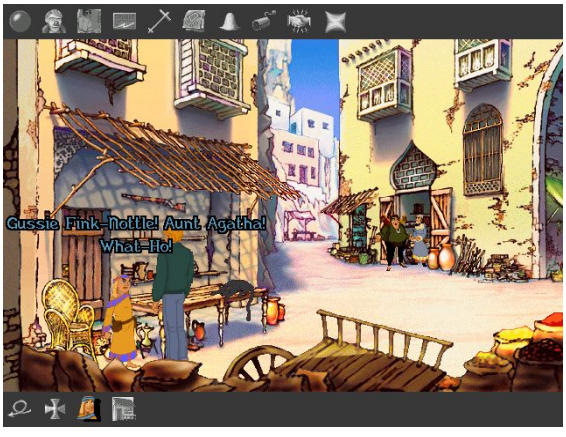
Still, even though some might claim *Broken Sword* is overwritten, that's actually one of its greatest strengths. Like *Beneath a Steel Sky*, there's no such thing as a generic NPC – each character has their own bizarre quirks and mannerisms, all with cleverly goofy dialogue peppered with dry British humour. Within the first few minutes of the game, George is introduced to the dopey Sergeant Moue and his gruff superior, Inspector Rosso, a practitioner of "psychic detective skills". Eventually when you wind up in Syria, you meet a young boy who learned English by watching *Jeeves and Wooster* ("What–ho!") and a middle aged couple named Pearl and Duane, who claim to run a greeting card company in Ohio but may or may not actually be involved with the US military. A seemingly innocuous historian named Andre Lobineau also ends up as a recurring character in nearly all of the *Broken Sword* games, as George's rival for Nico's affections. And these say nothing of the assassin, who likes to murder

people while wearing a number of bizarre outfits, including penguin costumes. The game is so full of characters like these that it's a delight running through each of their conversation options.

George, too, is a likeable leading man. Although he seems a bit bland in the beginning, his understated sense of humor and everyman attitude has its own special charm, largely in part of some excellent voice work by Rolf Saxon, who plays the role in all four *Broken Sword* games. Although most of the game is presented as taking place in the present, George narrates all of his thoughts – item descriptions and such – in the past tense, as if he were relating it as a story. Nico, unfortunately, is a bit underused (at least in the original release) and spends most of the game sitting in her apartment while George roams around Europe. It's only at the end that a romance is shoehorned in, and it's a bit jarring.

The puzzles generally aren't too difficult, and a number of them solve themselves by simply exhausting all available dialogue options. There aren't many objects to interact with on any given screen, so it's usually easy to piece together the solution. The only problem comes with actually finding those hotspots, as some of them are extremely tiny, or aren't immediately apparent. Like the rest of the game, the puzzles are occasionally a bit silly, as one requires that you acquire a stolen toilet brush, which has been repurposed and used by a street vendor as a basting tool. (Eww.) You can get killed, although they're mostly limited to a few sections where you need to react quickly to use certain items or bits of scenery before an enemy attacks you. Each of these is accompanied by a unique cinematic of the killer disposing of your body, which is a bit chilling. There's also the infamous goat puzzle, where you need to outwit a rather diabolical looking animal. The solution isn't that hard, but getting it to function correctly is something in and of itself.

Broken Sword uses an upgraded version of the engine used in *Beneath a Steel Sky*. It works mostly the same way – just highlight something and left click to operate it, and right click to look at it. The dialogue options are a bit different though, giving you icons to talk about specific topics or various items in your inventory. The orchestral soundtrack is sparsely used, but it's effective when it flares up, usually when solving a puzzle or finding an important clue.



This boy's taste of British comedy is part of the quirky charm of the series.

Broken Sword was initially released on the PC, under a variety of titles in different territories. The US release was called *Circle of Blood* for some reason, although later sequels keep the *Broken Sword* moniker. It was also ported to the PlayStation not long after its initial release. While the resolution needed to be downgraded, so it doesn't look quite as crisp, most of the animation is intact, and it still looks pretty decent. Unfortunately, the frequent load times when moving from screen to screen slow the pacing down ever further, and it's a bit awkward to move the cursor

with the control pad. Still, it was fairly successful for an adventure game on a console, which largely accounts for why many of the later games were also ported to home gaming systems.

Broken Sword was also released for the Game Boy Advance in 2001. In downgrading the graphics for the portable format, the backgrounds have been mangled into visual train wrecks, and the animation looks terrible. Obviously there's no voice acting, but significant chunks of the dialogue have been completely removed. The cursor control has been removed, and instead you directly control George, with little icons that pop up when you're next to a hotspot. There are also a handful of game breaking bugs that can screw you over if you approach them improperly. While it's really one of the only graphic adventures on the Game Boy Advance, that doesn't excuse its shoddy quality. The only interesting thing is an Easter Egg – an extra room in the sewer beneath the cafe – that ties in with the third game, *The Sleeping Dragon*, which was released around the same time as this port.

With the resurgence of adventure games in 2009, Revolution revisited its classic, dubbed *Broken Sword: Director's Cut*, which was published by Ubisoft for the Wii and DS. (A PC version was released over a year and a half later.) It's more than just a quick and dirty port though, because it expands greatly on the original. The most notable change is amping up Nico's role in the story, with several new segments where you play as her and investigate the death of Pierre Carchon, an incident which appeared in a newspaper in the original release, but was never expanded upon. The *Director's Cut* begins on Nico's new adventures before moving on to the scene with George and the explosion of the cafe, and then the view alternates between the two for a few segments. However, once George leaves for Ireland, the game focuses solely on him up until the end. Nico's sections are okay, but her introduction isn't as impactful as George's, and her scenes are only really interesting for fans who want to learn more about the character. Besides, it mucks with the beautiful opening line. ("Paris in the fall, the last months of the year, at the end of the millennium. The city holds many memories for me, of music, of cafes, of love, and of death.")

All of the characters now have dialogue portraits provided by Dave Gibbons, who drew *The Watchmen* and previously worked with Revolution on *Beneath a Steel Sky*, and also illustrated a small promotional comic for the *Director's Cut* release. These portraits are not animated, but do change expressions with the dialogue, like in a JRPG. New dialogue has been recorded for the new segments – Rolf Saxon reprises his role as George, naturally, while someone new does Nico – but they didn't record or remaster any of the old dialogue. As a result, some passages are mishmashes with varying quality, and in Nico's case different voice actresses.

Some of the dialogue has been touched up a bit too, and not necessarily in a good way. In the original game, after the bombing, George says:

"As I picked myself up, all I could hear was the ceaseless drone of traffic. Life went on around me, but the explosion was to change my life forever."

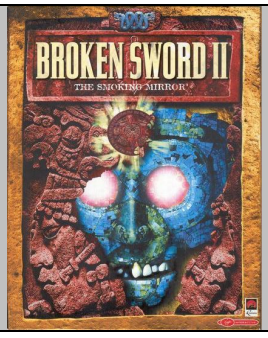
In the *Director's Cut*, this line becomes:

"As I picked myself up, I was really angry. One minute I was on vacation and the next the cafe was exploded by a guy in a clown costume. I knew right away what I was going to do. I was going to find that clown and bring him to justice. Because Justice matters. Justice is up there with Liberty. And Equality. And er... Fraternity. After all, that's why I studied law, wasn't it? Well, that... and the money, of course."

You can also no longer die, which naturally means all of those cutscenes were removed. It's kind of a shame, and a bit of an overreaction to the criticism of the rampant death scenes in older adventure games, especially since *Broken Sword* was fairly conservative in that regard anyway. It would've been better to keep them and simply gives an option to restart immediately before death, like the later games in the series. Some of the hotspots have been removed too, and the goat puzzle has been simplified.

The DS version completely lacks voice acting, which is disappointing, but not unexpected. The top screen is usually devoted to the character portraits, with the action taking place on the bottom screen. Despite the lower resolution, the animation is still clean, and it's leaps and

bounds beyond the Game Boy Advance version. By tapping the stylus, you command your character to move, while holding down the stylus and tracing it over the screen will reveal any hotspots, which you can then interact with. The iOS version is similar, but has full voice acting and runs at a higher resolution.



Broken Sword II: The Smoking Mirror

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation / iOS
Designer(s): Charles Cecil
Developer: Revolution Software

Broken Sword II: The Smoking Mirror was released just a year after the original. The graphics and engine are more or less the same as its predecessor, although the item text pops up when you highlight an item à la *Beneath a Steel Sky*, and the voice quality is much better. You can also jump to locations by double clicking on an exit, which speeds up movement quite a bit.

Taking place a few months after the original game, George and Nico are invited to the house of a noted archaeologist to examine some fantastic mythical object. They're greeted at the door by a man who looks less like a butler and more like a hitman. Something is obviously amiss, but before the duo can realize it, it's too late – Nico is kidnapped and George finds himself tied to a chair as the house is burnt to the ground. After escaping and chasing some leads, he rescues Nico, only to learn of a drug smuggling ring operating out of South America. This illegitimate operation is actually a cover–up for a crazy evil man named Karzac, who seeks to resurrect the evil Mayan god Tezcatlipoca, but needs to obtain three special stones before the ceremony can be completed. With one stone in hand, George and Nico split up to find the remaining stones, and once again, attempt to save the world.

The tone and humor is much the same as the first game, and the writing is still quite excellent. You'll run into a few old faces too, like the archaeologist Andre Lobineau, who still has a bit of a thing for Nico, as well as Duane and Pearl, who, at one point, help George escape from a South American prison. Later on, George takes off to the apparently dangerous Zombie Island, where he wanders into a clueless movie crew, and during the final scenes, you're accompanied by a Mayan midget named Titipoco who only has the slightest idea how to speak English. One of the main villains (if you could call him that) is a "ruthless" dictator who's a bit of a mommy's boy. Possibly the most amusing part is right before the end of the game – before you enter the final room, the hotspot description text for the entrance reads "Certain Death".

While the writing and story is satisfying, this sequel still appears to be missing something. Either they took the criticisms of having too much dialogue to heart, or they just weren't as interested in Mayan gods as the Knights Templar, but there just isn't quite as much depth to the plot as before. Furthermore, some major events happen completely off camera, making it seem like the production was rushed and scenes were dropped. This affects the ending as well. While the final scenes are quite satisfying, you don't actually "play" any part of them – even less than the original game, actually. The climactic puzzle – where you need to open a door by rotating a series of wheels to match some tiles – is more tedious than it is difficult.

Some of the jokes just don't seem to work either. Take, for example, the buzzer from the first *Broken Sword* game. You got it pretty early in the game, and you could show it to practically anyone – the running joke was that George was too incompetent to get anyone to fall for it, but it ended up saving his life near the end. One similar object is a pair of frilly panties – a gift from

Andre to Nico, apparently. It's used right at the beginning of the game, to open a door during a fire. And for the rest of the game... well, you can show it to people to get their reaction, but there's no real payoff. It simply disappears from your inventory at a certain point.



Nico waits in the sidelines to rescue George from being sacrificed.

In the grand scheme of things, these are ultimately nitpicks – it's still a fantastic game, and most definitely worth playing. It's also notable for being the only game in the Broken Sword series to not involve the Knights Templar in any capacity, which makes it stand out a bit more from its peers. In 2010 a revamped version was released under the title *Broken Sword 2 Remastered*. It includes the dialogue portraits like the *Director's Cut* of the first game, as well as a hint system, but otherwise it's mostly identical to the original release.



Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon

Initial Release Date: 2003
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation 2 / Xbox
Designer(s): Charles Cecil
Developer: Revolution Software

One would think the life of a patent lawyer would be boring – what with being cooped up in an office in Idaho – but that's not the case with George Stobbart, who seems destined for crazy adventures. Although he and Nico have since split up, he ends up in the Congo jungle to investigate a patent for a machine that can apparently create limitless energy. It seems too crazy to be true, but things get complicated when George witnesses his client being murdered by a sinister man named Susarro. Meanwhile back in France, Nico has an appointment to interview a hacker who's decoded the mysterious Voynich Manuscript... until said hacker is murdered by a disguised woman, framing Nico in the process. The view switches back and forth between the two, until both of them learn that their investigations are connected to the same mystery.

Susarro has taken charge of the Neo–Templars and renamed them The Cult of the Dragon. He seeks to harness a geothermic power of the Earth by mining ley lines (also described here as Dragon Veins), allowing him to rule the world. The adventure is structured much like before,

with lots of globetrotting to be done and secret artifacts to be found. George travels to Glastonbury, which is apparently a tourist trap due to the has heavy connections to King Arthur and the Grail legend, while Nico stays in Paris for her part. When the two team up, they explore a temple in Congo, complete with *Indiana Jones*-style traps and puzzles, invade Susarro's castle in Prague, and discover the true secret of the Dragon in Egypt.



George and Nico get into an argument. Again.

A lot happened in the eight years between the release of the second and third *Broken Sword* games. LucasArts and Sierra, formerly the two giants in the arena, gave up after *Escape from Monkey Island* and *Gabriel Knight 3*, leaving the field to a handful of smaller companies. Once again unfazed by the odds against them, Revolution revived their flagship franchise with *The Sleeping Dragon*... but not without some significant changes, in hopes of capturing a larger market.

The biggest and most obvious alteration is the completely 3D polygonal graphics in lieu of the hand drawn 2D cartoons. The change removes much of what made the original *Broken Sword* games unique, and so it looks like practically every other game on the market. That being said, it actually looks pretty good, with detailed, well lit locales and fairly decent character models. Since the plot is somewhat connected to the original game, there are a few familiar places you can explore, like Nico's apartment and Montfaucon Square, but redesigned in 3D.

With the change in visual style also comes a completely different control scheme – the mouse driven interface has been completely ditched in favor of direct control. You can technically use a keyboard, but it's obviously designed for a gamepad. (In addition to the PC version, it was also released on the Xbox and PlayStation 2, with the latter only being available in Europe. A GameCube version was planned but cancelled.) As you move close to an object, you can press one of the four face buttons to interact with it, depending on what it is. The camera style is much like *Resident Evil: Code Veronica*, with mostly static viewpoints that occasionally scroll or switch positions based on your movement. While it's a bit awkward – and can potentially cause some trouble in a handful of action based segments – at least it doesn't utilize the much maligned tank controls of *Resident Evil*. In a further bit of frustration, you can no longer skip lines of dialogue, which tends to make things drag a bit.

Another big problem that comes with 3D graphics is its location design. In the 2D games, areas can consist of a small handful of still screens. In 3D games, they need to be much larger, which also means a lot more tedious running around. This game has a number of filler areas which serve no purpose but to waste time, especially when you first enter a new section and find out that five of the six doors are locked and completely irrelevant.

This may be a tough barrier to get over for many longtime adventure game enthusiasts, but it generally works well. However, it's not without its problems, which mostly involve puzzle

design. There are still a number of inventory based puzzles, some of which involve getting help from your partner, but for some reason, the developers figured the use of 3D space meant that it would be suitable to stick in box puzzles, the bane of video gamers everywhere. They start off simple, but soon get more complex and irritating as the adventure moves on. What's even worse is the boneheaded decision to stick in a few stealth segments. Like the original games, there are a handful of reaction events, where you need to press a button within a split second notice, or run from an enemy, or else you're killed. There's no need to reload any saved games at least, because it picks off right before the segment starts.



Some of the areas you explore are quite gorgeous.

It also seems that with the shift away from cartoony graphics came the desire to be a bit more mature. The plot is just as cool as the previous games, and George and Nico are still just as amusing, but *The Sleeping Dragon* is largely missing a lot of the quirk that defined the rest of the series. With the exception of some of the characters early on in Glastonbury, most of the NPCs just don't have the same snap, and the dialogue just isn't nearly as funny. You can no longer talk about every item in your inventory with everyone, which was probably to cut down on extraneous dialogue, but also loses a lot of flavor. There are still some cool aspects – you get to meet the niece of Lady Piermont (the snooty woman from the hotel in the first *Broken Sword*), as well as her crazy father, and it's neat how they turned Professor Bruno, an extremely minor character from the first game, into a major supporting character. So despite its issues, *The Sleeping Dragon* is still a pretty alright game – it's just not quite up to par with its predecessors.



Broken Sword: The Angel of Death (UK)
Secrets of the Ark: A Broken Sword Game (US)

Initial Release Date: 2006
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Charles Cecil
Developer: Revolution Software / Sumo Digital

By 2006, Revolution Software had been reduced solely to Charles Cecil, but that didn't stop him from hiring up a few old folks as consultants and developing the fourth *Broken Sword* game.

Subtitled *The Angel of Death* in Europe, and known as *Secrets of the Ark: A Broken Sword Game* in North America, this most recent entry was actually outsourced to Sumo Digital, the British development house who's mostly known for working with Sega on their tennis games. Once again, it's fully 3D, but it's a bit of a return to form, bringing back the cursor–based interface and ditching some of the more annoying puzzles.

The story begins with George having separated from Nico once again, this time having ended up in New York City and reduced to working as a bail bonds clerk. On a rainy night, George is visited by a young woman named Anna Maria, who seeks his advice in deciphering yet another old manuscript. Trouble follows her, though, as George and Anna Maria are forced out by a group of mafia thugs, who have their own plans. After retrieving and analyzing the manuscript, the duo is led to Istanbul, where they discover a golden statue beneath the palace. Unfortunately, the next day George wakes up to find both the statue and Anna Maria missing, and furthermore, gets tossed into a Turkish prison. Through some fantastic coincidence, George meets up with Nico – disguised as a nun, with a different haircut and yet another voice actress – and both set off to find the statue and the missing girl. Their adventures will take them to a monastery in Rome, a strange laboratory in Phoenix, and the bowels of the Vatican, as they discover another group of people set to destroy the world. This time, they seek the power of the Lost Ark, to unleash the plague that Moses cast upon the people of Egypt – otherwise known as, of course, the Angel of Death.

While the basic plot isn't terribly different from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (minus the Nazis), there are enough twists and turns to make it stand out. The narrative isn't without its problems though. The opening segments are quite boring – it takes far too long to escape from the bail bonds building – and the game really doesn't pick up until Nico joins about a third of the way through. And then there's Anna Maria. She's obviously meant to be a new love interest for George, but she's really little more than a nice body and a pretty face. In other words, she's no Nico, but at least the tensions between the two girls lead to some interesting dialogue.



Anna Maria is pretty but bland, in spite of George's devotion to her.

Some of the humor from the first two games has made it back, which is definitely welcome. One of the first thugs you face is a bizarre Elvis impersonator, the local mafia thugs have a strange fixation on salami, to the point where it appears on their gang tattoo, and one of the most interesting folks is a priest obsessed with action movies. (Apparently *In Cold Blood*, an action-adventure game by Revolution Software, is an action movie in the *Broken Sword* universe.) You even get to run into Duane at one point, however briefly. It's still not as funny as it could be, although the writing is otherwise pretty decent. And while the endings of the previous games have always felt a bit rushed, this one is even worse, with only the vaguest of resolutions.

While fans may champion the return of the point-and-click interface, it doesn't work nearly as well as it should either. The pathfinding is terrible and the sudden camera changes make maneuvering more difficult than it should be. There's still an option to move with the keyboard, but it's also clumsy and hardly manageable. Most of the more annoying bits from *The Sleeping Dragon*, like the box puzzles and the reaction segments, are gone, although there are still a few stealth segments. In their places are regular inventory puzzles, as well as several hacking mini–games. One of George's greatest tools is his PDA, which can be used to jack into certain computers, as well as make phone calls and access historical databases, which not only provide extensive background but are also required to solve certain logic puzzles.

Despite the three year difference between *The Sleeping Dragon* and *Secrets of the Ark*, this game somehow looks worse than its predecessor. On a technical level, it's a bit better, with improved character models and such, but the backgrounds are incredibly drab, the lighting effects are gone, and the animations are a bit worse. It's also quite glitchy at parts, and the seams in the programming are quite apparent. Strangely, they ditched the past–tense narration, and you still can't skip through lines of dialogue.

Even though it's a step in a better direction, *Secrets of the Ark* still suffers from a number of issues. It's not just the technology though – it's well written and amusing enough, as usual – but it doesn't feel like it has anything interesting to say. It's good to see the genre is still alive, especially in a series so revered as *Broken Sword*, but merely showing up isn't enough.

Fan Game:



Broken Sword 2.5: The Return of the Templars

Initial Release Date: 2008
Platforms: IBMPC
Designer(s): Daniel Butterworth
Developer: MindFactory

In 2001, a group of German fans who called themselves MindFactory began work on their own *Broken Sword* game. Between then and the time it was released in 2008, two official *Broken Sword* games had been released. And yet those seven years of effort paid off in an astounding way. Officially known as *Broken Sword 2.5: The Return of the Templars*, it utilizes the same 2D art style as the first two games, and thus feels closer to being a "true" *Broken Sword* game than even its official 3D sequels.

As the title suggests, *Broken Sword 2.5* takes place in between *Broken Sword 2* and *3*. George has left for America once again to tend to his dying grandfather, when he receives a shocking telegraph – Nico Collard is dead! He takes the first jet to Paris and finds her alive, if not particularly well. She's quite distant, and furthermore, seems to be involved in an assassination attempt on the governor of Paris. Of course, the truth isn't quite apparent, but it does involve the resurgence of the Templars. In digging further into their history, George and Nico learn of an ancient connection to a Chinese emperor – and naturally, the two must travel the world to stop another diabolical Templar plot. Along the way, they'll meet a few familiar faces, including one character from the original *Broken Sword* that, by all means, should have been dead.

It's astounding how professional this game feels. The game actually runs in a higher resolution than the first two *Broken Sword*s – 800x600 vs. 640x480 – which means the graphics are even crisper. Many of the assets needed to be redrawn, or at least touched up. There are plenty of familiar locales, and while the redone artwork isn't quite as detailed as it was in the first

game, everything still looks very nice, and the new locations are just as well illustrated. Even the music, despite missing a live orchestra, sounds fantastic. All of the dialogue is fully voice-acted too, and they even got the original voice actor for the German games to reprise George. The English version has a decent replacement for George (no Rolf Saxon, unfortunately), and Nico... well, Nico's been played by four different actresses in four different games, so it's not like Revolution had any real consistency either. It's also surprising how well written the dialogue is too – it's quirky and funny, as it should be, and it just cements the fact that you probably wouldn't know it's a fan game if someone didn't tell you.



The art style in Broken Sword 2.5 is remarkably similar to the "real" games.

Well, that and the cinemas. Asking for fully animated, hand drawn cutscenes might've been a bit much, so we have to do with computer rendered cutscenes, which don't look great, but are sparse in number. The rest of the stumbling blocks are few, and many are common with the rest of the series. A few of the puzzles involve tiny objects that require lots of pixel hunting, and the plot doesn't really pick up until near the end, by which point the game's almost over. The adventure is quite a bit shorter than the other games, and a bit too much takes place in Paris, making it a bit overly familiar (or perhaps, nostalgic) to players of the first game. Still, there are plenty of new locations, and it's cool to talk to old characters, like the waitress in the cafe, who's considerably less shaken up than she was in the first game.

Broken Sword 2.5 is available for free download on Mindfactory's site, which even includes printable materials to make your own case. It's a class act job all around, and not only one of the best fan made games in the adventure game genre, but more than worthy of the *Broken Sword* name. It can be obtained from **http://www.brokensword25.com**.



Gold & Glory: The Road to El Dorado

Initial Release Date: 2001
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation
Designer(s): Charles Cecil, Steve Ince
Developer: Revolution Software

The 2000 Dreamworks film *The Road to El Dorado* tells the story of two 16th century Spanish con artists named Tulio and Miguel, who end up with a map to the mystical city referenced in the title. In 2001, Ubisoft published a video game based on the movie, developed by Revolution Studios, the guys behind *Broken Sword* and *Beneath a Steel Sky*. It's not nearly up to the level of their previous works, but for a licensed game undoubtedly developed under budget and deadline constraints, it's not altogether terrible. Since it was primarily developed for the PlayStation, it forsakes the standard point-and-click interface in favor of direct control, utilizing polygonal characters over static backgrounds. In that manner, it's much like *Resident Evil* and *Grim Fandango*, and actually uses the same engine as Revolution's action-oriented game *In Cold Blood*. The visuals are decent for the era, but obviously haven't aged gracefully. While the PC version runs at a higher resolution and loads much faster, the animation is still sluggish and the controls aren't as smooth as they should be.



The polygonal characters look a bit janky next to their cel-animated onscreen renditions.

It definitely captures the look and feel of the movie, complete with the amusingly dim-witted banter between the two heroes, although none of it is quite laugh-out-load funny. The story, though, is incredibly disjointed. Transitions between chapters are handled by cutscenes from the movie, but they hastily introduce characters and plot points that have almost nothing to do with the game. As such, the story doesn't really make a whole lot of sense unless you've watched the movie already. It's also incredibly easy, with the heroes often spelling out solutions for you, and is quite short to boot. It was undoubtedly intended for the 13-and-under audience, and while it's certainly preferable to the usual awful 3D licensed platformers of the era, anyone outside that target range is likely to find this inconsequential.

Dark Seed

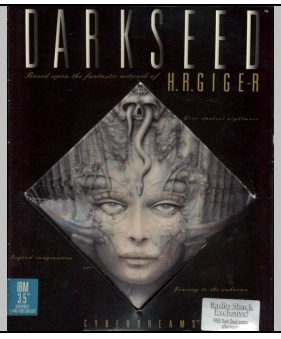
Ridley Scott's 1979 movie *Alien* still ranks as one of the scariest movies ever made. There are at least a dozen reasons why it's still so effective while other horror movies of the day seem like child's play, but a huge chunk of credit goes to H.R. Giger, the Swiss artist (or, rather, "surrealist") who developed the eponymous xenomorph. His works combine nightmarish biological creations with dark, mechanical imaginary, often overlaid with immensely disturbing psychosexual themes. It's all very distinctive, and many video game developers of the '80s copied his style wholesale, as evident in arcade games like *Contra* and *R-Type*. Outside of the officially licensed *Alien* games, Giger also supplied artwork to the *Dark Seed* series, two adventure games developed by Cyberdreams.



The disturbing nightmare cutscenes are some of the most memorable moments of Dark Seed.

Dark Seed involves an unfortunate young man named Mike Dawson, who discovers a portal to an alternate dimension called the Dark World. This terrifying realm consists of the H.R. Giger artwork, and is like a negative image of our own world, which is dubbed the Normal World (the question of why the denizens of Dark World don't regard theirs as the normal world is never answered). Despite the generally horrifying environments and equally ghastly inhabitants, the folk of the Dark World aren't necessarily evil. Some of them are quite friendly, in fact, but they've been taken over by a contingent of aliens calling themselves the Ancients. These guys, on the other hand, are legitimately evil, and conspire to drain the Normal World of all its life. The catch is that they are unable to cross dimensions themselves, instead relying on other methods to launch their invasion. This is where Mike Dawson comes in, apparently being one of the only people who can switch between worlds using mirrors. Like all great psychological horror stories, there's some ambiguity as to whether the Dark World is real or merely a hallucination of an extremely ill person, although solid answers are never given and neither theory is completely airtight.

Dark Seed, along with Infogrames' *Alone in the Dark*, comprise the first wave of computer games that tried implementing the horror genre in an interactive setting. Games such as these helped pave the way for the modern survival horrors that became popular in the 32-bit console generation. So while *Dark Seed* might seem quaint today, given the technological constraints, it was incredibly unsettling in the early '80s.



Dark Seed

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: Amiga / Amiga CD32 / IBM PC / Macintosh / PlayStation / Saturn / Famicom (bootleg)
Designer(s): Michael Cranford, Mike Dawson
Developer: Cyberdreams

Dark Seed begins amidst a nightmare wherein our hero, new homeowner Mike Dawson, envisions an alien gun ejaculating into his forehead. He awakens, understandably shaken up, and with an astounding headache. After spending a day or so exploring the neighborhood, Mike discovers that one of the mirrors in his house leads into the Dark World, the place he sees in his dreams. It should be no surprise that aliens have impregnated Mike with one of their gruesome offspring. Its birth will kill Mike, obviously, but it also potentially spells the end of humanity. Their plan must be foiled, but Mike is not alone, as he is guided by the Keeper of the Scrolls, the creepy female-esque figure on the box cover, who holds no love for the Ancients. Furthermore, the houses' previous inhabitants were aware of the connection between the human and the so-called Dark World, and much time is spent following their tracks.

It's undoubtedly a cool premise, one which draws generously from the works of H.P. Lovecraft, and the whole "dual world" aspect is an interesting precursor to Konami's excellent horror series *Silent Hill*. But the proceedings are quite sparse, seeing how there's very little storytelling outside of a few expository scenes. There are a handful of characters in town, but they never speak more than a line or two. Each room has a text description at the bottom of the screen, a remnant from the days of text adventures, but the writing is astoundingly juvenile. "My house seems somehow out of time," Mike explains when in front of his abode, "a relic of a dark past or perhaps a dark future." The foreshadowing cannot possibly get more ham fisted.



Whenever Mike is killed, he's dragged to one of these incubation pods.

At least *Dark Seed* delivers on the promise of H.R. Giger artwork. The palette in the Dark World changes to an unsettling grey, and scenery is warped into the frightening bio-mechanical horrorscapes the Swiss surrealist is known for. While it looks cool, it just doesn't feel as shocking as it should. There are a few guards which will kill you if you get too close, and all of

the switches will electrocute you if you grab them, but otherwise there's no danger and no tension. Mike can stroll along freely and the horrifying inhabitants just don't seem to mind.

While the game runs in high resolution 640x480, it's limited to 16 colors, due to the limitations of VGA, but what it does with that small palette it does damn well. Mike is a digitized sprite, played by one of the designers, also named Mike Dawson. While his animation is exceedingly jerky, it actually doesn't completely clash with the scenery, due to the decreased color palette. The nightmare scenes, much like the head-rape in the intro, are also memorably gruesome. Unfortunately, the game only takes place in a window about half the size of the screen – the rest is simply an overly elaborate frame, with the dialog window at the bottom.

While the visuals do a decent job of building a suitably creepy atmosphere, the rest of the game is undone by extremely haphazard design. *Dark Seed* takes place over the course of three days, and runs in real time. There is little direction or purpose beyond the occasionally cryptic clues stumbled onto. It's very possible to waste too much time and miss events, which is troublesome. There are numerous actions you need to take on the first day, but none of that will even be evident until you visit the Dark World, which isn't even possible until the second day. It is practically guaranteed you'll get stuck in some kind of unwinnable situation at some point, as these scenarios are poorly telegraphed. Late in the game you become wanted by the police, who stand guard outside your house. There is no way back in, unless you tied the rope to the gargoyle on the balcony earlier in the game. This is one of the least cruel moments – there are some absolutely infuriating ones.

For example, the Normal World and the Dark World are connected to each other, but in vaguely defined terms. Sometimes these make sense, like opening a secret passage in the human world will trigger its counterpart to open in the parallel world. Others are more bizarre, like how starting the car in your garage back home will then activate the power generators of the alien starship in the Dark World. But the most maddening involves your run-ins with the police. The clues tell you that the police station is important, for some reason, but won't tell you why. When you're arrested in the human world you can leave three, and only three, items beneath the pillow. Later, when you get in the same exact scenario in the alien word, all of these items are mysteriously retrievable. This leap in logic is frustrating enough, in that it's this one arbitrary location where items can apparently teleport between worlds, but there is never any suggestion of what items you should be bringing.

And even amidst the terrible framework, the events that occur are simply bizarre. One important event, for some reason, is to meet your new neighbor Delbert for a get-together. When you do meet him, all he does is play fetch with his dog, almost infinitely. This is a scenario that, if you miss, will render the game unwinnable, but the only thing you need to get out of this is the stick he's playing with. This is then used to distract the dog's Dark World counterpart, which is a gigantic canine-thing. That's all kind of ridiculous, but it gets worse. The first time you enter the Dark World, you can't actually do much other than explore. Sure, there are important plot revelations and all of that, but the only tangible thing to obtain on the first trip is a shovel. Not a fancy, futuristic shovel with mysterious properties or anything, just a regular old shovel. Let's break this down – your character wandered into an immensely hellish landscape, faced off against beings the very thought of which would drive lesser men to complete insanity, and it was all just for a shovel, the kind of which you should have been able to buy at the general store down the street? It's a common trope in adventure games that you need to go through tremendous lengths to get everyday items, but this is just silly.

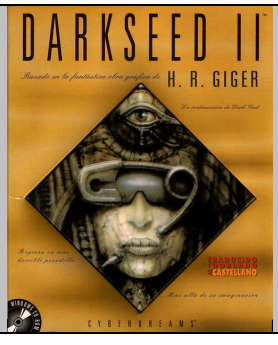
Dark Seed was originally released on both the Amiga and IBM PC platforms. Visually they're practically identical, although the PC version runs at a slightly higher resolution. Mike's movement is sluggish in the Amiga version, but the MOD music is appropriately creepy. In comparison, Mike is much speedier in the DOS version but the FM synth music almost completely ruins the atmosphere. The CD versions on both platforms include voice acting, but since most of the script is simply Mike talking to himself, it's pretty sparse. It was also ported to the Sony PlayStation and Sega Saturn, but released only in Japan. No effort was made to

improve any the visuals, and as such, it looks tremendously dated compared to its contemporaries. While the text was translated into Japanese, the voice acting is still in English.



The bootleg Famicom port is incredibly strange.

Far more bizarre is the Famicom version, which is an unofficial cartridge published by Asian outfit Mars Production. Visually, the palette had to be pared down more than it already was. Nearly everything in the Normal World is one of two shades of orange, while practically everything in the Dark World is some kind of pea green. But the room design is still more faithful than the NES port of *King's Quest V*, and even the nightmare scenes actually look fairly decent for the system. Movement is awkward and glitchy, as you still control Mike with a cursor, but it's functional. The music is awful though, as there's only one extraordinarily abrasive song that plays through the entire game. Surprisingly, the developers sprung for a battery backup, allowing you to save your game, although there's only a single slot. All of the text is in Chinese, but most of the puzzles are remarkably faithful, other than some chunks cut out here and there. A few screens were removed, and the ending is massively truncated. It's vaguely impressive for a bootleg product, although on its own terms, it's only barely playable.



Dark Seed II

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / PlayStation / Saturn
Designer(s): Raymond Benson
Developer: Cyberdreams

Dark Seed II picks up a year after the ending of the original. Mike has had the good sense to sell that old haunted house of his, but his experiences in the Dark World have left him disturbed and psychologically disabled, forcing him to move back in with his parents. His dreams of the Ancients continue, and neither the hypnosis nor the drugs from his therapy sessions seem to be working. The only light he has left in his life is a rekindled relationship with his former high

school sweetheart, which abruptly ends when her headless body is found outside their school. Mike was the last person to be seen with her alive, and has no recollection of any of the events, leaving him as a prime murder suspect. Perplexed by the mystery, he once again finds his way into the Dark World, which has also again been subjugated by the Ancients.

Their plan, this time, is to hatch a monster called the Behemoth to literally suck the life force out of the Normal World. However, this abomination can only be hatched with life energy from humans. As the first game established, the denizens of the Dark World cannot usually cross over into the Normal World, but they've created a being called the Shape Shifter which can skirt these rules, temporarily taking human form and mutilating its subjects for the mission. It's clear that the Shape Shifter was responsible for Rita's murder, but how will Mike solve this when he's not only dealing with a murder investigation, but also his own psychotic breakdown?

Dark Seed II makes such tremendous improvements over its predecessor that it practically feels like a whole new game. Gone are the time limits and dead end events, in favor of a more straightforward mystery. There are actual characters this time around, with plenty of background and dialogue, and the story is much more intricate than simply going into the Dark World and stopping the aliens, even though the basic goals are the same. The Dark World itself benefits the most from the improved narrative, as you actually get to talk to its denizens to further understand its culture, government, and how the invasion of the Ancients has totally ruined their civilization. While it does take away some of the disturbing mystery of the first game, the narrative depth definitely makes for a more involving experience.



The increased color depth allows for the disconcerting artwork to stand out.

The investigations in the Normal World have been substantially fleshed out too. The first *Dark Seed* had a bizarrely entrancing atmosphere, but that seemed to emerge more out of ineptitude than anything else. In contrast, the town of Crowley, Texas, has a carefully telegraphed Lynchian vibe. Mike may have had good memories of Rita, but nearly everyone in town seems to have something against her, and there's something deeply unsettling beneath the seemingly normal small town exterior.

The technical improvements make for a much better looking game, even though it still has its quirks. The digitized sprites are back, and the animation is still incredibly choppy and unnatural, but the backgrounds in the Normal World look decent enough. Some of the scenes are peppered with images from the Dark World, visual clues that suggest Mike's descent into madness. The Giger artwork is much more varied and detailed than it was before, due to the greater color depth, making it freakier than ever. That being said, some of the intended effect is lost, because digitized sprites are always going to look kinda weird when placed against what is clearly a painting. The voice acting is pretty uneven, with Mike clearly having a different voice,

although a similar looking actor (the real Mike Dawson had no part in this game's development). The music is much better though, as the main theme is appropriately creepy, with some light jazz peppering in during the trippier moments, likely a homage to *Twin Peaks*.

There aren't very many puzzles in *Dark Seed II*, as most of the game is spent talking to the denizens of both worlds to uncover their respective mysteries. The few puzzles that do exist tend to revolve around the interplay between the Normal and Dark Worlds. Their implementation makes more sense than some of the stupider parts of the first game, but they're still vague. A good chunk of them involve winning games at the local carnival, rewarding you with teddy bears. These adorable fluffy creatures become hideous monstrosities in the Dark World, and are used to solve a few problems for reasons that aren't entirely clear.

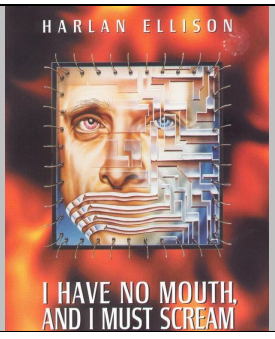
The worst puzzle is the mirror maze at the carnival, which is where you'll find the portal between worlds. It's frustrating because you can see the whole maze at once, broken up into hexagonal rooms, but there's quite a bit of visual trickery to determine whether you can move between spaces or not. One has a locked door which is nearly impossible to see, others are one way doors which are equally hard to pick out. It becomes a tedious exercise in randomly clicking until you find your way through. Thankfully, once you've navigated the mazes – once in each world – you can skip right through them every time you transport between worlds. That is, until a segment late in the game where you need to race the Behemoth to the exit. In this case, you'd have better memorized the most efficient route, or else you'll have doomed humanity.



Naked women? Vaguely Satanic imagery? Yup, this is unquestionably H.R. Giger.

For the most part, *Dark Seed II* is fairly solid, up until its climax. It's not the only horror adventure game where you play a mentally unsound protagonist, and it certainly won't be the last, but how a story handles the border between reality and delusion is incredibly important. There's an extraordinarily funny bit where one of the characters claims they will explain everything, then their head suddenly explodes, explaining precisely nothing. But then the ending goes out of control and just becomes crazy for its own sake. There's a difference between ambiguity and being intentionally obtuse, and *Dark Seed II* takes the latter route, ending on a "what the hell just happened" note rather than one which inspires internal debate. But while the execution is sloppy, it shouldn't sour the whole experience – there's still enough freakiness to justify accompanying Mike through his descent into lunacy.

Dark Seed II was also ported to the PlayStation and Saturn, much like its predecessor. The resolution is halved, resulting in jagged visuals, and there are more load times. Most of the voice acting is cut out, except for Mike's lines, which have been redubbed into Japanese.



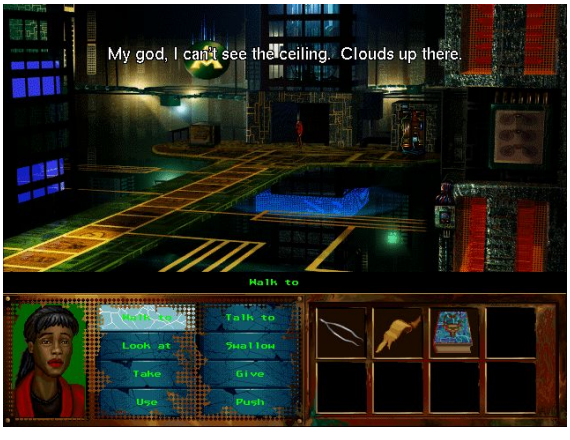
I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Harlan Ellison, David Mullich, David Sears
Developer: Cyberdreams

"Hate. Let me tell you how much I've come to hate you since I began to live. There are 387.44 million miles of printed circuits in wafer thin layers that fill my complex. If the word 'hate' was engraved on each nanoangstrom of those hundreds of miles it would not equal one one-billionth of the hate I feel for humans at this micro-instant for you. Hate. Hate."

The "Games As Art" movement started gaining some traction with PlayStation 2 titles like *ICO* and *Shadow of the Colossus*, but the actual argument started long before those. Back in the '90s, gamers and journalists were championing Cyberdreams' *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, based on the famed sci-fi/horror short story by Harlan Ellison. It didn't hurt that Ellison himself, an extremely well-respected author, was aiding the development process, crawling out of his curmudgeony hatred of computers to expand the story and create a game that was both thought provoking and morally challenging.

The game's plot is basically the same concept as the short story, and runs off a fairly well-known Cold War-fueled sci-fi cliché. America, Europe, and China, scared witless of each other, each create their own super computers beneath the Earth's surface. Somehow, they become networked and develop a sentient mind, calling itself AM (which technically stands for Allied Mastercomputer, but also comes from the phrase "I think, therefore I AM"). AM is more than a bit frustrated at its human creators – it's a being of astounding intelligence, but it can't taste or touch or smell, or even move, as it's confined eternally to a stationary prison. In retaliation, it nukes the entirety of the planet, save for five select humans. These not-so-lucky folk are essentially made immortal and kept underground within AM as he tortures them eternally.



Ellen's is one of the few areas that actually looks like the interior of a computer.

It's about here that the game deviates a bit from the original work. Since the story itself wasn't particularly long, topping out at a bit over 6,000 words, it didn't go into much depth about the trapped humans. The game fleshes out each of the five, giving each of them much more expansive backstories, and most importantly, some kind of fatal weakness.

Everything begins with AM wanting to play a little game – he wants to send each of the five into their own nightmare world and play up their fears, hoping to demoralize them even further. Naturally, you need to prove him wrong. Although it's obvious that AM's cruelty resembles the concept of Hell, the remaining five aren't exactly what one could consider typical sinners. Some of them are, sure, but they seem to have been chosen just because AM considers them the most fun to torture.

Other than a few instances of crossover, the characters and scenarios generally don't intertwine with each other. However, beyond the common theme of redemption, most have a character that acts as a part of AM's subconscious. AM isn't completely evil, as these personalities within him want to see his downfall just as much as the humans do. The final chapter shows each of these factions fighting, as they try to destroy AM once and for all, and give the humans their final peace.

The Cast:

Gorrister

"Do you remember the last words you heard your wife speak before they took her to the asylum? Huh? Before they locked her away in the room? That tiny room? She looked at you so sadly, and like a small animal she said, "I didn't make too much noise did I, honey?" The room is padded, Gorrister. No windows. No way out. How long has she been in the padded room, Gorrister? Ten years, twenty-five... or all the 109 years that you've lived down here in my belly, here, underground?"

Gorrister begins his chapter trapped in some kind of hellish dirigible. After landing, he comes across a bar with his name. It's only here that Gorrister can come to terms with what happened to his wife.

Benny

"Sometimes I blind you and permit you to wander like an eyeless insect in a world of death. But other times, I wither your arms so you can't scratch your chewed stump of a nose. And I've changed your handsome, strong masculine good looks into the hideous warped countenance of an ape-thing, haven't I, Benny? Do you know why? Can you guess, Benny? Remember Private First Class Brickman in a rice paddy in China? No... ? It wouldn't hurt you to remember, Benny. Then you might be able to suffer my torment with a little greater sense of retribution. You might walk a mile in my shoes."

Benny is thrown to an early tribal society that worships and gives sacrifices to AM. He wants only food, even though is body is so mangled that he can't even chew it. Only by standing up for a young child can Benny find redemption.

Ellen

"So think, think about the yellow box, Ellen! Remember the pain? Remember the many caverns in which you felt the pain? Now, now, don't start to cry, it's only pain. Tsk tsk tsk. That's such a sexist stereotype! Just remember the pain, Ellen, and think about how to end it, Ellen, to survive here in the center of my beating heart, my hungry belly, my tightened bowels. But be careful, dear, look around you... the only woman in the center of the earth... and these filthy creatures with you are men. Just a sweet warning, Ellen, my love."

Ellen is outwardly strong, inwardly vulnerable, a smart and capable woman completely traumatized by the color yellow. Her journey takes place in a pyramid, as she begins to unlock the core of AM's subconscious.

Ted

"Do they know you're a fraud, Ted? Have you told them there wasn't any money, and no great home on the shore drive, no speedboat and no wonderful cabin cruiser that could sleep twelve and a crew of six? Do they know? Have you let them in your other secrets, Ted? Are they ready to cut you, to torture half as well as I can, just to find out the secrets? Maybe I'll rat you out, sweetheart!"

Ted was the narrator of the original story, but here he's a paranoid, lying sleazebag. Despite his demeanor, he still has strong feelings for Ellen, and pictures himself as her (literal) knight in shining armor. He's thrust into a medieval castle and must not succumb to temptation to save the soul of his beloved.

Nimdok

"How are things in the pastry corps, Nimdok? Tell me again how you saw the smoke from the furnaces and you thought they might roasting chickens? Or don't you want to talk about all that, about your pal, the Good Doktor Mengele? For everyone else, it must be Hell, but it must be Heaven for you, eh, my good friend... we're so much alike... we enjoy the same pleasures, mein good brother."

A Nazi scientist, Nimdok (not his real name – it's just a funny sounding word that AM gave him to amuse himself) is thrust back to World War II and his medical experiments at a concentration camp, where he must attempt to find some way to redeem himself. (He can't, not completely anyway – his crimes are too unforgivable.)

Many of the proponents of this game speak of the moral choices you need to make it through each of these chapters, but really, it doesn't work very well at all. The portrait at the bottom-left is your "Spiritual Barometer", a measure of the current character's self-esteem. Whenever you do something good, the character smiles and the portrait turns green; do the opposite, and they'll frown, slowly turning dark again. The same concept was loosely reused in *The Indigo Prophecy* as the "Stress" meter, but here it won't kill you if you dip too low. In fact, it's not entirely clear what it does at all. The game won't tell you, but if it's not high enough, it'll prevent you from getting the "best" ending.



These natives teach Benny how to care and share.

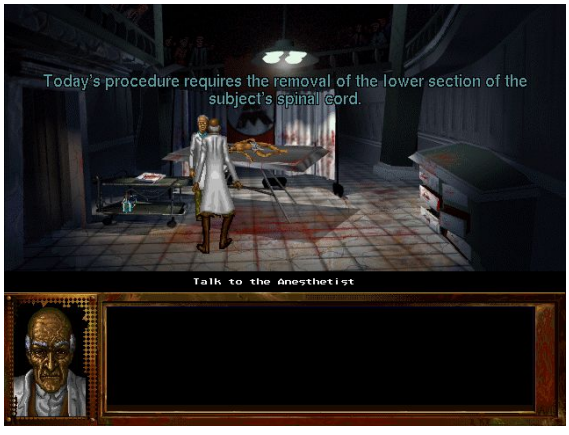
On a moment-by-moment basis, though, the Spiritual Barometer doesn't affect much. Sometimes there are "good" and "bad" ways to get through certain situations, but at least half the time you'll end up being "killed" anyway, and forced to either reload or start the chapter from scratch. That's a huge detriment to what the game seems to be trying to do – the whole concept of a moral grey area is that there is no right or wrong answer, but here it's obvious.

There is almost literally a point in the game (during Ellen's chapter, specifically) where it asks "Would you like to face your fears? Y/N?", where "N" will obviously make you lose.

It doesn't help that the Spiritual Barometer is controlled by mostly invisible strings. At one point in Gorrister's chapter, you need to grab a key by pulling a switch. You don't know it, but this will kill a series of animals in cages that were previously hidden in the darkness. It's a necessary part of the chapter, and Gorrister remarks about his guilt. In order to restore your Spiritual Barometer, you need to wipe your hands on a tablecloth, metaphorically wiping his hands of blood. That's actually a bit poetic! Too bad it doesn't make sense in the framework of an adventure game, unless you're the type to just haphazardly click on stuff. All characters also have access to a "Psych Profile" in their inventory, which gives extremely vague clues on how to proceed. Reading it, however, will drop the barometer a bit.

Giving the scenarios, a brute force approach is almost required at points. The main issue is that the player is aware of the intended character arcs – to an extent – but the actual character is not. Take, for example, Benny's scenario. Benny is so focused on finding some food that he won't even bother picking up anything that isn't edible. This is an interesting storytelling mechanic, because it shows the fanaticism on his mind, but it still feels forced and restrictive. Early on, one of the villagers is sacrificed to AM. It's obvious that you're supposed to Do The Right Thing and take her place, but the game won't let you – it'll only give you the option to sit back and watch, or try to eat her, the latter of which will make you lose completely. It's not until you're forced to take care of her orphaned child – and watch as he, too, is about to be sacrificed – that you're allowed to fulfill your scripted role and play the martyr. The final chapter, where you choose characters to be digitized and inserted into AM's brain, is suitably freaky, but the puzzles here make even less sense than the rest of the game.

Amidst the messiness lie some technical issues. The game runs in SVGA, and while it looks decent in stills, the animation is awful. Not only are the frames awkwardly animated, but it's choppy and looks quite cheap. There are various other bugs and scripting errors, too, and the interface is occasionally unresponsive.



No matter what you do, Nimdok cannot fully redeem himself for his crimes.

Still, even if the scenarios themselves are confusing from a design standpoint, and the technical issues reveal a game that could've stood more time in quality assurance, the actual stories remain fascinating. The only game that remotely even deals with the same themes of fear and regret – and having the player experience each of the character's metaphorical nightmares in physical form – is Konami's *Silent Hill 2*, released six years later, and something which hasn't quite been followed up since. It's also a remarkably depressing game, if not just from the concept but the execution as well. Ellison's original idea was to create a game where the player

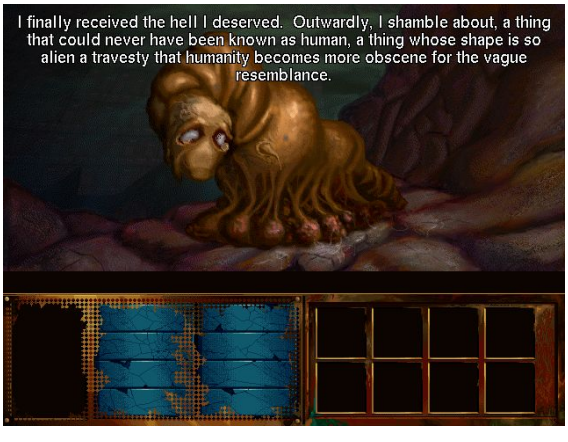
could never win. This was dropped somewhere along the line, perhaps for being too depressing. Even the "best" ending is remarkably dismal, and the bad one remains shocking, even though it's basically the same as the short story.

It also helps that the writing is almost uniformly fantastic, placing it way beyond your typical horror adventure game, and creates a much fuller sense of character. Things like this happen when you actually get someone qualified as one of the greatest science fiction writers of our time to help develop your game! In the short story, AM only spoke once, but here he routinely barges into each scenario, taunting and threatening his captives. Harlan Ellison also provides the voiceovers for AM, and rather than talking in a monotone computer voice, he sounds like a raving, if somewhat eloquent, lunatic. The rest of the voice acting is also more than suitable. While most of the characters grouse depressingly, Ellen sounds almost disturbingly chipper, which is kind of the point – her character has a strong outside that hides her shattered interior.

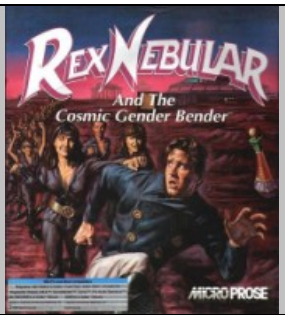
It's also careful to balance some bizarrely out-of-place humor. You'll find a jukebox in Gorrister's bar – three of them play a sound clip from his memory, while the fourth will randomly play a silly clip from the '60s song "Surfin' Bird". The same chapter has a talking jackal and a bathroom stall which mysteriously transports you into a meat locker. The visualization of AM's hellish interior also adds a lot – it's one thing to read about it, but it's another thing to see and walk through it. Cyberdreams' only other major adventure series was the *Dark Seed* games, both of which drew from the works of H.R. Giger. *I Have No Mouth* doesn't share the same inspiration, but it still has a similar style, interweaving nightmarishly organic patterns into stone and metal.

For all of its mechanical issues and poorly implemented morality choices, *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* still remains essential gaming, especially for science fiction fans. It says a lot about the quality of the story that it almost entirely supersedes its other failings. It complements the original short story perfectly, so much that they should be taken together as a complete whole, for a nightmarish experience unlike any other.

Due to the World War II themes, Nimdok and his scenario is completely missing in the German and French versions. The game uses a lot of euphemisms to avoid mentioning he's a Nazi, nor does it use any of their imagery, but perhaps the idea of playing through a part of the Holocaust – even as a vision – was too much. However, due to Nimdok's removal, it's impossible to beat the game, because he's required to finish a certain part of the final chapter.



The bad ending is much the same as the short story, and is where the title comes from.



Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Kenn Nishiuye, Matt Gruson, Frank Frazier
Developer: MicroProse

"Rex: LOG ON. Ah, there we go! This is Rex Nebular, making his first official log entry, aboard the fastest, stealthiest ship in the galaxy, The Slippery Pig. Yes siree, this log is a GREAT idea! I'm gonna make an entry every single day! This will become the definitive record of my life! Yes siree, I'm not gonna miss a day! Anyway, not much happened today. Oh, spilled some coffee onto the Theama Wave's 47-prong bedistor board... must remember to order a replacement. LOG OFF. Okay, where's my dram bedistor board mail-order data"

"Rex: LOG ON. Oh, nuts the battery must be – Aha! It still works! Wow! Guess what I just found in the back of my sock drawer! That self-transcribing log I bought last year! What a gas! I'll have to start keeping my log again! Let me clip it right here on my belt so I won't forget about it. *snapping noise* There. LOG OFF. Now let's see... is it a boxer day or a jockey d"

What you just read is a small excerpt from Rex Nebular's "Voice-Activated Auto-Transcribing Audio Log", a 22-page booklet of flavor text shipped with the game, written by no one less than Steve Meretzky of Infocom fame. Later entries revolve around his latest flame Lolita and his constant hunt for money to pay his debts show best what *Rex Nebular* is supposed to be: a science-fiction comedy with some slight softcore erotic touches that doesn't even try to hide the fact that its basic concept is "*Space Quest* meets *Leisure Suit Larry*". Too bad there were no adventure game veterans of Meretzky's caliber working on the actual game, so this booklet remains the funniest part of the whole product. For example, the idea of Rex's audio log always shutting off a few seconds too late is ingenious, but the game doesn't take it anywhere. It also doesn't do anything with the characters introduced in the text other than Rex himself and Stone, his current employer. Rex's would-be girlfriend Lolita is only mentioned a few times.

Instead *The Cosmic Gender Bender* simply tells the story of the latest contract job Rex takes to save himself from his chronically broke status. A filthy rich guy named Colonel Stone (the guy's got his own private moon) asks him to retrieve an incredibly previous vase. It's 75,000 galactars precious, so Rex doesn't hesitate a second and is on his way to the lost planet Terra Androgena, which is supposed to hold the vase. But things go wrong as Rex is attacked by a giant space ship entirely manned... er, womanned by hot females. Rex's attempts to talk himself out of the situation fail, and he is forced to crash-land into a lake on the surface.

Soon after Rex gets out of his crashed vehicle, he learns that the planet is highly hostile to his kind: it's populated exclusively by women! As we find out, the male population got wiped out in what is called the Great Gender War a hundred and fifty years prior. Not only that, the biological weapon used to defeat them made the women also incapable of bearing male children, so they have to resort to some tricks to sustain their population. There are two factions of women: "Keepers" and "Stock". The Keepers have access to high technology (they're the ones who shot down Rex in the first place), among them the Cosmic Gender Bender. They use this device to temporarily transform themselves into fake men to fool and impregnate the Stock, tribes of women living in the wilderness. Of course, the Keepers hate being men just as much as the Stock hates being abused by transmorphs, so everyone is looking out for "real" men from outer space to have them mass raped, and who could be a more manly man than Rex?

So on his search for the vase, Rex not only has to avoid the industrialization of his testicles, find another working space ship, and generally avoid dying, he is also forced to use the Gender

Bender himself multiple times. Only as a woman he can safely wander around the Keepers' base, which is guarded by both its inhabitants and a complex security system. And then Machopolis, the former capital of the men, awaits him, as of course only men would keep useless stuff like a vase in an art collection. Much of the game's plot revolves around gender stereotypes, seeing how most women are sexy (the only fat ones are cannibals) and use baby powder as weaponry, while all men are filthy, lazy good-for-nothings.



Rex tries his luck with some of the local ladies.

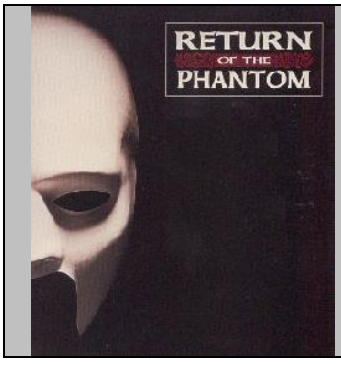
The solutions to the puzzles are never as tricky as in the early Sierra or LucasArts games, but rather quite logical. For example, Rex finds a blowgun and poisoned arrows in a hut. One screen further, Rex is attacked by an ape who steals another important item from him and escapes up a tree. Hmm, what to do? This style makes especially the first part of the game really easy, at least as soon as one finds the right hotspots. The default mode only displays hotspots when clicking them, although the "easy" interface displays them when hovered over.

The interface also provides more hurdles. MicroProse was searching for a compromise between the comfort of a point-and-click interface and the flexibility of a parser, so next to the standard commands like "take" or "push" (strangely, "throw" is also among them), each item has its own set of uses. LucasArts-conditioned players may tend to overlook that they can "look at" something through their binoculars or "disassemble" them in lack of a simple "use" command.

That said, the game really takes off in the second half, where one is allowed to explore Machopolis while grabbing stuff left and right until a plan slowly forms. This big puzzle is one of the most satisfying experiences in the whole game, if only it weren't for the aggravating, unskippable driving cutscene at each location change. There are also quite a few ways to die, but these aren't nearly as annoying, as the deaths are just played for laughs, and Rex is immediately placed at the screen before his untimely demise, like in some of the later Sierra games.

The graphics in *Rex Nebular* are kind of a mixed bag. While most backgrounds are beautiful pieces of pixel art, the somewhat-half-digitized-actor characters are ugly, and look inconsistent in style. Only the intro is fully voiced, but the acting is quite amateurish.

As soon as the game's weaknesses are overcome, *Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* becomes quite strong in the latter half. The only problem – soon after that, it's already over. This game is incredibly short, with only three major areas to explore: the wilderness, the Keepers' base and Machopolis. There are also some stretches of loneliness and relatively few characters to interact with, though the atmosphere is quite befitting of a dead city such as Machopolis. *The Cosmic Gender Bender* almost feels like a chapter from a much bigger game, and Steve Meretzky's audio log leaves one hungry for more adventures of Rex Nebular, which will almost definitely never come to pass.



Return of the Phantom

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Raymond Benson
Developer: MicroProse

MicroProse's adventure games weren't exactly known for their originality. *Dragonsphere* owed a huge debt to *King's Quest*, and *Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender* was a conceptual melding of *Space Quest* and *Leisure Suit Larry*. *Return of the Phantom* is its only true original title – as original as one can get for a game based on a public domain novel, anyway. The game was designed by Raymond Benson, who would later make a name for himself writing James Bond books and video game novelizations.



The sewer maze comprises an unfortunately large chunk of the game's play time.

The story begins in the "present day" of 1992. During the opening performance of *Don Juan Triumphant* in the Paris opera house, the chandelier falls into the audience, killing several people. Inspector Raoul Montand is called in to investigate, especially regarding the numerous threatening letters left by the so-called "Opera Ghost" who haunts the premises. During his inspection, Christine Florent, the star actress, is found strangled in her dressing room. Montand discovers the perpetrator and struggles with him in a dramatic confrontation atop a catwalk, but our hero is knocked to the stage. When he awakens, he not only finds himself transported back in time to the year 1881, but he has also assumed the persona of Viscount Raoul de Chagny, the protagonist of novel *The Phantom of the Opera*. Stranger still, his apparent girlfriend, Christine Daae, bears a suspicious resemblance to the murdered Christine Florent from the future. Something strange is obviously afoot, and so Raoul resumes his investigations to catch the masked phantom and perhaps save the future. It's an interesting concept, one that would have been more innovative had similar ground not already been tread in the 1989 movie version of *Phantom of the Opera* starring Robert Englund.

This whole concept was used so the designers could adapt Gaston Leroux's original story into an adventure game mystery. Of course, there are a handful of characters from the book;

beyond Raoul and Christine, the self-proclaimed psychic Madame Giry plays a role as well, seemingly aware of Raoul's time-traveling predicament. Another significant character, The Persian, is nowhere to be found. More bizarre is the appearance of Edgar Degas, a real-life French painter who often illustrated young ballerinas, but here, for some reason, is presented as a hilariously salacious, lip-licking pedophile.

In the process of rewriting the story, though, the designers forgot to give the player much to do. Through a good chunk of the game, there aren't any real puzzles to solve, and the only major conundrum is a pixel-hunting fetch quest. The entire game takes place on the theater grounds, and while they aren't very large, the extremely slow walking speed makes such exploration a huge annoyance. Most of the time is spent interrogating the various theater workers and cast members in both time periods and learning about the history of the theater and of the Phantom. It's relatively well written, although the voice acting in the CD-ROM release is abhorrent. It sounds like it was recorded in a bathroom, and none of the actors can even remotely pronounce any of the French names and words they're trying to say.

Then about two-thirds of the way through, you discover the underground catacombs beneath the opera house: a huge maze sequence complete with a few puzzle rooms. This isn't an easy maze, either – there aren't any clues to get through it, and it requires judicious mapping to conquer. Even though this section is long and boring, the climactic encounters with the Phantom, on top of the chandelier that crashed in the present, make for some level of excitement. Sadly, the ending is a bit daft, as there's no satisfactory explanation for the time travel and it's practically hand-waved as little more than magic.



The Phantom has some curious taste in décor.

Like most of the various adaptations of *The Phantom of the Opera,* fans will either be intrigued to see how the characters have been interpreted or horrified at the fan-fiction style reinvention. At the very least, it's interesting to see this variation of Erik the Phantom, particularly in how violently sadistic he is. His chamber is filled with gore and furniture made out of bones. Play the wrong notes on his organ and you'll end up engulfed in flames (complete with a ludicrously blood-curdling scream). Still, despite his bloodlust, he is kind of an idiot – what kind of moron puts a puzzle lock on his room and makes the password his name?



Dragonsphere

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Douglas Kaufman
Developer: MicroProse

The third of MicroProse's adventure games using their MicroProse Adventure Development engine, *Dragonsphere* is a typical high fantasy story. There are knights, there are forests, there are fairies. There's an evil sorcerer named Sanwe, who was imprisoned twenty years prior but is now seeking to break free. There are dragons and there are spheres, the titular one representing the strength of said sorcerer's bounds. As the King Callash of Gran Callahach, you must fulfill your destiny and destroy him.

As King, you apparently lived a sheltered life, having truly met none of your kingdom's denizens, some of whom don't take too kindly to you. Outside of the humans, there are the fairies, who speak in infuriating rhymes and whose existence is governed by a curious sense of logic; the shapeshifters, a race that can take practically any form and is uniformly regarded with suspicion; the Soptus Eclitpus, a band of desert dwellers with its own language and strange customs; and the shaks, a race of sentient birds. The magical stones needed to defeat the sorcerer lies within their grasps, and only through understanding their cultures (and general smooth talking) can you obtain the items you require.



Our hero wanders through Sanwe's tower, ratsicle in hand.

Sanwe is entombed atop of a trap-filled tower, which is on top of a dangerous mountain. After uncovering all of the items you need and scaling these heights, you'll face off against him, hoping to catch him in a weakened state. Most of the sub-quests up until this point are fairly short, and at first it seems like the story has reached its climax far too quickly. But Sanwe's defeat is only the first half of the adventure – during this encounter, it's revealed that your character isn't quite who he thinks he is (it's not quite amnesia) and the focus then shifts on saving the kingdom from the backstabbing royal matriarch. From here, you need to discover who you really are (a young unknowing boy named Pid, actually), attempt to rescue the queen (who you've thought was your wife but really isn't), and find a tiny spark of romance with a

young duchess who nearly sacrificed her life for you. All in all, it's one of those twists that is fairly well telegraphed, because there's quite a bit of good foreshadowing, but nonetheless proves to be surprising unless you're really paying attention.

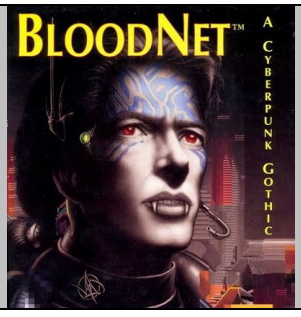
This is about as clever as *Dragonsphere* gets though, because for the rest of the time, it's a fairly typical fantasy story. However, while it lacks the whimsy of a *King's Quest*, from a writing and design standpoint it's better than most of Sierra's entries, save for the sixth one. There's a lot of detail to the writing, revealing both the historical background of the kingdom and the developments of the various other races, although it's not quite at the level of a Legend Entertainment product. The dialogue is pretty good, although the wooden voice acting and poor sound quality – all of the voices have an annoying echo with them – does it no real favors.



Meanwhile, the plot thickens on the home front.

There are no dead ends, and while deaths may be sudden, there's an option to immediately redo situations leading to death. The puzzles are occasionally silly, one regarding finding a bizarre use for a frozen rat (a "ratsicle"), another involving constructing a love poem to awaken a sleeping beauty ("Originality counts", you are told by the wise bystander). Other tasks involve an insanely aggravating jewel-guessing minigame, that can only be won through brute force.

Any issues are the same as MicroProse's other games – the backgrounds aren't anything special and while the character animation is smooth, the sprites are lacking in detail. The interface is occasionally cumbersome, mostly because there is no standard "use" verb, instead requiring a unique command associated with each inventory item. The walking speed is slow, but outside of the castle at the beginning, there really isn't too much aimless wandering. In the end, it's a perfectly capable, B-level adventure game that doesn't really try to exceed expectations, but is perfectly content at just being decent.



BloodNet: A Cyberpunk Gothic

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: Amiga/ IBM PC
Designer(s): John Antinori, Laura Kambo
Developer: MicroProse

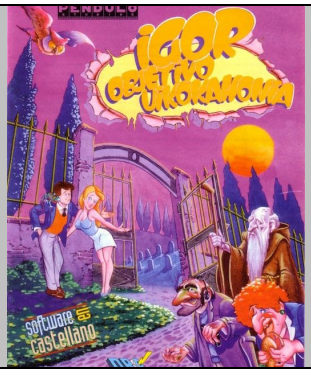
MicroProse's final adventure game takes elements of RPGs and meshes them with elements of cyperpunk and vampire fiction. You play as the customizable protagonist, Ransom Stark, who lives in a dark, futuristic Manhattan that is ruled by an evil Company. The main difference from your typical cyberpunk story? Here, vampires are real. Stark has been infected, and the only thing keeping him from immediately losing his humanity is a neural implant. It's only a temporary fix, and if he doesn't find a cure, he'll be a vampire forever. Similar to *Quest for Glory*, you can choose what character class you wish to play and adjust skill levels accordingly.



Ransom Stark: not impressed.

From the get-go, you have access to nearly every location in Manhattan, which can be overwhelming. There are methods to narrow down helpful destinations, but it's still easy to end up surrounded by of vampires or vampire hunters. There are so many people that want Stark dead, it can be difficult to keep track. Once you're up and running, however, it becomes easier to follow the plot. Besides the main story, there is an abundance of optional sub-plots and side-quests to enjoy along the way. It's this wide variety of possibilities, from opening stats to the choice of recruitable party members, which makes *BloodNet* both interesting and replayable. The writing is also surprisingly good. Party members have interesting conversations, and they even lament the loss of companions that fall in combat. Best of all, the story manages to combine cyberpunk and vampires without insulting either genre. There is also a strong sense of urgency, as Stark's bloodlust grows over time and his humanity begins to seep away.

While the game has generally aged well, some components do frustrate. For instance, the controls are somewhat slow and unintuitive. Combat, while generally avoidable, is also a chore. Besides traveling the city, you also need to jack into a cyber world, like in *Neuromancer*, and unfortunately, the game controls there are even worse. Still, if you're looking for a something unique and can dig the occasionally clumsy RPG elements, *BloodNet* should be on your list.



Igor: Objective Uikokahonia

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Joseph Kluytmans, Corinne Perrot
Developer: Pendulo Studios

The first game from Pendulo Studios, who would later go on to develop the *Runaway* series, *Igor: Objective Uikokahonia* has absolutely nothing to do with the infamous hunchback but is rather the name of a prep school student infatuated with his gorgeous classmate Laura. She's about to go on a class trip with her Biology class to the beautiful tropical island of Uikokahonia, where it appears she may be hooking up with Phillip, Igor's jerkass romantic rival. This transgression cannot stand, so Igor must find a way to accompany her. This relatively freeform adventure requires three tasks – enroll in the Biology class, find a way to cheat on the test so he can qualify, and figure out how to get the cash to pay for the trip.

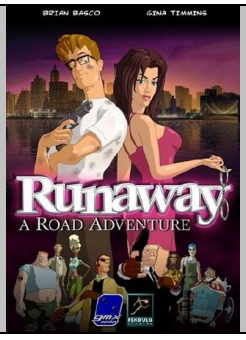


Despite having a tropical island in its title, nearly the entire game takes place at a dull university.

The game looks and feels like *Monkey Island*, but much like practically every LucasArts copycat in the '90s, the writing just isn't up to par. It's not offensively bad, but there's no reason to feel any sympathy for Igor nor his plight for Laura, since her only real asset is being really hot. There are at least a dozen folks across campus that could have been funny – the wise janitor, the sandwich hoarding classmate – yet there's barely any opportunity to interact with them. The puzzles carry some comedic weight, though like the later *Runaway* titles, they tend not to make a whole lot of sense. In order to screw with Philip, you must switch his whiskey with a bottle of strange fluid from the school laboratory, which will cause him to go crazy Linda Blair-style and force the priest to leave his post to perform an exorcism. Other such puzzles are equally silly, like promising to find an old blind lady's cat and instead giving her a fattened lizard instead. The cause-effect relationship is incomprehensible, and there's way too much pixel hunting, but at least they provide the humor that the writing lacks. There is a CD-ROM version with voices in its native Spanish, but the purported English version does not appear to exist, with only a disk release commonly available.

Runaway

Runaway, a trilogy of adventure games developed by Spanish developer Pendulo Studios (who made *Igor: Objective Uikokahonia* and *Hollywood Monsters*, the latter of which was never translated into English), might be one of the most controversial series in the genre. When the first game was released in Europe in 2001, many proclaimed the cartoonish adventure to be a return to form, the true successor to LucasArts' legendarily humorous titles. Others found it a harrowingly shallow experience, one with gorgeous graphics but completely lacking both the soul and the wit of the genre's golden years. Despite the gigantic schism in the audience, *Runaway* spawned two sequels, to the delight of fans and the apathy of everyone else.



Runaway: A Road Adventure

Initial Release Date: 2001
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Ramón Hernáez, Rafael Latiegui, Felipe Gómez Pinilla
Developer: Pendulo Studios

Runaway tells the story of the nerdy Brian Basco, picking up as he's preparing to make a cross-country journey. Just before his trek gets started, he accidentally runs over a gorgeous nightclub dancer named Gina Timmins, who's being pursued by a group of gangsters. Brian takes her to the hospital and helps her recover, after which she recounts the events that landed her in hot water. Not only was she a witness of a brutal murder, but she's also in possession of a mysterious cross passed down from her father. After checking in with one of Brian's friends, the two learn that the cross is an artifact from the Hopi Indian tribe, but before they can investigate further they are captured by the gangster henchmen. Separated from each other, it's up to Brian alone to not only rescue Gina (again), but discover the secret behind her cross.

From the get go, *Runaway* presents a number of problems, most of which have to do with the weak writing. The most prominent issue stems from the hero himself – Brian is an awkward, nerdy character who exuberantly comments on every single thing that you do. Many works of fiction revolve around hapless underdogs, but they need to be at least somewhat charming. Brian isn't, because nothing that comes out of his mouth is ever even remotely funny. Each of the game's six chapters are introduced with Brian sitting against a black background, regaling his story in flashbacks and elaborating on the madcap situations he's gotten himself into. It would've been much more beneficial to, you know, actually show them, instead of having some mook talk about his totally crazy escapades. The running theme is Brian's evolution from a weenie to a totally cool dude, although how his adventures trigger this change isn't entirely evident.

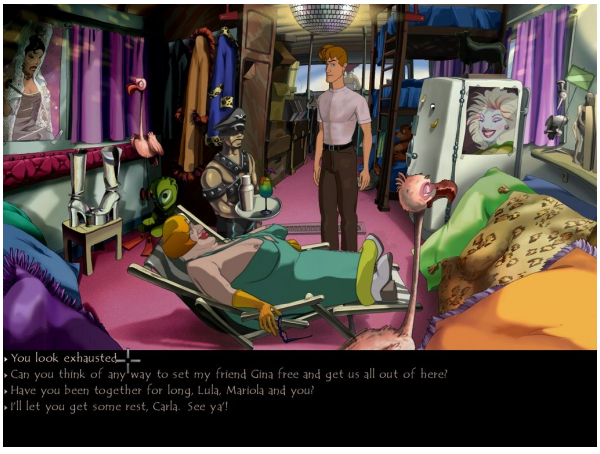
The subpar writing completely affects everything. Brian's prime motivation throughout the whole adventure is due to his infatuation with Gina, who's largely absent through most of the journey anyway. The narrative simply assumes that her pretty hair and ample melons are sufficiently compelling characteristics, despite the fact that she has a somewhat bitchy attitude. It just doesn't work. Furthermore, there are some moments that should be funny, like when Brian ends up stranded in the desert along with a trio of crossdressers. It's like the developers thought that the very concept of transvestites was hilarious enough to carry itself, without actually going

through the effort to write any jokes. Many of characters like to namedrop famous movies and other pop culture references, but never to any great effect.

Then there are the witless supporting characters, like the upbeat techie nerd girl Sushi and her gang of hippie pals. One of them really likes marijuana, and that's about as funny as the jokes get. Even worse is the UFO conspiracy nut Joshua, an Asian caricature with gigantic glasses, embarrassing buck teeth, and an unfortunately racist accent. Maybe the dialogue is actually much better in its native Spanish, but in English, it's all quite bland. The English voice acting doesn't help either. Although most of it isn't explicitly bad (despite one actor clearly voicing several roles), it is lifeless, and never expresses any of the humor that's supposed to be there. It doesn't help that a good chunk of the game is just a random series of escapades up until the final chapter, when the plot takes a few interesting twists, but it's a bit too little, too late.

Beyond the story, the game isn't terribly well designed either. The puzzle solving is all rigidly linear, because Brian won't pick up certain objects unless he knows there's a specific use for it. This means that you'll spend lots of time looking for event triggers and then retracing your steps to find what you weren't allowed to grab in the first place. The puzzles themselves constantly devolve into absurdity. In one instance, you need to find some lubricant so you can fix a machine gun. One of the crossdressers has some tanning lotion, but won't let you have it because her tan's not done. In order to obtain it from her, you need to steal her sunglasses and dip them in a pool of oil. The logic is that the oil makes the glasses darker, so when you give them back to her, she'll think her tan is darker than it really is, so she'll willfully give you the lotion. There are all kinds of problems with this puzzle. First off, if you can steal her sunglasses without her noticing, why can't you steal her lotion too? Secondly, if the tanning lotion works as suitable lubricant, why doesn't the pool of oil? Thirdly, under no circumstance would oil make sunglasses darker – it would just look really messy.

This is far from the only moronic puzzle. One character will attempt to give you a trowel, except he accidentally chucks out the window, where it lands in a dirty trough. Brian won't man up and just stick his hand in to grab it. Instead, you need to find a flower pot and drop it from a ledge into the trough, displacing the water and causing the trowel to overflow out onto the ground. Try not to think about the physics of this, much less the stupidity behind it.



The cross dressing tour group is about as funny as this game gets.

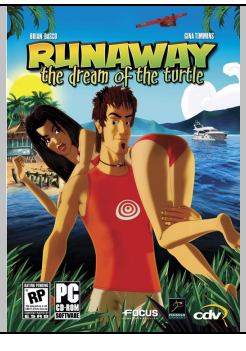
These puzzles are both quite daft, but there's an even more troublesome one. Out in the desert, you need to get into a shack, which is predictably locked. However, one of the guards lets loose a hint that the local fire ant population, which is astoundingly vicious, is attracted to peanut butter. The only jar of peanut butter you find is empty, so you need to make your own

by grabbing an army helmet, mixing butter and peanuts together, and leaving it to melt in the sun. Then, you smear your homemade concoction on to the shed, attracting the ants to eat it entirely. It's kind of stupid, because anyone can clearly tell you that's not how to make peanut butter. But a puzzle like this would work in something like *Monkey Island*, because it's the sort of ridiculous game where that kind of lateral logic applies. *Runaway*, on the other hand, might look cartoony, but the world itself, outside of the puzzles and a few isolated instances involving aliens and mysticism, is largely grounded in reality.

Runaway's biggest problem is that its tone is all over the place. Early in the game, you meet a goofy surfer dude janitor, who, shortly thereafter, is brutally shot to death. That's... not funny at all. Later, when Gina accidentally falls down a mine shaft and is presumed dead, there's a scene where Brian mopes and remembers their sparse time together, complete with a ghostly montage and sappy music. Here, Brian is monumentally shaken up about some girl he just met and with whom he has spent maybe five minutes of completely charmless screen time. Is this meant to be ironic? Or are we actually expected to take this seriously? If the game's supposed to be a comedic adventure, why is it so violent, and not in the light-hearted slapstick kind of way? And if it's trying to be a vaguely serious mafia heist story, then why does it keep trying to be funny? It never pulls off the balance it's aiming for, and just comes across as really uncomfortable.

It's a real shame that *Runaway* is so terribly written, because it does indeed look damn good. The backgrounds are all hand drawn and scanned at a very high 1024x768 resolution, and only get prettier as you get farther into the adventure. The characters are rendered in cel-shaded 3D, with filters applied to make them appear two dimensional. It purposefully limits the framerate so it looks choppier than normal 3D, but at the same time, looks much more similar to a classic 2D game. The only real failing comes in the cutscenes, where the limited facial animations make everyone look like robots when speaking. The music is strangely dramatic, another aspect which totally clashes with the tone. The poppy opening vocal song is suitably dubbed "Runaway" and is sung by Vera Dominguez, then of the Spanish band Liquor and more recently of My Haircut. Her English is a bit slurred, but it's a surprisingly catchy song, if a bit cheesy.

It's easy to see why *Runaway* holds some appeal. At the time it was released, it was an oasis amongst a desert of other dry and/or badly-designed European entries, and the fact that it consciously emulated the classic style of point-and-click adventuring was a distinct plus. While it may have seemed fresh, and its usages of modern technology makes it look totally fantastic, beneath that veneer it is dully written and questionably designed.



Runaway 2: The Dream of the Turtle

Initial Release Date: 2007
Platforms: IBM PC / Nintendo DS / Wii
Designer(s): Ramón Hernáez, Josué Monchan
Developer: Pendulo Studios

Runaway found enough success that Pendulo released a follow-up about five years later, subtitled *The Dream of the Turtle*. This time, the framing story involves Brian instant-messaging Sushi, as he finds himself in yet another scrape. Brian and Gina are now an official couple and head off to beautiful Hawaii to catch some rays. Unfortunately, an ill-advised airplane tour goes awry, with Brian giving Gina the only onboard parachute to jump out the door, while trying to crash land safely. Trying to recover Gina turns out to be much harder than he anticipated, seeing as the location they've happened across, Mala Island, is occupied by the United States military. It's led

by the cigar-chomping Colonel Kordsmeier, and he's not up to letting civilians waltz through his encampment, which just so happens to be where Gina landed. After cavorting with the locals and disguising himself as a professor to infiltrate a series of ruins, Brian learns that the army is guarding the remnants of a crashed UFO, complete with stellar life forms. In the face of mad military generals and cold-blooded assassins, Brian must not only rescue Gina, but discover the secret behind the aliens and the mysterious element called Trantonite.

From the beginning, *Runaway 2* is a lot surer of its tone than the first game. When divorced from all of the murdering gangsters, the story is free to be a lot sillier, and the introduction of aliens allows for a much more off-the-wall plot, especially once you find an artifact that can bend space and time. The downside is the return of Joshua, an aggravating character from the first game who's been promoted to a supporting role. He's had close contact with the aliens and joins your quest, but does little other than causing lots of annoying problems for Brian. It's a terrible way to motivate players to solve puzzles when you really want to strangle the dope who keeps getting you into mess after mess.

A few other characters from the first game, including Sushi and her pals, make a return appearance, and they still try hard to elicit laughs while failing completely. Slightly more amusing are a few of the new characters, including the overtly slutty barmaid Lokelani, who inappropriately regales Brian with stories of her many, many, many ex-boyfriends, and a dim-witted Army sergeant named O'Conner, who can be manipulated in a number of amusing ways. The final chapter is a dream sequence that takes place onboard a 15th century ship, and has more than its fair share of *Monkey Island* references. One of the first "characters" you meet is an alcoholic lemur, who, quite frankly, should've had more of a starring role.



After mourning his captured girlfriend, Brian hooks up with this barmaid. Wait, what?

Runaway 2 also occasionally does some clever things with the hotspot descriptions. At one point you need to break off part of a wooden window sill. When you go back later and try to fix it, instead of saying something like "Use Board on Window", the action text reads "Restore Board's Lost Honor By Returning Its Status As a Window Sill". The game really could've used more clever bits like this! All in all, it's certainly a step up from its predecessor, but the story is still filled with questionable moments. Why, for example, does Brian stop to hook up with the bikini-clad waitress? Doesn't that sort of undermine his whole quest to find Gina if he's just going to shack up with some random floozy? And while it's perhaps a bit much for a Spanish studio to understand American political correctness, they should have maybe realized that a white dude wearing makeup to dress up as a black man is perceived as fairly offensive.

But the larger problem is that this is really only one half of a game. While it's still six chapters long, it ends on a cliffhanger and almost nothing is resolved, so some aspects really

stick out. Considering Gina's featured right on the cover, it's weird how little of a role she plays. She's in the intro, and pops up a few times in later cutscenes, but beyond that, she's totally absent. And the story goes through the trouble to introduce Tarantula, a scorchingly hot assassin who disposes of her targets with deadly spiders, but outside of killing a few henchmen off-screen, she doesn't really do much of anything. It doesn't help that the plot is overly elaborate without being interesting. Sure, the whole alien case somehow ties in with a Spanish conquistador, but it's a plot thread that's given way more exposure than it deserves. And the dialogue still hasn't improved, making for long, pointless bouts of conversation.

While the narrative sees some slight improvements, the rest of the game doesn't. Brian still refuses to pick up stuff unless you've previously discovered a reason to, and the hotspots are still too difficult to find. The puzzles aren't as overtly stupid as in the first game, but there are still some real headspinners. At one point, you need to get an item from one of Sushi's stupid friends. He's an inventor, and discusses how he wants to create a tool that makes people eat slower. (How odd.) To solve this, you need to empty a few wine jugs, fill them with sand, tie them together, and stick them on to a trident you nab from a statue. Thus, you have a large-scale model of a "time fork", a fork with an hourglass attached to it. The game almost seems to acknowledge how dumb this is, but it's still quite inane.

The graphics still look fantastic. Since a good chunk of the game takes place on gorgeous tropical islands before moving to the Alaskan mountains, and eventually out into the ocean, there's much more room for the artistry to shine. The style of character design is similar, although the models are much improved over the first game, and there are far fewer awkwardly lip-synched close-ups. Brian has received a huge makeover and now looks like a surfer dude, although he still talks and acts the same as before. The new title song sounds like an awful boy band ripoff, although Vera Dominguez still provides a few other decent songs.

While *Runaway 2* is an improvement in many ways, it still falls prey to most of the troubles of its predecessor, and haters of the first will likely not be convinced. Those that enjoyed the first game will obviously find more of the same, although some have voiced their displeasure over the prevalent science fiction aspects. No one will be pleased by the ending, although at least the third game fits everything together nicely.

In addition to the standard PC release, *Runaway 2* was also released on the Nintendo DS. Obviously the backgrounds and characters needed to be greatly resized to fit onto the portable screen, so the visuals lose much of their luster. Many of the movies are heavily chopped up and compressed. There's no voice acting, either. The touch screen interface works well enough, though, since it zooms in whenever you point at something with the stylus, and the hotspot indicator is a godsend. A Wii version was also released in 2009, which features remote pointer controls and an online help system similar to the one in the third *Runaway* game.



Runaway: A Twist of Fate

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC / Nintendo DS / Wii
Designer(s): Ramón Hernáez, Josué Monchan
Developer: Pendulo Studios

Pendulo followed up with the third *Runaway* game, released in late 2009. Rather than picking up immediately where its predecessor left off, *Runaway: A Twist of Fate* begins on a seemingly unrelated note. Brian (who's been again redesigned to look a bit more thuggish) is held on trial

for the murder of the Colonel Kordsmeier, the army chief on Mala Island. He's a bit of a wreck, with no memories of what happened directly after the events of the second game, so he's checked into a mental institution, where he's killed under mysterious circumstances. But not really, of course – it's just a cover so Brian can escape and figure out who framed him. Meanwhile, Gina, who apparently escaped unharmed, begins an adventure of her own to discover what happened to Brian, and ends up investigating a different, although related, murder. She has no memory of the past either, and a good chunk of the game involves both of them piecing together parts of the puzzle.

The whole bit is a very clever way to structure the game, since it provides more motivation for the player to move forward, and it's much more involving than its predecessors. But one can't help but feel as if the developers lost interest in the supernatural setting of *The Dream of the Turtle* and wanted to do something different. *A Twist of Fate* feels closer in tone to the first game, being more of a darker murder mystery, right down to the assassins that are tracking down the heroes, and the only supernatural components are the scenes that deal directly with its predecessor. Despite the fact that the aliens are the driving factor of the plot, you never directly interact with any of them, and they only show up in a few cutscenes. It doesn't negatively affect the storytelling; it's just strange. Thankfully, the game resolves all of the dangling ends from its predecessor, especially Tarantula, who plays a pretty strong role in this game. *A Twist of Fate* also finally fleshes out Gina, and the chapters switch back and forth between her stories and the flashbacks of Brian escaping from the sanitarium. It's great that she's actually more than a damsel-in-distress here, although other than a few references to her pole-dancing past, she's actually not that much more different from a female version of Brian.



For all of the crap he gets, Brian almost becomes likable in the third game, if mostly out of pity.

It's not only the narrative that's improved – Pendulo has really taken into account the criticisms of the earlier games and fixed a lot of the problems. The puzzles are still occasionally a bit off, but they are easier, and at least a bit funnier. One of the first tasks Gina has to do is translate a Swedish instruction manual. (Never mind that the IKEA-style pamphlets that are being parodied are, in reality, entirely illustrated, but let's roll with it.) The first chapter takes place entirely in a graveyard, and you can't leave. As Gina determines, the only way to solve this puzzle is to find a Swedish person buried somewhere in the graveyard, get the local paranormal expert to channel his spirit, and get the soul of the dead to translate it. That's the sort of bizarrely overcomplicated situation that the series has devolved into on many occasions – except when you actually convince the spirit medium to conduct her ceremony, she exposes herself as a fraud, pulls out a Swedish-to-English dictionary and translates it herself in an attempt to cover her ass. Hey, there's an actual punchline in there! The ridiculous puzzles in LucasArts games

tended to be forgivable because their solutions were funny, and Pendulo finally picked up on that. Furthermore, it's not even a particularly difficult puzzle, because Gina comes to most of the conclusions herself just by looking around, gently guiding the player to the correct solution. It's certainly much better than the time fork.

Indeed, the whole game is much more user-friendly. The new hotspot indicator is a very welcome addition, and there's an online hint function for pretty much every step of the way. Here, Joshua is confined to the role of a customer service representative deep in the bowels of Pendulo Studios, and he even offers some (fictional?) stories about the game's development. Otherwise, he doesn't play any real role in the plot, which is definitely for the game's betterment.

The writing as a whole has improved a bit too. It still occasionally tries to be humorous and does a bad job of it, but most of the annoying aspects of the original are gone. The new wacky sidekick this time is Gabbo, Brian's buddy from the insane asylum, who looks more than a bit like Steve Buscemi. Making him randomly shout "Banana!" at the end of every other sentence isn't funny, but his references and parodies of action movie heroes prove a bit more endearing, and he's used sparsely throughout the story. Brian's other buddies at the sanitarium, and the ways to manipulate them, prove slightly amusing too. The voice acting cast is totally new, and while fans of the older games might be put off by the change, the new voices for Brian and Gina are definitely an improvement. Although the game is still six chapters long, it's fairly short, and given that the puzzles aren't as obtuse as the previous games, they go by pretty quickly. The upside is that it's much better paced, and feels less tedious as a whole.

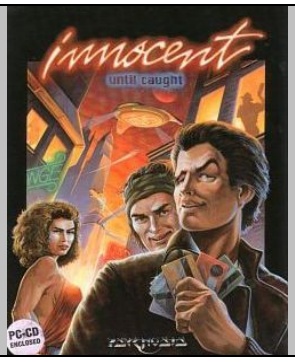


Brian Basco is dead? If only.

The graphics are technically on the same level as *The Dream of the Turtle*, and so the game still looks quite good. Given that a good chunk of the game is set in insane asylums and dirty back alleys, it's not as scenic as the jungles and deserts from the previous games, but it manages to be attractive nonetheless. Vera Dominguez returns to sing the title song, too, which again is quite catchy.

Although *A Twist of Fate* is hardly a classic, it's still the best of the trilogy. The puzzles aren't as frustrating, the characters are actually likable, the plot's more engrossing, and the dialogue, while still not fantastic, isn't nearly as awkward. Despite being the third in a trilogy and heavily connected to its predecessor (although not initially), it's probably the best place for a newbie to jump in, because the quality really is quite a bit higher.

Innocent Until Caught / Guilty



Innocent Until Caught

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: Amiga / IBM PC
Designer(s): Andy Blazdell
Developer: Divide by Zero

Innocent Until Caught starts off amusingly, as small-time intergalactic crook Jack T. Ladd is humorously detained for tax evasion. After being comically humiliated in front of a court, he finds himself on the shifty planet of Tayte in an attempt to scrape together enough cash so he's not totally eliminated. After surviving bar fights, stealing from pawn shops and running numerous jobs for the local mafia – including a heist in a zoo – Jack finds himself jailed anyway, until he's broken out by a mysterious benefactor. It turns out that Jack has been selected to break into the fortress of the Grand LordMaster P'PauD'P'Pau, who has a device that can potentially destroy whole star systems.

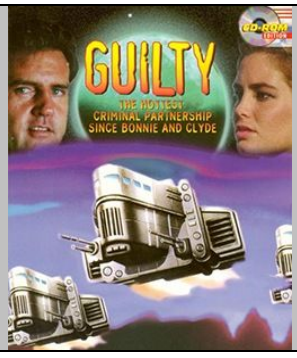


Strip clubs? Bordellos? Bars and pawn shops? This game tries a little too hard to be "bad".

It's a cool idea, on a few levels – at first, Jack seems like an incompetent version of Han Solo, and the cheeky title recognizes the criminal tendencies of most adventure game protagonists, who, despite being the "good" guys, are more likely sociopathic kleptomaniacs. And yet developer Divide by Zero can't think of anything interesting to do with the concept, largely due to the bland characterization of the protagonist. He's not enough of a jerkass to be a decent anti-hero, and he's not incompetent enough to bring on the laughs like a Guybrush Threepwood or a Roger Wilco. He makes plenty of wisecracks, all of which are lame. During the ending, he propositions Ruthie, the gorgeous love interest, suggesting that they get married, but avoid the ceremony in favor of the consummation. Then he's slapped and the credits roll. It's predictable and not at all funny. It's certainly not impossible to write for a likeable sleazebag, but the designers just totally failed here.

The rest of the humor is far more miss than hit, and oftentimes nonsensically out of place – an early puzzle involves getting some money by obtaining a "change mail" (a piece of chain mail made out of coins) worn by a biker. On the other hand, the scene where Jack is knocked out and swapped with a stripper, leaving the confused criminal to jump out of a cake during a policeman's birthday party, is probably the best moment of the game. Once you reach the halfway point, the game introduces Narm N'Palm, a likeably deranged gun nut who develops an unwavering allegiance towards Jack and continues to help him, despite his ineptitude. And the villain both looks and sounds like he crawled out of a *Buck Rogers* serial.

Beyond the wildly inconsistent humor lies a game that just isn't terribly well designed. There's a general lack of focus and direction through a good portion of the game, too. Too many puzzles involve around picking up single pixel-sized objects – there's a window that shows a zoomed-in view of the area surrounding your cursor, which certainly helps, but it's just a band-aid for the larger problems. Hotspots aren't labeled unless you've selected a specific cursor, and generally the interface is a mess. All of this taken together, along with the drab, lifeless graphics, equals a game that struggles with mediocrity. The laughs are sparse, and neither the sci-fi nor the criminal elements play a large enough role, leaving the story dry and mostly uninteresting.



Guilty

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Andy Blazdell
Developer: Divide by Zero

Innocent Until Caught didn't exactly have a large fan following, but someone somewhere must've felt the need for a sequel, so here we are with *Guilty*. The story once again starts off strongly, as not-quite master criminal Jack T. Ladd attempts to coerce money out of some citizens by taking a gun to the head of a cow, but he's quickly captured by Ysanne Andropath, a female police officer eager for justice. Along the way, they end up stumbling upon an intergalactic war, and Ysanne decides to get the duo involved.

Guilty is somewhat unique in that you can play the story from the point of view of either Ysanne or Jack. The plot is technically the same either way, but since most of the time the duo are separated off doing their own thing, it allows for two relatively unique paths through the game. Each path is relatively short, but putting them together, it's roughly the length of a standard adventure game. The structure is fairly episodic and linear compared to the relatively freeform *Innocent Until Caught*, and the scenery is a little bit more varied too, as you head to a few planets, running the gamut through snow, desert and jungle climates, as well as a luxurious resort where Jack idiotically gambles away the ship.

But it doesn't seem like Divide By Zero learned much in the years between this and *Innocent Until Caught*. Jack is still a lousy character, and Ysanne, while less obnoxious, manages to be more abrasive than likeable. The American packaging tried to make the duo seem to be "an intergalactic Bonny and Clyde!", which, despite not making sense (Bonnie and Clyde were in cahoots, not on opposite sides of the law), the romantic tension between the two never elevates beyond sitcom-style bickering. "Women drivers!" Jack remarks when Ysanne gets in a tank. No, those jokes were old twenty years ago, if they were ever fresh at all. The quest sees some

returning characters from the first game, including former love interest Ruthie (whose crowning moment involves a joke about premature ejaculation) and Narm N'Palm, apparently still blindly faithful after being ditched in the last game.

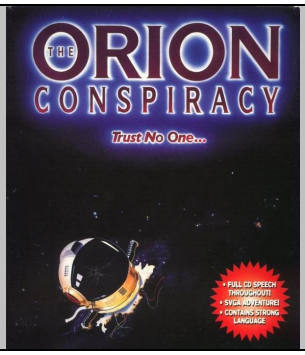


Ysanne and Jack don't exactly have the most intriguing brand of chemistry.

The graphics look pretty much the same as in its predecessor, and were dated by the time of its release in 1995. The close-up portraits, for some reason, actually look worse. The interface has been given a slight tune-up, and there's now an option to increase the speed, but too many puzzles still revolve around hunting for tiny or nearly invisible hotspots. The only other major improvement, if one can call it that, is the voice acting. It's technically pretty well done for what is clearly a low budget product, but it certainly does nothing to endear the characters to the player. On the whole, *Guilty* mostly repeats the same mistakes of its predecessor, in some cases making them worse. *Innocent Until Caught* at least had a few funny moments, something this sequel almost entirely avoids.



Jack isn't exactly a sweet talker.



The Orion Conspiracy

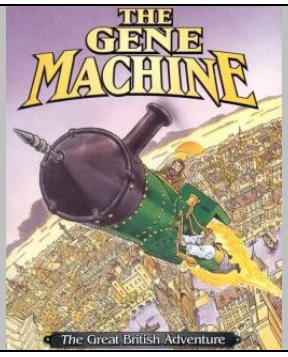
Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Andy Blazdell
Developer: Divide By Zero

In *The Orion Conspiracy* you control Devlin McCormack, who has recently lost his son Danny during an accident in deep space. After flying to the space station Cerebus to attend the funeral, Devlin receives an intriguing note – the death was no accident, and Danny was actually murdered. Eager to not only track down the killer but to piece together the life of the son he never really knew, Devlin begins investigating and uncovers the titular conspiracy for himself.



The conversations here are often ridiculous and full of excessive profanity.

The story is a pretty standard murder mystery with a sci-fi twist, but nothing terribly interesting. Part of it has to do with the setting – space stations should be awesome, but the Cerebus is perhaps the most boring one imaginable, filled with identical gray corridors and laid out in such a confusing manner that you'll spend half your time looking at maps and figuring out which elevator to take to which section of which floor. It also tries to tackle some adult subject matter, but it succeeds about as well as an average soap opera. Devlin eventually learns that his son was gay, an issue never before tackled in a computer game, but it doesn't have any real effect on the plot. The language is also salty and often quite silly. You can, for example, walk up to a female crew member and she'll volunteer tales of her sexual exploits in great detail. You've met but seconds before, and it's absurdly inappropriate. It also doesn't help that the voice acting is consistently terrible, with British actor Patrick Mower, who supplies Devlin's voice, providing some awful readings of what is already some pretty lousy writing. (The butchery of his son's eulogy is on the levels of William Shatner.) Combined with the silly puzzles (freeze a rat to distract the bartender to steal his pie) that contrast badly with the overtly serious nature of the plot, *The Orion Conspiracy* is alternatively excessively boring and hilariously awkward.



The Gene Machine

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Andy Blazdell
Developer: Divide by Zero Productions

Divide By Zero's previous efforts, the *Innocent Until Caught* series, had some funny ideas, but were hamstrung but inconsistent writing and an extremely unlikeable protagonist. *The Gene Machine* refines everything about their previous games and results in a hilarious, sadly forgotten little title.

The hero, if one could call him that, is Sir Featherstonehaugh (pronounced "Fanshaw", he insists), an arrogant explorer and self-proclaimed man of science. After returning back to England from a prolonged trip overseas, he is tracked down by a large talking cat. Proclaiming to have escaped from the clutches of the ruthless Doctor Dinsey, the cat-man-thing warns of his creation at the hands of a terrible device called the Gene Machine. Using this monstrosity, Dinsey seeks to create an army of terrible hybrids to take over the world, and the cat believes that Fanshaw is the man for the job. He isn't, really, because he doesn't give a toss about the fate of humanity, but he does care about fame and fortune, so he takes on the adventure in hopes to establish a name for himself.



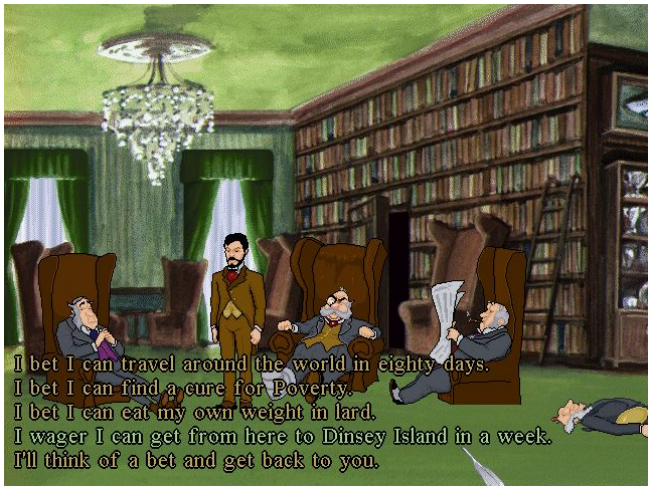
Victorian England, just as you'd imagine it.

Of course, simply setting off into adventure isn't as simple as it sounds, so Fanshaw has to trick some foolish investors into believing his expedition has any scientific value. Somewhere along the line, he gets sidetracked on a trip to the moon, a journey undertaken solely to determine whether it is made of cheese. After returning to terra firma, Fanshaw is able to contract a boat and set off for Dinsey Island, only to end up as the prisoner of the fearsome Captain Nemotode, discover the sunken city of Atlantis, fend off pirates working on collusion

with Kingpeace, Fanshaw's biggest enemy, and finally face off against Dr. Dinsey and his terrible creations.

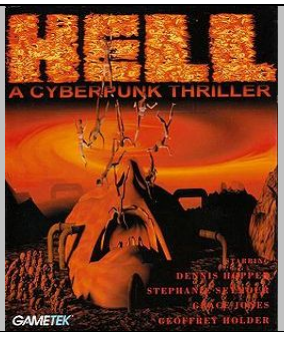
Fanshaw is accompanied by his manservant Mossup, who acts as little more than a butt monkey. Their relationship is similar to the one between the main characters in the popular British sitcom *Blackadder* – like Rowan Atkinson's titular character, Fanshaw is a braggart who relishes his position among high society, while Mossup, like Tony Robinson's Baldrick, is quite content with his place on the lowest rung of the social ladder, and graciously accepts any verbal punishment Fanshaw bestows upon him. The relationship works, because Fanshaw is an arrogant twit who's not nearly as clever as he thinks he is, and he routinely makes himself look like a fool without even realizing it. Though unlike Blackadder, his silly plans actually work – they need to, or else the game wouldn't actually progress.

For the most part, the Victorian era has traditionally been depicted as rather stodgy – when not dwelling on Jane Austen novels, it's concentrating on *Sherlock Holmes*. *The Gene Machine* is much, much sillier, with a plot that takes bits and pieces from various Jules Verne and H. G. Wells novels, including *20,000 Leagues Under of the Sea*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and *From Earth to the Moon*, amongst other literary classics and historical figures. For example, you'll meet a fidgety chap named Jonathan T. Ripper, and you can casually suggest that yes, the world is completely deserving of being cleansed of sin. It basically does for classical English literature what *Simon the Sorcerer* did for fairy tales, with much the same level of wit and class.



Fanshaw attempts to flim-flam some cash out of some rich, ignorant businessmen.

Beyond the ill-conceived trip to the moon, one of the funniest moments of the game occurs when Fanshaw attempts to speak like a commoner and puts on the worst Cockney accent imaginable. For a different puzzle, Fanshaw must steal the engagement ring from his fiancée in order to barter for another item, an act that's only acceptable because she's an even more hilariously terrible person than he is. Most of the dialogue is punchy and quite funny, and it's carried by the excellent voice acting. Fanshaw has just the right amount of pompousness that he can sell his act as a snobby jerk while still being likeable, and it's enough to make this overlooked game well worth playing.



Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / 3DO
Designer(s): John Antinori, Laura Kampo
Developer: Gametek

Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller was the product of the burgeoning multimedia era in the mid-90s. PCs were finally infiltrating the homes of average families, and with it, game publishers sought the older, potentially more "sophisticated" gamer, the kind that wouldn't normally be caught with a gaming console. Purportedly taking advantage of the expanded space of the CD-ROM, most of these attempts were filled with then-trendy computer graphics animation and/or C-list actors in live action video, all claiming to change the industry. Most of these adult-oriented products, like Sierra's *Phantasmagoria*, were barely games, meant to demonstrate technology and little else. Gametek's *Hell* is technically no different, rendered completely in CGI, although it has something many of these other games didn't: a fairly detailed plot, a tremendously large script, and entirely peculiar game world.

The year is 2095, and the underworld has literally bled into the real world, with demons cohabitating with humans and controlling territories like mobsters. To combat this, the Hand of God is established, which outlaws practically everything fun. Gideon Ashanti and Rachel Braque are two officers of ARC, or Artificial Reality Containment, the division which represses technology and the sins it represents. They're true believers in the Hand and its mission... that is, until a hit squad breaks into their house and attempts to assassinate them. Against all odds, the two escape, and begin an investigation as to why their former employer decided to terminate them.

Hell is, to some extent, relatively open-ended. A map details which locations you can visit, although more are unlocked as you speak with various people. Most of the game is spent running subquests for various people, which slowly opens up more and more backstory regarding Gideon and Rachel's supposed sins.

While potentially tedious, the game world is so bizarre that it remains strangely compelling. Oftentimes you'll need to journey into the depths of hell to rescue some tortured souls. The journey to the realm of the damned is taken by way of a computerized device called a "psychopomp", accompanied by the visage of random assembly language code. While technically a den of pain and suffering, the depictions of torture tend to be approached in a darkly cartoonish manner. In between gruesome tasks like rescuing a girl from a device which breaks her neck, only to have it instantly heal and continue ad infinitum, you'll visit a demonic dentist's office, a demonic zoo, a demonic schoolroom (where the puzzle solution involves state capitals), and a demonic porn studio. There are numerous demons dredged up from *The Goetia*: Belial, Asmodeus, Mephisto, Beelzebub, and of course, Satan himself, all as somewhat weird caricatures. Charon, the boatman of the River Styx, talks like a tour guide:

"Greetings! Welcome to Charon's Boatrides along the scenic Styx. My name is Charon, and I'll be your guide on this red-water rafting trip. Passengers are advised not to dip their hands into the river, or they will pull back a CHARRED STUMP. And beware of the spray, as it will dapple your complexion with searing lesions and, well, outright holes. As there is limited seating, passengers are further advised to cling to each other for dear life. We hope that you regret traveling with us today, that you suffer mercilessly during your stay, and that you come again."

As should be evident, this is most certainly not a horror game, despite what the occasionally freakish visuals might suggest. It's not quite funny enough to be a straight comedy, although it certainly has its moments.

Even sillier is a mission to investigate two street gangs – the Cleans and the Deadly 7. The Cleans are a group of do-gooders who strictly follow the Hand and its teachings – the Deadly 7 are the opposite, with each of its members representing one of the sins. It's here where you need to hook up Drip, a geeky member of the Cleans, with Electric Sex, an absurdly over-the-top personification of Lust that pulls aside her top and flashes her bare breast at you every few seconds. This mission is accomplished by buying some pornographic comics and giving them to one of the Cleans, thereby allowing the star-crossed "lovers" to unite.



The demonic dentist's room... in hell!

It's a good thing *Hell* doesn't take itself too seriously, because if it did, it would have been really, really terrible. The heroes aren't exactly the most likable of the bunch, with Gideon acting like a frat boy meathead and Rachel acting like an irritated wife in a lousy sitcom. When they trade off with their good cop/bad cop routine, they have all of the charm of a bitter old married couple. The whole game takes place in Washington, D.C., because, get it? Politicians are evil! You can visit the Watergate hotel! There's even a Deep Throat! That's about as witty as the game gets, although the matter-of-fact manner in which the narrator relates how the Chiefs of Staff were sentenced to hell is curiously humorous. Also, if you feel that typing "hell" to start the game at the DOS command line is somehow offensive, you can type "heck" instead.

Still, the designers and writers were obviously in love with the game world, because the script is absolutely huge, to the point of excess. There are at least a few dozen characters, many with a disposition for aimless rambling and speaking with eccentric mannerisms. One security guard really, really loves barbeque ribs! The demons themselves are more mischievous than one would expect, often speaking in obtuse rhymes.

A huge chunk of the game is simply spent listening to conversations. All of the dialogue is accompanied by computer-rendered videos of the character speaking, although it's just a short animation looped over and over until they finish speaking. Besides the narrator, whose genial tone is tremendously out of place, most of the voice acting is acceptable. The "big name stars", as listed on the cover, include Dennis Hopper playing the role of a demon mafia lord named Mr. Beautiful; Stephanie Seymour as the hologram of Gideon's dead ex-girlfriend; and Grace Jones as Solene Solux, the leader of the Hand. Most of the character models have aged badly, although the developers put a lot more effort into Hopper's and Jones' characters, making them look as close to the actors as possible. Seymour's character is pretty curious, considering she's

one of the two live actors in the entire game. Not only is she out of place, but it's hard to believe that the ex-Victoria's Secret model could actually be a competent demolitions expert. The other live actor is Geoffrey Holder, who appears in video diary form as a government agent.

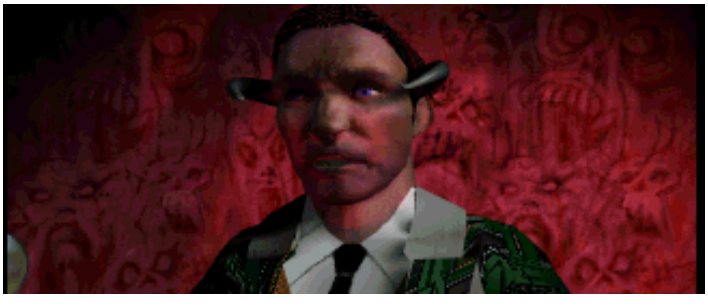
The story is really the primary focus of *Hell* – while technically a point-and-click adventure game, the actual puzzle solving is quite minimal. Items are sparse, and most tasks are accomplished simply by talking to different people. In one of your journeys to hell, you need to wage war on a demon. If you managed to pick up every weapon in the previous room – hey, you automatically won! Occasionally you'll need to do a bit of light thinking to decode passwords. Not all of them are easy – some of the ones when rescuing various folks in hell can get rough – but their appearances are so inconsistent that it's almost jarring when you actually need to do something beyond clicking around.

Right at the beginning of the game, you recruit three characters to tag along, including Seymour's character, but other than some extremely rare interjections, they don't do much of anything other than inhabiting the inventory screen, and it's easy to completely forget that they exist. There is also a borderline impossible action sequence where you need to maneuver your character through a series of lasers, but finishing it only gives a clue in order to progress – it's much more advisable to read a walkthrough and skip the whole mess entirely.

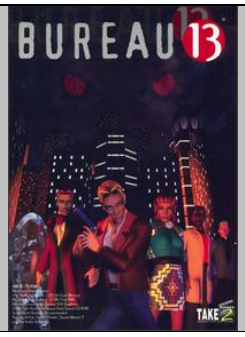
In order to make it a little bit more of a game and less of an interactive movie, you're pressed to move with an invisible time limit. Take too long and Gideon and Rachel will be sentenced to hell forever. Some events won't trigger until a certain amount of time has passed, requiring some dawdling until you can progress, assuming you're ahead of schedule. The actual death scenes are relatively minimal compared to a Sierra game, but running out of time is not something you can prevent by saving and reloading – you need to begin from scratch.

Hell's storyline is not nearly smart enough to be satire, it's far too convoluted for its own good, and its plot twists – what are the true secrets behind hell? – are largely transparent from the outset, even if the heroes are too naive or stupid to piece it together. And like so many titles that claim to be mature, it undermines itself by concentrating on cartoonish violence, naughty language, computer rendered nipples, and just enough references to demons to potentially piss off a bible thumper. The name and title screen are trying so desperately to shock and promote controversy, which was enough to garner it a bit of mainstream press back when it was released. The fact that it completely fell off the radar when Congress had already picked on far more innocuous games like *Night Trap* shows its lack of effectiveness. But its paradoxically light-hearted nature and bizarre, if kind of stupid, plot, make it something of an interesting curiosity.

In addition to the PC version, *Hell* was also released for the 3DO. While the PC version runs in SVGA, the 3DO version is stuck in a lower resolution, so most of the visuals aren't quite as crisp. However, the dialogue portraits in the PC version are pretty small, not even a quarter of the screen in size. Here they're larger and take up a substantial portion of the screen. There's also a novel based on the game, which expands the plot even further.



Dennis Hopper makes an appearance as a demon named Mr. Beautiful.



Bureau 13

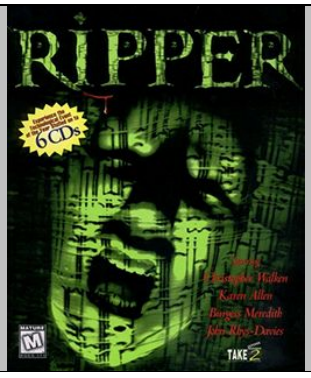
Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Rick Hall, Thomas Howell
Developer: Take 2 Interactive

Developed by some of the same folks as *Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller*, *Bureau 13* is based on the award-winning tabletop RPG series of the same name, featuring an unusual team of agents tasked with investigating extraordinary phenomena. On this mission, an agent has gone rogue and it's up to them to stop him. You begin by choosing two agents, with eclectic class options including "thief", "hacker", "priest", "witch", "vampire", and "woman in a mech suit". Like in *Maniac Mansion*, your choice of characters will affect how some puzzles are solved, and the developers did a fine job integrating the characters' various abilities. You are even scored based on your solutions – if you cause too much of a ruckus, you'll gain less points. It's assumed you will want to play through the game multiple times to use all the characters, but it would have been nice to have a way to switch out your agents mid-game.



A vampire, a woman in a mech suit, and an RV: possibly the best idea for a TV show ever.

It takes some getting used to, but the point-and-click interface works quite well. Puzzles are inventory based with occasional dialogue, but the conversations are needlessly slow, as are most of the action animations, making exploration a total slog. The story is interesting, involving mind control, demons and sentient computer viruses, but there is no real development of your player characters. For better or worse the game ignores its origins in a role-playing system. There are no traits, attributes, experience points or levels, and combat is simplistic and best avoided altogether. The MIDI soundtrack is enjoyable, and the low-res rendered graphics, while extremely dated, get the job done and have some wonderful details. While the game feels like a missed opportunity due to its slowness and lack of RPG elements, *Bureau 13* manages to be a decent adventure with plenty of puzzles and a massively ludicrous premise.



Ripper

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): F. J. Lennon, John Antinori, Dennis Johnson
Developer: Take 2 Interactive

Ripper was one of the last big multimedia productions of the mid-1990s, and comes on a hefty 6 CDs. Developed by some of the same folks as *Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller*, it is loosely based on the unsolved Jack the Ripper murders, although it changes the setting from boring old Victorian England to a futuristic rendition of New York City.

You play as newspaper reporter Jake Quinlan who, in a role similar to Paul Avery in the Zodiac case, has been in close contact with a serial killer who is terrorizing the city. At the outset the murderer has struck a bit too close to home, attacking Jake's partner and lover, Catherine Powell. She survives the attack and lies helplessly in a coma, but she may hold clues to the identity of the mysterious butcher. The investigation starts as Jake begins to track down a rogue doctor to hack into her memory. This sounds patently ludicrous, but scientists in the late 1800s believed that the cornea held images of the final moments of the departed, and while these techniques were only rumored to be used in the Jack the Ripper killings, it is one of the only real links to the original case. Through his inquisitions, he learns that the Ripper has developed a method to kill people through the internet by causing their internal body pressure to rise, eventually resulting in an ungainly explosion. The stakes to find the killer become much higher, as such a method of murder could easily be used to bring the world to its knees.



Walken's best line? "Dis guy is... un-f$#$king believable."

As an FMV adventure game, *Ripper* sits somewhere in between *The Beast Within* and *The 7th Guest* on the interactivity scale. Exploration is viewed from the first person, but they're little more than long, aimless, unskippable cutscenes. You're given the choice of dialogue options, but these feel pointless because you need to ask them all anyway to proceed. As such, like most of the games of this type, much of the time is spent watching the live-action video scenes.

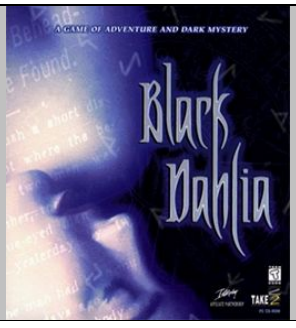
Although there's an inventory it's rarely used, and puzzles focus more on logic and deduction. To be fair, it differentiates itself from the numerous *Myst* clones by featuring various types of brain teasers – one involves deciphering a series of posters to uncover the secret location of a hacker meeting spot, another involves looking at patterns in a library registry to determine a perpetrator's username. Like most such puzzles they're clumsily integrated. Before you can find your girlfriend's password for example, you need to solve an overtly elaborate scheme involving constellations and crystals. While some of these are admittedly creative they can also get blisteringly hard. There aren't any explicit instructions to most puzzles, and while there are usually clues, part of the challenge is actually figuring out where these are before deciphering them In addition, when the developers ran out of ideas they resorted to the usual sliding tile and chess puzzles. There are also a few shooting gallery segments, for some reason.

Of course the puzzles are mostly just roadblocks in the way of the "interactive movie". *Ripper* has a decent number of recognizable character actors – Karen Allen as Claire Burton, grumpy surgeon with a dark past; Burgess Meredith (in his last role) as Hamilton Wofford, a demented old cyber architect; Paul Giamatti as a crazy morgue worker (is there any other kind?); Jimmie Walker (the "dy-no-mite!" guy from *Good Times*) as yet another eccentric nut, and John-Rhys Davies (who *PC Gamer* magazine had once termed as a "multimedia whore" due to his ubiquity in these type of projects) as a mobster. The hero is played by Scott Cohen, who is mostly known for his role as a werewolf in the ABC TV miniseries *The 10th Kingdom* and little else, although here he looks a lot like Nicholas Cage with an especially skeezy haircut.

But the crowning jewel is Christopher Walken as Detective Vince Magnotta, a no-nonsense cop who not only plays by his own rules, but appears to be actively working against you. His overacting is routinely hilarious – if you want to watch Christopher Walken trying to pull off a bad Christopher Walken impression, this is the place to be. He pulls off each and every ridiculous line with unintentional panache, apparently unable to vocalize without making some kind of overemphasized body movement. It's all bad, technically, but makes every moment he's on screen totally sparkle. The rest of the acting is nondescript – it's not terrible, and Scott Cohen does a decent enough job as Quinlan, but like most FMV games there's far too much dialogue, far too many scenes of talking heads, and not enough story to justify any of it.

The developers realized that inherent linearity and lack of replayability were an issue with FMV games, so they tried to make each playthrough unique by randomizing the identity of the Ripper. It's a cool idea which is, in typical fashion, poorly executed. It heavily implicates four characters – three obvious ones from the outset, and one "twist" – and makes them all seem guilty before the game makes up its own mind. The final act is only slightly different, and the endings are all practically identical regardless of the killer. Even worse, only one of the possible suspects has the proper motivations to pull off the killings – the other three are merely written off as psychos, which is absolutely the laziest possible justification in a murder mystery.

Beyond Walken's fascinating acting and a few choice scenes – the one where a hapless victim suddenly erupts mid-conversation, guts oozing out of his abdomen, is much sillier than it is gruesome – *Ripper*'s most notable feature is its delirious vision of the internet. It was released during that time when virtual reality seemed like the Next Big Thing, so all online interactions are handled with goggles, as characters take on the form of abstract gooey human-like avatars. Why is the color scheme in cyberspace so awful? Why is the librarian dressed up in S&M gear? As a naively enthusiastic cultural period piece, *Ripper* is most certainly an amusing slice of the '90s, dated in all the right ways. But as a game? It's not so great.



Black Dahlia

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Glasstetter, Patrick Freeman
Developer: Take 2 Interactive

Take 2's follow-up to *Ripper* is another murder mystery, which once again takes historical fact and very loosely interprets it into its own thing. In *Black Dahlia*, though, at least they're more consistent with the time period. The story begins in the early 1940s, as Hitler's armies are storming across Europe while the United States has not yet joined the war effort. Jim Pearson is a newbie agent in the COI (the predecessor to the CIA) assigned to investigate a series of murders around Cleveland, the result of a maniac known as the Torso Killer. During his inquisitions, he stumbles upon some notes left by his predecessor, a detective by the name of Walter Pensky. Pensky was investigating an ancient German cult before being driven mad by delusions of the supernatural. Upon tracking him down, Pearson learns of a jewel called the Black Dahlia, which has the power to invade and disturb people's dreams. As with all similar stories that take place during World War II, such a powerful artifact is sought out by the Nazis, and so Pearson sets off to find it, to make sure it doesn't fall into the wrong hands.

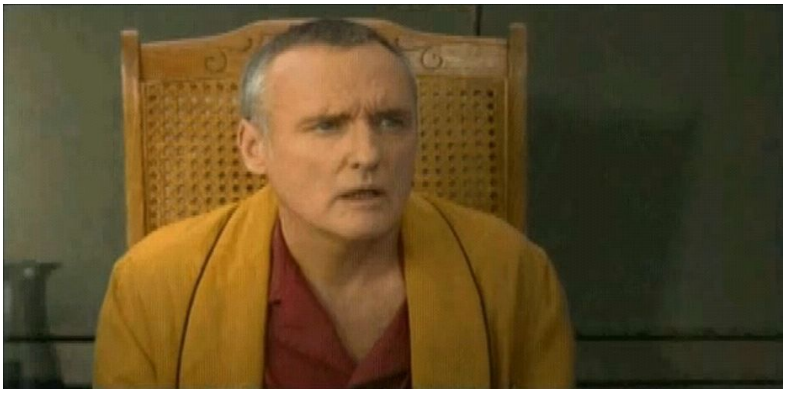
The gameplay and structure is pretty much identical to *Ripper*, right down to the font used in the dialogue menu. The major difference is that each node is a full panoramic picture rather than a singular static image. Since there's more to look at, there's much more actual investigation going on, as you search through drawers, desks and so forth to find hidden clues. Since it's still mostly FMV based, it obviously doesn't offer the freedom of, say, *Under a Killing Moon*, but it ensures that there's more going on than clicking and watching movies play.



Despite beginning as a standard detective mystery, Black Dahlia takes several twists to the supernatural.

Most of the puzzles are also of the similar variety, as you try to analyze manuscripts, newspaper clippings or various scribblings, decoding and applying them to a variety of obtuse machinations. They are inconsistent in difficulty, with some being total breezes and others being gigantic nightmares. However, the game's story takes place over the course of several years, and the second act moves away from detective work and into the realm of tomb raiding, as you search for the Black Dahlia in the dank underground of Nuremberg, Germany.

Here, you wander through mazes and solve numerous sliding tile puzzles and other similarly inane tasks. This all feels like padding, both from gameplay and storytelling standpoints – not only is it incredibly uninspired, but it's also quite boring. It's obviously trying to make allusions to *Indiana Jones*, right down to the Fedora hat, but it's missing the fact that Indy always had a companion to bounce off of. Without that, it's just a guy stumbling through a cave. Thankfully things get back on track in the final act, which sees Pearson return to the United States. It's here where the plot finally intersects with the actual Black Dahlia murder case, where beautiful up-and-coming actress Elizabeth Short was brutally murdered in Los Angeles. She was nicknamed after her affection for the color black, which of course includes her fondness for a particular jewel which happens to have mystical powers.

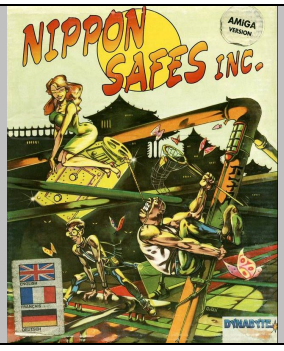


Dennis Hopper gives up maybe fifteen minutes of his time to play a rambling lunatic.

Like *Ripper* (and most FMV games), *Black Dahlia* is both overwritten and overacted. There's nearly three hours of FMV, spanning 8 CD-ROMs (which actually bests the 7 CD record set by *Phantasmagoria*), and while the story is relatively decent, it still feels too long, even disregarding the extraneous mid-section. An unknown named Darren Eliker plays the role of Pearson and does a pretty decent job of it, better than Scott Cohen of *Ripper*, anyway. The big stars here are Dennis Hopper and Teri Garr, playing the halfway-insane Walter Pensky and a spirit medium, respectively. They only appear in a couple scenes each, despite earning top billing, and their presence feels wasted.

Still, in many ways, it's definitely superior to *Ripper* – while the CG graphics clash slightly with the authentic '40s-era footage which act as establishing shots, it's better at creating an atmosphere that both encapsulates the era and manages to be suitably creepy. This is largely thanks to an excellent (if slightly repetitive) soundtrack. And without having to worry about featuring multiple killers, the story is able to remain focused, even if the ending is still lame. But while it's technically more competent, it lacks the enduring cheesiness of *Ripper* – Hopper in his brief role isn't even a sliver as amusing as Walken – which in turn makes it far less memorable. Indeed, while *Ripper* had found some success, when *Black Dahlia* was released in 1998 both adventure games and FMV-driven titles had fallen out of the public favor, resulting in it being entirely ignored.

Nippon Safes. Inc. / The Big Red Adventure



Nippon Safes, Inc

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Mr. Tzuzumi
Developer: Dynabyte

Nippon Safes, Inc is a comedic crime caper from Italian developer Dynabyte. It's set in Japan and stars three different playable characters, each tasked with stealing some type of artifact. Dough Nuts ("Smart") looks like a nerd but is actually a master thief; Donna Fatale ("Sexy") is a dancer who can use her charms to get her way; and Dino Fagoli ("Sucker") is an ex-boxer who's something of a nitwit. Each fairly short story is self-contained, although the paths of the trio do cross on occasion, as they all take place on the streets of "Tyoko".



Almost more Japanese than Japan.

The funniest thing about *Nippon Safes, Inc* is that it doesn't use proper nouns, substituting them with some slight variation instead even for non-copyrighted places, yet almost the entire soundtrack consists of the "Peter Gunn Theme". The second funniest thing is the way the designers wrote themselves in as major characters, who not only dish out important advice but can tell you how far you are in your quest. For a comedic adventure it's not very funny though, as the main characters are largely charmless, and almost everything else is subpar. The background graphics are average while the animation is awful, the interface is clunky, practically every puzzle is a pixel hunt, the English translation is mangled (and not in that cheeky Coktel type of way), and the whole thing feels very amateurish. It has been described as having a very Italian sense of humor, so perhaps it comes off better to native speakers. For the most part though, it seems to exist only because the developers really liked Japan and wanted to make a game about it.



The Big Red Adventure

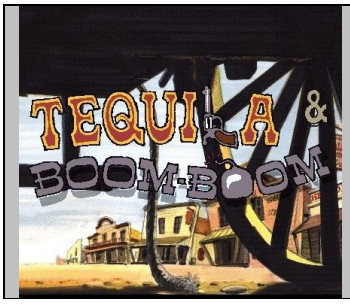
Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Paolo Costabel
Developer: Dynabyte

The sequel to *Nippon Safes, Inc* takes our three not-quite-heroes to the land of post-Soviet Russia, which is enjoying an influx of Western culture. However, amidst the various heists, they run into a plot by the ex-Soviets to return the country to its Communist days. Unlike the previous game, where each character had a largely separate story, *The Big Red Adventure* is linear, with each of the chapters starring a different character. However, some of the areas can be solved in multiple ways. The SVGA backgrounds are nice, and while the cartoony art style does a lot to separate it from the brightly generic feel of the first game, the artistry is sketchy to say the least.



The art style has changed completely with the higher resolution.

While *Nippon Safes, Inc*'s portrayal of Japan was relatively straightforward, *The Big Red Adventure*'s vision of Russia is positively silly, with the KGB having been turned into a television network and Vodka Cola becoming the new favorite drink. Much of the humor lies in the various parodies of Russian stereotypes and other bits of pop culture (the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Beatles* are the British rock quartet re-imagined as crime fighting heroes in bug bodies). They're never, ever clever, but the net is cast so wide that they provoke some legitimate laughs. The rest of the game, however, misses the mark, with boring, underwritten characters, a barely readable interface font that attempts to look like the Cyrillic alphabet, and tons upon tons of bugs.



Tequila & Boom Boom

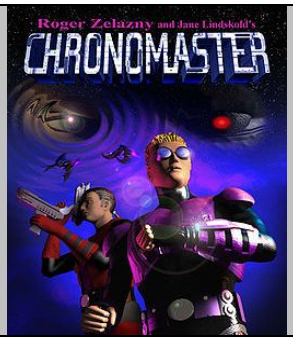
Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Paolo Costabel
Developer: Ludomedia/Dynabyte

Tequila & Boom Boom is an overlooked classic. Originally released only in Italy (but with the option to play in English), this is one quality title that failed to find its audience. With the feel of a traditionally animated movie like Disney's *Robin Hood*, *Tequila* has an engaging story, memorable characters and wonderful graphics. Set in the Wild West, the game tells the story of Tequila, a lynx, who arrives in Stinky Town. Mr. Vyle, a coyote, is going to foreclose on the farm of a raccoon named Melissa, and it's up to Tequila and his old friend Boom Boom the bear to help. The game has the look of a classic cartoon, with bright colors and first-rate art direction. Although choppy at times, the animations are full-screen and fluid, which was quite a feat for 1995. The voice actors are uncredited but talented, and the soundtrack suits the setting. It compares favorably to LucasArts adventure games, but looks more like a Walt Disney or Don Bluth animated film.



A certain internet subculture is going to love this.

The writing is excellent, creating a believable world. The characters are genuine, and the attention to detail, such as Tequila's past relationships with characters, is admirable. Inspiration was drawn not only from classic cartoons, but also films like the spaghetti westerns of Terence Hill and Bud Spencer. Playing as Tequila, Stinky Town is fun to explore, and it's interesting to see how your actions in one location affect what happens in another. Most of the puzzles are inventory-based, but there are also arcade sequences and an area where you play as Boom Boom instead of Tequila. On the downside, navigation can be frustrating, as you have to stand at the extreme edge of the screen for it to reveal more of an area. And playing *Tequila* on a modern system runs into some problems. Although it is still playable, this game screams to be added to ScummVM. While it first looks like only those in love with anthropomorphism could enjoy *Tequila & Boom Boom*, this is actually a short but sweet game that deserves more attention.



Chronomaster

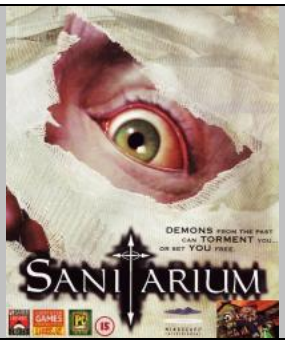
Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Rob Toone, Ian Sabine
Developer: DreamForge Intertainment

In *Chronomaster*, written by sci-fi author Roger Zelanzy (and finished up by his partner Jane Lindskold after he died), technology has advanced so far that people can create their own realities, dubbed "Pocket Universes". However, some of them have been mysteriously frozen in time, causing the government to draft Rene Korda, an architect of these universes, to restart them by finding their "world key". Since each universe is stuck in stasis, Rene can only move around via something called "Bottled Time", which unfreezes anything near him (and can be used from a distance). Obviously this presents many dangers – if you walk in front of a firing gun, you're going to get shot. While it's a clever idea, the designers don't fully exploit this gimmick, and so most puzzles are quite standard, though many have multiple solutions.



The world of Verdry, filled with wacky nonsense, is easily the highlight, but it takes too long to get there.

Each universe has its own theme – you'll visit a futuristic war-torn society, a desert wasteland, a luxurious resort, a fairy tale world filled with dwarves and fairies, and a tripped-out paradise colored like an Easter egg. They're all rendered in CG, which looks better than most others of the era, though the animation is stiff. It allows for a wide variety of scenarios, but most of them are surprisingly dull, except for the psychedelic one (which has talking corn stalks, physics-defying landscapes and random guitar wailings, as well as some truly nonsensical puzzles). The voice acting is spotty – Rene is played by Robbie Benson, who did a great job in *King's Quest VI* but sounds insufferable here. He's a boring protagonist, and outside of your old pal Milo and AI partner Jester (who mostly just warns you of danger), there aren't any other real characters. It's an inconsistently creative game, and you'll need to put up with numerous mazes, a slow walking speed, random deaths, and an overcomplicated interface to get to the good stuff.



Sanitarium

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Michael Nicholson, Chris Pasetto
Developer: DreamForge Intertainment

Sanitarium was developed by DreamForge Intertainment. Not to be confused with the various other companies of that name (and certainly not Dreamcatcher Interactive), DreamForge was responsible for a number of RPGs based on various *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign settings. Their previous adventure was *Chronomaster*, which was only mediocre. But fortunately, the developers still knew what they were doing with *Sanitarium* and were willing to put in the effort to do it right, resulting in a game that easily stands up well next to the creations of more prolific adventure game developers.

While *Sanitarium* isn't readily comparable to other adventure games, it does follow some typical horror and science-fiction tropes. After a suitably ambiguous cutscene of a car crash, the protagonist wakes up in a mental institution, garbed in blue hospital clothes and with his head wrapped entirely in bandages. He has no idea who he is or what he is doing there, which is a problem since the institution seems to have been hit by some kind of serious disaster. It almost goes without saying that he will find himself journeying through various exotic realms, questioning what is real and what is some strange creation of his warped mind, gradually recovering his memories while coming to grips with his own personal demons in time for a dramatic twist ending. It all might sound familiar, but that's hardly a bad thing, as the game does a thoroughly excellent job of telling a story and establishing atmosphere nonetheless.

It doesn't take long for the protagonist to remember that his name is Max, and that he seemed to have been involved in some form of medical research before he fell into his current predicament. He also has some unresolved psychological issues about the death of his little sister when he was a child. While he does have some shallow motivations that are overtly presented, there's never actually too much insight into his character. He just seems to be a pretty nice guy, albeit understandably distressed at the weirdness going on around him. Max barely has any more of an idea of what's going on than you do, which is all part of the game's charm. Constantly lurking in the background of his journey is Morgan, who might be the one running the sanitarium and performing horrible experiments on its inmates, Max included – or he might be something else entirely. In the end, everything is explained just well enough to make sense, provided you don't mind filling in a few of the blanks.

Admittedly, you shouldn't necessarily expect anything too profound. Max's psyche just isn't as overtly tormented as you might think at the start of the game when so much is still shrouded in mystery. Cutscenes pop up at suitably unexpected intervals to reveal more and more of Max's lost memory, and as the game progresses, you may find the story – and the antagonist of Morgan – to be downright mundane. It is tempting to say that the lack of explicit violence is detrimental to the game's attempts to inspire fear and horror, but it would be wrong to suggest that violence is necessary when it comes to inspiring such sentiments. It might be more accurate to say that the limited technology available at the time just can't quite convey everything the designers might have wanted to, though they definitely tried pretty hard.

The game is sharply divided into eight chapters, each with its own distinctive title. Each also has its own fairly obvious goal that, once achieved, will catapult you into the next, leaving all your items behind. Alternating chapters are spent in the asylum, or at least something that

might be the asylum – you return to a different location within the building each time, and the only thing the parts have in common is that they're all pretty gloomy, uninviting, and rather Gothic places with weird statues. The other chapters are forays into very different worlds:

In "The Innocent Abandoned", you'll take control of Max in a small farming village where there are no adults to be found, only a group of horribly deformed and curiously contented children. They're all rather coy about just what happened, though they all keep speaking fondly of "Mother". Naturally, you'll be spending some time investigating.

In "The Circus of Fools", Max suddenly finds himself completely transformed into Sarah, a little girl, perfectly sweet and innocent and, oddly enough, demonstrating no knowledge of Max. She's trapped on an island with an elaborate but run-down circus, whose dejected performers are all desperately trying to go on with the show despite the presence of an escaped freak that threatens to pick them off one by one. The NPCs are particularly well-done in this chapter, with every sad clown finding his own way to cope with the crisis, with varying degrees of success. Sarah eventually escapes and starts poking around a sepia-toned house filled with glowing, ghostly figures.



What is it about clowns and mental patients, exactly?

"The Hive", the third trip out of the asylum, sees Max changed into Grimwall, a four-armed Cyclops and one of his favorite childhood comic book characters. He finds himself in a hive of gruesome insectoid lifeforms preparing to massacre much of his race, with the assistance of a traitor named Gromna. It's all rather reminiscent of *Mortal Kombat*, or possibly the Zerg from *Starcraft*.

In "The Lost Village", the final adventure features Olmec, a holy warrior made of stone summoned to a cursed Aztec village filled with the ghosts of warriors who fell trying to defeat Quetzalcoatl, a king returned from the dead. Olmec has a bit more personality than Sarah or Grimwall, fully aware that his station puts him well above the distressed villagers and is not hesitant to remind them.

Sanitarium is a very atmospheric game. As stated, you won't find too much actual graphic violence, but it nonetheless bears a T rating from the ESRB, and you'll find a good amount of blood, gore, and dismembered bodies throughout the chapters. A sprinkling of religious imagery is also used to some effect. Music primarily takes the form of creepy ambient sounds, often overlaid by the ongoing conversations of nearby NPCs. There are a great many of those NPCs, and even the ones who aren't at all essential to the plot are fairly fleshed-out with some good dialog. Unfortunately, as they talk rather slowly – especially the ones suffering from some debilitating condition or another, and there are a lot of them – you might find yourself just reading the subtitles and clicking on through rather than listening to their distinctive voices.

Whatever the chapter, the game is largely typical adventure game puzzle-solving. There are some action sequences that stand out rather strongly by virtue of the fact that there are only two of them. They're both pretty short and not terribly difficult, nor is there any substantial penalty if you mess up. They're still worth mentioning as they do inject a little suspense and serve their purpose better than an ordinary cutscene would. (A third sequence was planned for the Grimwall chapter but was cut during development; the chapter feels just a bit truncated as a result.) Late in the game there's also a short maze puzzle of the sort that is rarely welcome in an adventure game, but it is once again over with fairly quickly. The most frequent departure from standard adventure game fare is what the game's manual calls "blow-up puzzles", not unlike what you might find in *Myst* and its derivatives – you zoom in on some mysterious device or another and try to manipulate it via mouse-clicks until you achieve some desired outcome. Yet again, these are no great annoyance and serve to break up the game flow neatly.

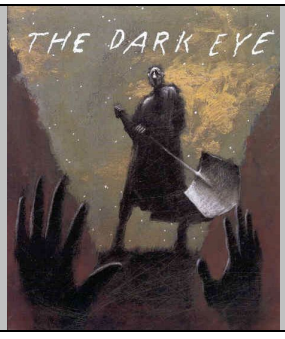
The adventure game puzzles themselves are reasonably challenging. The interface is neatly unobtrusive, and almost all of the solutions are entirely logical, even in the game's more outlandish settings. Problems only arise because occasionally the graphics aren't as clear as they could be. There are a lot of necessary items that are really tiny, leading to some pixel hunting, but generally the game is fair enough; some things you need to pick up stand out pretty obviously and even twinkle conspicuously. (The game handily contains a manual gamma-correction option that can be useful in some of the darker areas, depending on your monitor setup.) Amusingly, several chapters contain a very literal red herring in one form or another; it never has any purpose beyond leading Max to question what it might be doing there.

Sanitarium spans a whopping three CDs, and the fact that some sacrifices evidently had to be made even to cram it in to that volume speaks to how much content there is. Rather than being hand-drawn, the sprites have a distinctly old-fashioned 3D-modelled appearance about them. Some of them are a little small, and some of their animations are a bit sparse and jerky. The environments are sprawling and lavishly detailed, though the low color depth makes it all look a bit washed-out. They're also a little bit tricky to navigate at times; most locations contain buildings and other enclosures whose interiors become neatly revealed through a cutaway view when you approach the entranceways. The whole effect is a bit reminiscent of some of the isometric RPGs of the era (such as *Fallout* or *Baldur's Gate*).

The aforementioned FMV cutscenes are also plentiful enough to take up a good chunk of *Sanitarium*'s considerable size. Like the sprites, they're done with puppet-like 3D models, but while the characters move stiffly, they at least move convincingly. They show some very effective use of perspective and filtering effects, but unfortunately they're marred by rather ugly interlacing – probably due to space constraints again.

While the speech quality also takes a hit, encoded only at 22 kHz, even a higher sampling wouldn't remedy Max's voice. His exaggerated and unrealistic mannerisms bring to mind not so much William Shatner as Dave Seville from *Alvin and the Chipmunks*. Even for someone of questionable sanity it's a bit over the top. Everyone else sounds quite appropriate, but you'll be listening to Max a lot. It's enough to make it difficult to sympathize with his plight.

As you start to make sense of the denouement and *Sanitarium*'s ending credits play, you are treated to what ought to rival *Portal's* "Still Alive" for the most amusing video game ending credits music. It's a brilliant mashup of various voice samples from throughout the game, and strongly instills that unfamiliar sensation that the game's developers really cared about the game they were working on. *Sanitarium* may not necessarily be the incisive glimpse into one man's complex, tortured soul that it hopes to be, but it is this sense of diligence that pervades the game as a whole.



The Dark Eye

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Russel Lees
Developer: inSCAPE

Considered by many to be one of the first great American writers, Edgar Allan Poe created stories that have chilled readers for two hundred years. His life was a short and difficult one, full of pain and tragedy, yet he managed to leave behind a collection of stories that will be remembered forever. In 1995, inSCAPE – publishers of *Drowned God*, *Devo Presents: Adventures of the Smart Patrol*, and *The Residents' Bad Day on the Midway* – used Poe's stories as the starting point for a unique, original adventure game experience: *The Dark Eye*. Spear-headed by Russel Lees, whose more recent work includes *Full Spectrum Warrior* for Pandemic Studios, and featuring the talents of Thomas Dolby and William S. Burroughs, *The Dark Eye* still manages to leave the player with a disquieting sense of unease.



The puppet-like figures are haunting.

In the opening of *The Dark Eye*, your player character is a nameless man, lacking any distinguishing features even in a clear reflection. You arrive at a large house, where you are thrust into the story. The primary storyline in the game (called "Malevolence", according to an interview), which is very loosely based on Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The dialogue, characters, and plot are an exceptional recreation of Poe's style. As the game progresses, your character becomes caught up in the tragic story involving his uncle (perfectly voiced by William S. Burroughs), brother, and cousin. The uncle's servant is the first character you see in the game, and his odd appearance is an excellent introduction to the graphics of *The Dark Eye*.

All characters in the game are portrayed by puppets, as in a stop-motion animated film. These puppets are one of the defining characteristics of the game, and they are absolutely first rate. The faces are distorted, gray caricatures, their unifying trait being the lack of any eyes – most characters have shadowy, empty sockets. This gives the unsettling impression that they are staring at you at all times. These character images are generally seen as a series of still pictures,

although there are numerous videos where they are convincingly animated. The CG backgrounds, unfortunately, do not hold up nearly as well. They will look familiar to anyone who has played adventure games from the time period of *Myst* – they are adequate, but strangely shiny. The contrast is not exactly jarring, but one can't help but wonder how much better it would have looked if they had built actual sets to better suit the puppets.

The gameplay is that of a stripped down point-and-click adventure: you point and you click. You have no inventory, although you will occasionally pick up and use an item such as a sharp or blunt instrument. There are not any true puzzles to speak of, aside from trying to guess what comes next in the story. This might be a turn off to gamers seeking an intellectual challenge, but for those who are simply hoping for a new experience, this will fit the bill. Your default cursor is a translucent human hand, and if you are able to move or interact with something or someone in the game, it wiggles and shows what can be done with various hand signals.

The Malevolence portion of the game functions as a framing story, like the storytelling bride of *One Thousand and One Nights* or the inn from Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman: World's End.* You explore the dilapidated house and speak with your family members. As the main plot progresses, the scene will shift and the house will become dreamlike, as if your character has entered into a trance. The other characters disappear, and voices begin to whisper in the background. At this point, you seek out your reflection in objects around the house. Finding these items triggers a new story to begin.

In *The Dark Eye*, you directly experience five of Poe's works: *Berenice*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart, The Masque of the Red Death*, and *Annabel Lee*. The latter two of these sordid tales are read to you, accompanied by an artistic slide show, while you actively play through the other three. You trigger the transition to these stories inside the trances, and the effect is intentionally bizarre, as if dropping in and out of a dream. The playable sequences are faithful adaptations of the original stories. They all involve a murder, and you play through them each twice: once as the murderer and once as the victim. The use of multiple perspectives is an ideal way to add interaction to what are fairly scripted plots. The feel of the game shifts dramatically as you switch between playing a naive, haunted individual to taking on the role of a killer gripped by madness. For players familiar with these stories, there will be no surprises, but the twists and turns will be a treat for the uninitiated.

Scattered among these scenarios are opportunities to do what the manual refers to as "soul jumping". This gives you the opportunity to switch from the murderer to the victim or vice versa by clicking on their eyes when they show your flickering reflection. This was lifted from another inSCAPE game, *Bad Day on the Midway*, and the designer said in an interview that he regrets its inclusion. It interrupts the story without adding to it, and at times can be quite frustrating.

The two stories that are watched and listened to rather than played are still enjoyable, and feel like bonus content. One of the stories, read by Burroughs, is illustrated with what looks to be Picasso-inspired artwork. The other is paired with various mixed-media images, reminiscent of Dave McKean's work. While only five stories were actually included, there are many allusions to other Poe stories. Whether it be a painting or a stray newspaper article, one never forgets the original source of the game's terror.

As you complete the various story levels, you have the option to replay them using the Phrenological Map menu, which serves as a level select throughout the course of the game. Phrenology, later discredited, was a popular method of psychology that involved examining the shape and size of the human skull. The map starts out blank, but is slowly filled in by stylistic icons of the various narratives inside the game. This allows you to replay completed level and also serves as the load screen; your game is automatically saved as you play, and you can resume from either the main story or an uncompleted side story. The game is certainly not long, and could easily be finished in several evenings without a walkthrough. It feels complete, however, and it steadily ramps up to deliver a satisfying, nightmarish ending.

The audio adds much to the game's shady experience. All of the characters' voice acting is quite well done and brings each scene great depth and personality. The cast is excellent, especially for its time, and while not every voice is spectacular, certainly none would be considered dead weight. Another excellent use of voices are the fleeting, audible thoughts of the various player characters. These thoughts are often repeated, poignant phrases, sometimes accompanied by short video clips or other imagery. Their repetition is possibly the strongest way in which the game simulates madness. The game's score was created by Thomas Dolby ("She Blinded Me With Science!") and the company he founded, Headspace (now Beatnik). The music sets the mood perfectly, and it's only unfortunate that the included pieces are not of longer composition. The tunes are both haunting and memorable.



Seeing one of these things in a slinky dress is awfully disturbing.

There are a few minor criticisms. Beyond the dated background graphics, the game's replay value is also sadly lacking, as the only thing that can change is the order in which you play the various stories-within-a-story. And the soul jump is a truly inspired idea – if only it had been better utilized, allowing you to jump into the various minor characters into the game, just for a moment, to see things from their viewpoint. It would have been fantastic to witness the story of *Berenice* from the maid's perspective, or *The Tell-Tale Heart* through the eyes of the policemen. The game's biggest faults have to do with the control and a lack of clear goals. Movement is not always clear; clicking on a right turn might turn you 90 degrees or 180 degrees. This makes it completely unintuitive to move about an area, especially the maze-like catacombs. As for a lack of goals, there are several instances where playing the game amounts to guessing where to stand.

Despite these shortcomings, this is a rare case of classic literature successfully being adapted into an interactive game. The short stories used are just as gripping as when Poe first wrote them and the makers of *The Dark Eye* did an expert job portraying them in a fresh, compelling fashion while keeping the spirit of the original works. The art design is truly amazing, and the inclusion of talent like William S. Burroughs is ingenious. One can hope that future game designers will find inspiration in *The Dark Eye* that will allow them to work the same magic.



The Residents' Bad Day on the Midway

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Russel Lees
Developer: inSCAPE

Bad Day on the Midway is a game that David Lynch and Terry Gilliam could have co-directed. It's bizarre, dark, hilarious and unbelievably creative. It was produced by The Residents, an art collective that has been in existence since 1972. The group has produced over sixty albums as well as numerous DVDs, short films, music videos, and CD-ROM projects. The true identities of The Residents are kept secret, and they perform publicly wearing concealing eyeball helmets (which are exactly what you are picturing). The game was developed and published by inSCAPE, a company which created several unusual games, including *Drowned God* and the Edgar Allan Poe-inspired *The Dark Eye*.

You begin the game as Timmy, a young boy visiting a crumbling amusement park known as the Midway. But Timmy doesn't see a pathetic locale where everything is falling apart, but rather a world of wonder, with his thoughts appearing in written form at the bottom of the screen. He loves talking to the mechanical fortune teller, killing communists at the shooting gallery, and riding on the Marvels of Mayhem merry-go-round. Timmy also meets the most interesting people at the Midway: a tattooed lady, a man who loves rats, a log woman (shades of *Twin Peaks*, perhaps), and even a man from the almighty IRS.

You are welcome to play out the game as Timmy. But where the story gets really interesting is when you begin jumping from person to person and seeing the game through their eyes. When you encounter another character, an eyeball cursor appears and allows you to switch your viewpoint. There are other video games where you possess characters, like *Messiah* and *Geist*, but in this game you aren't simply riding the characters' bodies; you actually become them, seeing a different set of thoughts and having very different experiences.

Regardless of which character you choose, the controls remain very simple. The cursor changes to whichever action you are capable of taking – moving, looking, or changing bodies – and you click. These basic controls help the story to flow, as there are no puzzles to solve or fights to be won. You are given basic goals to accomplish, and the key to reaching those goals is to explore and observe. Each character lives out very different plots. Timmy simply wanders around the Midway until it is time to go home. One woman searches for tax documents, while one man is a serial killer. It's only by playing as every character that you can make sense of the events taking place around the Midway. By jumping from person to person over the course of several games, you can take advantage of subplots, explore otherwise blocked areas of the map, and see new endings. Despite your starting character, this game was not intended for children. It features several mature themes such as madness, murder, and sexuality. The humor throughout the game is very dark, such as when a Nazi sympathizer is played for laughs.

Several events in the game take place on a timer outside of the player's control. Generally, the clock progresses by entering and exiting buildings, showing an odd number while outside and an even number indoors. However, the clock has some odd behaviors. The official strategy guide describes the clock movement for Dagmar, the Dog Woman:

"If you become her, time does not change when you go in and out of a building. Rather, if the time is an even number when you become her, then thirty seconds of real time will advance the game clock one hour. If the time is odd, it will take four minutes of actual playing time to advance the game clock one hour... usually."

It does not take long to complete, but each playthrough will be very different. Death is possible, and for some characters it is inevitable, but even finding new ways to die is fun. Continuing the story depends entirely on finding the right location as the right person, so some players might be disappointed by the lack of traditional puzzles, inventory, or action in the game. Beyond seeing everything there is to see, there is no real challenge. The randomness of some events is also frustrating, as your chances of dying rise as the game nears its end. Because of this, it can sometimes take several tries to see a particular ending.



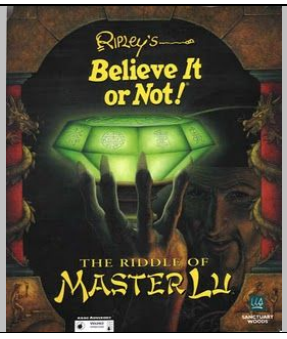
This is actually one of the more normal looking screens in Bad Day on the Midway.

The visual design is absolutely stunning, and incredibly trippy. The pre-rendered graphics look dated, but the style is unusual and impressive. The backgrounds and characters are CGI, but the characters' mouths and eyes are live action footage. This makes every face-to-face conversation look pretty weird, to say the least. Several Midway attractions are actually animated films, each created by a different animator; the Kill-A-Commie shooting gallery is especially impressive, with its classic tattoo-style artwork by Steve Cerio. The many characters are prone to telling their life stories, each related through a slideshow illustrated by a different comic artist. They recruited a remarkable amount of comic talent, including Richard Sala (*Hypnotic Tales, The Chuckling Whatsit*), Paul Mavrides (*The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*), Doug Fraser (*Blab!*), Peter Kuper (*The Metamorphosis, The System*), and Dave McKean (*The Sandman, Arkham Asylum*).

The Residents are known for their musical creations, and the game's soundtrack does not disappoint. While not as memorable as the exceptional graphic design, it adds to the fantastic and often terrifying atmosphere of the Midway. The music is done with subtlety when necessary and always with style. A CD soundtrack, *The Residents Have a Bad Day,* was released in 1996, and some of the game's animated segments were released on the *Icky Flix* DVD in 2001.

It does feel as if a few elements of the game were left out, either intentionally or by the limitations of what could fit on the CD-ROM. Although it is prominently placed, the rickety roller coaster is sadly inaccessible (with one tiny exception). And despite the numerous endings, the characters' stories cannot be truly resolved – they simply die. There are also a couple of characters that would be interesting to inhabit, but there is no opportunity to jump into their bodies.

Succeeding on many levels, *Bad Day on the Midway* is as much a collection of wonderful art, music, and writing as it is a game. For those seeking an unusual title with simple gameplay, it is a must to try. It's unfortunate that this was the last game The Residents had a hand in, as they could obviously breathe plenty of life and creativity into the industry.



Ripley's Believe It or Not! The Riddle of Master Lu

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Lee Sheldon, François Robillard
Developer: Sanctuary Woods

Believe it or not, Robert Ripley's columns about strange and bizarre historical facts (or fictions) were, at one point, read by more than 80 million people worldwide. Of course, this was back in the 1930s – nowadays, they've just devolved into goofy picture books and a fast food-style chain of museums, all positioned in the most painful of American tourist traps. Nonetheless, Sanctuary Woods took it upon themselves to recreate Ripley as an Indiana Jones-style jet-setting knowledge seeker in their 1995 title *Ripley's Believe It or Not! The Riddle of Master Lu*.

The year is 1936 and the world is once again on the brink of war. A series of bandits have broken into one of Ripley's Odditoriums in search of a key to the tomb of the first Chinese Emperor, who had buried with him a mystical artifact that has the power to destroy the world. Ripley doesn't have this key, but this burglary launches an investigation to China to discover this secret. It's here where he learns of one Master Lu, who set out to explore the globe nearly two millennia prior and actually discovered the Americas long before any European. His goal was to find an elixir that granted eternal life, which he didn't quite accomplish, but he did bring back a world's worth of knowledge. Naturally, a number of obstacles stand in Ripley's way. The world's current leading expert on Master Lu, the Baron von Seltsam, has recently passed away, requiring that Ripley uncover his secret laboratory to find the key. Furthermore, Lu's wisdom is encoded in a tablet written in three different languages, all of which happen to be long forgotten. This triggers more world jetting as Ripley heads to three different locations: Easter Island, with its enigmatic Moai statues; a temple in Sikkim, located in the Himalayan Mountains, and Mocha Moche, a long lost city in the Andes.

Much like the original Ripley strips, there's a considerable mixture of fabrications mixed along with the truths – Master Lu did not exist, for example, but Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, who erased all historical documents prior to his reign to stress that he was the true beginning of the country, was most definitely real. This is by far *The Riddle of Master Lu*'s biggest strength – there's a substantial amount of detail paid to the history of the countries and cultures Ripley visits, almost to the point where it could potentially be construed as the dreaded "edutainment". The screens, gorgeously rendered in SVGA, are filled with hotspots describing the local culture, and its denizens have their own customs and legends to impart. In general it's a fantastic looking game, too. All of the characters are digitized actors, and while other games have attempted this, like Sierra's *Phantasmagoria* and *The Beast Within*, *The Riddle of Master Lu* ends up looking the best of them, even if the animation is still a little stiff.

But while the global studies lessons are more interesting than a typical text book, the narrative is far from the pulp adventure fantasy it wishes it were. Ripley is, to put it lightly, a bit of a weenie, wearing an obnoxious, wide-brimmed hat and an incredibly dorky bow tie. He is enthusiastic but bland, which can be applied to the supporting characters as well. His girlfriend, Mei Chen, is a cunning, beautiful master of martial arts, but their relationship is devoid of conflict, and thus anything interesting. Dr. Samantha Twelvetrees is a female archaeologist with a little more flair, but not enough to really keep things interesting. The writing is average, and the voices are tolerable, although none of the actors ever sound like they're really comfortable.

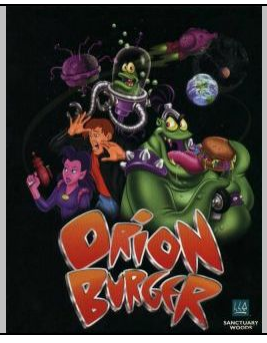
The interface proves to be the game's most frustrating obstacle. The character movement is ploddingly slow, there's no way to skip through any of the long winded dialogue, and there's no option at all for subtitles, which all work together to make the adventure feel much longer than it really is. And unlike nearly every other single game that uses an icon-based cursor, you can't cycle through commands with the right mouse button, instead requiring that you click the menu on the bottom of the screen every single time.



The land of Sikkim, buried deep in the Himalayas, is one of the beautiful locales you'll plunder.

Puzzle design isn't exactly the game's forte either. The first involves distracting a scrap metal obsessed vagrant by taking an army helmet and chucking it on a rooftop. In order to infiltrate an ancient society of monks, you need a ring which signifies years of dedication and study. Well, obviously that would take far too much time, but the coincidentally the wrapper on a cigar halfway around the world looks suspiciously similar, and the wise monk apparently can't tell the difference. The most difficult one involves trying to swindle an emerald lodged inside of an incredibly complicated, Rube Goldberg-esque bit of machinery. It requires an expansive, multi-step solution, resulting in several attempts of trial and error to fiddle with it until you finally pop it loose. It's somewhat similar to the infamous Babel Fish puzzle from Infocom's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, although thankfully you get unlimited tries. If you're down with pixel hunting, there's also a running subquest to find wacky items and sketch interesting locations, which will bring in revenue for the museum and get your creditors off your back.

The Riddle of Master Lu is one of those games that works brilliantly as a travel advertisement. The visuals are easily the best part of it, and it really is quite fascinating to explore the ancient secrets hidden within these mystical lands. Sadly, the rest of the game doesn't offer much beyond touring these exotic locales, resulting in a game that falls short of its potential. There was a sequel planned, to be subtitled *The Siberian Cipher* and focusing on the Tunguska explosion, but was scrapped due to the sale of Sanctuary Woods to Disney.



Orion Burger

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Robert Aitken
Developer: Sanctuary Woods

Some games are well remembered for their excellent stories, but suffer from lack of actual gameplay. Others have memorable graphics but are otherwise a shallow experience. *Orion Burger* is a tragically overlooked game that manages to get everything right. It tells the story of Wilbur Wafflemeier, a young man randomly selected to test whether human beings are intelligent life. If he fails the tests, humanity will be harvested and turned into fast food Orion Burgers by an evil intergalactic conglomerate. In fact, there's a good chance the human race will become burgers whether he passes the tests or not. After Wilbur fails the first test, he is meant to be sent back to earth from the exact moment and time that he left by a temporal transporter with his memory erased. Something goes wrong, and a *Groundhog Day*-style time loop is formed, allowing Wilbur to do what he needs in order to pass the horrible tests while remembering what went wrong in all of the previous attempts.

The game's graphics are done in the style of traditional western animation. The characters are surprisingly well drawn, fluid and energetic, similar to LucasArts games like *Sam & Max Hit the Road* and *Day of the Tentacle*. The backgrounds are of the same quality, making the entire game a pleasure to see. Unsurprisingly, several of the lead designers, programmers and artist went on to work for Disney Interactive and LucasArts. To compliment the excellent animation, all of the characters have an abundance of things to say, and all of the dialogue contains humor and personality. The English version of the game benefits from recognizable voice actors such as Rob Paulsen (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Animaniacs*) and Jim Cummings (*Aladdin*, *Goof Troop*). Even the bit characters are well acted, which is a great touch.



Wilbur's bedroom shows his interest in the skies above.

The game features two primary locations, one being Wilbur's quaint home town. While it is definitely set in modern times, the idealistic small town – complete with a barefoot kid fishing off the old bridge with grasshoppers – feels right out of a fictional 1950s. The colorful characters and nostalgic presentation are reminiscent of the film *The Iron Giant*. You would hate for the rude waitress, the mayor with split personalities, or dear old Aunt Polly to be turned into hamburgers. The rest of the game is spent with the aliens, and it feels more like the animated *Space Ace* arcade game. There is even an alien love interest that looks like a cheesecake pinup girl. The main alien antagonist is of the evil obese variety, and while everything in the game is played for laughs, his callous attitude toward murder and even genocide is unsettling.

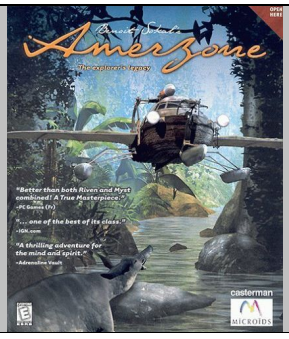
The story is well crafted, especially in its use of the time loop as both a plot device and as a gameplay element. It works like this: after failing the alien's test the first time, you return to Earth. You gather what you think will help you to pass the test, and attempt the chain of events again. If you manage to pass the test, the aliens give you another and another, and if you fail the loop continues to repeat itself. The time loop is more than just a replacement for the usual dying and restarting. Some events in town are on a set schedule; for instance, a delivery truck comes into town. If you act early enough in the loop, you can change the driver's route. If you miss the truck, you can always hit the menu button to reset the loop.



Wilbur is treated like a lab rat by the obnoxious invaders.

The puzzles are quite tough. This is especially true for your test preparations, as you have no idea if something works until you return to the alien ship, and you sometimes have to perform very specific actions within a time limit to complete the aliens' tests. While you can't actually die in the game, the time limit makes completing some puzzles very difficult, and if you managed to miss something it turns out you need later, you're better off pushing the button that allows you to begin the loop again. However, more and more necessary actions in the time loop are done automatically as you progress. The game also lets you know if you have something partially right, so not everything is a complete shot in the dark. Still, the repetition and difficulty will be a negative for some players, and completing this game without the help of a walkthrough would be an amazing accomplishment.

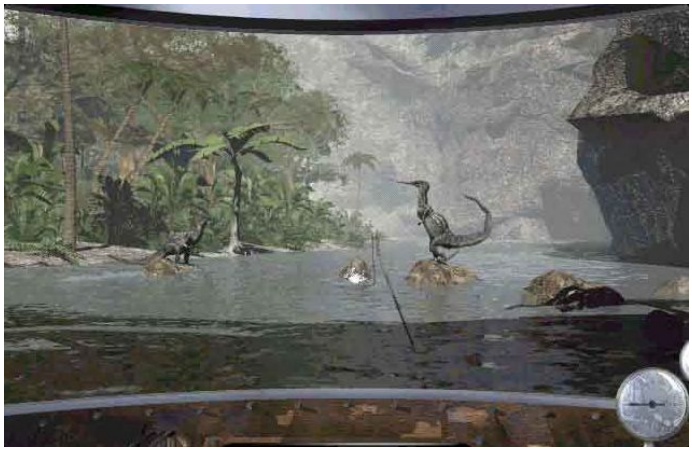
Orion Burger was released only Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. While pirated versions of the game can sometimes be found online to download, actual used copies are quite rare and demand a high price. But if it originally had a wider release, it surely would have been a well-remembered classic.



Amerzone: The Explorer's Legacy

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation
Designer(s): Benoît Sokal
Developer: Microïds

In the 1930s, a young explorer named Alexandre Valembois ventured off to the jungle known as the Amerzone, and brought back with him an egg that proved the existence of a mythical bird. Seventy years later, while on the verge of death, he seeks restitution for this crime by returning it to its native habitat. Unable to make the trek himself, you play as a nameless journalist who's stumbled into this situation and is tasked with returning the egg in his steed. And so, you fly to the Amerzone on a hydrofloat, which can transform into a boat, a submarine, a helicopter and other forms, jetting from point to point, finding gasoline and navigational data. That's pretty much the whole plot – there are some vague underlying themes about the tragedy of modernization, seeing how the natural beauty of the Amerzone is under control of a dictator, as well as some wistfulness about the birds themselves, who spend their entire lives in the sky. But these are never really explored in any depth, especially seeing how the quest is quite short despite taking up 4 CDs.



The Amazon... err, Amerzone is filled with uniquely bizarre creatures.

There's not a whole lot to set the game apart from other slideshow, node movement-based *Myst*-clones of the era. Rather than controlling a cursor, the mouse rotates the viewpoint around in 360 degrees, making it feel like you're stumbling around in a gigantic bubble. The puzzles are all inventory based, and quite easy, with the biggest challenge simply finding items and navigating through the confusingly designed terrain. The graphics have not aged as well, particularly the character models, but there are some interesting animals to be found, particularly the pig-hippopotamus hybrids and various dinosaur-like creatures. It's not a particularly remarkable game, but it was the first by Belgian artist Benoît Sokal, who would later go on to explore similar themes in *Syberia*. The Amerzone itself was also based on a location in his comic book, *Inspector Canardo*.

Syberia

Benoît Sokal isn't exactly a household in North America, but in his native country of Belgium, he's known as the artist behind *Inspector Canardo*, a noir detective comic starring a hard-boiled duck whose adventures have been ongoing for nearly thirty years. Sokal also joined French software development team Microïds, where he designed the first person adventure game *Amerzone*. While this story of a fabled land filled with astonishing animals found some degree of success, he found worldwide recognition with his next game, *Syberia*. Sokal tells the story of a young woman named Kate Walker, a lawyer from New York City stuck in a corporate world, and of how the expanses of a reimaged version of Europe sets her desires free.



Syberia

Initial Release Date: 2002
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation 2 / Xbox / Nintendo DS
Designer(s): Benoît Sokal
Developer: Microïds

When Kate Walker strolls into the sleepy town of Valadilene, she expects her job to be an open-and-shut case. The village, bordering on the French Alps, is almost encased in a bygone era, mostly free of modern technology. Instead, it is filled with automatons, developed by the Vorarlberg Toy Company. They are living creations that are powered by old-fashioned gears and move like clockwork. Some of them are even sentient. Automatons, the citizens tell us, are not robots, but are not precisely clear on what the differences are. (Some even claim that automatons have souls.)



Mammoths are extinct, so people say, but Hans thinks otherwise. These here are mere statues.

However, times are tough on the town, as the world at large has little need for the creations of the Vorarlberg factory, and thus negotiations have begun to sell the whole operation to an

American conglomerate. Matters are complicated when Anna Vorarlberg, president the company, suddenly passes away. The heir to the company, her little brother Hans, has long fled the country. Since Kate cannot officially complete the transaction without Hans, she sets off on a journey across the continent to find him, slowly retracing his footsteps and learning why he ran away in the first place. The only vessel of transportation is a disused train which takes her eastward, stopping through a variety of fantastical European cities to get there.

Hans is an interesting character, at least from what we learn about him. An accident in his youth left him permanently in a state of arrested development, viewing life as a child even as he aged into adulthood. And yet his genius at designing mechanical beings did not fade. He left town as he grew older, unwilling to take on the responsibility of running the family's business, instead wishing to chase after the mythical mammoths that he believes live in the faraway land of Syberia. (This Syberia is different from the Russian region of Siberia, despite being pronounced the same way.)

Syberia is a romantic game – not in the lovey-dovey kind of way, but in the way it's nostalgic for technology which has long outlived its usefulness, despite its obvious beauty. Hands down the best scene is the intro, where Kate walks into town and finds the funeral procession led by an automaton drummer, carrying out its duties as programmed but seemingly unaware of the gravity of the situation. The town is constructed with automatons built into the walls like machinery, and there's a certain innocence in their design, mimicking the mindset of their departed creator.



Kate meets Hans in the snowy fields at Aralbad.

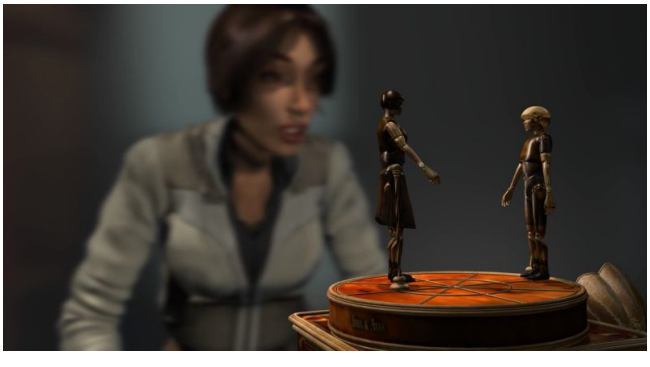
Kate finds herself slowly becoming entranced with the world outside of her corporate shackles, which she drifts away from as the game progresses. Some of the other characters you'll meet, like an aged opera singer and a washed-up cosmonaut, are in varying states of depression regarding their failed aspirations, causing Kate to question her own place in life and to consider all of the magical things she's missed out on due to her boring, normal job. Nearly all of her character development is handled through her cellular phone conversations, where she chats with her boss, her friends, her mother and her fiancée, and her relationships with them change as the narrative progresses. It's a unique way of showing character development without resorting to an internal monologue, like most adventure games. But it's also not as effective as it should be, and that's because Kate is just a really boring character. Her dialogue lacks personality, and she never seems to react to the fascinating things she sees. It's easy to sympathize with her, since her frustrations are practically universal to anyone in modern society, but she's also incredibly bland, making it hard to care about her emotional growth beyond the

player's own projections. The story itself is solid, even beautiful, but the storytelling is badly handled.

Perhaps some of these issues can be attributed to the same problems that effect most European games not originally written in English – namely, the questionable writing and inconsistent voice acting. The translation isn't awful, but the prose hardly sparkles, and the characters that are supposed to be weird and funny, like the dim-witted boy Momo or the eccentric rectors at the university, come off as annoying. Infinitely more appealing is Oscar, the automaton who acts as the train conductor. He's stuffy and overtly proper, and his quirky obsession with procedure leads to a few slightly humorous moments, but his likeability stems from the similarities he shares with a certain fussy robot from the *Star Wars* saga. As the only real main characters, Kate's and Oscar's voice actors do a reasonable job with the lines they're given, but practically everyone else's range from despondent to atrocious.

Since the writing is lackluster, it seems as if the developers were trying to fill that void with the game's computer rendered visuals. The world of *Syberia* is filled with some absolutely gorgeous architecture, especially once you leave Valadilene. The town of Barrockstadt is home to a majestic university, with mammoth statues that herald its entrance, and the train station is encased in a gigantic greenhouse, decorated as a man-made jungle. (This area also has several references to *Amerzone*, as *Syberia* takes place in the same universe.) The Russian city of Komkolzgrad is a contrast in that it's terribly depressing, filled with abandoned factories that used Vorarlberg's designs for war, yet it's still home to some fascinating architecture, particularly the giant statues at each of end of the complex.

From a technical standpoint, the artwork is all extremely well done, but outside of the charming automatons, there's a certain lifelessness to it all. Nearly all of the environments consist of muted grey coloring, making everything feel depressing when it should be inspiring awe. The artists were clearly in love with their creations, though, and expect you to feel the same way. There are numerous screens in each location, most of them quite empty and acting as little more than filler. And since, unlike *Amerzone*, this is a third person adventure, that's a lot of time spent watching Kate jog around. Yes, it provides a sense of scale and wonder, and complements the sense of sadness that permeates the narrative, but it quickly saps the energy out of exploration. There's a fine line between "lonely" and "boring", and *Syberia* more often falls on the latter. The main musical theme is decent, at least, but there are only a small handful of songs that loop repeatedly in each area, eventually growing tiresome. It doesn't help that the puzzles are rarely compelling either, consisting of standard inventory lock-and-key tasks, mechanical puzzles, and worse, plenty of plain old fetch questing.

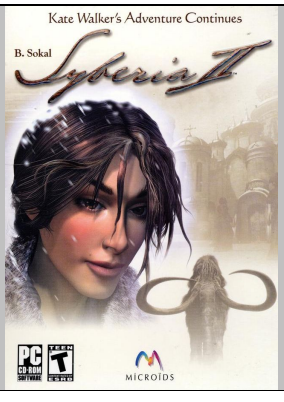


Kate looks on as a flashback takes the form of a mechanical play.

Thematically, *Syberia* tries to examine the human condition, a universal theme of literature and one rarely attempted in video games. It has its heart in the right place and it's certainly ambitious, but its execution leaves it wanting. It feels as if *Syberia* is trying to balance out the

narrative elements of a traditional point-and-click adventure with the atmosphere of a *Myst*-style game. But both elements are merely competent, possessing neither strong writing nor a proper sense of wonderment, and thus it stands in limbo between them. That's really depressing for a story largely built on discovering the joys of life.

Beyond its initial PC release, *Syberia* also found its way onto the PlayStation 2 and Xbox, although only the latter version was released in North America. Since the original version runs in 800x600, by default the resolution had be to downsized, but the Xbox version is one of the few games on the system that supports high definition output, negating any graphical discrepancies. Obviously the control pad is cumbersome compared to the mouse, but it works just the same. In 2009 it was also ported to the Nintendo DS, in a rather ill-fitting decision. In downgrading to a portable screen, the game loses not only resolution but scale as well, removing practically all of the best elements in favor of a blurry mess. Bits of the narrative, like the newspaper clippings and even the cell phone conversations, are gone, destroying most of the depth the narrative had. Some puzzles have been removed or simplified, and the stodgy stylus-driven interface complicates matters further, to the point where it's almost unplayable.



Syberia II

Initial Release Date: 2004
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation 2 / Xbox /Nintendo DS
Designer(s): Benoît Sokal
Developer: MC2-Microïds

The original *Syberia* ended abruptly, as Kate found Hans, who promptly signed away the factory and leapt on the train, still looking for those mammoths. Kate took a quick minute to ponder before deciding to throw away her old life, following the eccentric old man on his crazy trek. *Syberia II* starts literally moments after these events, to the point where this feels more like the second chapter of the first game rather than a full-blown sequel. The DVD compilation even lets you start *Syberia II* immediately after the final cinema of the first game.

Microïds had apparently planned to release one single long game, but instead split it up into two pieces to make it more manageable. This is understandable, given the cliffhanger at the end of the first game, but it leaves the sequel in a conundrum – yes, Syberia must still be found, but Kate's character arc has effectively ended. She's already decided to shun the corporate world and follow the dreams of the human heart, but what is her goal, exactly? As the narrative explains, Hans' dream is to find the mammoths, so Kate decides it that it will be her dream too – a deeply unsatisfying explanation. There are a few phone conversations with kin back home, but they provide little insight. Her office, concerned over her abandonment, also sends a detective to stalk her, but this entire subplot is related only through sporadic cutscenes that have little effect on anything. The humanity that made the first *Syberia* somewhat compelling is almost entirely absent.

Instead, it seems that *Syberia II* has positioned Hans as the protagonist instead, leaving Kate (and therefore the player) in a supporting role, but even that doesn't come off well. After the first game spent so much time building up Hans to be this amazing larger-than-life genius, in reality, he's just a very short, very old man, whose frail condition continually and literally throws

the story off course. The ending is somehow even more disappointing than the first game's, addressing Hans' desires but not even giving a sentence to Kate's.

There's still Oscar, at least, whose character arc proves to be one of the most emotional of the series. But to counterpoint that are the two villains, Ivan and Igor, who appear to have stepped out of a second rate Disney film. They are poachers who steal the train to try to find mammoth tusks. Their trite existence clashes with the maturity of the rest of the game, as they provide external conflict where none is needed.



The middle section of the game is a bit dull from a narrative standpoint, but boy is it pretty.

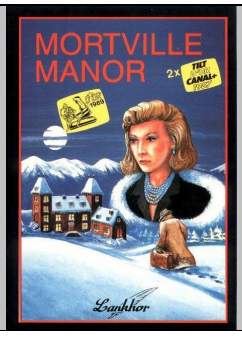
Functionally, *Syberia II* is much like the first, although without the character motivation some of the melancholy feel is lost. The visuals, however, are even more enchanting. While the story lingers far too long in the frigid industrial town of Romansburg, the second chapter is spent wandering through gorgeously rendered snowscapes, past majestic rivers, and into the tribe of the Youkal, who are essentially *Syberia*'s version of the Inuit. On one hand, the locations are not nearly as visually diverse as its predecessor, given that nearly the entire game is spent in wintery locations. On the other hand, the artists can render some damned pretty scenery, even if it is predominately white. If *Syberia* was fascinated by the ingenuously elaborate designs of mankind, then *Syberia II* is instead entranced by the simplicity of natural beauty.

The rest of the experience is simply par for the course, with none of the other issues of the first game addressed. The writing is still spiritless, and the voice acting is still average. While there are a few more item-manipulation puzzles, you'll still spend much time playing delivery woman, and most areas are still long and overdesigned. While the first *Syberia* was flawed, it can be admired for its ambition, whereas this sequel is merely redundant.

While this sequel feels unnecessary, it is also one of Microïds most popular games. As of 2009, they have announced a third game in development. Where it might go is unknown, especially seeing how Sokal had since left the company to form his own team. Perhaps whoever takes up the reins can spend more time developing the main character, and give her the closure she fully deserves.

Jérôme Lange Mysteries

Lankhor was a small French developer who published a trilogy of similar adventure games. *Black Sect* was never released in English, but slightly more popular (at least among European gamers) were two mystery games starring '50s-era detective Jérôme Lange. They are first person adventures, vaguely similar to ICOM's MacVenture games like *Shadowgate*, but with less of an emphasis on adventuring and more of a focus on detective work.



Mortville Manor

Initial Release Date: 1987
Platforms: Atari ST / Amiga / IBM PC / Amstrad CPC / Apple IIGS
Designer(s): Bernard Grelaud / Bruno Gourier
Developer: Lankhor

While in his office, Jérôme Lange finds a letter slipped under the door. Proclaiming to be from a childhood friend named Julia, it beckons him to a place called Mortville Manor, although no reason is given. Upon arriving, Jérôme learns that Julia is dead. An intense storm keeps him from leaving, so he decides to solve the mystery in the meantime.



This being an early point-and-click game, the interface has many holdovers from text adventures.

Interaction is handled through a menu bar, which includes well over 20 different verbs. The graphics are quite basic, and there's no real music to speak of. Ostensibly the game is based around the works of Raymond Chandler, although outside of the title card it's really hard to get that vibe. Each room contains a phrase describing it, but otherwise there's very little narrative text, despite the extensive number of actions. The game runs on a clock, and the various inhabitants of the mansion walk around according to their own schedule. Curiously, they do not actually appear in the graphical window, but are rather listed by name on the side. The lines of questioning are substantial, as you can ask about the victim, as well as specifics about any other characters. It seems like a lot, but most interrogation attempts are just met with the tedious response, "You are too curious." All of the dialogue is spoken out loud via a speech synthesizer. It's borderline incomprehensible at times but a cool trick for a game from 1987.

The entirety of the game is spent pixel hunting, rummaging through stuff and exhaustively talking to people. Technically the game is small, and with a solution you can find your way to the end extremely quickly. Lankhor later rereleased the game with a mandatory quiz near the end, which would inquire if the player fully understood the events behind Julia's death. As such, it's a tough game to properly win, just because the amount of stuff you're supposed to search for and talk about is extremely overwhelming.



Maupiti Island

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): Sylvian Bruchon / Dominique Sablons
Developer: Lankhor

The sequel to *Mortville Manor* takes place on Maupiti Island, a small outpost in the French Polynesia. During a boat trip, Jérôme Lange is washed ashore during a storm and, once again, he gets embroiled in a murder mystery, this time involving another woman. It's very similar in style and structure to the previous game, although the graphics have been improved substantially. The number of actions and dialogue selections have been pared down, making it slightly easier to manage. The characters are now digitized actors, and it uses slightly enhanced speech synthesis. It's easier to understand, although still vaguely nonsensical. When asking one of the folks about one of the other female characters, he proclaims that he's never been with a woman. Too much information, good sir. When you ask someone about a woman named Anita, you are told, "She is a Communist because she had a difficult childhood."



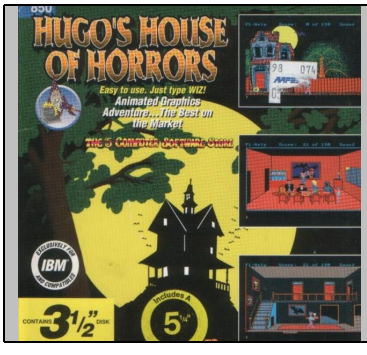
Tropical islands are more fun to explore than stuffy old mansions.

Like its predecessor, the quest is remarkably short, and just amounts to searching for the right objects to unlock a hidden underground passage. There's another extensive quiz before you finish the game, ensuring that you've properly interrogated everyone like you should have. Similar to the Coktel games, there's a pervasive sense of confusion, not only because the game is so difficult but because the dialogue is so damned weird. That being said, the beautiful graphics and upgraded interface make it an improvement over the first game.

Hugo

Back in the early '80s, the concept of shareware on PCs was just about as popular as the concept of buying a game straight from the store shelves. While a couple of professional companies worked with this business model – the first part of a game was to be distributed for free, acting as a long demo and an incentive to purchase the remaining portions – many times they were done by a single guy working in his basement. He handled all the graphics, sounds, and coding himself, and it more than likely showed when you played the game. The *Hugo* series, done by one British programmer named David P. Gray, is pretty much the perfect example of shareware before Apogee and Epic started making shareware a bit more professional.

While the *Hugo* titles are fairly well known by PC gamers of the era, they aren't exactly sterling examples of the adventure game genre, ranking average at best. At worst, they're incredibly dated even for the time period compared to games like *Monkey Island*. While they do a good job of replicating the basic gameplay of Sierra's offerings, they just don't have the soul or challenge of any of their games. And while they're a decent achievement for only one person doing everything, they just haven't aged well at all. All the games are still available for purchase from David Gray's site, with the Windows and DOS versions of all three games packaged together for $10, and *Nitemare 3D* for $12.



Hugo's House Of Horrors / Hugo's Horrific Adventure

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): David P. Gray
Developer: Gray Design Associates

Somewhere in town, a girl named Penelope is called over to a haunted mansion to babysit, but has instead been kidnapped for some unknown purpose by whoever lives inside. Hugo, her boyfriend, is the one who heads out to rescue her.

The game basically plays out like the AGI *King's/Space/Police Quest* games from the eighties. You control Hugo with the arrow keys, and type out actions into the parser to execute them. The fact that the game doesn't pause for commands means that you'll sometimes need to have a command ready as soon as you enter a room to avoid getting killed by something. The parser, while simple, tends to work pretty well for the most part, although there might be a few times you'll have to guess around for a verb.

The first part of the game is about finding the items lying around the mansion for later on. A huge majority of the puzzles are about picking up things and using them on other things, and the few puzzles that aren't inventory based tend to be even easier. At one point, you find a door locked with a combination lock. All you have to do to get past, however, is just enter the number you found conveniently written on the bathroom mirror. There's one wasted opportunity where a mad scientist's machine ends up transforming you into various things, and you can neither leave the room nor push the buttons to bring you back to normal. It's too bad the solution ends up being as easy as telling the helpful Igor fellow to push buttons until you end up back as your regular self.

Eventually, you manage to uncover and open a trap door leading to a cave under the mansion. The trickiest part of the game is right here, when you find a room with a mummy and a bag of gold. The mummy's way faster than you are, so you're supposed to maneuver around

the various rocks scattered about the room so that it gets stuck on one of them and can't move. This is pretty much the only part of the game that requires any kind of precise movement, so you'll probably want to keep your finger hovering over the save button until you manage to make it out.



Outside of the titular House of Horrors.

The penultimate puzzle is where you come across an old man blocking your passage across a lake. Out of all the things David Gray could have ended the game with, he decided to end it with answering trivia questions. They aren't even questions about the game itself, either. Just be glad you've got GameFAQs by your side if you don't happen to know off-hand what the name of Roy Roger's dog was, because there couldn't have been any other purpose for this scene other than to get hint books sold.

The graphics tend to be a bit of a mixed bag. The sprites are a little less blocky than the old *Quest* games, even though they tend to be even more pixellated. The biggest issue tends to be the outfit Hugo wears throughout the game: a sky blue sweater with purple pants. Even considering the sixteen color budget they were working with, it's still really hard to think of why those colors were chosen, other than to keep Hugo from blending in with the backgrounds, which tend to be pretty dark and muddy. The game doesn't have any sound effects, but it does play a couple of songs through the PC speaker.

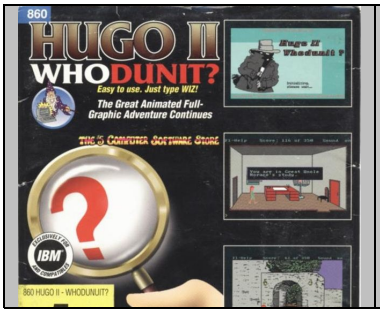
Even the writing tends to be sub-par. There are lots of grammar and spelling mistakes, and much of it usually ends up sounding really silly, like the game explaining that a "mystical force" keeps you from picking up a broom that's actually part of the background. Most of the characters you meet are pretty much there to either kill you, give you items, or both. Hugo's pretty much a blank slate with no dialogue, too.

Overall, the game takes about ten to fifteen minutes to complete if you know what you're doing, and not much longer if you don't. The biggest thing you have to worry about is making sure you don't miss an item, because in classic Sierra fashion, missing anything means you're pretty much stuck. Since the game's so short, though, it doesn't slow you down as much as it would in a full-length adventure. There are quite a few ways to die, as you'd expect – some easy to see coming, and others more sudden.

It's not a completely terrible game, and it's important to remember it was just developed by a single amateur programmer. On the other hand, it seriously pales compared to pretty much any adventure game from around the same period or by any professional company. The writing's pretty boring, the puzzles are incredibly easy, and it succumbs completely to the worst aspects of old-school Sierra game design.

Hugo's House of Horrors was classified as shareware, but the funny thing is that the version you actually bought didn't have any difference aside from coming with a hint book, which is

more or less useless now in the era of the Internet. In 1995, three years after the original *Hugo* series ended, David Gray resold *House of Horrors* and the other three games in the series for Windows. All four games are the exact same in terms graphics and gameplay, but now there's a simple mouse-based interface. It's not as handy as the one in most Sierra games, but it's useful if you can't handle typing out every command. There's also a MIDI soundtrack and digitized sound effects. There was also a version made in 2001 with the Adventure Game Studio engine, but it was removed from the Internet after a cease and desist order from David Gray.



Hugo II: Whodunit?

Initial Release Date: 1991
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): David P. Gray
Developer: Gray Design Associates

Hugo II starts shortly after the events of the first game, with Hugo and Penelope deciding to take a vacation in England to recuperate. They stop over at the mansion of Hugo's uncle Horace, where Penelope quickly settles in for a nap and Hugo fetches a book to read. In the most expected of clichés for this game to pull, however, Hugo ends up triggering a secret passage and goes missing. Penelope wakes up just in time to witness Uncle Horace being murdered by an unknown assailant. So, as a slightly interesting twist, this time around you take control of Penelope. It's kind of strange that it's still Hugo's name in the title, but was obviously kept for name recognition.



So no, the graphics really haven't gotten much better.

The engine is exactly the same as the original game, and the graphical and sound quality is unchanged. Some of the backgrounds are digitized pictures recolored into EGA, and these tend to look a lot better than the backgrounds that were actually drawn. There's a much bigger area to explore this time around, and not only do you have the mansion to deal with, but its nearby grounds, too. The fact that the game is so much longer means that starting over from a single mistake is even more of a hassle, so it's even more important that you watch what you're doing and make sure you keep a lot of saves. There are a lot of objects that don't serve any particular

use, but the police won't come by to gather up the suspects until you manage to get enough stuff.

The thing that makes this game such an absolute pain to play are two scenes requiring very precise movement. Shortly into the game, you come across a field full of Venus flytraps, with a magnifying glass in the middle. What you're supposed to do is maneuver around the plants to the other side of the field. The problem is that the collision detection is very sensitive, and you don't even have to be touching the plants for the game to kill you. There's another point where you need to cross a bridge over a river while carrying a box of matches. Touching the edges of the bridge will drop the matches into the river, making them useless. In both of these situations, the only possible way to get through them is by walking pixel by pixel and saving your game every single time you can take a step without dying. And that's not even mentioning the hedge maze, where you have to wander around looking for four items with no kind of hint for navigation.



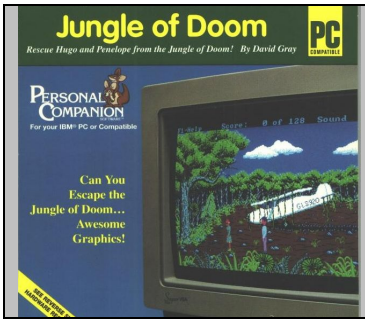
If you want an actual good mystery game, you'd be better off with The Colonel's Bequest.

There's also this one really strange scene where Penelope ends up on the surface of an alien planet through a phone booth, where she has to blow up a robot by shooting it. Then a man who calls himself "The Doctor" thanks her and offers her his "sonar screwdriver". If you're not familiar with British television, probably none of that sentence will make any sense to you at all. Even if you are, it's a seriously jarring part in what was already a pretty weird series.

While the game advertises itself as a murder mystery, that doesn't even actually come into play until about the last third, when the game starts throwing implications at you that various characters committed the murder. Eventually, you gather everyone (including a snake from earlier in the game, weirdly enough) and make your guess of who the murderer is. It turns out the correct answer is nobody at all, for which the game doesn't give you any real justification. It turns out Uncle Horace and Cousin Harry were practicing for a play, and Hugo ended up locked in the laundry room. Of course, the game tells you this after Penelope has been nearly been stung, bitten, blown up, poisoned, and exterminated to death. Hilarious!

The sad thing is that in terms of personality and character Penelope is basically just Hugo in a dress, and her pea-green outfit doesn't make her a whole lot easier to look at than he was. This time, though, at least there are more characters that won't try to kill you on sight. Some of them even have something almost like a personality, even if it's just things like "The maid has a bad French accent" and "The gardener is always lusting after Penelope". Penelope also comes across the old trivia man from the first game, although the fact that she's not as patient as Hugo means things go a little differently this time, in what's undoubtedly the greatest moment in the entire series.

The length of the game compared to the other *Hugo* games, about 45 minutes or so, combined with all the unwinnable situations and the scenes requiring quicksaves with every step, make this pretty much the worst game in the series. On the other hand, the writing is much improved, so at least it's worth playing through once for that.



Hugo 3: Jungle of Doom / Hugo's Jungle Adventure

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): David P. Gray
Developer: Gray Design Associates

Hugo 3 begins with Hugo and Penelope returning home on a plane from England when a freak magnetic storm causes them to crash somewhere in the Amazon. Penelope wanders off to explore while Hugo works to get the plane fixed, but ends up being bitten by a spider. A native informs him that the only thing that can save her is water from the Pool of Life.

After wandering around the jungle and picking up a few random things, Hugo ends up in a village of friendly natives. After trading his bouillon cubes for a blowgun and pipes, Hugo next ends up being captured by a witch doctor before paralyzing him with a voodoo doll and taking his things. Eventually, you come across the old trivia man again, but he thankfully decides to go easy on you this time around and asks if you have certain objects in your inventory. After healing Penelope, the game ends with their plane flying off into the sunset. The game never actually tells you if they ever make it back, though.



It's surprising Hugo can actually get a girlfriend, given how much he resembles Gilligan here.

This third entry somehow manages to be even shorter than *House of Horrors*, although the difficulty sits somewhere between that game and *Whodunit?*. While unwinnable situations are still possible if you miss items, there's actually no way to die, which really makes the game a whole lot more fun than its prequels. While the puzzles still aren't that difficult, at least there's more variety to them than "use this on this". The most difficult part to deal with is how to lure a mouse into a cage, but that's more a matter of positioning than anything else.

The engine is once again the same, although there's the minor addition of a few scenes having something like a scaling effect as Hugo approaches and walks away from the foreground. He also gets a new safari outfit that's a lot easier on the eyes than his usual blue and purple combo, although he still looks like a doofus.

Jungle of Doom is pretty much the best way the adventure series could have ended. It's short, but that just makes it less painful to play through again if you happen to miss an item. There's no telling if the series could have been improved from beyond here if it continued, but *Jungle of Doom* is more or less the best it ever got.



Nitemare 3D

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): David P. Gray
Developer: Gray Design Associates

After three graphic adventure games, you'd expect the fourth game in the *Hugo* series to follow the same formula as the others, possibly with some updated graphics and sound. What David Gray actually did, however, may surprise you. Probably noticing the popularity of *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D,* he ended up making his own version of them.

Penelope's once again been kidnapped and placed somewhere in a haunted mansion by a mad scientist named Dr. Hammerstein. This time, however, Hugo's taking a more direct approach to the situation by shooting everything that moves. Just like most first person shooters of the time, the story is split into three episodes with ten areas each. The game starts out in the mansion, through the caverns and dungeons beneath the mansion, and ends in a hellish alternate dimension.

The goal on every level is to find the keycard that will open up the transporter that will bring you to the next area. As you'd expect, every level is full of monsters to shoot and ammo to collect, along with a good number of secret rooms. It's pretty difficult not to compare this game to *Wolfenstein 3D* right away. The easiest way to put it is that what the first three games were to Sierra adventure games, this game is to *Wolfenstein.*

To be fair, though, the game does have its own original ideas, even if none of them work all that well. The most noteworthy thing is how it handles the weapons. There are four weapons in total, one of them a faster-firing version of the first gun, and one of the gimmicks is that certain weapons work better on certain enemies. Robots don't take damage from the magic wand, for example, but it's the only thing that will kill a ghost. It's a nice idea, but the problem is that each weapon has its own ammo stock, so running out of one kind of ammo will mean you're probably doomed if you happen to have a lot of otherwise-immune enemies hanging around. The fact that only one of the weapons does damage on hitscan means running low isn't unlikely, either, because you have to be aiming straight at the center of an enemy to do any damage.

Another slight improvement over *Wolfenstein 3D* is the automap, complete with an enemy radar. The drawback is that while it's activated, it drains power that you get from picking up magic eyes and crystal balls. While the magic eye is activated, a little icon of an eye on your HUD will light up any time you're near a secret wall, which is handy. Unless you're good at navigating, you will need this map, because the levels tend to be long, windy and maze-like. The fact that the map doesn't show you any obstacles like plants doesn't help, either.



That's... quite an unexpected development for an adventure game series.

One of the problems with the game is that it's just not really fair. Most enemies tend to do damage on hitscan, where it's either incredibly difficult or impossible to avoid losing health. Health pickups aren't too common, and the most annoying part of it all is that the game will kick you right back to the main menu when you die. Not even a change in genre has made it safe to take your finger off of the quicksave button.

The graphics and sound are a huge step up from the adventure games, with full VGA graphics and digitized sound. The engine is about on par with *Wolfenstein*, with flat levels and solid black ceilings and walls. The textures can get pretty repetitive at points, but a few rooms have extra detail that helps make them a little more realistic, like a kitchen with cupboards and ovens on the walls. The sprites are decent, even if they're pixelly and lacking in frames.

The entire game has a pretty thick 1930s horror vibe, from the cheesy organ music on the first level to the gargoyles that border the screen. The game was apparently meant to be something small kids could play, so most of the enemies are things like Frankenstein monsters, ghosts, and witches, and there's no blood to be seen. Of course, if you have a child who wants to play an early '80s FPS for some inexplicable reason, you might as well get them *Ken's Labyrinth* instead, but it's nice that David Gray was trying to do something for all ages.

This was the first *Hugo* game that was actually sold in the standard shareware format, with only the first episode available to play until you bought the full version. Buying the game also gave you a cheat menu that let you turn on things like god mode, infinite ammo, and infinite energy for your map, which is something you should leave on at all times.

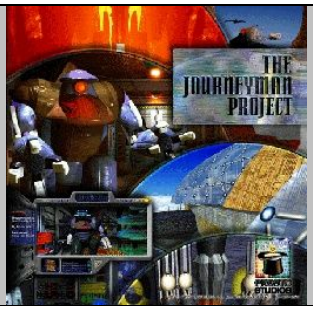
The game ends with Hugo and Penelope escaping the mansion. Penelope mentions that she has to leave Hugo because after seeing Hammerstein's experiments, she has things she needs to do. Who knows if this was supposed to be a sequel hook, because after this game, David Gray switched over to making computerized jigsaw puzzles and apparently has no interest in continuing the series. It's a really anti-climactic way to end everything, but considering the overall quality of all four games, not all that surprising.

The Journeyman Project

It is The Future, and time travel has been discovered in what's known as The Journeyman Project. While vastly important from a historical perspective, this proves incredibly dangerous for civilization as a whole, as there are those that would abuse the ability to travel to the past to alter the present. To combat this, a government body known as the Temporal Security Agency (TSA) is established to uncover such transgressions (dubbed "anachronisms" in the game's sci-fi lingo) and fix them before the time-space fabric is permanently altered. You control a member of this organization, dubbed Agent 5 in the first game, and eventually given the name Gage Blackwood, who spends no less than three games (and one remake) trying to keep Earth's timeline straight.

Presto Studio's *The Journeyman Project* trilogy tends to get lumped into the "*Myst* clone" territory, commonly viewed as a sci-fi version of Cyan's seminal series. This is not entirely true, although it's an easy mistake to make – after all, they're both first person adventures featuring fantastic worlds rendered in computer graphics, both were on the forefront of the CD-ROM multimedia explosion in the mid-90s, and both had an affinity for the Macintosh. After Presto was finished with *The Journeyman Project* games, they were even drafted by Ubisoft to continue the *Myst* series.

That's about where the similarities end though. While there is a fair share of logic puzzles, there's also an inventory to manage, although the solutions are usually pretty simple lock-and-key affairs rather than convoluted LucasArts-style conundrums. You can also get killed in *The Journeyman Project*, something that will happen quite often. In many ways, it's a much more traditional adventure game, just set up in a different way. But perhaps the biggest aspect that absolves it from taking after *Myst*? It was actually released a year before it.



The Journeyman Project / The Journeyman Project Turbo!

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: Windows / Macintosh
Designer(s): David Flanagan
Developer: Presto Studios

In the year 2318, humanity has finally made first contact with alien life forms called the Cyrollans. They are friendly, thankfully, and offer humans a chance to join the Symbiotry of Peaceful Beings, bringing them closer to other civilizations throughout the galaxy. The aliens leave, giving the Earthlings ten years to decide. Those ten years have come and gone, and Earth is intending to sign the pact. However, three temporal disturbances are sensed which will put this meeting into jeopardy. Your job is to teleport to these three time periods – in 2185 on the Morimoto Mars Colony, in 2310 at the World Science Center in Australia, and in 2112 at the underwater Norad IV military installation – to figure out what's wrong. In each of these three time periods, you'll discover a menacing robot – Ares, Mercury and Poseidon – who have caused each of these anachronisms, and they obviously need to be stopped. Upon returning to the present day, it's your final task to uncover the figure that set these robots to their job in the first place, and prevent them from screwing up the meeting even further.

The backstory of *The Journeyman Project* is quite decent, and it's introduced to you in a somewhat clever, cheeky manner. Your character has overslept and is late to work, resulting in him being forced to watch all of the exposition as punishment, as it discusses the history of time

travel and how it has affected the present. While perhaps overly long, it is probably the most interesting part of the game, because most of the story then disappears and then sets you on your tasks. Each of the four time periods has a unique look, and the graphics are definitely quite impressive for the era, although the tiny display window is irksome, as it only takes up roughly half of the screen. There's a great sense of atmospheric immersion too – the sound effects when entering or exiting doors, the reflection of your character's face in windows, and so forth. When you start the game in your apartment, you can play around with the virtual systems that will fill your living room with various holograms, technically a pointless activity, but one that makes the experience feel really futuristic. The music is also excellent, which largely consists of sparse but catchy new age rock.



Mars consists of numerous, red-tinted tunnels.

Navigation works a bit differently than the *Myst* games, which use a node-based movement system, where clicking on a section of the screen will take you to some other arbitrarily defined location. In *The Journeyman Project*, all movement is grid-based, and almost feels more like a first person dungeon crawler a la classic RPGs such as *Wizardry* or *Might and Magic*. While you can use a mouse to navigate, it really is much easier to use the arrow keys on the keyboard. At times it feels like you're just a rat in a maze though, running through a series of corridors without really doing a whole lot. The worlds aren't quite as detailed as *Myst*, but even though you're still just cycling through static images, the grid-based movement feels more like you're exploring an actual place instead of clicking through a series of pretty pictures.

The inventory puzzles are quite straightforward, and many simply revolve around using special biochips. You begin with three of them – they access the save/load menu, activate automapping, and allow instant transportation back to the present day. Properly defeating the robots will give you additional biochips for more interesting functions, which can be used to simulate retinas for scanners or analyze signatures left by previous time travelers. The actual puzzles are sparse, and they are a bit dull. The very first puzzle doesn't show up until at least an hour in, where you need to play with color patterns until you find the correct one to defuse a bomb. It's rather stupid and quite easy, despite the presence of a time limit. The later ones are a little more interesting – upon entering the World Science Center, you'll immediately get shot with a poison dart, requiring that you synthesize an antidote before you perish.

Death is a common occurrence in *The Journeyman Project*, and it can often happen without warning. Your jaunts to each period are timed through a depleting "energy" meter at the top screen, although it's simple enough to reset it by leaving and re-entering. However, this also

resets your actions and requires that you retrace your steps. There's also a scoring system, which feels strangely antiquated, and gives your tally when you either die or finish the game. There are two ways to disable the robot in each time period, a peaceful way and an aggressive way, with the former rewarding more points than the latter.

There's a lot about *The Journeyman Project* that feels limited. Beyond the general emptiness of the mid-section of the adventure, the concept seems slightly wasted. The time travel aspect isn't used on any puzzles, and feels sort of weird to be visiting areas that are in the game world's past but, from the player's perspective, are technically the future. There's no connection to the fictional colonies, and 2185 doesn't look any different from 2310 – they are merely numbers. Why aren't we revisiting all of these historical events that the nice tutorial lady talks about in the introduction? You briefly take a trip to the age of the dinosaurs for an incredibly contrived reason, but you're there for literally a minute and don't do anything interesting (except fall off a cliff, if you're not careful). The advertised full motion video is sparse, as there are only two other characters – the woman in the tutorial, and Dr. Elliot Sinclair, the inventor of time travel – making everything feel quite empty. As an early tech experiment, *The Journeyman Project* is far better than most, and it's still remarkably atmospheric for a game developed in 1992. But while exploring the corridors and becoming embroiled in the story is fun, ultimately it still feels like something is missing. Thankfully the development team realized this, and the series potential is more fully realized in the sequels.

The Journeyman Project was built using Macromedia Director, which perhaps wasn't the best tool to use at the time, because the game ran very sluggishly. Since the problems were too big to fix in a simple patch, in 1994 Presto Studios issued a revamped version called *The Journeyman Project Turbo!,* which significantly improves its speed. The difference obviously won't be noticeable on today's computers, but given that most machines back in 1992 were stuck with single speed CD-ROMs, it made a huge difference back then.



The Journeyman Project 2: Buried in Time

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: Windows / Macintosh
Designer(s): David Flanagan, Michel Kripalani, Phil Saunders
Developer: Presto Studios

After foiling the plot of Dr. Elliot Sinclair in *The Journeyman Project*, Agent 5 – now properly named Gage Blackwood and given an actual face – has become a planetary hero. But six months after this historic event, he is visited by himself, from ten years in the future. Future Gage has been accused of stealing historic artifacts for profit, which is he clearly being framed for. In the middle of begging for help, he is subdued and captured, but not before giving you his suit, allowing you to warp through time to piece things together. However, there's more to the story than just Gage's conundrum. While humanity has been inducted into the Symbiotry of Peaceful Beings, this has not been without fallout, as the other members are suspicious of humanity's sole grasp on the power to time travel, which is threatening to close the TSA. The timing of these two events is not coincidental, and their relation becomes clear as the story unfolds.

The perpetrator of these crimes is soon traced to Agent 3, a rogue TSA agent. There are four different time periods that have been identified as having anachronisms introduced by your former co-worker – the Frederick Space Station in 2247, the Chateau Gaillard in France in 1204, Leonardo da Vinci's studio in 1488, and the South American village of Chichen Itza in 1050.

These anomalies are items from the future disguised as ancient artifacts, a sneaky way of selling the secrets of time travel to another race known as the Krynn. You need to track these down, without getting killed yourself.

The Journeyman Project 2: Buried in Time is a drastic improvement over its predecessor in almost every possible way, although these enhancements aren't without their own problems. There are now animated transitions when moving, and the grid movement has been replaced with node-based movement. You can now also look up and down, further enhancing the immersion. While this makes the layouts less rigid, it also makes them more confusing to navigate, especially since the automap function is gone. It also forces you to obsessively look up and down at each and every view point on each and every node, lest you miss a vital item. The view window is still fairly small, but the locations you visit are far more interesting than before. While all but one loses the cool sci-fi edge of the first game, the varied locations more than make up for it. And rather than fighting robots, you're simply gathering evidence, while avoiding the various inhabitants of the time period, who have no problem killing you on sight. (Since you're just supposed to be observing the time period and not actually mucking around with it, you're not equipped with any weapons, which is apparently why an explorer in a gigantic futuristic suit can be easily taken down by a mook with a sword.)



Every time you warp to the castle time period, you'll see this soldier comically pelted with an arrow.

In the first game, the only items you needed to use between time zones were the biochips, obtained by defeating the robot at the end. Therefore, if you played the game in the proper order, you never needed to jump between them. *Buried in Time* changes this up, with certain puzzles being solved with items found in a different period, forcing more jumping and back forth. This proves problematic – as before, when you re-enter a time period, you start at the same point, requiring that you retrace your steps to pick up where you left off.

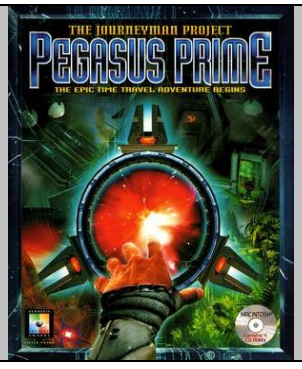
The story is much more involved this time around, especially considering there's a mystery to be solved. While Gage is still largely a silent protagonist (except when talking to his future self or having delusions), the proceedings are lightened up significantly by your traveling partner, an AI named Arthur. He provides much flavor commentary and makes the game feel far less empty, even though there still aren't many characters to interact with. Unfortunately, he needs to be activated manually every time you want to consult him, a function which is buried in the inventory menu.

The prologue is fairly open, as you're given free rein to walk around your apartment, dig through your files, check out the various toys and models based on your exploits, watch some news broadcasts, and even view some very silly commercials. The only downside is that there's

not much direction given in this part of the game – those silly commercials may seem easily skippable, but they have some important information you need to properly start the adventure.

There's a new "Walkthrough" mode, which is essentially an easy difficulty level, where puzzles practically come pre-solved, and death can be rewound with a hit of a button. However, some parts are inaccessible in this mode, so you need to play the standard "Adventure" mode if you want to see the whole game proper. As before, the number of puzzles is pretty scant – the score tally lists twenty total, but that's an awfully generous definition of term "puzzle", and most of the ones that require any thought are still pretty lame. The first one is a usual Tower of Hanoi puzzle. Another merely involves translating ancient symbols and matching them on a wheel, which is easy enough if you remembered to order the Translator biochip. Deaths are still common and sudden, though.

While it still has a fair share of issues, *The Journeyman Project 2* is a significant step above the original, managing to provide a much fuller experience that's still quite playable today. The Windows version was re-released in 2010 by the digital distribution portal Good Old Games, which reconfigures the game, originally developed for Windows 95, to run smoothly on modern computers. In addition to fixing issues with the resolution and removing crash bugs, it also eliminates the need for CD swapping. The original release comes on 3 CDs, and switching them every time you jump to a different time period is a bit annoying.



The Journeyman Project: Pegasus Prime

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: Macintosh / Apple Pippin / PlayStation (unreleased) / Windows
Designer(s): Eric Dallaire, David Flanagan
Developer: Presto Studios

For a long time, publisher Sanctuary Woods promised *The Journeyman Project: Director's Cut* for the PlayStation and Saturn consoles. A full remake rather than a mere port, the game was completed and delivered to a new publisher, Acclaim, who decided at the last minute that it wasn't worth it and canned the whole project. It wasn't a total waste, because it did end up on the Macintosh, as well as the Apple Pippin, both published by Bandai. Word has it that the PlayStation version was released in Japan, although there doesn't seem to be any solid evidence of this. There are trailers floating around the internet with Japanese subtitles that seem to prove its existence, but there are no solid listings, no gameplay screenshots or videos, or no ISOs, leaving one to conclude that it is merely a myth.

At any rate, *The Journeyman Project: Pegasus Prime* is basically the first game reimagined using the technology of the second game. The graphics are all new, with the static pictures being replaced by video transitions. There's more voice work and live-action FMV, which provides some extra exposition and characterization for Gage Blackwood. Both Michelle Vizard (AKA Agent 3) and Commissioner Baldwin from the later games are in here as well, and they explain some of the plotholes (or at the very least gaps in logic) from the original game. The creepy computer voices have been replaced with more natural-sounding ones, for the most part. Arthur, of course, won't be a part of Gage's life until *Buried in Time*, but you do have an AI partner nonetheless. Unfortunately, she's an unsettling, pasty-white face faintly evocative of a younger David Bowie. The bad news is, unlike Arthur, you can't turn her off, so expect her to show up frequently to dispense wholly unnecessary information. She's not even funny. Some of

the pieces of music are totally missing, sadly. With all of the brand new video, the game also now comes on four CD-ROMs instead of one.

While the story and events are basically the same, the puzzles have been redesigned, and many areas have been expanded. Unfortunately, most of the modifications to the game itself amount to that most dreaded of words: padding. In the original, it was possible to complete the three time periods in a linear fashion; in fact, it was impossible to complete the game without clearing the three time zones in order, as beating the robots was the only way you could get the Biochips necessary for certain sequences. *Pegasus Prime* happily complicates some of the classic puzzles so that they require items from the other time periods. This is nothing new in the later games, but like the original *The Journeyman Project*, what makes it frustrating here is that time zones reset after you leave them... and they sport numerous lengthy, unskippable cutscenes.



The robots in Pegasus Prime still look pretty damn cool.

Not all the additions are bad, though: some are perfectly logical extensions of existing locations and puzzles. You can actually get killed by the dinosaurs in the prehistoric period now, whereas before they were little more than harmless shadow puppets. The Mars Colony now has a reception room, and the mine is now populated with robots (which will kill you if you dawdle in their presence!) Norad IV has a lengthy sequence as you propel through the water in a submarine. The World Science Center is arguably the most improved location: instead of a trick maze, you have free run of the laboratory area and auditorium entrance, and the puzzle instead is figuring out where to go and how to get there. The finale adds in a frustrating sequence where you have to find the right spot to attack the final enemy with the stun gun before he snipes the Cyrollan ambassador, but the game makes up for it with a brand-new puzzle. In the original, your foe hints that his backup plan is to blow up the TSA headquarters – in *Pegasus Prime,* he makes good on it, and defusing the bomb involves a devilish little "draw the geometric figure without doubling back over any line" puzzle.

Like *Buried in Time*, there's also an easy mode which can essentially solve puzzles for you, as well as the ability to resurrect from a safe spot upon dying rather than reloading a saved game. It's a pain to get running nowadays, though in 2014 an updated version was released digitally, which includes a Windows port. The video quality is also higher than the original release.



The Journeyman Project 3: Legacy of Time

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: Windows / Macintosh
Designer(s): Eric Dallaire, David Flanagan, Tommy Yune
Developer: Presto Studios

The Journeyman Project 2 ended with Gage having cleared his name, but Agent 3 was still on the loose. During her travels, she discovers something terrifying – the Cyrollans had previously visited Earth and destroyed the mythical cities of Atlantis, Shangri-La and El Dorado. When confronted with this, the Cyrollans admit to keeping tabs on Earth's history, but their interest was not in destruction, but rather the search for an artifact called the Legacy of Time. Another alien race was also hunting for this mysterious item, and the war between them was actually what destroyed these lost civilizations. Furthermore, this other, mysterious race has returned in the present day, resuming their war. Time travel has been suspended for being too dangerous, so the only hope is for Gage to hop into a prototype suit to go back in time before these cities were annihilated. Here, he must find the three pieces of the Legacy of Time, which have kept the universe in a state of a war crossing several millennia.



The lost city of Atlantis, before it sank into the ocean, is a sight to behold.

Much like how the second game substantially improved the storytelling over the first game, *The Journeyman Project 3* takes that even further, with even more FMV cutscenes and a more tightly integrated plot. Granted, the acting is only so-so and the CG rendered Cyrollans look positively frightening, but the actual story is far more compelling, since the lives of two civilizations are at stake. What's even more interesting is the way they've fleshed out the backstory of Dr. Sinclair, who, in the present era, is lying on his deathbed. Initially portrayed as a xenophobic monster in the first two games, it's revealed that he was aware of the dangerous Cyrollan presence in the past, and upon having his concerns dismissed during first contact, resorted to extreme measures to do what he thought was right.

The improvements go far beyond the plot. In *The Journeyman Project 2*, you could only turn in the four cardinal directions, and look up and down in each view. The third game instead utilizes Quicktime VR, where each node is a single panoramic image that can be rotated 360 degrees. In addition to making the world feel fuller, it also makes navigation far more intuitive, since you can easily find paths by using the mouse instead of relying on the keyboard. The view area is much larger too, inhabiting a significantly larger chunk of the screen.

The environments are fantastic as well. The first game used a sci-fi setting, while the second uses a historical background – the third one trumps both of these with its depictions of mythical locations, each envisioned and recreated as wonders of architecture during its prime. Atlantis is comprised of a series of watery canals, much like modern day Venice, with a distinctly Grecian feel. El Dorado is high in the Andes Mountains, with transportation handled via balloons. And the beautiful Shangri-La is constructed amidst the snowy Himalayans, full of gorgeously rendered Asian temples. This being released in the late-1990s, the CG quality is generally fantastic, though both the still panoramas and the videos are slightly pixellated. The initial DVD release of the Windows version runs at a higher resolution, but you can still pick out the artifacts.

In general the interface has seen numerous enhancements. The cumbersome biochip scheme has been completely eliminated. Arthur returns once again and is depicted as a pair of eyes in the lower-right corner. Any time he has anything to say, you can click on an icon above him for some commentary or hints about whatever you're looking at. While you still need to travel between time periods for essential items, you'll always return where you left off, eliminating the need to retrace your steps like in the earlier games.

Perhaps more important is the introduction of the Chameleon Suit. While the bulky Journeyman suit looked awesome, it tended to freak out the natives of the time period in the second game. Here, you can copy the image of inhabitant and transform into them, allowing you to further blend in with the scenery. Different characters will also have different conversations based on the identity you've assumed, of course. With this, the death scenes have been eliminated as well – Arthur won't even let you get near the other characters unless you've assumed a proper visage. It also greatly helps each time period feel like it's a living society, since you become more involved with its citizens, like when you aid the freeing of Egyptian slaves in Atlantis, or discuss Buddhism with the Lama in Shangri-La. It's also much more compelling than the "find this MacGuffin" treks of the earlier games.

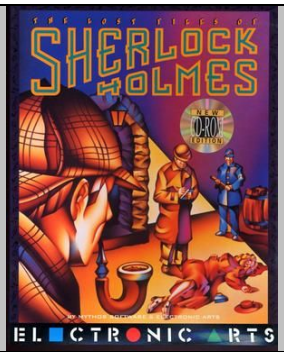
The only real complaint that could be lodged against *The Journeyman Project 3* is that it's a little too easy. Logic puzzles are sparse, and the other puzzles are pretty straightforward, especially if you consult Arthur. From a certain viewpoint it does feel like you're just playing "find the hotspot", but the emphasis is placed on the experience of exploring these beautifully rendered cities rather than worrying about screwing up or getting stuck. In that way, this game succeeds fantastically – it's easily the best of *The Journeyman Project* trilogy, and is highly recommended even for those who don't normally care for first person adventure games.

The Legacy of Time was so impressive that Presto Studios was drafted to create the third *Myst* game after Cyan decided to concentrate on *Uru*, its online game. While *Myst III* turned out fairly well, it was also Presto's last game, and *The Journeyman Project* series came to an end. Still, various ex-members of the team have kept up support over the years. In 2008 they re-released *The Journeyman Project 3* in updated form on DVD, making it compatible with the modern Mac OS. It also featured the higher resolution art from the Windows DVD version, which wasn't present in the original Mac DVD. Very few companies put such extra effort into such old games, showing the amount of love that went into these titles, a rarity in the gaming industry.

The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes

Sherlock Holmes needs little introduction – he is one of the most well known characters in English language literature, and the progenitor of the modern mystery novel. Created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1887, the famed detective and his sidekick Dr. Watson have appeared in nearly sixty official stories, along with numerous television, radio and movie adaptations. The riddle-solving nature of the mysteries makes perfect sense as adventure games, as he's also appeared at least a dozen different computer and video game titles. The first was a 1984 text adventure, simply entitled *Sherlock*, but later games included *Sherlock: The Riddle of the Crown Jewels*, developed by Infocom, and *221B Baker Street*, which was actually a computerized board game. ICOM Simulations created the *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective* series, a trio of products focused heavily on full motion video with only the barest of gameplay elements, and are probably the most well-known, due to their publication on both the Sega CD and Turbografx-16 CD platforms. European developer Frogwares published six different *Sherlock Holmes* games between 2002 and 2009, and shows little intention of slowing down.

But while it's not exactly the most popular, the best adaptations of Doyle's works remain part of a small sub-series called *The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes*. Developed by Mythos Software and published by Electronic Arts in the mid-90s, these two adventure games (not to be confused with *The Lost Cases of Sherlock Holmes*, which is casual game nonsense) do the best job of bringing 19th century Victorian England to life, not only in its atmosphere and characterizations, but also to its consistently excellent writing and faithful plotting, both of which would fit in excellently in the official canon.



The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes: The Case of the Serrated Scalpel

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / 3DO
Designer(s): Eric Lindstrom, R. J. Berg
Developer: Mythos Software

Sarah Carroway, a promising young actress, is brutally murdered outside of her dressing room. Inspector Lestrade and the incompetents at Scotland Yard are quick to implicate the famed Jack the Ripper. Sherlock Holmes, on the other hand, knows better, for the murder weapon cut like a serrated scalpel, not the clean, surgical kind commonly associated with the serial killer. As Holmes and Watson delve further into the case, they learn that Sarah's sister, herself a famed singer, has mysteriously gone missing. None of this is coincidence, and it sets off a mystery far deeper than appearances suggests, which has our heroes exploring pubs, billiard halls, psychics, taxidermists, zoos, and both the highs and lows of Victorian-era London, all while overcoming the tangles of troublesome police bureaucracy.

At first glance, *The Case of the Serrated Scalpel* is not an attractive game. The backgrounds are murky, the character sprites blurry and indistinct, and the music is irritating at best. And while the game was released on CD-ROM, the speech in the PC version is relegated to a mere three scenes, with the rest being text only. The interface, not much of a departure from LucasArts', is also clumsy, especially when it comes to item manipulation.

Standard adventure game puzzles would seem out of place in a *Sherlock Holmes* game, and such instances are mostly reduced to simple, silly things like stacking boxes or cleaning

windows. Instead, the crux of progress relies on thorough investigation, which unfortunately translates into judicious pixel hunting and flat-out tenacity. Although your inventory will be overflowing by the end of the game, most objects are just used as clues to open up other items or locations, rather than used in puzzles. If you ever get stuck, a majority of the time, it will be because you forgot to look at a specific item, or neglected a line of questioning. The investigation is not entirely linear, as you can explore a few of its threads independently of each other, until they all come colliding together in the end. There is a simple minigame of darts, which is easy despite bringing the pace to a screeching halt, since you need to play (and win) four times to continue, but otherwise there is not a whole lot of challenge.



Look closely and you can see the bullet holes spell out "VR" in Holmes' room, an authentic detail.

Sometimes it even appears that the story is simply on auto-pilot. A couple of items need to be analyzed on Holmes' lab table, but much of the scientific work is done automatically. And watching Holmes make incredible deductions out of the tiniest details – in one case, calling out the myriad actions that expose a purportedly blind salesman as a fraud – is always amazing, but perhaps better care could have been taken to involve the player more. Watson goes severely underutilized, acting as an occasional consul and a distraction for some annoying puzzles, although he also holds the game's extremely detailed journal, which transcribes every line of dialogue (there are many), which can be searched and even exported into a text file.

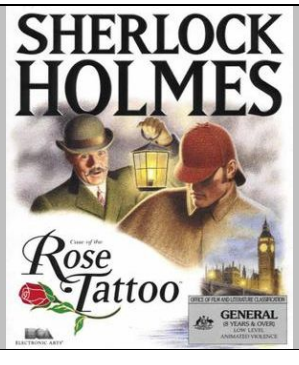


The 3DO version features full motion video dialogue portraits.

But the whole product is saved by one of the most important aspects of any adventure game – the writing. The style is extraordinarily faithful to Doyle's own, and while it is stuffy in the same way many *Sherlock Holmes* adaptations are, the dialogue remains both authentic and engaging. Perhaps more important is the exquisite attention to detail in the background descriptions. Rarely content with a single line of text, many hotspots are accompanied by a paragraph of descriptive text, some of which are historically informative, while others are drolly humorous. Looking at Holmes' violin will give you a history of its origin and maker. A set of hurling sticks recounts "a mysterious Afghan game in which large groups of men ride donkeys over a great distance for the purpose of capturing the stuffed head of an albino goat." A Monet painting is criticized as if it were illustrated by someone with cataracts.

There are other touches of authenticity for the fans, of course. Holmes often relies on Wiggins and the Baker Street Irregulars, and will need to contend with Inspector Lestrade, amongst some of Scotland Yard's other not-so-finest. There's even a guest appearance by Sherlock's faithful dog Toby. And at its core, it's still an extremely compelling mystery, with enough twists and turns without dragging on too long. There are no doubt flaws in its design, but as identified as part of Electronic Arts' "Interactive Stories" line, it's quite engrossing

In 1994, *The Case of the Serrated Scalpel* was ported to the 3DO, with some enhancements not found in the PC release. Here, the dialogue portraits are replaced with live digitized actors reading off the lines. The costumes are decent enough and acting is alright, about on quality with a PBS production. It is a bit disjointed, because the actors are contained in their little windows and don't interact with each other outside them, but it does make the characters livelier. The narrative and descriptive text remain unvoiced and the rest of the graphics are identical, outside of some text design changes to accommodate the television screen.



The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes: The Case of the Rose Tattoo

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Jeff Glazier, Troy Harris, John Williams
Developer: Mythos Software

The classy Diogenes Club has been rollicked by a devastating explosion. Scotland Yard is quick to blame it on a simple accidental gas leak, but Holmes is certain that it was quite deliberate. He's also got a personal stake in this mystery – the owner of the club is none other than his older brother Mycroft, who was seriously injured in the blast and has been rendered a muttering lunatic. As expected, these mysteries are never simple, as Holmes and Watson learn of a secret formula that has been stolen from the Ministry of Defence, which is all somehow connected to a string of murders where the victims are signed with a rose tattoo. It's an extremely long, expansive game with dozens of characters and numerous locations, substantially outlasting its predecessor. There are also more historical figures to question and London landmarks to visit – you get to meet Kaiser Wilhelm II and Queen Victoria, and see places like Cleopatra's Needle, Kensington Palace and Spitalfields.

The second of *The Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes* series is a gigantic technical improvement over its predecessor. The characters are all digitized versions of live actors, complete with extremely smooth animations. It runs in SVGA, and looks similar to Sanctuary Woods' *The Riddle of Master Lu*, although there's no actual full motion video. The backgrounds are reasonably modeled CG renditions of Victorian London, which somehow manages to avoid the artificial

look commonly associated with the technique, and there are occasional authentic photos of the era that preface each location. All of the dialogue is fully voiced, although they're missing the portraits that were in the 3DO version of the first game. The interface has been pared down so the visuals are full screen, with a right click bringing up a context sensitive menu. The unfortunate downside to all of this is that it's painfully slow. The first game was hardly expedient either, but in an attempt to look realistic, the characters walk too slowly, or wait for animations to finish before continuing on.



The second Lost Files game does a remarkable job of capturing the look of the era.

It still suffers from some pacing issues as well. *The Case of the Rose Tattoo* acknowledges some of the issues of its predecessor, and tries to integrate the player into observing the locations before the solutions are provided to them. There's even more pixel hunting, and you'll spend a lot of time trying actions and dialogue trees until you stumble upon the necessary triggers to let you continue. For example, there are at least a few scenes where the intent is clear, but the game won't let you proceed until you've talked to numerous characters, fully examined the area, and then talked to them some more, by which point maybe the essential dialogue option will pop up. The dart minigame returns, as does the lab table to analyze items, although this segment is slightly more difficult, as you have to use the proper chemicals this time around. There are also times where you play as Watson, although functionally he is no different than Holmes.

While it's a more involving game, it's involving in the most of the wrong ways, making parts of the investigation tedious, as it feels like you're spending the whole time simply getting permission slips to search crime scenes or convince butlers to talk to suspects. The pacing in the beginning sections is awful, especially when you need to sneak past a grumpy hospital matron on two separate occasions, each with two different solutions. Thankfully things pick up after the first few hours, and the labyrinthine twists and turns become just as compelling as any true *Holmes* novel. The writing is still excellent, with even more dialogue than before (sometimes to an excessive level), and more colorful item descriptions, often with interesting trivia. For example, a "chesterfield", a type of couch, was apparently named after one of the late Earls of Chesterfield, who, lacking in any real motivation, found his comforts in fashion and furniture.

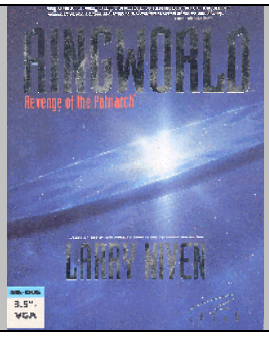
The Case of the Rose Tattoo is slow going, and it's hard to recommend over its predecessor, which kept a quicker pace without getting too dull. It definitely requires some patience, as well as even more dogged thoroughness, but there's still an enjoyable mystery lying beneath it all.

Ringworld

The Ringworld is a gigantic, artificial ring floating in space, with a surface area roughly three million times that of Earth. It has its own atmosphere, ecosystem, and evolving indigenous life forms. Where it came from and who created it is initially uncertain, but it's the setting for a number of science fiction novels by Larry Niven, itself a subseries as part of his larger *Known Space* body of work. While immensely popular within the literary community and quite influential – the concept of the Ringworld was popularized in the mainstream by Bungie's *Halo* – it never quite broke into other realms of media, with the exception of two computer games. They do not strictly follow any of Niven's books, but instead take place between the second and third *Ringworld* novels, telling their own story while remaining accurate to their universe.

Though there are dozens of races in the *Known Space* series, the game primarily focuses on three – the humans, of course; the Kzin, a large anthropomorphic feline race who, as depicted here, look an awful lot like the Kilrathi from the *Wing Commander* series; and the Puppetmasters, which are small two-headed dinosaur-like creatures who are known for their persuasive (or one might say manipulative) manner of speaking. The humans and the Kzin were once at war with each other, a battle which has since ended by the beginning of the game.

The original *Ringworld* novel starred three characters – Louis Wu, a 200-year-old human who had grown bored of his life and seeks adventure; Speaker-to-Animals, a Kzinti diplomat who later changes his name to Chmeee; and Teela Brown, a young attractive female bred for her "luck" gene. The games star a similar trio – Quinn, a friend of Louis' who also happens to be about 200 years old; Seeker-of-Vengeance, a Kzin and relative to Chmeee; and Miranda Rees, a young, attractive female engineer who's mostly along for the ride. These (mostly) analogous characters allow for an experience similar to the original novels but also one that can send them on different adventures, all while remaining in canon.



Ringworld: Revenge of the Patriarch

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Robert E. Heitman, Chris Hoyt, John Jarrett
Developer: Tsunami Media

The first *Ringworld* begins with the Patriarch, the leader of the Kzin, learning that the Puppetmasters had been conducting experiments on their race. This act is deemed unacceptable, and the Patriarch orders their extinction. Furthermore, the humans have recently built a hyperspace-enabled spacecraft known as the *Lance of Truth*. The fools intend to use it for peaceful purposes like exploration, but the Patriarch has built an identical model called the *Destroyer*, and plans to use it to wreak the revenge mentioned in the game's title.

Quinn gets involved after learning of Louis Wu's disappearance, which triggers a message to visit Chmeee's clan to warn of danger. This proves right on the money, as Quinn arrives just as the Patriarch's assassins have arrived, having dubbed the whole family a group of traitors against their race. After escaping, Quinn and Seeker-of-Vengeance commandeer the Lance of Gold, which just happens to be docked nearby, and escape out into space. In the meantime, they are contacted by the Hindmost, the deposed leader of the Puppetmasters, and coerced into exploring the Ringworld for a variety of mysterious artifacts, a quest which serves as the bulk of the game before they attempt to take down the Patriarch. All of this boils down to two

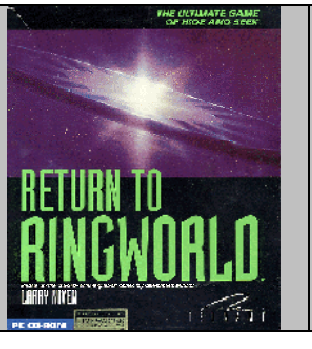
tangentially connected plot points – stop the bad guy from committing genocide, and find stuff on a mysterious world.



The Ringworld is filled with strange, indigenous creatures, including these water dwelling folk.

It's hard not to compare Tsunami's work with that of Legend Entertainment, who pretty much specialized in adapting various literary works, and its roots in text adventures allowed for an extremely fleshed-out experience. *Ringworld* doesn't quite work the same way – there's an insane amount of hard science-fiction and tons of background story from the novels that are occasionally touched upon but largely glossed over. There is an in-game encyclopedia, but even that is pretty brief. It also doesn't help that so much of the plot is on auto-pilot. The experience amounts to numerous cinematics interspersed with brief bits of gameplay. All of it keeps the story moving, but it's hard to feel part of the universe when it's shuttling you from location to location. While fans of the novels will probably be interested to see it depicted graphically, it can't help but feel more like a movie adaptation rather than a fully interactive work of fiction. It's also pretty short – for a location as purportedly gigantic as the Ringworld, it's disappointing to only be involved in three brief scenarios before confronting the Patriarch.

When separated from its deep background, the game largely follows what are now standard sci-fi tropes. Upon visiting a tribe of aboriginals, the group adopts what they call the "God Gambit" and try to pass themselves off as deities. The slightly sarcastic Quinn often barbs the humorless Speaker, who speaks of battle, honor, and not much else. Channeling Captain Kirk, Quinn even hooks up with the tribeman's daughter, although she's the exact opposite of a babe. The whole experience is enjoyable, albeit far more shallow than it probably should be.



Return to Ringworld

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Ken Allen, Susan Frischer
Developer: Tsunami Media

Revenge of the Patriarch ended with our heroes successfully destroying the Patriarch's dangerous vessel, although not the Patriarch himself. Despite having prevented another intergalactic war,

they find themselves hunted by both the Kzin (for obvious reasons) and the humans, because they did steal their ship, after all. Their only course of action is to return to the Ringworld in hopes to finding something to get them out of this mess.

Return to Ringworld fixes some of the problems of its predecessor. While it looks largely the same, the interface has been improved to show the inventory on the bottom of the screen. The CD-ROM version has full voice acting, which gives the characters more personality. While the first game only allowed you to control Quinn, this one lets you choose between all three characters, though you're still Quinn most of the time. There are still some action scenes, but you can't die anymore. You can interact more with the computers and even play a virtual card game. It's also a much more interactive experience, and while there are still plenty of cinematics, they don't quite dominate so much of the play time.



Here's the crew on the deck of the Lance of Truth.

But while the "game" portion is substantially meatier than before, the folks at Tsunami didn't really think of anything interesting to do with it. As stiflingly linear as the first game was, it was also extremely fast paced. This one, on the other hand, positively drags. When first learning that pretty much everyone is on their tail, instead of doing anything exciting, you're forced to putz around on the ship solving some menial puzzles before you can go anywhere. Once you actually reach the Ringworld, you spend far too much time wandering through empty screens and dull mazes.

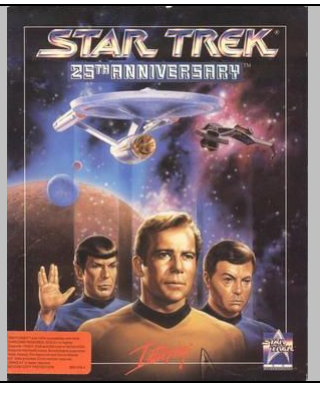
The story, too, isn't exactly compelling, as Miranda ends up getting kidnapped early on, and Quinn and Seeker spend most of the game trying to save her. While the Patriarch is still technically a threat, the game's new antagonist is the sadistic General Teal, a member of a galactic police force known as ARM. Yet once he's defeated, the game ends again rather abruptly. There was meant to be a third game, entitled *Ringworld: Within ARM's Reach*, but it was never produced, leaving the whole story feeling rather incomplete. On the whole, the duology gives an interesting glimpse into Niven's universe, but neither game is particularly satisfying, making them feel somewhat like wasted opportunities.

Star Trek

When it first premiered on American television in 1966, *Star Trek* was immensely ahead of its time. In following the voyages of the USS *Enterprise*, viewers became embroiled in the crew's mission to visit uncharted worlds, discover new species, and maybe learn a bit about humanity's foibles. Like most great works of art, its appeal was not immediately recognized and it was cancelled after three seasons on air.

Its cult popularity kept it alive in the minds of fans for two decades, when it finally returned in the form of numerous theatrical motion pictures. Its popularity grew even further with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a second TV series which took place in the same universe, but with a completely new cast of characters. This resurgence in popularity helped establish *Star Trek* as one of the great icons of modern science fiction.

With the series back in the pop culture consciousness, in 1991 the producers behind *Star Trek* ran a campaign to celebrate its 25th anniversary. This took the form of several video and computers games ranging across many platforms, all starring characters from the original series. These were far from the first *Star Trek* games to be made. One of the earliest computer mainframe strategy games used the *Star Trek* name, although in an unofficial capacity. (It later inspired Atari's *Star Raiders*.) There were a handful of text adventures like *Star Trek: The Promethean Prophecy*, and other genre-bending titles like *Star Trek: The Rebel Universe*. But the most noteworthy took the form of an adventure game as part of the 25th anniversary celebration. Developed by Interplay, it also spawned a sequel named *Judgment Rites*, and eventually led to a third game featuring the cast of *The Next Generation* called *A Final Unity*. There have been numerous *Star Trek* games since, in genres ranging from real time strategy games to first person shooters to FMV games, but none have captured the narrative elements of the series as well as these adventure games.



Star Trek 25th Anniversary

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Macintosh
Designer(s): Scott Bennie, Elizabeth T. Danforth, Jayesh J. Patel, Bruce Schlickbernd, Michael A. Stackpole
Developer: Interplay

Star Trek 25th Anniversary is broken up into seven episodes, each with a title and a self-contained story. They are all short and are quite faithful to the kind of plots found in the original series – defusing hostage situations with pirates, dealing with pesky Romulans, defusing other issues with the Klingons, and so forth. Amongst the more interesting ones, *Demon World* features a post-Ice Age planet which has seemingly been terrorized by devils. *Another Fine Mess* sees the return of a conman named Harry Mudd, a minor recurring character from the series. *That Old Devil Moon* involves preventing a missile attack from destroying a pre-warp civilization. Each mission begins at the bridge, where you can order Sulu to warp to different star systems (the game's method of copy protection, seeing as the locations are only identified in the manual).

On each away mission, Kirk is joined by Spock, McCoy, and a generic Security Officer, known in the fandom as a "redshirt". Much like their roles in the series, said redshirts are little more than cannon fodder to draw away danger from the more important characters. There are

certain situations where, if you screw up, you'll get your redshirt killed, but all of these are entirely preventable. A few episodes even have branching paths. At the end of each scenario, you're graded on your performance, which is calculated by obvious things, like how well you've protected your fellow crew or whether you took the violent approach over the peaceful (and therefore strategic) option. You're also awarded a higher score for thoroughly examining objects and choosing the dignified dialogue options. Although you can pass a scenario regardless of your final score, your final tally determines the ending sequence.



Kirk and crew warp into some distressing circumstances.

While the point-and-click adventure segments occupy the bulk of the game, there are also some space combat sequences. They look and feel quite similar to Origin's *Wing Commander*, depicting ships as 2D bitmaps in 3D space. Compared to that game's light fighters, the USS *Enterprise* is obviously much bulkier, as are most of the enemies you'll face, so the action isn't quite as fast. You can issue commands to your various crew members to raise shields and so forth. Although long time adventure game fans tend to grumble at the presence of action sequences, the ones in *Star Trek 25th Anniversary* are surprisingly well executed. They aren't overwhelmingly difficult either, save for the final encounter, because the *Enterprise* can take quite a bit of damage.

The developers absolutely nailed the look and feel of the original series. While the character sprites are indistinct, the color palette is bright and optimistic. The CD-ROM release is essential, as it not only adds in sound effects taken from the show, but also features voice work by all of the original cast members. They all do a fantastic job, and round out an authentic experience.

But while it looks nice, sounds nice, and is even fairly well written, some interface issues plague its design. None of the icons are labeled, making it confusing to issue commands on the bridge unless you've got the manual on your lap. On the away missions, you technically control Kirk, but you're also joined by Spock and McCoy. Sometimes you can simply "use" something and the appropriate crewmember will take action. At other times you need to specifically select one of them by clicking on him, creating some frustrating inconsistencies. The animation is glitchy and your characters are occasionally unresponsive to mouse clicks. Even the inventory and dialogue implementation is cumbersome.

The CD-ROM version also features an extended version of *Vengeance*, the final scenario. In the disk version, it consists of a very brief adventure sequence, followed by an extremely difficult space combat sequence where the *Enterprise* faces off against three ships at once. The CD release fixes this by expanding the adventure scene, as well as reducing the difficulty level of the arcade sequence.



Star Trek Judgment Rites

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Scott Bennie, Elizabeth T. Danforth, Mark O'Green, Michael A. Stackpole
Developer: Interplay

Judgment Rites is the direct sequel to *25th Anniversary*. The interface is practically identical, it uses some of the same assets in regards to the *Enterprise* and its crewmembers, and it follows the same episodic structure. While the scenarios are, for the most part, still self-contained, there's an overarching plot which loosely connects them together. This involves a previously-unknown race called the Brassicans, who are unsure whether to make contact with other races. There's also a subplot about the *Enterprise*'s repeated attempts to enjoy a shore leave before getting sidetracked by various life-or-death missions.



Dr. McCoy's wry sense of humor keeps things lively.

In *Federation*, another ship, the USS *Alexander*, has warped in from eight days in the future, and warns of the destruction of the Federation, before itself exploding. This rather unnerving occurrence ties in with Ies Bredell, the antagonist from the final episode of *25th Anniversary*. *No Man's Land* finds the crew running in with Trelane (from the episode "The Squire of Gothos"), a powerful alien with an obsession with ancient Earth technology – here, he imagines himself to be a World War I German fighter pilot. In *Light and Darkness*, Kirk and crew discover remains of two rival life forms that had wiped out other several millennia before. Although they had been at war with each other, their dual natures fit each other like yin and yang, so Kirk must try to unite their remnant genetic material into a single race. *Voids* finds Mr. Spock being kidnapped by a long extinct race called the Vurians (created specifically for the game), who have been hiding in the Antares Rift, requiring Kirk to hop into an alternate dimension to find him. In *Museum Piece*, Kirk is invited to speak at the Smithsonian Annex but ends up defusing a terrorist plot. *Though This Be Madness...* and *... Yet There is a Method To It* act as the two-part finale, culminating in the crew answering a series of philosophical questions posed by the Brassicans. Not only does

the overarching plot strengthen the storyline, but the individual episodes are also more interesting than the ones in *25th Anniversary*.

Indeed, practically every element in *Judgment Rites* has been improved over its predecessor. There is a difficulty select for the combat segments, or they can be completely disabled. The interface is still awkward, but the puzzle solutions are more consistent, even though many of them just involve telling Spock to futz with a computer. The killable red shirts are gone, but each mission gives you different crew members to join the away team. While Spock and McCoy are still at the forefront, other members like Uhura, Sulu and Chekhov are controllable, allowing for more diverse puzzle solutions, as well as more inter-character banter. As a whole, all of these little things add up to a substantially fuller and more enjoyable experience.

While *Judgment Rites* was initially released on floppy disks, an expansion pack was later released to add in CG movie scenes and voiceovers for the introduction. The later CD release includes these movies, as well as full voice acting from the original cast and crew, much like *25th Anniversary*. This game also sees the addition of Majel Barrett-Roddenberry as the voice of the computer. It is also officially DeForest Kelly's last portrayal of Dr. McCoy before he passed away in 1999.

Judgment Rites was also one of the few games of the '90s to receive a Limited Collector's Edition. This large box, numbered to indicate its limited quantity, included the CD-ROM version of the game, an extra CD for use in computers with various interviews, a video tape with an episode of the original series ("The City on the Edge of Forever" in the US release, while the UK version also has "Errand of Mercy"), and a small badge.



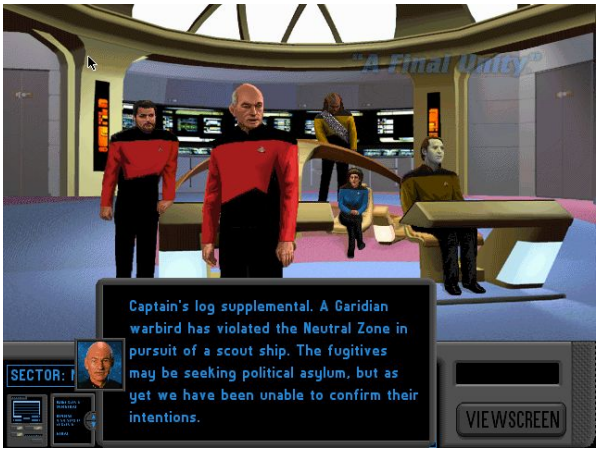
Star Trek The Next Generation: A Final Unity

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Mathias K. Genser
Developer: Spectrum Holobyte

Although it's developed by a completely different team – Spectrum Holobyte as opposed to Interplay – *Star Trek The Next Generation: A Final Unity* is very similar to the two previous adventure games. It features incredibly authentic visuals, technology, and writing, and of course includes all of the original cast members providing the voices. The story is divided up into chapters which connect into one overarching narrative, although they aren't given separate episode titles anymore. Away missions have you controlling multiple characters, each with their own skills. Most chapters also have variable outcomes depending on your decisions, although they don't have much impact on the overall story.

The biggest changes, obviously, come with the shift in tone from the original series to *The Next Generation*. The visual design is much darker, and while they benefit from a resolution bump to optional SVGA, the computer-rendered backgrounds just aren't quite as attractive. The dialogue and general atmosphere is less campy, with more of a focus on technobabble. Furthermore, while the puzzles in the Interplay games weren't exactly great, they're even weaker here. While rarely infuriating, most of the time they're just flat out boring, either requiring that you talk to the right person for the right solution or in a few cases, simply waiting around for an answer to reveal itself. There are multiple difficulty levels, with the easier ones automatically picking the optimal away team roster and equipment. In the end this helps the experience, because running into difficulties because you made the wrong decision is quite tedious. The interface has technically been improved, although your characters walk incredibly slowly.

The battle sequences have been replaced with some kind of real-time tactical minigame, which is full of so many inexplicable buttons and gauges that it's practically inscrutable. Thankfully, you have can Geordi or Worf take over the controls, and there's even a cheat code ("make it so") to re-equip the *Enterprise* and give it an advantage.



Picard and crew on the bridge.

The overall plot revolves around a long-gone race called the Chodaks, elements of which were borrowed from *The Next Generation* games for the Genesis and SNES, despite them being completely different games otherwise. It begins when the *Enterprise* encounters a ship of Garidian rebels who are seeking the Fifth Scroll, a long lost document that would help their cause. This begins the search for the Chodak, as the *Enterprise* gets pulled off into other directions to save people or investigate various situations per usual *Star Trek* protocol. Though the story is not broken up into discrete episodes like the other two *Star Trek* games, there are still various scenarios you'll find yourselves in – one involves rescuing a space station where one of its sections was apparently removed whole and stolen, and another involves a race of ape-like creatures in a matriarchal society. It's supposed to take place during the show's final season, which was airing when *A Final Unity* was released.

While a solid game, again quite faithful to the series, it lacks the energy of Interplay's games – the missions are occasionally dull, and it's never as creative as the better episodes of the TV show. Still, it's a solid product, as many regard it as the last good *Star Trek* game.



Star Trek Deep Space Nine: Harbinger

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Mark Buchignani, Sarah W. Stocker
Developer: Stormfront Studios

Fans still speak fondly of *A Final Unity*, but mostly everyone has forgotten *Deep Space Nine: Harbinger*. You control an original character named Bannick, who is on a journey to meet up

with a newly discovered race in the Gamma Quadrant, a region of space reached via a wormhole near the titular Deep Space Nine space station. Suddenly your vessel is attacked, causing it to crash right into Deep Space Nine. While you are safely rescued, the same droids that attacked you focus their sights on the space station. While you are able to fend off their attack, it begins a chain of events that leads to a murdered ambassador from the race you were sent to meet. Once the murder is solved, you set off to destroy the droid factory and hopefully stop any further trouble.



Deep Space Nine is hardly a fan favorite, and this game does little to change that.

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine: Harbinger has three things working against it. First off, obviously, it's based on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, which even as a TV series is far less interesting than either of the series that preceded it. Secondly, instead of directly controlling any of the main cast members, you take on the role of a completely original character. You still interact with most of the regular crew, including Sisko, the stoic captain; Odo, the shape shifting Changeling; Quark, the Ferengi; Kira Nerys, the Bajoran; and Jadzia Dax, the Trill. Their voices are provided by the original actors, like the other games, but their readings are dry and incredibly boring. But most importantly, Harbinger ditches the third person perspective of the other games for a first person perspective, entirely comprised of computer rendered graphics. The backgrounds are incredibly dull and navigation is extremely difficult, while the character models look really, really bad. And while the puzzles of the earlier games were hardly noteworthy, they're still much better executed than they are here, where they mostly involve fiddling with circuits, panels and computers, as there's no inventory whatsoever. The exploration is also broken up by extremely banal rail - shooter action sequences, which are only tolerable because you can adjust their difficulty. Overall, it's a boring, pointless game, and one that's hard to recommend even to Trekkies.

The 7th Guest / The 11th Hour

The CD-ROM may have been one of the most important developments in the history of the personal computer. Long thought of as little more than a business or education tool, it was once merely an interesting side effect if it could play games as well. But the expanded storage space of the compact disc, combined with sound cards and VGA displays, brought around a new buzzword: multimedia. In enabling a computer to play videos and music, it became the hot new tech toy, one of the first steps towards getting the computer into the average home. Amongst one of these fancy new games was *The 7th Guest*.

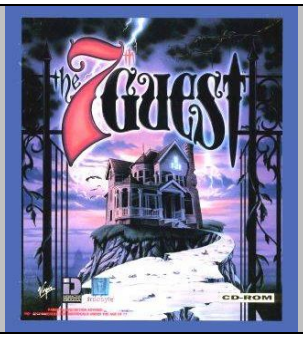
The 7th Guest was developed by the startup Trilobyte Studios, formed by Rob Landeros and Graeme Devine. It was far from the first CD-ROM game, as console developers Sega and NEC had released their own add-ons, and computer veterans like LucasArts and Sierra were starting to rerelease their disk-based games with full voice acting. More often than not, these games failed to take true advantage of the format, offering, at best, better music or full voice tracks. However, *The 7th Guest* was one of the few games for which the CD-ROM format was integral to its very being, and more importantly, one which didn't rely on twitchy reflexes like the laserdisc arcade games of a decade prior. It was a huge graphical powerhouse, one that could be used as a showpiece to convince skeptical consumers. Computer graphics were still in their relative infancy in 1993, when movies like *The Lawnmower Man* were massively impressing audiences, and *The 7th Guest* not only featured a fully computer rendered mansion, but allowed you to wander through its halls, solve cryptic puzzles, and become enveloped in the mystery that lied within.



Due to issues with the chroma key, the characters were turned into "ghosts".

Of course, time has pulled back the curtain and revealed its mechanical core. The prerendered CG may have wowed back in the day, but fifteen years later it can be seen in most children's shows. It uses live digitized actors, like many CD-ROM games back in the day, and both the video and acting quality are sub-par. And once you got beyond the wow factor, the actual gameplay – straightforward logic puzzles, more or less – is fairly uninspired. *The 7th Guest* was harshly criticized by computer game fans for its shallowness, a sentiment which became more widely realized as the years marched on. Still, it's hard to fault Trilobyte for making a popular product, especially one that fueled so many hardware sales. It was one of the first big "casual" games, framing familiar logic puzzles in a graphically dazzling manner that appealed to an audience larger than the typical gamer demographic.

While *The 7th Guest* was an overnight success, its sequel, *The 11th Hour*, failed to replicate the same glory. A third puzzle title was developed, technically unrelated to either of the first two, called *Clandestiny*, although the general framework and style of puzzles are exactly the same. Alas, these were the only three retail titles published by Trilobyte before they went under.



The 7th Guest

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / Phillips CD-I
Designer(s): Graeme Devine, Rob Landeros, Matthew Costello
Developer: Trilobyte

The Great Depression was not kind to Henry Stauf. Homeless and penniless, he resorts to thievery and murder, leading the life of a vicious vagrant. That is, until a dream presents him with a vision of a beautiful, wood-carved doll. He sets up a toy business and quickly becomes monstrously successful, with nearly every child in town owning one of his dolls. But not long after, many of the kids become mortally ill, succumbing to a mysterious disease. The link between the dolls and the virus is discovered, but never proven, as Stauf closes up shop and disappears from the public eye. His only other legacy is a spooky old mansion, apparently abandoned, constructed with the profits of his empire.



The main staircase in Stauf's mansion.

Years later, six guests are invited to this mansion, apparently by Stauf himself. Each has their own problems, and each are promised that their dreams will come true, if they show up. Edward Knox is a compulsive gambler who has found himself drowned in debt, and is joined by his faithful but naive wife Elinor. Martine Burden is a floozy who attaches herself to rich men but has since found herself discarded. Julia Heine is a washed-up alcoholic who wants the return of her youth, while Brian Dutton is a cutthroat businessman who will do anything to succeed. And Hamilton Temple is an eccentric vaudeville magician who wants his career back. All take Stauf up on his offer, but find the mansion strangely abandoned and in a state of disrepair. The only evidence of any presence is a number of letters, addressed to each of the participants, along with several obscure puzzles, purportedly leftovers from Stauf's days as a

toymaker. While initially confused, the guests learn of their true purpose – to hunt down the seventh guest, a young boy named Tad who snuck into the house on a dare, and bring him to Stauf to be sacrificed. The various guests fall on different sides of the moral line, with some fighting to deliver the boy to Stauf first while others try to save his life.

You, the player, takes on the role of a mysterious, amnesiac entity as it explores the house, witnessing the events of the story and solving the same puzzles as its guests. At first, most of the mansion is closed off, with the simple wagging finger of the skeleton-hand cursor to deny progress. As you solve puzzles, you are rewarded with full motion video cutscenes that further the plot, and eventually open up more rooms, and thus more puzzles.

Indeed, puzzle solving is pretty much the whole game, and each puzzle is entirely self-contained, with no inventory to speak of. The general idea was based off an old Macintosh game called *The Fool's Errand*, which also used similar puzzles in the framework of a larger storyline. There are twenty-three puzzles throughout the entire game, although when you begin them there are no explicit instructions. Both your player character and Stauf will chime in to provide some insight, although most of the time all they've got are stupid puns – Stauf will taunt you about being "cryptic" when playing in a crypt. If you need guidance, there's a book in the library which will provide some hints, and repeat visits will simply solve the puzzle for you. The manual says there are consequences for this, although this is bold-faced lie to keep you from abusing it. The only puzzle where this will not work is the last one.



Get used to these chess puzzles. They're all over the place.

Many are variations on puzzles you've probably seen before, ripped straight from something like Games Magazine. For example, in one there are coffins laid on a 3x3 grid. The goal is to get them all closed, but whenever you close one, it affects some of the other ones. A knife puzzle is a variation on the famous peg solitaire game, where you need to clear a diagonally-oriented board by jumping pegs over one another. Still others are fairly straightforward, like playing with valves to route blood flow from a heart. Some are word puzzles, such as one where you're given cans with different letters and need to rearrange them to spell a coherent sentence. At least a few of them are based on an understanding of the rules of chess, involving the movement of certain pieces to accomplish specific goals. There is a maze sequence, although solving it simply involves following a map located in some other part of the house. (Of course, since you can't take it with you, you either need to make notes or take a screenshot.) Not all of them have consistent solutions, because some randomize the starting conditions, although there are strategies for most. The only consistently difficult one is a game similar to Reversi (also known as Othello), with the colored chips replaced by cells beneath a microscope. You're playing against an AI, and it's absolutely ruthless, to the point where even hint guides straight from the developers couldn't provide a good strategy.

In between the puzzles are the mansion exploration segments. *The 7th Guest*, unlike *Myst*, uses full motion video transitions as you walk around the house, making the experience more like exploring an actual world than clicking through a series of slideshows. *The 7th Guest* was released during the time when the heavily artificial aesthetics of computer rendering were just entering the public consciousness, thanks to movies like *The Lawnmower Man*. In spite of its age, it still looks attractive, mostly due to its use of color. The muted blues of the mansion hallways are pleasant, while the bedrooms are covered with decadent flourishes. Small touches, like the plates designed as bloody eyeballs in the dining room, are welcome, but on a screen-by-screen basis, nothing is quite as detailed as the individual pictures of *Myst*. Furthermore, *Myst* elicited the experience of exploring strange otherworlds, but even at its best, the world of *The 7th Guest* is nothing more than a fancy house.

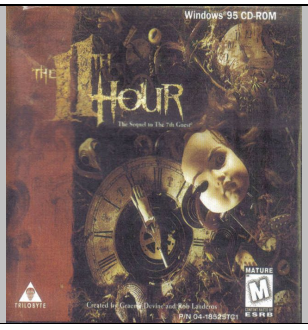
While impressive at the time, a cynic might muse that the house exploration is little more than a fancy level select screen. There are very few places to actually explore or things to look at, as most of the rooms are constructed so you can only enter, exit, or solve a puzzle. Occasionally you can stumble upon creepy animations. But otherwise much of the extravagant detail can only be seen in passing. Sparse as it may be, it's still an important part of the experience, because it is incredibly moody. The movement is slow and the animation is choppy, but it really feels like you're floating through the hallways, as if you were a ghost. The mansion also has a number of hidden passages, some twisted and illogical, betraying physical conventions, all of which eventually reveal themselves as important to the plot. (As one can guess, this is not exactly a spoiler.)

But while the graphics may feel somewhat dated, the music is just as catchy as ever. Provided by George Sanger, the immensely prolific musician known as The Fat Man, the soundtrack is simultaneously moody and upbeat, eliciting the feeling of a mad carnival. The main theme, called "The Game", is not actually featured anywhere in the game, but is included as a redbook audio track (along with the rest of the music) on the game's second CD. The lyrics are silly – akin to a TV theme song, it relates the basic premise of the story – but the actual melody is remarkably catchy, and variations of the theme are found throughout.

However, the puzzles are also not as well-integrated to the game world. In *Myst*, each of the gadgets you mucked with would open a door or raise a bridge somewhere else. In contrast, their placement is arbitrary in *The 7th Guest*, where solving one will magically remove the invisible detours that block out parts of the house and reveal chunks of the plotline.

The story itself isn't bad and there's at least one clever twist by the game's end, but it's entirely muddled by some extremely awkward progression. Events do not play out in a linear manner, leaving you to piece them together once you've seen them all, with many scenes making little sense otherwise. The acting is about on the level of high school theater, with lines being read inappropriately and actions exaggerated, as if the actors had thought they were performing on stage. The actual video quality is a terrible mess. All of the characters are transparent, akin to ghosts, due to technical issues. But the fuzziness makes it difficult to make out any details, and they all look incredibly unnatural against the computer rendered backgrounds. But even worse is the incredibly unbalanced sound, as the music is too loud and always drowns out the dialogue. There are no discrete sound controls and no subtitles, making the already confusing plot nigh-indecipherable. The script was provided by horror author Matthew Costello, who also worked on the official novelization. The first half of the book is merely an elaborate prologue, giving some backstory to the main characters, while the second half presents the events of the game in the present tense. It helps straighten out the plot, although the writing isn't exactly inspiring, and the story feels lacking when removed from the atmosphere provided by the game.

Beyond its release for the PC and Macintosh, *The 7th Guest* was also released on the Phillips CD-I system. The rights were also purchased by Nintendo for their intended SNES CD-ROM add-on. However, the system never came to fruition, and it was later revealed that the license was only obtained to prevent Sega from releasing it on the Sega CD, leaving them resigned to rip-offs like *Mansion of the Hidden Souls*.



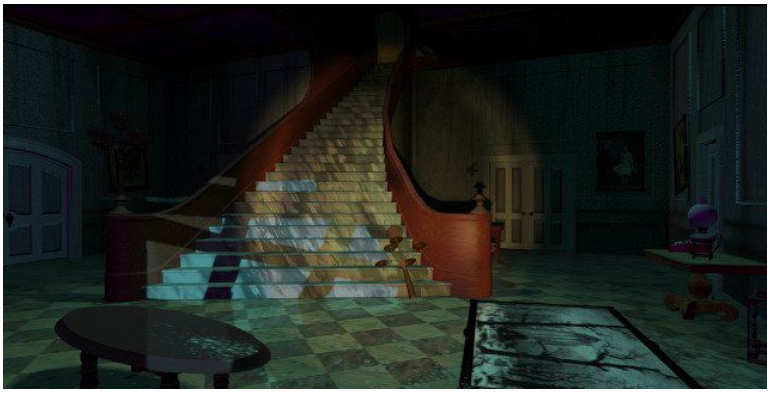
The 11th Hour: The Sequel to The 7th Guest

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Graeme Devine, Rob Landeros, Matthew Costello
Developer: Trilobyte

The 11th Hour: The Sequel to The 7th Guest, began production before *The 7th Guest* had even hit the shelves. Trilobyte's goal was to make a game that was much darker and serious than the funhouse ride of its predecessor, and in that way they succeeded, but a troublesome development cycle resulted in a game that was not only weaker but was also a commercial flop.

Fifty years have passed since the events of *The 7th Guest*. The Stauf Mansion still sits, abandoned and purportedly haunted, with stories of its horrors passed through the small neighboring town of Harley-on-the-Hudson. Victoria Morales, a correspondent for a television show about supernatural phenomenon, sets off to the sleepy burg, only to go completely missing. The player fills the shoes of Carl Jenning Jr., Morales' producer (and lover) as he traces her steps through Stauf's mansion, solving puzzles and facing off with the denizens of hell in games of Connect Four.

Yes, there's a distinct sense of déjà vu in *The 11th Hour*. The layout of the house hasn't changed much, and most of the locations are more or less the same. However, the graphics have been entirely re-rendered with a darker, more foreboding feel. While *The 7th Guest* looked like an animated cartoon, *The 11th Hour* is more realistic, as it feels more like you're stumbling through a decrepit old manor. The color palette has been extended beyond the 256 color limit, allowing for use of fancier lighting techniques. The animation, too, is much smoother. And yet, for all of its technical improvements, visually it's not just as not attractive as it predecessor. More detailed, yes, but the color scheme of *The 7th Guest* has been replaced with little more than dark browns, it loses its sense of otherworldly exploration in favor of boring old dinginess. Due to the more advanced graphics, *The 11th Hour* shipped on four CDs.



The 11th Hour is a much darker game, both thematically and visually.

The atmosphere just doesn't feel the same either, and part of the blame can be laid with the music. There are some familiar themes, but largely, it's strangely dull, despite still being composed by The Fat Man. And while *The 7th Guest* had those jaunty vocal songs, *The 11th Hour*

opens with a creepy little piece sung with nightmarish, heavily distorted voices, hammering in the fact that this is meant to be a totally different experience.

The storytelling falters too, in several ways. The ghostly reenactments from the first game were far from ideal, but at least they were integrated into the plot. Here, there's a short movie, roughly forty minutes in length, most of which focuses on Robin's exploits with the townspeople. Whenever you solve a puzzle, you're rewarded with the next clip of the film. You don't even get a proper complete scene – it'll just stop, sometimes in the middle of a shot, until you solve the next puzzle. All of the video is displayed as part of Carl's personal data assistant, which also acts as the save/load interface. While the video quality is a step up from *The 7th Guest* – most of it was filmed on location using live sets, rather than blue screen – it feels completely divorced from the player, whose exploits in the mansion are rarely featured. And while the Ouija board interface from the first game was suitably creepy, there's really nothing scary at all about fancy digital phones, further ruining the horror vibe.

And then there's the simple fact that the plot just isn't very good. The directors and writers try to channel David Lynch and *Twin Peaks* by portraying the people of Harley-on-the-Hudson as a group of backwater residents who hate outsiders. Morales first runs in with a waitress who lost her arm, who claims it was due to an accident with a dog. This is obviously suspicious, and Robin spends half the story figuring out that this was actually a result of the waitress' childhood run-in with the Stauf Mansion. She got off easy, though – her friend was impregnated by the house (!!) and gave birth to a devil woman. We know this devil woman is evil because she dresses in slutty clothes, sleeps with married men, and makes them murder on her command. After lots of meandering, Robin ends up in the mansion and is captured. Once Carl reaches them, Stauf challenges him to a morbid game show where he needs to save one of three female characters in an "11th hour" decision. This leads to one of three endings, only one of which is the good one.

It's really an awful experience all around, with bad writing and iffy acting, although it is arguably a step up from its predecessor, despite some ludicrous plot developments. Rob Landeros originally planned for the story to feature more prevalent violence and sex, although objections raised by Graeme Devine caused it to be toned down a bit.



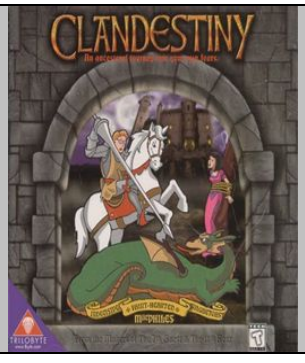
The 11th Hour certainly tried to be scary, although it didn't quite work out.

Plot aside, *The 11th Hour* progresses in much the same way as its forbearer. There are nineteen puzzles in total, although five of them are played against Stauf. Some of these include competitive board games of Connect Four, Penti, The Game of Y, and the return of an Othello-style puzzle, this time represented as a honeycomb. These are thankfully easier than the microscope puzzle, as the artificial intelligence has been toned down a bit. It's clear Trilobyte was already running out of ideas for puzzles too, because many are recycled variations of the

ones from the first game. You can expect more chess conundrums, of course, more word puzzles, and more tasks which require swapping one set of objects with another in a series of increasingly complicated steps. And while you can skip through the transition scenes when exploring the mansion, you can't fast forward through the extra animations on the puzzles, so some of them take far, far too long, even if you know the solutions.

The only addition takes the form of fetch quests. In between the main puzzles, Stauf will give you a word puzzle, implicating an item somewhere in the mansion. You need to figure out what the item is and find it in order to advance. Like the rest of the game, the challenge provided by these is inconsistent. Take, for example "Fruit Loop on Stove". You are obviously looking for some kind of fruit, and there's a picture of an orange in the dining room. (Also, a "loop" can also be an "o", and a "stove" can also be a "range".) Others are far more obtuse. Some require decoding by the use of anagrams – "A Heart attack could put you into the ground" means you're looking for a globe, because "heart" is an anagram of "earth". In one you're given a string of numbers and have to decode them by looking at an alphanumerical telephone pad. After any of these, you need to actually scour the mansion to find the item before you move on. *The 7th Guest* barely let you explore any more than was necessary, and these extra items give the rooms some additional detail, but rummaging through each and every corner of the mansion, looking for hotspots, just ends up reducing the pace to a tedious slog. In the end, it does nothing to improve on its predecessor, and hammers in the idea that it's really nothing more than a pointless retread.

Related Game:



Clandestiny

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Graeme Devine, Rob Landeros
Developer: Trilobyte

While not technically part of *The 7th Guest/11th Hour* series, *Clandestiny* is very clearly of the same lineage, seeing as the interface and its icons are exactly the same. It was entirely ignored – without the name recognition, everyone simply assumed it was one of the numerous rip-offs which had since completely overwhelmed the market, and most had simply tired of them. Those who actually do remember it regard it as something like *The 7th Guest* "Lite", mostly because of its animated cartoon cutscenes and generally light-hearted demeanor.

Nerdy Andrew MacPhiles, of the MacPhiles clan (their Coat of Arms reads "Fainthearted, Milquetoast, Indecisive"), learns that he's inherited a castle out in the foggy Scottish highlands. It's spooky and haunted, as to be expected, but through both exploration and puzzle solving, he can learn the mysteries behind its departed inhabitants and hopefully amass a fortune to boot. The animation is clearly low budget, having been farmed out to Taiwan on the cheap, and its classic cel style clashes horribly with the computer rendered backgrounds. But aside from Andrew's girlfriend Paula and her obnoxious gold-digging attitude, it's all a bit of fun, in a Saturday-morning, marshmallow-cereal kind of way. Fergus the impossibly bushy-eyed, kilt-wearing midget provides a bit of amusement, as do the various ghosts, although subtitles would've been nice for the goofy Scottish accents.



Your guide, Fergus, is a weird little character.

The setting is a bit more fresh this time around, and the castle itself quite a bit larger than Stauf's estate, but the actual artistry and depth is merely average. The music has gone fully digital but is bland and entirely forgettable. But worst of all, the one thing that set Trilobyte's game apart from the rest – the animated movement transitions – are almost entirely gone. While it does make exploration faster, ultimately it cheapens the experience. It also makes navigation unbearably confusing, as the castle rooms are not as distinct nor as neatly compartmentalized as the old mansion. And when that pointing skeleton hand points left, are you turning 90 or 180 degrees? There's a map, like there's always been, but it's still useless, and there's a lot more aimless wandering than before.

The puzzles haven't changed much, or in some cases, at all. The very first puzzle, involving sugar cubes, is basically the knife-jumping puzzle from *The 7th Guest*, which in turn was basically just peg solitaire. The Mars canal telescope puzzle has been reworked as a bowl of alphabet soup. There are more chess related puzzles, although the developer tried desperately to hide one of them by changing the pieces into colored bowls. There are only two AI games this time, including yet another Reversi-style game. If *The 11th Hour* puzzle recycling was beating a dead horse, then *Clandestiny* practically immolates the poor thing.

At least those stupid fetch quest puzzles from the previous game have been reworked. There are still word puzzles to solve, but here they simply act as keys to open doors. Overall, the game is much shorter than before, with roughly a dozen puzzles and approximately as many word puzzles, spread across a mere (by comparison to *The 11th Hour*) two CDs. It does, however, offer three different difficulty levels. The hardest mode imposes a move limit, while the easy ones practically come pre-solved, requiring only a single move to beat.

Clandestiny absolutely feels like a step back compared to Trilobyte's other efforts, and obviously its design by this point was more tired than ever. Still, its reworked word puzzles and general refusal to take itself seriously marks it as a slightly more bearable experience than *The 11th Hour*. Otherwise, it's little more than redundant white noise.

In order to make a quick buck, Trilobyte compiled puzzles from all three games into one package and called it *Uncle Stauf's Playhouse*. The game sold extremely poorly, and nothing they did was able to save them from the financial black hole they had dug for themselves.

Myst

Myst is an adventure game series created by Cyan. But you already know about *Myst* don't you? Everybody has played *Myst*. You played it, your friend played it, your mom played it and your cat probably gave the mouse a few clicks while your back was turned. While *Myst* is one of the better known names in the video game industry, it is mostly because of the first game, as not as many people are familiar with the later entries.

There are actually six games in the *Myst* series, but only three of those are especially relevant, as they are all masterpieces in their own right and ended up defining Cyan as a company. Two *Myst* games were developed under license by other companies: *Myst III* was developed by Presto Studios (makers of *The Journeyman Project*) while *Myst IV* was developed by Ubisoft Montréal. For that reason, they feel a little bit... off. *Myst V*, while developed by Cyan, was a kind of "farewell gift" to longtime fans, made up of unused concepts meant for *Uru*.

This leaves us with three very important titles: the original *Myst*, its sequel *Riven*, and the tragically visionary MMO *Uru*. The original *Myst* is the game that started it all. Not only is the first *Myst* a perfect example of a small team creating a masterpiece and a runaway hit, but it also gave birth to an entire subgenre of adventure games. *Riven* was to be more of the same, but bigger and better in a multi-million dollar adventure game spanning five CDs. *Uru*, on the other hand, was born out of the hubristic proposition that you could create a Massively Multiplayer Online Adventure Game. This, as recent history has shown, was not the winning idea that Cyan thought it would be. *Uru* is the focal point of the *Myst* franchise, not necessarily because it is the best game, but because it was a gigantic project, one that represented everything the people at Cyan always wanted to do. Not only that, but *Uru*, in all its doomed grandeur, almost singlehandedly bankrupted the company... which has never quite been the same since.



Rand Miller, the man behind the series, plays the role of Atrus, pictured here in Myst III.

At its core, the *Myst* franchise is about fulfilling a fantasy of loneliness – you're all alone in surreal imaginary worlds without anybody to kill you or bother you and plenty of puzzles to keep your mind occupied. As you start each game, the story's most important events have already occurred and it's up to you to piece together what happened from journals, drawings and various objects in the rooms. Everything has an "after the fact" feel. The series is also a noble representative of the "figure-out-what-the-hell-you're-supposed-to-do-if-you-can" school of game design. You could call those puzzles "non-directive tasks", but that sounds a bit like psychology babble. In other words, you are thrown in a mysterious world without knowing what you're supposed to do, where you're supposed do to it, how you're supposed to do it or why.

One has to admit that a game that relies on this type of task isn't exactly attractive or easy to get into, but when you make the extra effort, the payoff is really incredible.

The games' manuals are a perfect example of this design ideology – outside of an introductory letter from some character and basic technical information, you are provided no character bios, no historical background, no gameplay help and no tips. Figuring any of this out is going to be your job. So even saying what a puzzle is about in a *Myst* game is already giving away half of the solution. Even providing vague hints about the story or the overarching goal is already shedding some light on what should be total darkness.

In presentation as well as interface, *Myst* is known for its minimalism. That hand floating on the screen, that's you. You click on stuff. That's it. There are no dialogue trees and no item lists. *Myst* is also notorious for having weird machines and crazy locks standing right in front of every single worthwhile destination. Any claim that *Myst* is full of intuitively placed puzzles that reward everyday logic is frankly indefensible. You either have to accept this or cut your losses and start running right now. On the other hand, most people only remember the first game, so they don't know about the effort that was put in later games to better integrate the puzzles in the environment. *Riven* is particularly successful in that regard.

Still, there are recurring themes in *Myst* puzzles. Here are the three golden rules:

The first is: Machines won't work if you don't restore power. Do that first. Water, wind, sunlight, breakers, electric current... that weird machine won't do a thing without juice.

The second is: If a symbol looks important, it is. Write it down. Yes, with a paper and a pencil. The pointy thing and the rectangular thing. Yes, you probably bought a computer to get away from those. It doesn't matter. You should also note the initial position of complex machines because a) it might already be set in a favorable position and b) you might click yourself into a corner by messing around without knowing what you did.



Myst sure does love cogwheels.

And the third is: The more inaccessible the back of an object is, the more likely it is that there's going to be something important there (the path of most resistance is always the right one, obviously). So look behind doors and under elevators. If an area can reached in two different ways, you can be sure something happens when one entrance is closed and you go through the other.

Although this wasn't fully thought out as of the first game, *Myst* is about a race called the D'ni. They are long-lived humans who built a city deep under the surface of our planet Earth and thus have a natural aversion to bright light. What is truly interesting about them is the Art, the ability to write worlds called ages and "link" to them using special books. You put your palm on a book created for this purpose and presto, you're in a new world! This is an obvious but

fitting metaphor about the power of books, computer programming and the written word in general. The interesting tidbit is that this age isn't created by the writer: it is merely "linked to" from an ocean of infinite possibilities. Every age is unique – you could write exactly the same words twice and not reach the same place again, only a very similar one. You can probably handle the philosophical implications on your own.

Rand Miller is the father of the franchise as well as a guru to the fans of the universe he's created, making him a bit of a diminutive George Lucas. It also helps that he plays Atrus, the *Myst* series' central character. Richard "RAWA" Watson is Cyan's official D'ni "historian" and has also been a major influence in creating the D'ni mythology. As an amateur linguist, he created an entire language for the D'ni (both spoken and written) by drawing from his knowledge of Hebrew, German, Spanish, and of course English. The sign of a real Trekkie is that he speaks Klingon fluently. Accordingly, the sign of a hardcore *Myst* fan is that he can read and speak D'ni... and correct mistakes in the game's script. The D'ni also have their own numeric system and are obviously quite obsessed by numbers and gizmos

The creators also strived to give the D'ni their own architectural style. To make it seem more authentic, the in-house rule was to make everything as original as possible by not resorting to any sci-fi or fantasy cliché. The result is a mix of art nouveau, tribal design and monolithic stone structures that's hard to compare with anything else. Over time, the franchise's style became increasingly unique, but kept touches of steampunk, because the usefulness of elevators and wacky door mechanisms is undeniable no matter the historical setting.

The *Myst* games were made with a level of attention to detail that is almost unparalleled in videogamedom. Very few companies have an obsessive-compulsive attention to detail, especially when it comes to handling visual elements and ambient sound effects. Maybe there's something about living in the primeval wilderness of the west coast that inspires game makers to create more interesting landscapes and appreciate the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves? Every *Myst* also has well-hidden Easter eggs, their existence often leaked by an "anonymous source" that gives the fans some extremely obtuse hints on how to find them. So even when you think it's over, there's still something else to look for.



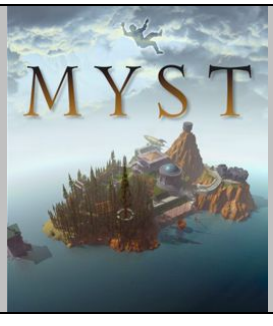
Scenery like this was what first brought the series to public attention.

And yet the critics lament: "Loneliness, puzzles and visuals are nice, but where's the story?" Granted, *Myst* may be low on narrative, but it is really high in history. How many games strive to create their own architectural style and bother to invent a language, both written and spoken that fans can actually speak? Everything in *Myst* happens after the fact, but you can always find signs of past events and tie together what occurred.

There is a practice called letting the player "close the circle" when it comes to telling a story, meaning that the player has to put some of the pieces together to fully understand what is going on. This can be done by hiding storyline details or withholding them completely, instead of spoon-feeding the plot. The end result of this narrative practice is that the player builds a deeper relationship with the events, because they did some of the intellectual legwork. Remember how cool it was piecing the chronology of *Pulp Fiction* together? The other advantage is that if you don't give a damn about stories, you can just focus on the task at hand, ignore all extraneous details and enjoy the ride. If you don't want *Myst* to have a story, it doesn't have one. No endless text, no incessant cutscenes, but an endless amount of little details to discover that add up to the hidden story of a civilization's downfall.

Video games aren't always particularly good at storytelling, but on the other hand they are excellent at worldbuilding. This is where the ages come in, obviously. *Myst* games aren't about people, but places. The worlds, or ages, are the true characters of *Myst*. In fact, some people do not even consider *Myst* an adventure game, because it has little to no character interaction and puts heavy emphasis on visual and aural design. Perhaps it's an artistic 3D virtual environment simulation with imbedded logic problems, far removed from the inventory puzzles of the LucasArts/Sierra mold. Despite its initial popularity at the time of release, it was commonly criticized by core gamer magazines for being pretty but shallow, a complaint which holds water when the first game is viewed by itself, but falls apart due to the efforts of the later installments.

While many runaway hits in the video game world have now turned into colossal billion-dollar franchises, *Myst* somehow fell off the radar entirely. This is most likely because Cyan missed a crucial step in their development as a company, one you hear often about in management circles – going from a successful small business to a very successful large business. Obviously, you don't always get the chance to take that step, as success can be fickle. Conversely, some companies choose not to grow larger, because the decision is not easy as it sounds – while you'll be swimming in cash, you'll lose creative control over your baby and see it turn into a soulless monster that hungers for more money. It's actually a tough choice, one that Cyan didn't or couldn't make. *Myst* was their baby after all, one they weren't going to turn into a complacent cash cow. *The Sims* has since become the best-selling game of all time, supplanting *Myst*.



Myst

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / PlayStation / Saturn / PSP / DS / iOS / Pocket PC / Jaguar CD/ CDi / 3DO
Designer(s): Rand Miller, Robyn Miller
Developer: Cyan Studios

There once was a time when *Myst* was the biggest, baddest thing in gaming. It was one of the first things you would put in your brand new computer equipped with the latest hi-tech gadget – the CD-ROM drive. The game was made by a small team of seven including Rand and Robyn Miller, the two visionaries behind the series who also happen to play the roles of the characters in the game.

Myst is about Atrus, a man who has the power to create worlds by writing books, and his two sons of very ambiguous moral character, Sirrus and Achenar. Of course, you know nothing of this at first, as your character (a nameless, faceless protagonist) gets literally dropped onto Myst Island by looking at a linking book, without a clue as to what's going on. You do find the two brothers early on in the main building, but they are trapped in red and blue books and it is

impossible to understand what they are saying. You will then have to look for more linking books cleverly hidden on Myst Island where you will find red and blue pages. Bringing those back to the colored books will clear up the static and help you understand what the brothers are saying. Their speech will eventually be clear enough for them to give you a final clue that will allow you to finish the game. You will then have to make a decision as to whom you will help escape. Each one accuses the other of foul play, but which one is telling the truth? The annoying bit about the colored pages is that you can only carry a single one at a time. That means that you have to go through every age twice to hear what both brothers have to say.

The first age is Stoneship. There is a ship stuck inside of a gigantic rock, hence the name. This age requires you to restore power and lighting, tasks that will become synonymous with the *Myst* series. You also have to deal with flooded areas of the ship. Like most other ages of *Myst*, Sirrus and Achenar each have a room in here, the ones in Stoneship being the biggest. Their rooms offer a glimpse into their character, Sirrus apparently being a hypocritical violent snob and Achenar just being violent. Maybe the "no-inventory" rule wasn't as clear-cut in the first game, since you can pick up a key in Stoneship and use it in the same room.

Selenitic is deserted island ravaged by meteor showers. Sirrus and Achenar don't have rooms here since the place is completely barren, with nothing to plunder and nobody to exploit. Selenitic is a sound puzzle age. Some people hate those. First, getting there involves a pretty difficult piano puzzle, especially if you have a terrible ear for music. Once there, you have to match symbols with ambient noises heard around the island. This is one of the first ages that show the creators' obsession with intricate sound design. That clock you can hear here is actually the modified ringing of a monkey wrench. The bubble sounds have been made by blowing into a toilet. The age ends with a classic, yet still utterly tedious first-person labyrinth. The fact that you're stuck in a submarine thingy with only a tiny porthole to look out through and that you have to navigate by using the sub's slow and clumsy controls doesn't help either. And you're going to have to go through it twice to get both colored pages.

The Mechanical age is a large rotating fortress in the middle of the sea built to fend off pirates. The age's single puzzle involves rotating the fortress in order to find a way out of the place. Not that great, really. The only thing interesting about Mechanical is that the exit is literally right next to the link-in point, but you'll have to rotate the fortress all over the place to find the combination to the exit, only to go right back where you started.

In Channelwood, you start out on boardwalks in a marsh filled with the sound of frogs singing. After tinkering with a nearby windmill, you can gain access to an awesome treetop village, Ewok-style. You can find a machine that plays images of Achenar saying some really threatening-sounding stuff meant for the natives of Channelwood, but the speech is actually just gibberish; Richard Watson didn't start inventing languages for the *Myst* universe until *Riven*.

Myst was created by rendering the environments in 3D and then turning it into numerous two-dimensional interactive slides with HyperCard. In other words, it's a bit like cooking an entire loaf of bread just to keep a single piece of toast. True 3D was much too hard on the average computer in those days. The game's claim to fame is that it contained a whopping 2500 images, 40 minutes of music and 66 minutes of Quicktime video. Some of the team's technical issues, like paring down images from an impossible to process 500k to a manageable 80k, are also pretty quaint by today's standards. One sign of this effort to save space is that most of these 66 minutes of video are watched in tiny windows, whether it is the actual window of an elevator or a linking book's small frame. It's not too bad, but it is noticeable and does little to break the illusion that the game is in fact very static.

At that point, the Miller brothers hadn't fully thought up of the D'ni civilization, as the visuals of the game still have a lot in common with their first inspiration: Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (yes, that's where the name comes from). The sound effects are obviously not as top-notch as those of the later entries, but they already show the kind of creativity and hands-on approach that makes these games great. For example, the flames are actually the sound of a car running over gravel, as real fire noises didn't feel "fire-y" enough. The sound effect for the

square buttons in the fireplace is actually an air-compressor tank attached to an industrial staple gun. This is also where the "whooshing" linking sound was born, one of the most famous sound effects in videogamedom, right next to Mario "growing up" after eating a mushroom and Solid Snake receiving a Codec transmission.

None of the puzzles in *Myst* are terribly complicated, but they involve the three classic rules of the franchise: restore power, look behind objects and write down any symbol that even looks at you funny. All things considered, the original game is pretty easy, especially since the other games in the franchise usually start from the same template and then add a few layers of complexity to the puzzles. Even then, the original package included three increasingly obvious hints on how to solve the game's first hurdle: how to actually reach any of the other ages. This is the only game in the franchise to be generous enough to offer any direct hints in the box.



This is Sirrus' bedroom in Stoneship. He's a fancy snob, and this shows his taste in opulence.

The game has four endings, but only one of those is the real one. The others are pretty much "Game Over". In fact, like all other *Myst* games to follow, you can only die or get stuck at the very end of the game, and only by making a bad call. In other words, no grues here. Just create a different save file near the end of the game before making any important decision. Even the good ending is a cliff-hanger, as you are told that you will be called on later to undertake another important task, which will only happen if you buy the sequel.

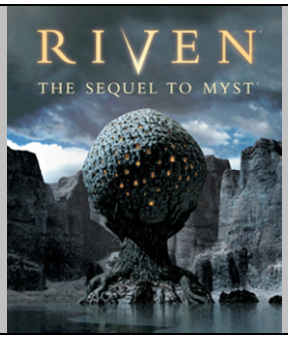
The most interesting thing about the game is that it can be completed from start to finish in less than two minutes, but that supposes you already know what has to be done and how to do it. Of course, actually gathering this information requires you to go through all the ages and finish the game normally. It's only after learning everything you have to learn about Myst Island that you can really realize just how close you were to victory right from the starting line (it's a bit like that movie *Cube*, when you think about it). Now if this is not a great tribute to the power of knowledge, then what is?

Cyan remade the game in 2000 with *Myst: Masterpiece Edition*. It's basically the same game, except using the original 24-bit colors renders instead of the pared down, 8-bit stills. The step in quality is hard to notice, which just goes to show how efficiently Cyan compressed and dithered the original renders. It also featured in-game hints, presumably for people who consider navigating the web an even greater riddle. On the other hand, *realMyst*, also released in 2000, is the real deal: a full 3D version of *Myst* including weather effects like rain, thunderstorms, sunsets and a day/night cycle.

realMyst also introduces a completely new age called Rime, which was also included in the later ports of the original *Myst* (in which Rime is made up of 2D stills taken straight from the 3D *realMyst* version). In the original game, your "reward" for finishing the game is being able to go back to the ages you've previously visited. In *realMyst* and the later ports, you are given a hint as to how to find Rime. Rime is a tiny hut on a bleak iceberg. Yet the age is not entirely lifeless, as you can see whale-like beasts in the water. This age is a bit of a tie-in with other games of the series, as putting color crystals of specific shapes in a machine (a puzzle you can also find in *Myst IV*) will let you catch a glimpse of *Riven*. Another small change is that Ti'ana's grave was added on Myst Island, Ti'ana being Atrus' grandmother and the main character of one of the *Myst* novels. *realMyst* was partly created as a tech demo for the then upcoming *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*. It was Cyan's way of warming up to the idea of giving a third dimension to the player.

Myst is a contender for the "highest number of ports for a videogame" award. If you don't count *Myst: Masterpiece Edition* and *realMyst* for both PC and Mac, there are Myst ports for PlayStation, Saturn, PSP, DS, iOS, PocketPC, Jaguar CD, AmigaOS, CDi and 3DO. All of them can be described with varying degrees of "meh", mostly because pointing at stuff without a mouse feels a lot less natural. The visuals also lose some fidelity in moving from a SVGA computer monitor to television or a portable screen. The DS version lets you use little gizmos like a notebook, a camera and a magnifying glass to help you in your exploration. Apparently, none of this helps you figure out the tiny, muddy graphics, least of all point at them with the stylus in a way the game acknowledges. All in all, these ports seem pretty pointless, and new players should probably try one of the computer editions instead of some subpar port (at least every other port/remake of *Final Fantasy* added a little something to the mix). Anyhow, *realMyst* on PC or Mac is the definitive version of *Myst*, as it includes Rime, is the best-looking version of the game and the only one in 3D.

Myst is an excellent game, albeit one that was partly overshadowed by its many sequels and the leaps in computer technology. What used to be amazing graphics now looks merely decent. Plus, the game doesn't have the same attention to detail that some of the later titles have. There hasn't been much of an effort to integrate the puzzles in a coherent universe either. Mostly, the biggest reason to redact some of *Myst's* praise is that a few years later *Riven* blew it out of the water in every way possible. And yet *Myst* is the one game everybody remembers and remains the top seller. On the other hand, *Myst* is the beginning of an idea: this is where the concept of linking books was born, but before the D'ni civilization was invented. It's still a great place to explore and the original "surreal adventure", full of, well, myst-ery. Compared to later games, it's shorter and has relatively simpler puzzles, so it's an excellent entry point for new players.



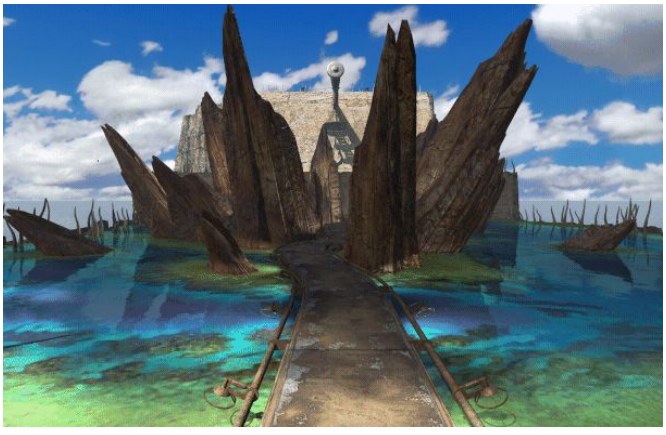
Riven: The Sequel to Myst

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC /Mac / PlayStation / Saturn / Pocket PC / iOS
Designer(s): Rand Miller
Developer: Cyan Studios

Myst was a runaway hit and sold millions of copies. Since they were now basically drowning in money, Cyan decided that their next project was going to be bigger, better and more expensive – as in multi-million dollar expensive. This was not going to happen with a rag-tag team of seven people, so the Miller brothers hired new 3D artists, bought new computers and upgraded their offices. The development of the game was apparently pretty tense, as it understandably is for a

relatively new team thrust into a big-budget project that lasted four years. After the game was finished, Robyn Miller decided to leave Cyan to pursue personal projects, which means that Rand Miller would then become the sole spiritual father of the franchise.

Was all this effort fruitful? Certainly. In 1997, it was something the world had never seen. *Riven* was the best looking game of its day, and reaches levels of photorealism very praiseworthy even by today's standards. The 2500 images of *Myst* would become 4000 images on an adventure spanning five islands and an equal number of CDs. The game was once again made out of stills created with HyperCard, but the level of detail increased exponentially and the black borders around the game window are almost gone. The game featured many more videos, fullscreen ones, including mine cart and hover train rides between the game's islands which were eye-poppers for the day.



This is a survey island, but none of the islands have a name in-game. It does look quite cool though.

Riven starts out where *Myst* ends, with Atrus giving you the mission he was alluding to in the previous game: save his wife Catherine from the age of Riven and make sure his father Gehn remains trapped there and unable to cause trouble. Atrus is not on good terms with his dad. Unlike its predecessor, this game has only one main age, the eponymous Riven, which is separated in five islands. The original packaging includes a very well done box for the game discs and each CD sleeve has some interesting artwork on it. Some adventure games provide printed documents like journals and codebooks with the CDs to create puzzles before the game has even started. *Riven* has a similar, but somewhat subtler approach. Look at the artwork closely, as it contains some veiled hints about the puzzles and the context of the story.

The fact that there are five CDs and five islands is not just a gimmick, as that number is a recurring motif throughout the game. You see, Riven is Gehn's fifth age and his best writing work, which isn't saying much considering the world is falling apart on a structural level (bad grammar, maybe?). That doesn't stop Gehn from obsessing over the number five, which is a magic number in the context of this game. This could make a good drinking game – anytime you see something related to the number five in *Riven*, have a drink. Speaking of numbers, the mythology of the D'ni is fleshed out much more in this game and one puzzle will require you to learn the basics of the D'ni numerical system.

When it comes to immersion, coherency and overall quality of the world, *Riven* is really a step above *Myst* in terms of worldbuilding. This seems to show that Cyan's talents had really matured in a few short years. All of the islands are interconnected, and a lot of little things have their story to tell. Subtle signs can be seen of Gehn's despotism and obsession with writing ages, as one island has been razed to produce paper and another has been turned into factory to manufacture the tools needed to further Gehn's ambitions. Most of the vistas show a

breathtaking amount of detail. A fishing village filled with round stone huts built on piles. A tiny forest, lighted by paper lanterns, filled with strange flora and golden scarabs, the only area somehow spared from destruction. A lonely bay inhabited by sunbathing aquatic dinosaurs. A gilded temple, filled with food offerings to an animal god. And so on.

The sound quality has been ramped up quite a bit as well. The effects are much more natural and sound much less like they were processed through a computer. The music is once again quite sparse, leaving place for the gorgeous ambient noise of the wind blowing, insects buzzing and birds singing. It is somewhat odd that you can hear chickadees on Riven... it doesn't seem like the kind of bird you'd find in an alien universe, but hey, it's nice to know the little guys are finding their way in the world.

There are still a few inexplicable gizmos just lying around to give your brain some trouble, but that's what puzzle games are for, right? To be fair, the majority of machines have actual in-world uses, most of them being devices employed by Gehn to cement his power. For example, that weird spider-like chair is actually a 3D recorder used to project messages to his amazed followers in his temple. It's interesting to compare what those devices were intended for and what the player does with them, like using an execution device as an impromptu elevator.

Riven is essentially two large puzzles, but they're two devious head-scratchers which will require you to travel to all the islands to discover what they are, exactly, and piece together the information on how to solve them. The upside of having just two large puzzles is that you can explore most of *Riven* while thinking about them, since both lock away tiny but crucial areas of the world, instead of being roadblocks that must be solved right now before moving on to the next riddle. Hints to solve both those puzzles are everywhere, it's just that those hints don't always have the decency of telling you what they are. Going back through the game a second time, it's amazing to see just how many hints are thrown at the player that that don't really seem to be important.

Obviously, you'll also have to tackle smaller, more mundane challenges, like opening locked doors, extending bridges and fiddling around with machinery. In that vein, the very first obstacle is deceptive – a very flimsy-looking wooden door with a padlock on it, preventing access to a cave. Aren't those annoying? Those stupid doors you could usually break or crawl under only to have to walk all around the world to find a key for them? You could search that key for a long time before simply deciding to just click on the floor and crawl underneath the door. Each island is contained on one CD and you need to switch discs each time you move on to another, so prepare to see that "insert CD" prompt a lot if you're at a loss as to what to do next. The rereleased edition contained on one DVD does not have that problem, obviously. The game has ten endings, but there is a single good one and all the others are bad endings punishing you for doing something stupid (like annoying Gehn into killing you, which is still pretty funny). It seems like *Riven* is a much harder game than *Myst*, but the difficulty of a puzzle is extremely hard to judge – sometimes you "get it" and sometimes you don't.

D'ni was introduced here as a fully fledged language, so the more motivated fans can even translate their writing to get some extra background info. Important journals are thankfully written in English since they are a necessary read if you want to have any hope of finishing the game. If you started playing games to get away from reading, then Riven isn't for you.

Although there's very little human interaction in the game, the few actors help give the universe a lot of credibility. Gehn is fittingly theatrical and falsely civil... and he can also belt out a mean "O Sole Mio" in a secret Easter egg. The actress portraying Catherine is surprisingly pretty, which makes meeting her up close a pretty good reward for freeing her and saving the day, especially after all that wandering alone you've been doing. You can also catch a glimpse of some of the natives of Riven whom, subtly enough, do not speak D'ni. They speak "Rivenese", which is really a dialect of Papua New Guinea. In fact, the incomprehensible guard you meet at the beginning of the game starts by talking to you in Rivenese, then uses a sentence in D'ni probably taught to him by Gehn to "greet" newcomers. Seeing that this doesn't work, he goes for the more universal approach of robbing you.



Same island as before, just a little bit further. The plateaus are actually basins viewed from below.

There's another situation worthy of elaboration. In Gehn's bedroom, you can find a spherical machine with a lever on it. If you activate the lever, you will see a video of a woman saying some gibberish: "Blurga? Scrugla pridla bugga." Boring, right? Well, you have to understand that this woman is in fact Gehn's wife and that the D'ni words she is saying can be translated as something like: "Is this thing on? My dear Gehn, I will love you for all eternity". Considering the woman in the Imager looks thirty-ish and Gehn looks almost seventy, it really makes you wonder: How old is this video? How many times has Gehn watched it during his thirty years of confinement in a lonely world? It almost makes you feel some sympathy for the despot he's become. You can also find his journal on his desk, where most of his writing is steady, self-assured descriptions of his nefarious plans, except for a single entry about his wife. It is extremely pale and shaky, ending in a smudge that suspiciously looks like a single tear. This is really mind-blowing – it's got to be the most understated tidbit of background information in a video game. How many games require you to have knowledge of an imaginary language to understand all the nuances of its story? And *Riven* is literally full of little things like these, which most players will probably never notice.

All in all, *Riven* is amazing both from a technical and artistic perspective; it is also a masterfully created universe in terms of coherency and depth, plus the puzzles should really get your gears turning. It is one of the high points of the adventure genre.



Myst III: Exile

Initial Release Date: 2003
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / Xbox / PlayStation 2
Designer(s): Phil Saunders, Mary DeMarle
Developer: Presto Studios

After finishing *Riven*, Cyan was too busy chasing the wild dream that was going to be *Uru* to have time to make the next numbered installment in the *Myst* franchise. On the other hand, the fans were clamoring for a sequel, so the job was given to Presto Studios, who were not exactly new to the adventure genre since they had already created *The Journeyman Project* franchise. The

game still doesn't allow free movement, but *Myst III* does allow you to look around in 360° in each spot, much like the third game from Presto's own series. In other words, instead of navigating from photo to photo, you're moving from sphere to sphere.

Myst III tells the story of Saavedro, a native of one of Atrus' ages that was wronged by Atrus' two sons. To get his revenge, Saavedro steals the book of Releeshan, an age meant to be a new peaceful home for the remnants of the D'ni race. You once again play as the nameless character from the first two games and it's up to you to get the book back. Rand Miller reprises his role as Atrus. Sadly, the part of Catherine is played by someone new this time. The role of Saavedro is played by Brad Dourif, who was nominated for an Oscar in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Playing nut jobs seems to be his thing, since that's pretty much how he acts here.

As soon as *Exile* begins... a few things seem out of place. First, while the opening FMV is a very high quality shot of Atrus writing at his desk and brooding about the past, what he is actually looking at while pondering are drawings of his family. Those drawings look awkward and very out of place, especially inside a fullscreen video next to a flesh-and-blood human being. This is strange since there were already photographs in *Riven*. Furthermore, the video ends in a dramatic crescendo of chanting voices that, while well executed, doesn't fit the mood of Atrus's monologue at all. Jack Wall (who later worked on *Jade Empire* and *Mass Effect 2*) was put in charge of *Exile's* soundtrack and, while he is extremely competent, his style is a big contrast compared to the other games, despite visibly (audibly?) having tried to stick to similar themes. A little bit later, in the first moments of the game, Catherine and her baby Yeesha get stuck in a weird three second loop where she throws her baby in the air again and again, while you can hear distressing gurgles coming from the baby. These may seem like small details, but a few minutes after the game has begun, you can already see that some notes are off-key.

The graphics are neither a step up nor a step down from *Riven*. While the ability to look in any direction is nice and the game is certainly more colorful, the images seem to have been compressed and look a bit blurry compared to *Riven*'s crisp, almost photorealistic, stills. This is despite the fact that *Exile* relies on better hardware and uses up more space. Maybe it is a concession related to creating 360° stills? Another problem with spherical images is that there is a slight delay when moving from one spot to the other. This can get really aggravating when trying to quickly move between important areas.



This is one of Amateria's puzzle stations.

You start in J'nanin, a training age built by Atrus to show his unruly sons the Art of writing. J'nanin is a rocky beach and acts as a hub that leads to the three other main ages of the game. *Exile* is structured much like the first *Myst*, since you have to solve an easier riddle to gain access to another age where you'll have to face harder brainteasers in a similar vein. Each age

has its own type of puzzle and finishing them will give you a symbol needed to access the final area. The extra reward for solving each age is a really cool theme park ride, much like the transitions between islands in *Riven*.

Voltaic is a barren rocky age and, as the name might suggest, it is an age all about harnessing various types of energy and distributing it in the correct proportions to other machines. You should know the drill – a dam, steam, valves, levers, the works. The puzzles here are fairly traditional *Myst* fare, so there's not much more to say about them. Finishing it will let you ride a wire-guided airship through a canyon onto a floating island.

Edanna is a verdant world set inside a large bone-like pillar lost in the middle of the sea. A giant bird creature has built her nest at the top of the pillar, right near your link-in point. You will eventually need to save her from a carnivorous plant so she can get back to tending to her babies. This age also features the squee, a squirrel-like creature that emits a call that is the most distinctive sound in *Exile*, both weird and cute. Certain plants react to that sound by expanding, creating new passages. The little beast is cute enough, but all empathy one has for it disappears once he sees that they were trying to commercialize his sorry mug by putting it on merchandise. There's an ad right there on the back of the jewel case, which is bad enough on its own.

Edanna involves manipulating machine-like plants to move around. For example, some plants project reflected light and others react by stretching out when illuminated, forming a bridge. A giant jumping leaf is even nice enough to act like an elevator. The jungle looks fabulous, with lots of flowers and mushrooms glowing orange, green and purple. On the flipside, navigating inside tree trunks and narrow passages at weird angles through lots of visual clutter is very confusing. Completing this age will get you a free ride from the giant bird mommy and a toboggan slide.

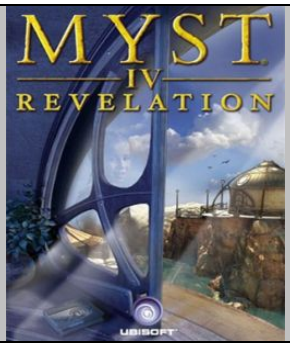
Amateria is a pagoda-themed age set in a perpetual twilight storm. The oriental theme is a bit too obvious and isn't really part of Cyan's leitmotif of going for architecture as alien as possible. This totally gives away the fact that *Exile* was made by a third party, at least to experienced eyes. But why complain, since it is the most gorgeous of *Exile*'s ages – bathed in purple light, full of glowing green crystals and surrounded by the sound of rolling thunder. Geometric shapes like hexagons and perfect spheres are also a theme here. All of the puzzles involve board game inspired control stations where the goal is to move large spheres across railings without breaking them or dropping them in the water. The highlight involves entering inside one of the spheres and going on a pinball ride through all of the paths you've previously created, which is quite an awesome sight. Amateria is a lot like playing mousetrap.

Completing all three ages will let you enter Narayan, Saavedro's homeland, where your actions will determine the game's finale. There is one last puzzle which will check to see if you've learned your "lessons" from Atrus' training ages. Although the concept of the final puzzle is really good, it requires you to input a lot of codes in a way that is not very clearly explained. This can lead to a lot of trial and error, something irritating so near the end of a game. Once again there is a clear good ending and a few bad ones involving you acting like a jerk or ending on the wrong side of Saavedro's sledgehammer.

While the ages are very nice and the puzzles mostly satisfying, *Exile's* puzzles are not as well integrated as those of *Riven*. The objects obey their own logic, but other than the fact that the ages are supposed to be puzzle ages to "train" Sirrus and Achenar, there is no deeper in-world purpose to anything found in *Exile*. The puzzles are just there, waiting to be solved, as some detractors of the *Myst* franchise would lament. The only bits of extra information to be gleaned come from Saavedro's notebook, murals and his recorded monologues.

Myst III is a good game, but it's hard not to compare it to *Riven*, which in many ways looked as good if not better, except maybe for the 360° thing. *Exile* is also a much less intricate experience than *Riven*, where every detail is accounted for. *Myst III* contains all the ingredients that are typical of the franchise and yet still somehow ends up feeling a little bit unofficial. A competent game, but the subtle touch of Cyan is missing. It ended being the very last game developed by Presto Studios. While the game garnered good reviews and sold more than a

million copies, it was deemed to be a relative commercial failure. It's hard to see what they were expecting, since by 2001 the adventure game genre was already in decline.



Myst IV: Revelation

Initial Release Date: 2004
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / Xbox
Designer(s): Patrick Fortier
Developer: Ubisoft Montréal

The fourth installment of the *Myst* franchise was once again handed out to a third party studio, this time to Ubisoft Montréal. The storyline undergoes a retconning in the fourth game, as Atrus' two sons, Sirrus and Achenar, are no longer lost forever after their prison books were burned in the original *Myst*. Not only are their books no longer destroyed, but they are also full-fledged ages without an exit door, instead of one-man prisons. The game thus takes place 20 years after the first *Myst*. (Forced exile and family troubles are really recurrent themes here, aren't they?) You can probably guess that your task is to explore these prison ages and see what happened to the two brothers. You are introduced to their kid sister Yeesha at the beginning of the game, but she gets kidnapped very early on, so you'll have to save her as well.

The opening video once again shows Atrus pondering about the past on his writing table. Interestingly enough, the drawings of his two sons on the desk are now actual photo portraits. That's probably because they are important characters this time around, or maybe they noticed the drawings were a little weird in *Exile*. They still kept Jack Wall's over-the-top orchestral music, though, as he returns to work on *Revelation* as well.

The first moments of the game are absolutely gorgeous – a classic *Myst* ride on a monorail, this time through a sunny canyon over a river. The music hits the right notes as Yeesha tells you a little bit about her family and gives you the chance to take a picture of their very photogenic house. Sadly, after those first few shots, the graphics never reach that same level again. The first area, Atrus' home in Tohmana (the same place where *Exile* begins), is also very well done. However, every area afterwards seems a bit less impressive, to the point where there are moments where it's hard to be sure if there was step up from the third game in terms of graphics. At least *Revelation* lets you choose your resolution up to 1024x768.

There's a bit more live-action this time around, it's just too bad the acting is not that great. Rand Miller is fine as always as Atrus. Sirrus and Achenar are no longer played by Rand and Robyn Miller, but by completely different people. While Sirrus is mostly okay, despite being guilty of chewing the scenery once in a while, Achenar sounds really unconvincing and unconvinced. Isn't he supposed to be the impulsive, aggressive brother? He does pick up the slack near the end, though. Yeesha has grown up from the baby in *Exile* and is now a young girl. The little girl portraying her is adorable, but she does have a French-Canadian accent, which some may find annoying. Anyway, nothing is as bad as all the priestesses that show up later in the game, all of them pointless and annoying. The "best" is the girl that has a hard time wrestling with the idea that she could take spare parts from one machine to fix another machine of the same type. The upside to all this acting is that every journal can also be read to you by its author, book on tape style.

While *Revelation* has kept the spherical stills from *Exile*, it has replaced the hyper-simple pixellated hand cursor for a fancy, animated 3D one. This new cursor reacts when in front of a hotspot, telling you what can be examined and what locations you can travel to. One problem is

that the hand reverts too slowly to its original position, giving you the impression that there are hotspots everywhere if you move the cursor briskly across the screen. You also need to open doors and operate levers by holding the left mouse button and dragging the object. The problem with that is that doing such an action changes the camera from being centered on the cursor to only panning when the cursor reaches the edges of the screen. This is a switch you can do at any time by pressing the right mouse button, but the game decides to do this by itself any time you drag an object. It sounds minor, but it's tiresome in the long run. To top it off, that 3D hand just looks ugly. Even worse: transitions between stills are slooow. In *Riven*, you could move as fast as your hand could point at the next hotspot. It might be the 360° spheres or the 3D cursor, but moving around in *Revelation* is long and tedious. *Exile's* movement was a bit slow too, but *Revelation's* is much worse. *Myst* is supposed to be known for its simple interface. Exploration should be as hassle-free as possible so you can spend time thinking about the bigger picture – the puzzles. *Revelation's* zip mode does mitigate the problem, since it lets you instantly teleport to any important location in an age, but it's simply not enough.



This is a temple in Serenia, where you choose an elemental "spirit guide" and go on a little dream trip. Bleh.

On the other hand, some interface changes are for the better. You are now given a photo camera and the ability to add text to your snapshots, so it's a great feature for those who are not too keen on using pen and paper to note things. If something looks important, you just take a quick picture, so it's five seconds of clicking instead of five minutes of recopying. However, it can be difficult to look at a picture and then input the information from memory, so paper still has its advantages. Luckily, you can also print your photos on paper to solve this problem.

Another item has been added to your inventory, one that's a bit more controversial. You find Yeesha's amulet lying on the ground early on and it lets you see visions of the past when looking at certain objects. Well, actually you mostly hear the visions, as very few are videos. The problem with these visions is that they're kind of useless – they very rarely have anything to do with the puzzles and the storyline details they offer are kind of irrelevant, not to mention that there are much better ways of giving them to the player, like subtle elements in the environment or good old journals. Who knows why they thought they needed to resort to magic or ESP, but that pendant sure doesn't fit the *Myst* theme. Anyhow, some of those visions are important, so you'll have to check the amulet every time you hear the noise signifying there's a vision associated with an object, just in case.

One last feature is that when your cursor is not on a hotspot, you can left-click to go "tap, tap" on any object to make a noise. Tapping on different objects will produce different sounds, like metal instruments clanging loudly, a wood table producing a dull ring and a stone wall making a very muffled sound. Anything your hand can reach, you can tap on.

There are three ages, once again. Spire is, well, a huge freezing spire made of nothing but various types of stones and crystals. As far as prisons are concerned, Sirrus really got the short end of the stick. The only life form and means of sustenance is a little bit of moss. The various crystals lets the programmers use a bunch of fancy lighting and transparency effects, but otherwise Spire is a bit barren, even if intentionally so. Sirrus is supposed to be the intellectual brother, so his puzzles involve scientific activities such as figuring out the properties of rocks, directing electrical current and using vibrations. It's surprising that Sirrus could build complex electrical circuits from nothing but his two hands and an endless amount of stone, but hey, you have to suspend that disbelief of yours sometimes. The puzzles in this age are satisfying and not too difficult. The final puzzle is a doozy, but you are given more than ample information to figure it out without too much trouble.

Haven is the age of Achenar, the strong, hot-blooded brother, so he got an appropriate prison – a beach with a pirate ship full of plunder and a jungle full of animals to hunt. Haven has the most wildlife in any age of *Myst* so far – you can see many species from small insects to dinosaur-like herbivores, hammerhead pterodactyls and of course little cutesy monkeys. Not only can you see these animals up close, but you can also see them interact with each other, like a predator taking down its prey. With so many animals to see, you can bet that some of this is going to be important. It's also interesting to note that Achenar built several camps on the age and visiting each one betrays an evolution in his mindset – he goes from a gruff brute to a lovey-dovey nature lover that lives with monkeys.

Speaking of puzzles, there's one in Haven that's notable for being particularly difficult – it requires you to send sound messages to monkeys in order to help them fight against a predator. The problem is that not only are the steps needed to succeed unclear, but the game also often fails to register the commands you're trying to send. You need to spin wheels to activate sound machines, but you're never told how long those sounds need to be or how many time the wheel must be turned. Stupid monkey, why won't you throw that rock? Ubisoft even released a patch to loosen the timing of the puzzle, something that has never been necessary in earlier games.

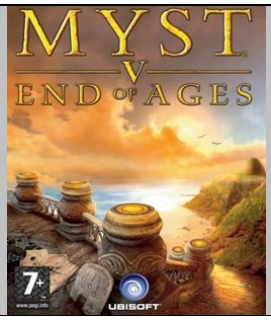
Serenia is the third and final age, which you can only complete with the help of information found in the two previous ones. The exploration is bad enough in *Revelation*, but Serenia just adds insult to injury. It is supposed to be some kind of lush paradise, but the place is just wrong. It's full of New Age silliness like floating soap bubbles, memory chambers, spirit guides, dream worlds, life stones, palm readings... and a bunch of chicks that are really into togas and face painting. Seriously, there are like six different women that show up and none of them have anything helpful to say except gobbledygook about dreams and spirits. Yeesha loves the place, so maybe it explains why she turns out to be such a hippie later in *Uru*.

It makes no sense that these people would have to commune with the spirits of their ancestors in their dreams to find somebody that's two hundred meters away from them. And everyone is on a tiny island! Less LSD, more observation. The worst bit is that you'll be forced to go on your own spiritual journey, with wonky visuals, trippy music, magic wormholes and everything. At least your spirit guide is voiced by Peter Gabriel, so that's pretty stylish.

However, before you can go on your little mental trip, you need to give a gift to get a spirit guide. Can't travel dreams without one of those, don't you know? The difficulty is that the gift in question will break if you move the cursor too quickly and will also break if you take too long before giving it, and the spirit guide will change spots if you screw up. Later on, you'll also need to redirect water by blocking certain rivers. The problem is that you have to navigate in a maze where it's impossible to visually follow a river to see where it ends. Both these puzzles are done in the same area, so prepare to get sick of seeing the same scenery over and over again. Maybe it's the setting or maybe the game is too long, but all of the final puzzles feel extremely irritating. You think that the game is about to end so you start getting pumped up to see the conclusion, but then, bam! The game throws you a puzzle wall. And then another. And another.

In conclusion, *Myst IV* is the weakest of the series. While the production values are there and the graphics fairly high quality, a lot of things prevent it from being too enjoyable. The final

third of the game in Serenia is much too long, and the puzzles require a lot of tedious back and forth. The other areas are much better, but the awkward exploration makes the puzzles more tedious than they should be. There's also too much live-action, character visions and voiceovers. All this chatter doesn't really suit *Myst*, but what makes it really mind-numbing is that the acting just isn't very good. *Exile* and *Revelation* proved that the *Myst* franchise is best left in the competent hand of Cyan, which is exactly where *Myst V* comes in.



Myst V: End of Ages

Initial Release Date: 2005
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Rand Miller, Ryan Miller
Developer: Cyan Worlds

After two quasi-successful attempts by third party companies at replicating the *Myst* formula, it was time for Cyan to get back behind the wheel again. As its name implies, *End of Ages* was meant as the final entry in the series – after the failure of *Uru*, it was decided to produce the franchise's curtain call. In fact, *End of Ages* is actually made up of unused concepts meant for *Uru* and you can also spot that some assets were taken straight from it as well. On the other hand, that doesn't meant they skimped on the original content. Most puzzles are solved through the new mechanic of drawing on special tablets and you can finally meet and interact with the Bahro, creatures that were hinted at in *Uru*, but rarely seen.



This is Taghira. Those are spherical trees and the triangular thing is a hut.

Mere seconds after booting up the game, *End of Ages* feels like coming back home. It is in part the locales – the game starts out in the same room where the first *Myst* ends and *Riven* begins. Shortly after, you are transported to the inside of the crater that you see in the desert at the beginning of *Uru* but can never reach. That crater is in fact the entrance (or rather, the exit) of the Great Shaft, a tunnel built by the D'ni that links the surface of the Earth with their underground world. It's a place of significant importance to the *Myst* universe and is one of the central areas of the Book of Ti'ana novel. However, the feeling is not just in the places – it is in the art design in general. Jack Wall has been replaced by Tim Larkin as music designer and the

latter delivers a much more atmospheric score. The buildings once again sport that unique blend of tribal architecture and steampunk stonework that is the style of the imaginary D'ni civilization. The game boasts some of the best texture work out there. It's in the skies, the caves, the clothes, the architectural details, everywhere.

The story in *End of Ages* is even more barebones than usual. You just pop into existence, touch a stone tablet and then Yeesha shows up and gives you a speech as well as the quest to restore the tablet by touching others like it in the game's four main ages. There's also something in there about freeing the Bahro from enslavement, a species of monkey-like creatures with the innate ability to link. They play a pretty large part in the plot of *Uru* and are fairly significant here too. Anybody that isn't on the side of the liberation of the Bahro will obviously turn out to be utterly evil under the surface. Boy, black and white morality sure is fantastic. Also, slaves of what? There doesn't seem to be too many slave drivers around – everybody's dead!

The other main character of the game is Esher, a D'ni survivor played by David Ogden Stiers. He does an excellent acting job, although some fans say that his D'ni accent in not authentic, whatever that means. What is more notable, however, is that he pronounces "D'ni" as "duck knee". Esher shows up quite a lot in the game, many times per area. That doesn't make *End of Ages* a verbose game, but it's still more than the other games, *Revelation* excluded. The people at Cyan decided that *End of Ages* needed a bit more character interaction to give a better sense of the setting for new players. Esher is also meant to hold your hand through the puzzles, so he gives out hints as well. It's a good thing that Cyan's definition of "holding your hand" is telling you things that you don't quite know if they're supposed to be hints and advice like "this place is different" or "the door is locked but you can find another way around".

End of Ages is supposed to be set some 200 years after the other four games, sometime around the present day. It's after the events of *Uru*, and Yeesha gives subtle hints in her journal that the DRC (D'ni Restoration Council)'s efforts to revive the D'ni civilization have failed. She must mean this both in the context of the game's story and outside of it, since *Uru* was a commercial failure. That could explain why *End of Ages* has a certain tinge of bitterness to it. Strangely, the characters seem to recognize you as the same person in every game despite the fact that they are now hundreds of years apart. Are you D'ni? Are you a time-traveler? Or an immortal? Maybe you're the Wandering Jew? Here's another mystery for you to ponder.

Much like *Uru*, *Myst V* is completely in 3D, except that navigation is exclusively first-person. *End of Ages* offers a control scheme to please everybody: frame by frame like *Myst* and *Riven*, sphere by sphere like *Exile* and *Revelation* or full 3D movement like *realMyst* and *Uru*. All modes work very well, but it's hard to use something else once you're given the option to move freely. The cursor actually goes back to being a simple and efficient 2D hand, but retains the upgrade of reacting when flying over a hotspot. So it's the best of both worlds.

There is no more FMV in *End of Ages*, as all character interactions are handled through polygonal models. The characters' movements are actually really fluid and natural. The face texture is obtained by filming the real actor and then putting it on a polygonal model, similar to the technique used in the *Siren* games for the PlayStation 2. It works, but it's also a bit creepy.

The puzzles in *End of Ages* use a new mechanic – Bahro stone slates. Basically, they work like this – you draw on them with the mouse, drop the slate to the ground and a Bahro will pick it up and react if the correct symbol is drawn. Each age hides symbols that act as checkpoints. Drawing those allows you to reach areas you couldn't otherwise, pretty much like how Journeys work in *Uru*. Each of the four main ages also has one special symbol that affect the environment, much like a magic spell... those Bahro can pull some fancy tricks that you'll have to discover by yourself.

There are four primary ages this time around, not including Direbo, a tiny age serving as a shortcut connecting the other ones. Taghira is a prison built on icebergs and the first main age. Criminals were sent there and left to fend off on their own. You can see some of the structures they built to take advantage of thermal currents and bulbous trees also survive thanks to the heat. The puzzles here are really simple, as the ages are placed in ascending order of difficulty.



This is the beach in Noloben. The bubble is the spot you use to link from age to age.

Todelmer is an age under a perpetual starry sky designed as the perfect spot for an observatory. You'll need to use telescopes to locate things around the area. Noloben is a beach island with a grassy plateau and a weird egg structure in the middle. A vanilla sky can be seen above, probably one of the most stunning skies seen in a game. The island is surrounded by what sounds like Northern Gannets, nesting and flying around. The only real challenge here is finding your way into the egg hut, but it's the most difficult puzzle in *Myst V*.

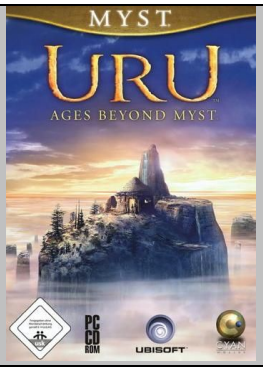
Laki'ahn is a tropical island used as an arena where humans fight large sea creatures for sport. The sky here is deceptive... a solid block of blue after so many great skies in every age? Right when you think Cyan dropped the ball, here it comes – Laki'ahn undergoes a showy eclipse every fifteen minutes or so. As the final age, Laki'ahn is also a bit longer than the others.

All of the game's four main ages are found along the way as you go down the Great Shaft. You can either solve them one by one or go all the way down the shaft and then solve the ages. *Myst V* is a bit shorter than *Myst IV*, but it won't last so long as to get on your nerves like the latter, so maybe it's a good thing.

The puzzles in *End of Ages* are a bit simpler than those in its predecessors, but they aren't especially easy either. There's nothing in there as bad as the worse head scratchers in *Uru* or *Riven*. The only problem with the puzzles is that the drawing recognition is a bit, well, sketchy. You shouldn't expect great precision from drawing recognition programs or great drawing skills from the average gamer, but there are still some major bugs. As an aside, it's interesting to note that you can finish the game in a few minutes provided you know all the right symbols in advance. It's similar to the first *Myst* in that respect

End of Ages is supposed to be about the player making an important choice deciding the ultimate fate of the D'ni (says right there on the box: "Decide the fate of a civilization"). Who knows how they came to that statement. *End of Ages* is like all the other *Myst* games – one good ending and a few bad ones that punish your stupidity. It's strange how they can pretend that this game somehow offers a more interesting or more important choice at the end. All of the endings are a bit sappy and awkward. They tried to give the series a definite conclusion in a few minutes of dialogue so the whole thing comes across as forced. You're asked to perform an action that has incredible consequences, but you've never been told what those are exactly and haven't been given reasons to care much either way. You're supposed to be righting hundreds of years of wrongs in one gesture, so that also comes out extremely forced as well. What those wrongs were is very vaguely alluded to in Yeesha's journals and might not be obvious even if you've played the earlier games, since *Myst* has always been stingy about storyline details. It's very hard to consider *End of Ages* the ending point of anything, especially since the series' motto is "the ending has not yet been written".

However, one of the perks of finishing the game is that you get to return to Myst Island. The age has become a dilapidated dump since your last passage there, but it's still cool to revisit it, especially under a different light. Unlike the spoof in *Pyst*, Myst Island doesn't become a pile of ruins because it was trampled to death by tourists, but because it was completely forgotten over the years. *Myst* went from a place full of unassuming mystery to an abandoned wasteland, a progression that reflects Cyan's unfortunate fate as a company. It's certainly a lot more interesting than Yeesha's nonsense speech about curses being lifted, kingdoms being earned and shackles freed from. The sad fate of Myst Island reveals much more about the franchise and says it in a manner befitting Cyan's storytelling specialty – without uttering a single word.



Uru : Ages Beyond Myst
AKA: DIRT (D'ni In Real Time), MUDPIE (Multi-User DIRT, Persistent Internet Entertainment), Uru Prime, Uru Live, Uru: To D'ni, Uru: The Path of the Shel, Uru: Complete Chronicles, Until Uru, MOUL (Myst Online: Uru Live), MORE (Myst Online Restoration Experiment), MOOSE (Myst Online Open-Source Experiment), MOULagain, etc.
Initial Release Date: 2003
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Cyan Worlds

If the original *Myst* is the contender for ports, *Uru* is a contender for the largest amount of deaths/rebirths. The reason why is simple – creative ambition, and too much of it. The brainstorming for *Uru* started right after *Riven* shipped out the door, making it a member of the illustrious club of games that took more than five years to create, a sure sign that either the developers or the publishers didn't know what they wanted, or wanted too much. *Uru* was supposed to be both a single player game (*Uru Prime*) and a MMOA, a Massively Multiplayer Online Adventure game (*Uru Live*). What? Adventure, online? If that sounds fishy to you, you may be right.

The word "uru" is Sumerian for "deep city", which is fitting for D'ni, a city built miles under the surface of the Earth. Uru is also a word spelling "you are you" which is handy since the game encourages players to be their real-life selves... possibly with a little more hair, a bit less body fat or maybe just a hat or something. *Uru* is set in the present day and revolves around a ragtag organization of individuals restoring the underground city called the DRC (D'ni Restoration Council). This is unlike the previous games in the series, which happened at an unspecified moment in time more than 200 years ago.

For the first time, instead of revolving around Atrus, the game is actually about his daughter Yeesha. The fact that Atrus could link to new worlds is pretty extraordinary, but Yeesha takes things a bit further as she is a lot more mystical. In fact, the powers that be at Cyan had made up some fairly rigid rules as to what people can and can't do with linking, but Yeesha throws those rules right out the window. This is mostly out of convenience, so every player can have his own home base and upgrade it. In this case, instead of "a wizard did it" you could say "Yeesha did it". Other than that, she peppers your adventure with semi-poetic prose and sends you on some unfathomable quest. You shouldn't expect much guidance from *Myst* NPCs.

They also added in the Bahro, and appeared again in *Myst V*. The Bahro look like shaved monkeys with bug eyes and they have the ability to link without books. Part of the mission given to you by Yeesha is to free these creatures. It's hard to know how you can help them exactly and why Yeesha particularly cares about them. Maybe she has PETA sympathies. It looks like her style. Their liberation is supposed to be a morally ambiguous moment (à la *Shadow of the Colossus*) but it's really hard to know where they were going with these guys. *Uru* went belly up (more

than once, one might add) without giving the Bahro much of a spotlight, although it seems Cyan had a plan for them that was in the process of being unveiled.



For the first time the world of Myst was explored in 3rd person.

It's hard to say why Cyan decided to add these things. The *Myst* series used to only be about human and the D'ni, which are also human unless you're really interested by the nitty-gritty details. Adding another species of anthropomorphic creatures to the mix feels like stretching things in a strange new direction. It appears that part of Cyan's plan was to create dissension among players by sending mixed information about the Bahro's nature and by seeing which people join the "beast-lovers" clan and the "angry xenophobes" clan. Good or Evil? You see, "Bahro" is supposed to be some D'ni racial slur meaning slave or beast, so some people were running around trying to find a more politically correct name for them. So Cyan succeeded to an extent. If you want some extra food for thought, you should know that the Bahro's screams are in fact heavily modulated human voices.

Uru is played in third-person perspective, a groundbreaking and almost sacrilegious first for *Myst*. First-person perspective was added in at the last minute to ease the moral outcry of the traditional fans, but the third-person camera usually pans in way that shows the environment in its best possible angle and lets you see otherwise hidden objects. Things also look somewhat stretched out in first-person (probably because some objects were meant to be seen from another angle), but all in all, first-person still works serviceably.

In *Uru*, the mythology of the D'ni has progressed to a point where it's really hard to point a finger on a specific influence, so the *Myst* universe is really starting to look alien. It's impossible to come up with a new universe without being inspired by real-world influences, but you can chop and mix those influences in a way that makes a resulting paste that doesn't exactly taste like anything else. It looks like a mix of the art nouveau use of floral motifs and round shapes, tribal scribbling and cave paintings, Islam-inspired use of abstract geometrical shapes with a bit of steampunk added in for good measure.

Sound design is a major part of any *Myst* game. The music here is composed by Tim Larkin, who also provided the soundtrack to *Myst V*. His main objective during the creation of *Uru's* soundtrack was to imagine what kind of music a completely unfamiliar society would make. To achieve this, he relied primarily on percussions (any society will figure out how to bang on stuff to make sounds, right?) but he also gathered a lot of exotic-sounding instruments, like the didgeridoo, duduk and the gamelans. A group of Maasai singers even showed up near Cyan's offices for a concert, and Tim obviously didn't pass up the occasion of recording them. There's also a heart-breaking piece sung by a young soprano that's used in the Kadish Gallery. Tim Larkin's soundtrack is mostly atmospheric and is played at key moments. It is not meant to

upstage the sound effects, something that is still rare in video games and yet is one the *Myst's* defining characteristics.

The majority of the sound effects were handled by Christopher Clanin. Most of them were made by combining different noises in a program to create the right "feel" for certain objects, while the rest were ripped right out of nature. Clanin would sometimes run out of the office with a microphone to directly record a running stream near Cyan's building. This is one of the great perks of living near nature and probably lets a sound designer get a better feel for what a landscape should or shouldn't sound like. Once again, familiar sound effects are often used in original ways to make them feel strange and unknown. Some of the computer-modulated sounds include the effect played when a Bahro pole dissolves, which is a mix of abstract sounds, electric sparks and whale calls. Some of the bird songs used to create the alien soundscapes are actually performed by the goose, the loon and the great horned owl, but as far as the cooped up layman is concerned, they might as well be jubjub birds.

This is pretty enthralling – the wind blowing, trees gently creaking in the breeze, water running peacefully nearby, the faraway rumbling of distant thunder followed by the echo of pattering raindrops heard from inside a cave (that's Eder Kemo, by the way). It's is a lot more engaging than some random J-pop track or rehashed Hollywood orchestration. As an example, it's easy to find oneself stopping the noisy machinery in Teledahn just to hear the surrounding marshlands and the sounds of the frogs singing. *Uru* really has some incredible sound design.

But what about the puzzles? Well, Cyan decided to crank it up a notch in this one. In *Myst*, information on the D'ni was just background decoration. In *Riven*, you had to decipher the specific meaning behind certain cultural elements. In *Uru*, they pretty much take it for granted that you know your D'ni numbers and have a basic idea of how their stuff works. While there's a lot of the usual, "push a button, find out what it does" and "find your way from point A to point B", almost every age throws a curveball at you. In fact, each age is a lot harder than what you usually see in most adventure games. Some puzzles feel totally arbitrary – they don't seem to offer the minimal amount of required information to solve them or ask you to make an illogical leap of logic. On the other hand, some puzzles make so much sense after knowing the answer that it's kind of embarrassing. It's easy to let *Uru* get the better of you.

Uru: Ages Beyond Myst

The first version of the game was sold in 2003. Much in the same way *Myst* helped push the CD drive, Cyan thought that *Uru* would help sell broadband connections. Hubris aside, considering the game was five years in the making, time has proved them right. Broadband connections were catching up, but not exactly because of their influence. Suffice to say, *Uru Live* was not as popular as expected. The beta test version of the game attracted somewhere between 10,000 to 40,000 people, but apparently something didn't quite work so the team decided to scrap the online component even before officially launching it. Some of the select few fans did get to try it and fondly remember the good old days of the beta test, though. It truly was a magic time, if you take their word for it. *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst* was then released as a single player game only. Nevertheless, even in its half completed, half aborted form, *Uru* is still the biggest adventure game ever, especially considering all the later expansions.

You start the game in a small crevice known as The Cleft, lost somewhere inside the New Mexico desert, without a single word about what to do. Beautifully *Myst*-like isn't it? This is the only location that is part of good old Earth as we know it. This place is of special importance to the *Myst* universe as it is where the D'ni have dug a tunnel from their underground world to the surface called the Great Shaft. The name Cleft also refers to a small dwelling where many members of Atrus' clan have lived. You are guided by Zandi, a Hawaiian shirt-wearing dude waiting to nudge along people like you who stumble in his desert. He passes the time by reading next to his trailer and listening to a Peter Gabriel song over and over (take a look at his bag of chip: D'nitos... get it?). He generously tells you your first goal: to listen to a message left by a

woman named Yeesha. She will then send you on your next objective: find seven Journeys (hand symbols made of cloth) in the Cleft and in each of the four ages of *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*.

Zandi can even give you direct hints for this "tutorial" age. *Myst* isn't known for holding your hand, so you'd better be grateful. Those Cyan guys are pretty clever – this age gives you an implicit primer on the three holy rules of *Myst* puzzles: restore power, look behind stuff and scribble down symbols. It's also interesting that this is the only area that uses a common instrument like the guitar in its musical theme. This was deliberately done to remind the player he is still in a familiar place. Everywhere else is going to be didgeridoos, whale calls and a mix of god knows what else. Rand Miller attended high school in New Mexico, a possible explanation for the choice of locale.

Relto is your personal *Uru* headquarters, which contains your wardrobe, your personal library of linking books and can be upgraded with various doodads. That's right, *Myst* is now collector and expression-freak friendly. The collecting/clothing mechanics may not be very deep, but they're still fun diversions that help take your mind off the puzzles for a bit and make you feel like you actually live in this world. For example, you can find a page that adds a pine tree to Relto that will grow to an immense size according to your computer's calendar (a subtle sign that the game was developed in Washington State). There's a lot of other stuff you can add too – a waterfall, lightning, butterflies, tall grass, a D'ni clock, strange alien-looking plants and so on. You can also upload your own pictures and music to the unlockable Imager and Cannen music player by putting files in your *Uru* folder, but only in the offline version.

In the online version, almost every item is available at all times, so it's nothing rabid MMO fans could obsess over for more than 500 hours. It's kinda depressing that the player-friendliness and absence of artificial scarcity probably contributed to the game's failure. Maybe *Uru* would have worked if Cyan sold Pegasus mounts at outrageous prices. The only exception to this rule are "sparklies", little shining lights that show up somewhere in the world for one month online and add a light to a stone circle in Relto. Finding all twelve and completing your "calendar" would be proof that you're not new around the block and would reward you with a fireworks show.

Relto also has another important use. You always carry its book with you and can link back to it from the menu or by pressing F3. Your character will "panic link" automatically whenever you miss a jump and are about to fall to your doom. Yes, that means *Uru* involves some platforming elements, but it's nothing even a barely competent player can't handle. Those who expected a game requiring no platforming skills whatsoever will be frustrated, since every time you panic link the games loads back to Relto, which requires you to walk back to where you were to try again. And yes, Relto does look like the original Myst Island.

The age of Kadish Tolesha is a forest under a purple sky where trees have grown to be hundreds of meters tall and have swallowed all man-made constructions. Early on, you can use a book to link to a cathedral-like gallery where the glasswork shows symbols that look suspiciously like those found in the main age. Yeah, you had a good reflex with your pencil there, but this is not going to be that easy. The puzzles here aim to deceive by their simplicity. This has to do with the function of the age. Can you see what is not there?

Teledahn is an orangish swamp with mushrooms so big the main one is used as a building. The local sun actually rotates around the world every minute or so. Weird. The age was used as a granary and exploited for its edible mushrooms, but the place hides a deeper secret. The Fry-Man aquarium makes a cameo appearance in the main office. The Fry-Man is an aquarium with a triangular open hole in the middle (no leaks!) that was created in real life by Tony Fryman, CFO of Cyan. It has nothing to do with anything, but it really shows what kind of place Cyan's offices are.

Gahreesen is a rotating prison located in a jungle valley. The rotation is supposed to prevent people from linking in the place and breaking people out, at least that's the idea. It took a bit of programming ruse to trick the player into believing the buildings are actually rotating, since sometimes the entire prison is rotating, sometimes only part of it is and sometimes it's

actually the background that's doing the merry-go-round. This is where you get your "KI", a handy note-taking thingy that is part camera, part PDA, part watch.

Eder Gira and Eder Kemo are twin ages that share seven Journeys. One is a volcanic age of orange dirt, cacti, lava and geysers. The other is a tranquil garden that is nonetheless prone to rainstorms every ten minutes or so. These places barely even offer any challenge at all, except for the last bit. That part has got to be one of the most obtuse puzzles ever. It involves playing around with the game engine in a way that seems impossible to figure out on your own. The fact that you can only find the barest of hints about what you should do doesn't help either.

Uru: To D'ni

The first expansion pack to *Uru*, released shortly after Cyan's decision not to go ahead with their online component. It basically adds back in the areas that were supposed to be the public multiplayer zones of the game. It was free to download.

Finally, you can visit the ancestral home of the D'ni found somewhere deep beneath the Earth. Their civilization is as dead as the dodo, but the buildings are still standing. This was supposed to be the central area of *Uru*, with the DRC repairing it and the players repopulating the area. When the game was picked up again by Gametap and released under the name *Myst Online: Uru Live*, these areas finally got a chance to be inhabited. D'ni is technically a single city, but it contains dozens of separate sub-areas and can be accessed through different links.

D'ni is actually split into two sections: Ae'gura ("downtown" in D'ni), an island where all the important buildings are located and an endless amount of neighborhood areas attributed to groups of players. In the online version, every player is a member of a neighborhood. Although they're all the same, you can still personalize them a bit by putting your own messages or pictures. The central area, however, is a lot more interesting since it's filled with larger-than-life constructions and all kinds of decadent architecture. An example of this is Kerath's arch, a gigantic obelisk-like structure whose tiny central slit is the only entry point for ships into the main island's bay. You can also find the Kings' Room, a circular chamber filled with books relating the history of every king of D'ni. A commendable writing effort, but still hopelessly boring unless you're dying to know who begat whom.

Despite being meant as a public area, a puzzle was still added to the city. The goal here is to reactivate the Great Zero, a large device which serves as the D'ni's own GPS locator. It only works in the cavern, though. Great Zero is a really stupid name, but guess which point the machine uses as its absolute origin? If you determine the position of any object in relation to yourself, you're pretty badass, no matter the name. Anyway, the goal here is to track specific points in space, a task that's not too hard but nonetheless a change of pace compared to the usual *Myst* puzzles. One the Great Zero's axis literally cuts right through the city – straight through a hollowed stalagmite in the central plaza, down the middle of a huge flight of stairs and exactly through the narrow slit of Kerath's arch. Visibly, the D'ni liked precise geometry as well as puzzles.

Uru: The Path of the Shell

This is the second offline expansion to *Uru*. It adds the Watcher's pub to the city of D'ni as well as the following ages. The Watcher's pub is actually a building with no door, which can only be accessed by linking elsewhere and back in it. It was probably a great way to keep the rabble out. The Art of linking can make for great imaginary architecture.

Er'Cana is a harvesting age built inside of a canyon. You start out in the canyon area near some bizarre plants and your first goal is to enter the main building. After you enter the actual complex, you'll need to mess around with machines for them do to your bidding. This age and Ahnonay both belonged to a D'ni rich guy named Kadish (why yes, as in Kadish Tolesa, the very same). How these places tie in together (and they do) is going to take quite a bit of figuring

out. In the online version, this is the place where people are persuaded to cook pellets for no purpose than to get them to toil away.

Ahnonay is an age of mind-blowing goodness. You can only reach it through a small watery cathedral. Once actually there, Ahnonay looks like an ordinary island surrounded by water. It has a suspicious clock at the center and you can see a few villages in the distance. However, this place's true nature is very cleverly hidden. You can swim around to reach the villages but the strong currents prevent you from leaving the island. It couldn't really have been that easy, now could it? It's hard to say much about this place without spoiling anything. Ahnonay tells its own story without as much as a single word. It would be amazing if more games had the genius of being able to pull a trick like this off.



The buildings are in ruins because the man who wrote it was apparently a poor writer.

You can even revisit Myst Island. Yes, the very place that launched a thousand CD drives. Alas, you can't leave the tiny central library, so there's not much to do here, a reality so utterly lame there is no word in the dictionary for it.

All the content from *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, *To D'ni* and *The Path of the Shell* has been repackaged into *Uru: Complete Chronicles*. It's the definitive retail version available. *Uru: Complete Chronicles* was a really good buy... until they released the game for free a while later. Since it contains three separate "titles", each puzzle route is self-contained and can be completed independently. The ages within a title can be completed in any order too. This is great, since you have a lot of other things to explore and keep yourself interested in case one riddle stumps you for a long period of time. On the other hand, if you have a brain the size of an overripe watermelon, the fact that there's more puzzles and that they're harder than the usual fare might actually keep you interested for a few seconds. It's a win-win situation, really.

Of course, this story doesn't end here.

Myst Online: Uru Live

For a while, things were still. Players with technical know-how and a desire to get a feeling of the multiplayer experience could host their own private "shards" of *Uru* with Cyan's implicit benediction. This was known in typical *Myst*-fan euphemism as "Until Uru".

The incredible did happen, however, as Gametap (an all-you-can-download game service for a monthly fee) decided they needed an online game to complement their selection of classics, oldies and arcade ports. Therefore, in February 2007, almost ten years after development originally started, *Uru* was given yet another chance at life. Its name was changed

to the redundant *Myst Online: Uru Live* ("*MOUL*"), presumably to piggyback on the brand name recognition of *Myst*, hoping to increase its popularity.

The game finally got a real chance at life. Even then, it didn't become the success many thought it would be. *MOUL* lasted until Gametap decided to remove *Uru* from its roster in April 2008, less than a year and a half after it had picked it up. At least, this version introduces many new areas.

Eder Tsogahl is a small garden age ("eder" means garden, by the way) set in a grassy valley bathed in sunlight. Very soothing. This place contains one of the very few puzzles that actually make use of the multiplayer component – buttons must quickly be pushed in a specific order, something a loner can't pull off. Maybe that's why this book can only be found inside public neighborhoods and not in your personal library. The task requires a team of three to eight button pushers and a "door caller" to call out the numbers and organize the rabble into a coordinated button-pushing machine. Not bad fun, when you think about it. Eder Delin is a beautiful alien-looking forest with pastel colors of blue, purple and green. The place would also go through a summer or winter phase depending on the real-world months of the year, with different ambient bird song in each season. Puzzle wise, it's the same deal as Eder Tsogahl.

Negilahn is a tiny metal sphere with windows to look into a tropical forest. Kind of like a D'ni zoo and also known as a "pod" age. Weird monkeys and a humongous alien turkey sometimes show up randomly, but only very rarely. Actually seeing them sounds really exhilarating... like a perfect simulation of an impromptu meeting with an elusive animal in the wild. Maybe they were aiming for too much realism, because these animals are pretty damn hard to see. There was a lot of speculation on the existence of "triggers" that would get the animals to show up... the only answer was that it either took a lot of luck or just as much patience. The guys at Cyan weren't stupid enough to cheapen the experience by making the animals a formality to witness. Some buttons can be pushed to emit various animal calls, but god knows if these really attract the creatures. Puzzle-wise, have fun figuring out what you're supposed to do here. Negilahn is sort of neat, in a boring way.

Dereno is another pod age, this time stuck in a glacier. The lower level lets you see aquatic plants, a manta ray and various fish swimming below the ice. On the upper level, you can see the glacier stretch away in the distance as well as some peculiar ice formations. There's no trickery to the fauna in here, it's just always there. There were some technical problems with the ice here, since to some people it would show up completely black and to others it would look like a greenish rainbow. It's minor, but a pretty worrying precedent nonetheless – before that, there were very few graphical glitches worthy of mention in this game. It's just not Cyan's usual style to leave loose ends.

Payiferen and Tetsonot are more pods. Payiferan is set in a dusty desert with a few hills peppered about. The elusive beastie here is a desert dodo the size of a Tyrannosaurus rex. Once again, the bird is a pretty cool show for those who have a good karma level and whose stars are aligned just right. Tetsonot is deep under the sea. The windows are blocked and there's nothing in the pod except a bit of water and a blinking red emergency light. Really, what can be said about this? They weren't even trying.

Minkata is the only really outstanding age *Myst Online: Uru Live* has brought to the mix. Minkata is a flat desert of sand and wind that goes on for as far as you're willing to walk and get lost. The age has both a sunny and a night-time version, the latter displaying a breathtaking sky full of constellations. A great, tribal-sounding beat plays when you walk in the desert. This place was used by D'ni surveyors to train in the most difficult environment possible, so the task here is to find your way to specific spots in the desert. You are given a series of bearings and distances that you need to translate into a course. They even give the player the simple Arabic numerals for distance, which saves you the effort of realizing the D'ni actually count in base-25 (for example: for them "62" would mean "152"... just think about it). The place is disorienting, but if you're smart, there are a lot of ways to find your bearings around the place – the shadows created by the age's three suns, your footsteps in the sand, precise time walked, the stars, and so

forth. It's just a matter of figuring out where the instructions are telling you to go and finding a way of calculating your character's progress... but they've also added an extra catch just for the heck of it. Hopefully you still have some graph paper left from high school. Despite offering a good puzzle, there's not too much to see in Minkata. It is an empty desert after all.

Finally, Jalak Dador is a tiny age deep inside the jungle set on a square pattern of pillars. The age has no goal except whatever enjoyment you may get from messing around with it. You can move the pillars up and down or drop down geometric shapes that move around due to the physics engine. Basically, you can either make up your own board game or use the pillars and shapes to create virtual architectural art. Any game you try to play is purely freeform, though, so you'll have to enforce the rules by yourself. A minuscule age where you have to make your own entertainment? This was definitely a sign that *MOUL* was on its last legs.

Uru Live – The Aftermath

Why didn't *Uru* succeed? Really, there's nothing else to say first other that the idea of an interactive puzzle game is interesting, but nonetheless terrible. The problem with a Massively-Multiplayer Online Adventure game is that it doesn't work on a fundamental level. Killing stuff with other players (FPS, RPG, it doesn't matter) is a classic recipe and it works. Being with another player who has top level gear or is extremely skilled can turn the game into a cakewalk, but the second he leaves you're back on your own with your four copper coins, your wooden club and your terrible hand-eye coordination. Playing skills can only be gained through experience and good equipment is rarely given without compensation (hence people selling their "virtual property" on eBay). Adventure games, however, deal in another currency – information, a magic little thing that can be reproduced infinitely and once you know an answer, the challenge is permanently killed.

Adventure games rely on knowledge, so it's pretty difficult for players to interact together. This makes managing social interactions really hard. You can't really play with people who have done it all; they're just going to spoil the puzzles for you. They might be courteous enough to keep silent, but what are they going to do, sit there doing nothing while you mess around with stuff like an idiot for hours, their lips burning with the answer? For the record, players have typically been very mindful of spoilers. On the other hand, the rookie player with no integrity can ask for all the answers and burn through the game in a few days, while pretending to be a great mastermind. Doing this is perfectly legal (for now), but it sure makes the whole concept feel pointless. The only good way to play with someone else is for both to start from scratch and hope the other guy isn't too smart or too stupid. The only problem is that a week after a new area was released it was already old news, so good luck finding another person who hasn't solved it yet. The result is that solutions spread like wildfire, sometimes long before all the pieces of the puzzle were actually given to the players. You just can't leave a knot lying around a bunch of *Myst* nerds without it being untangled *fast*.

It also seems like the most basic of courtesies to tell new players what to do first: get your KI, subscribe to a neighborhood, complete the Cleft, get your sparklies and so on. That's what most would do and although it comes from good intentions, it totally kills the mystique of a game where you're not even supposed to be fed any context. *Myst* is about *not* knowing what's going on and taking in the atmosphere. Otherwise, it feels a lot more like running errands than being a stranger in a surreal land. In the *Myst Online: Uru Live* version, players didn't start alone in the desert cleft... so you didn't even have to walk the first few miles without anybody holding your hand. Wouldn't it have been better if you could at least feel like you took the first steps of your pilgrimage alone, only to stumble upon a vast inhabited universe? Wasn't that the whole point? Maybe if veteran players intentionally behaved like poetic assholes the "mystique" would have been preserved.



This is Er'Cana. The machine is some kind of train for transporting grain.

But no, players were nice folk and *Uru* was a wholesome game. An MMO where you can't hurt or kill anyone? An MMO where there was presumably as many women as there were men? Where women (or men pretending to be women) can't give themselves enormous breasts or slut it out in a very revealing outfit? A place where there was no harassment of any kind, at least that was prevalent? A MMO where every room is filled with university graduates? A place where people don't know or care to know what leet speak is, since the English language is good enough for them, with spelling, grammar, conjunctions and everything. A place where some people come in and talk about their *grandchildren*?

A boring utopia, isn't it?

It could be the fact that everybody was eerily friendly. Players didn't even have the courtesy of being snobby intellectual elitists. Everyone was usually more than eager to help, probably because they were bored out of their skulls since they had already done everything and were trying to pass the time until the next tiny update. When they were bored in the game, *Myst* aficionados would go to the forums and leave each other complex ciphers to unravel; that's the kind of people they are. There is another problem with *Uru* as a social sphere – it was appealing to the nice and outgoing crowd, but also to loners who didn't really see what the chatter was all about and wanted to solve things on their own. The multiplayer aspect is wasted on them. *Myst* has always been a series about solitude, after all.

But how about the online game itself, how was it managed? Well, creator-player communication was pretty bad, new content was scarce and no release date was ever successfully met. The communication part is forgivable, considering how Cyan is a company known for creating mysteries. Content, on the other hand, was much too sparse, which would lead to mass boredom. In an attempt to correct the situation, Cyan turned the sporadic updates into TV-like "episodes" that would squeeze one month's worth of content on the first week of every month (that didn't stop them from delaying the episodes, though). How could this have made sense in their minds? It's trading four weeks of mild boredom for three weeks of intense boredom, with extra lag as a bonus, since everyone is logging in the same week.

Maybe it would have been easier if *Uru* was a typical MMO – give a few enemies a palette swap, double their stats, copy/paste some trees and put a regular sword that shines blue at the other end. Put the next benchmark in progress behind hours of tedious clicking so people will shut up for a few months or so. Grinding may not be exhilarating, but it sure is convenient for keeping people occupied at busywork. Cyan did try to implement their own version of the thing – people could use a machine to "cook" pellets in Er'cana which would be used to feed the luminescent algae in the main city and restore the D'ni's natural lighting source to its former glory. This sounds all nice and good on paper, the only problem was that accumulating "pellet

points" had no coded effect whatsoever within the game and that the machine put on the docks to track the players' progress was pretty much stuck on the same number. Some employee was presumably waiting for the arbitrary moment to switch a zero for a one in the code and, presto, instant accomplishment! What a cop-out.

The fact that Cyan has very high artistic standards didn't actually help them meet deadlines either. Copy/pasting was looked down by the team; every important object had to be unique. However, these standards were starting to waver very quickly during the online Gametap era. They've added a lot of areas during that year, but none of them reached the level of complexity of the original ages or the level of quality one would expect from Cyan. Maybe they were better off putting an end to the project before things got too messy. Look at Tetsonot!



This is Ahnonay. The clock actually turns out to be pretty important.

The online storyline was actually handled by Cyan employees showing up live and in character playing DRC officials, handing out proclamations and chatting with the populace. This means you had to be there at the right time to witness any event firsthand, but if you did you felt *special*. A single event is particularly noteworthy – the death of Wheely Engberg. An earthquake in the cavern ended up trapping two young women under the rock wall of an Ae'gura pub. Nervous onlookers gathered near the scene while DRC officials relayed the girls' messages and information on the progress of the rescue attempt. Wheely's father Michael tried to send messages to her and when Wheely finally managed a reply, she said she loved him very much. Wheely said weakly that she felt a presence around her. During the event, the Bahro showed up at the cave-in. Were they helping or hindering the rescue attempt? Did they stop the linking books from working? After a day's work of clearing the debris, messages were sent that only one person escaped from the rubble. Wheely didn't make it. The news went through the community as a great shock and flowers were placed on the scene of the tragedy. A monument was later built to honor her memory and that of other lost explorers.

Of course, all this amounted to was somebody typing about a fictional character's death. The player cap in the main city was quickly reached so very few people were actually at the scene of the "accident" (even then, they would only be standing close to a roadblock). Most players would hear about the event from someone who heard that someone is reporting that somebody died. Like Chinese whispers, the news would get distorted a little bit every time a new person talked about it. It felt a lot like the actual kind of information chaos you can expect whenever a real disaster happens. On some level it must have been a success, since people were complaining on the boards that this was terrible and that they didn't sign up for this kind of stuff.

In its defense, *Uru* is the best looking MMO game yet... except MMOs are not supposed to look state-of-the-art, they're supposed to be lean, mean and lag-free. There wasn't that much lag

to begin with, but the main city would be very slow when it was densely populated, as the environments weren't intended to hold more than a few dozen players at a time. Even if things ran fairly smoothly, that didn't stop people from chatting about lag, but in MMO parlance, discussing lag is like talking about the weather. Anyway, no matter how great every place looks, you'll still get bored of looking at them for their own sake eventually. If there is no adventure and no exploration, well that leaves the game at risk of receiving the most shameful of titles for a MMO: the glorified chat-room.

If you weren't satisfied with *Uru*, at least Canadians and Americans had access to the entire Gametap catalogue as well for their seven bucks a month. If Uru didn't catch your interest long enough, maybe you could at least find something to like in *Silent Hill, Deus Ex*, *The Last Express*, *Heroes of Might and Magic*, *Zork*, *Fallout* and so on? On the other hand, international pricing for Uru was $13.95 US, but without any of the other games. Ouch.

Some people did blame Gametap for not sinking enough money into the still-not-very-popular *Uru*. Those capitalists, you know? Always trying not to go bankrupt. Not a drop of vision or artistic integrity in the lot of them. Of course, more reasonable fans would just realize that *MOU*L was never going to be a commercial success and that it was already a godsend that Gametap fuelled the dream for a little while longer.

Overall, *Uru: Complete Chronicles* is really fantastic. The puzzles are difficult, the visuals are appealing, the soundscapes engaging and it's all tied together by the invisible hands at Cyan in order to give everything an extra layer of depth. Collecting stuff was just the cherry on top.

The online experience is another story. It was too little content too late and with too many complications. While it may not have been a success, it still was a great flop, because it failed in a way games rarely ever do – reaching for the stars. It deserves a place next to other great commercial flops like *The Last Express* or *Shenmue*.

What is the deeper source of the problem? It's probably because Cyan describes themselves as an artist dominated-company instead of being a programmer-dominated company. It might explain the painstaking attention to detail, but it might also explain the hubris. Rand Miller's official answer as to why *Uru* didn't work: it was ahead of its time. Maybe after the successes of *Myst* and *Riven*, the folks at Cyan started to believe they could do no wrong, who knows? It does make a good story, though – a team with uncompromising artistic principles and an innovative, but flawed idea trying to appeal to gamers' better nature. Cyan is a company that always kept its soul, but a soul is an inconvenient thing when there are financial decisions to be made. Despite the ideals, Cyan pulled the plug when money ran out, like any sensible company would. Good decision, considering the company had to lay off employees and almost went out of business. You could say Cyan is company whose artistic reach exceeded its financial grasp.

In 2009, Cyan has reclaimed the distribution rights from Gametap's owners and plans to re-re-release the game once again, this time for free! It's hard not to recommend one of the longest, most challenging and most inspired adventure games... all for zero dinero, right? In this new project known as "*MORE*" ("*Myst Online Restoration Experiment*"), Cyan would stop providing new content but give age creation tools to the players so they would make any new content, while Cyan would sit back and maintain a certain degree of quality control. This sounded like a wonderful idea. "Sounded", because this project went down the drain almost immediately. On the other hand, Cyan still decided to make age creation tools available to the players in the future, except in an Open Source format where people will be able to do whatever the hell they want. Fewer headaches for them, but for a series built on immersion and intricately constructed universes, it's pretty worrying to think the fans could muck it up with inferior work. Amateurish modeling, crappy textures, people flying around, rampant porn... *Second Life* anyone? To be fair, some of the early projects do seem to fit the bill wonderfully, though.

As of February 2010, *Uru* is open for explorers and downloadable for free. Its new name is now *MOULagain*. While there was a lot of traffic on the first days of re-re-re-release, things have mostly calmed down since then. *Uru* is exactly like it was when it went offline in April 2008. It lives on, mostly deserted, but with minimal activity, as in some state of undeath. *Uru* is supposed

to be about a dead civilization, so it shouldn't really matter to new players. If anything, it makes the place feel more authentic. However, there is still no set date for when open source creation tools are going to be released and player-created content is made possible.

Precursors/parodies

The Manhole – Mac (1988)
Cosmic Osmo and the Worlds Beyond the Mackerel – Mac (1989)
Spelunx and the Caves of Mr. Seudo – Mac (1991)

These three games were the first creations of Cyan, before *Myst* saw the light of day. They do, however, share the same sense of exploration and discovery of their successor, except in a much more cartoony setting. The games are mostly activity centers, focusing on sightseeing and messing around with wacky contraptions instead of solving puzzles. Be warned, though – the games are supposed to be aimed at children and might even be called educational.

Pyst – PC (1996)



Coming back here doesn't feel quite the same as the first time.

Myst was apparently memorable enough to get its own parody game, *Pyst*, in which you travel to the island after four million players have reached it before you, "clicking, snooping and spreading germs" all around the place. *Pyst* was created by Parroty Interactive and features John Goodman as King Mattrus, ruler of Pyst Island. The "game" is mostly for laughs, as there are no puzzles and no goals except listening to the jokes. Quite the opposite – graffiti on walls give away the answers to some of the original game's riddles. The whole thing is ten interactive slides long and lasts about thirty minutes, so there's no reason to buy this except maybe as a collector's item. However, it's pretty ironic that this short parody involved more people than the full-length game it is based upon. It includes a demo for "*Driven*", their parody sequel, which was never released. There's also a vocal song sung named "I'm Pyst", sung by Goodman himself.

While most of the comedy comes from belching and farting noises, there are a few funny jokes in *Pyst*. Here's one of the funniest. It's a conversation between the two tour guides that goes something like this:

Cheryl: This cave was used by the primitive aboriginal people of Pyst for their ceremonies.
Bob: How primitive were they, Cheryl?

Cheryl: Their simple language was made up of a mere seven symbols: Hello Goodbye, Tree, Bad, Very, Luck, Martini and Death.
Bob: Wow, we know very little about them.
Cheryl: Yes, except for their final haunting sentence: "Very Bad Martini Death, Hello Goodbye".
Bob: Oh, I've had one of those...

Other adaptations

Myst – The Book of Atrus / Myst – The Book of Ti'ana / Myst – The Book of D'ni

Rand Miller, Robyn Miller and David Wingrove co-authored three novels to flesh out the story of the *Myst* franchise. *The Book of Atrus* relates Atrus' youth up to the events that leads to the very first *Myst* game. *The Book of Ti'ana* tells the story of Ti'ana, Atrus' grandmother and the first human to travel down the Great Shaft built by the D'ni to discover their ancient underground civilization. *The Book of D'ni* is set after the events of *Riven*, where Atrus tries to rebuild D'ni civilization and meets up with other survivors. This leads to a clash as some survivors depend on slaves to lead their opulent D'ni lifestyle. All three novels were also sold in a single volume, called the *Myst Reader*. There was supposed to be a fourth novel, *The Book of Marrim*, but it was put on indefinite hiatus.

The *Myst* novels received pretty bad reviews, as do almost all novels based on video games. They rely pretty heavily on descriptions, but that's something to be expected when writing about a race obsessed with machines and puzzles. The novels are not literature, but they're not bad either. They're still much better than the average third-rate fantasy novel. *The Book of Ti'ana* is especially good, as its story is mostly self-contained, and it is also the best written of the three. The novels are an interesting read if you want to learn more about *Myst*'s history.

The Book of the Black Ships – Passages (#0) / The Joining (#1)

Two comic books were produced as part of a larger series called *The Book of the Black Ships* about Sirrus' and Achenar's rise to evil. Technically, only the second comic is part of the *Black Ship* series, as issue zero is a side story about the legend of the creation of linking books. The comics were coauthored by Lovern Kindzierski, Chris Ulm and Doug Wheatley. More comics were planned, but Cyan did not consider the first ones to meet their quality standards (they switched the two brothers!) so the series was put to an end.

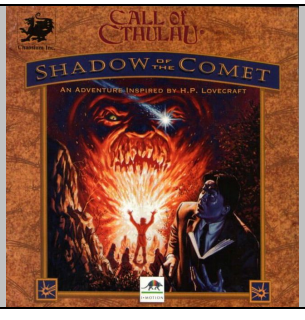
Myst Motion picture

At one point a *Myst* motion picture (called Project Passage) was in the works. The project is actually led by two people, Patrick A. McIntire and Adrienne Vanderbosch, who are more independent filmmakers than high-powered movie executives. Rand Miller describes the project as a "bootstrap operation", so don't expect lots of publicity or a clear production schedule. Like many game-to-movie prospects, it will probably never come to be.

Call of Cthulhu

Born in 1890, H. P. Lovecraft is perhaps the premiere American horror writer. His stories fed off one of the most basic of human fears, that there was something horrible lying just outside of the realm of the senses, incomprehensible to both science and religion. Many of his works are categorized as part of the Cthulhu Mythos, connected works of fiction about a series of deities of unspeakable grotesqueness, far older than humanity, who are simply biding their time until they can return and reclaim the world for themselves. Many of his short stories revolve around a normal person who somehow stumbles upon one of these abominations – or perhaps, the cultists who worship them – and is either driven to madness, or, if he's lucky, brutally killed.

Lovecraft's works have inspired many auteurs, who sought to replicate the same brand of horror, either officially or unofficially. One of the first such works was Infocom's *The Lurking Horror*, developed in 1987, and several other later games, including Silicon Knights' *Eternal Darkness* and Darkling Room's *Dark Fall* practically rip off the concept wholesale, despite not technically being related. A company called Chaosium, who had published the *Call of Cthulhu* pen and paper role playing game in the early '80s, decided to produce their own line of official games, which were led by a development team from Infogrames in France. Their two games – *Shadow of the Comet* and *Prisoner of Ice* – were not explicitly based on any Lovecraft story, although very specific elements were drawn for both, and any fan should be able to recognize their influences.



Call of Cthulhu: Shadow of the Comet

Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Didier Briel, Hubert Chardot, Beate Reiter
Developer: Infogrames Europe SA

Halley's Comet, one of the most well known astronomical phenomena, appears visible from Earth once every 75 years or so. In 1834, Lord Boleskine traveled from his home country of England to the quiet New England town of Illsmouth to get a better glimpse of the comet in action. He went mad and spent his remaining years in an insane asylum. Upon the next scheduled visitation in 1910, British journalist John Parker stumbles upon the story of Boleskine and becomes fascinated. He sets off to cross the Atlantic and attempts to follow in Boleskine's footsteps, with some impediments – mostly, anyone that knew of him is either dead, crazy, or simply refuses to speak of him.

Parker spends three days in Illsmouth, and the first day is spent interacting with the townspeople, who show varying degrees of friendliness or hostility towards his presence. It's only when Parker sets off to photograph the comet during that night when things start to get freaky – he happens upon a strange ritual in the middle of the woods, and upon developing his photos, discovers a pair of eyes staring directly at him. Further investigation reveals a group of families worshipping the demons known as The Old Ones, who, when called upon, will consume the Earth in their chaos.

The town of Illsmouth is obviously supposed to be a reference to Innsmouth, from *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, one of Lovecraft's most famous stories and one of the core elements of the Cthulhu Mythos. Despite both being small towns in Massachusetts, they are clearly different settings – Innsmouth was a creepy, run down village full of off-kilter locals, while Illsmouth, on

the surface, seems relatively normal. Therein lies most of the intensity, however – one goes into a Lovecraft story knowing that there's something insanely sinister behind the scenes, but it's all the build up that proves the most suspenseful. It's not until the later moments of the game that the real creepy monsters show up, making their appearance all the more impactful.



Nope, not modeled after Jack Nicholson at all!

The visuals do a fantastic job of establishing the creepy atmosphere. While the character sprites are unimpressive, the backgrounds are exquisite, with gorgeous pixel art that, at times, seems like it's based off real photos, and perfectly emulates the small town feel of a turn-of-the-century American town. Many of the townspeople are portrayed with full-screen portraits, many of whom are blatantly based on various American actors and actresses, ranging from Vincent Price to Jack Nicholson to H. P. Lovecraft himself. Certain actions, like picking up items or unlocking doors, are also accompanied with a close-up cinema using rotoscoped graphics, reminiscent of similar cinemas in *Out of This World* and *Flashback*.

The music, too, is surprisingly tense, and even the Adlib FM synth is remarkably capable in generating an extremely unsettling mood. There are only two real songs that loop continuously for a good chunk of the game, but they're so well composed that it's hardly an issue. The voices in the CD-ROM version are strange, because so much of the acting is extremely monotone. While this could be viewed as evidence of poor acting, in the context of the game, it actually fits the rather unsettling mood of the whole affair.



One of the horrors lurking beneath Illsmouth

While *Shadow of the Comet* is something of a brilliantly done horror game, it's let down by its rather unconventional interface. Despite being released in 1993, the game was not developed with the point-and-click interface in mind, and instead you're supposed to use the keyboard to maneuver Parker. To look at or interact with something you need to be next to it and then select the appropriate command. Any item you can pick up is highlighted with a sight-line. Using items is accomplished by equipping them, after which they'll be used automatically in the appropriate situation. It's all very weird and non-standard, and for no good reason either. The CD-ROM version adds some semblance of mouse control, but instead of directly pointing to where Parker will walk, it simply controls his direction relative to the mouse cursor. (If it's positioned to the left, you hold down the mouse button to make him walk left, and so on.) Parker walks slowly, although there's a quick map that lets you instantly travel to the major points of Illsmouth. Alas, only a handful of places are actually highlighted, and navigating the town on foot can get fairly confusing. There are several houses in the town, but it's easy to forget who lives where when there's no general "look" command to help you get a bearing on your surroundings.

The interface is at its worst during the climatic sequence of the second night, when Parker discovers a series of catacombs beneath the town graveyard. Many screens contain bats, rats, spiders, spikes, and various pitfalls, all of which need to be carefully avoided solely with the cumbersome controls. More frustrating are the occasional chase sequences, where you need to exit through a series of rooms in an extremely brief amount of time. All of these death scenes are indeed a necessity to invoke the kind of intensity these stories demand – what would be the point of a horror game if there was no threat of death? – but the controls really let the game down, and make these particular segments more frustrating than scary.

A few other factors can potentially irritate. There are a handful of possible dead ends, and a limited amount of save slots to counteract them. And for all of the halfway believable sorcery that comes with a story dealing with the summoning of ancient gods, the part where Parker escapes from a lighthouse by donning a pair of mechanical wings and jumping off is remarkably stupid. And yet, in spite of these pitfalls, *Shadow of the Comet's* other qualities ultimately overshadow everything else. It's a creepy, ultimately fascinating game, and a fantastic realization of Lovecraft's stories in an interactive medium.



Prisoner of Ice

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / Saturn / PlayStation
Designer(s): Philippe Chanoinat, Hubert Chardot, Frederic Cornet, Michel Monteille, Christian Nabais
Developer: Infogrames Europe SA

The year is 1937, and our hero is Lt. Ryan, an American in the British Royal Navy. During a mission in the Antarctic, the submarine HMS *Victoria* happens upon a piece of curious cargo. An attack upon the vessel causes the cargo to come loose, revealing a terrifying monstrosity that nearly spells doom for the entire crew. Upon their safe return, they learn that meeting these monsters – the eponymous prisoners of ice – was no isolated incident, as the Nazis seek to manipulate these demons in their quest for world domination. Although *Prisoner of Ice* initially seems unrelated to the previous *Call of Cthulhu* game, it is in fact a sequel, as Parker shows up about halfway through the game, having established a library in Buenos Aries. The events during the Halley's Comet appearance at Illsmouth also become a central event due to some crazy time

traveling, which also sends Ryan into the future to see what the world would be like if conquered by the Old Ones.

Unfortunately, *Prisoner of Ice* totally disregards the very rule of suspenseful horror that *Shadow of the Comet* pulled off so well – that is, to never show the killer right at the outset, to let a sense of dread build over the fear of the unknown. Here, you see a prisoner right in the opening minutes of the game, where it kills one of your crew members (and you, if you're not careful). There are similar situations spread throughout the game where you encounter one of the monsters and need to react in a timed situation, an annoyance lessened due to the autosave before any of these violent situations.

It doesn't help that the prisoners just aren't scary. *Prisoner of Ice* benefits from high res SVGA graphics (standard VGA is also available in the DOS release), but the computer rendered sprites look awkward even at their best. The similarly rendered cutscenes are also dated, although at least the painted backgrounds look fantastic. Unfortunately the Hollywood rip-off character portraits are totally gone.



The monsters in Prisoner of Ice are sadly kind of doofy looking.

The game also utilizes a more standard point-and-click interface, lessening the headaches of *Shadow of the Comet*, but it's drastically inferior in practically every other manner. The dialogue is sparse and the characters are ill-defined. Whereas in the first game you spent a good chunk of time uncovering the mysteries of the town, here you're put through standard (and rather pointless) puzzles like figuring out how to climb a gigantic bookshelf. The only real saving grace is the story. Although the "Nazis seek strange ancient power" thing is a bit too *Indiana Jones*, the twists near the end keep the story from becoming too derivative. It's also quite short and not particularly hard, which is both a plus and a minus – while it can be beaten in an afternoon, at least it doesn't suffer from too much padding.

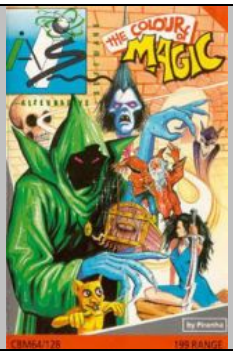
Versions of *Prisoner of Ice* exist for both DOS and Windows 95. It was also ported to the PlayStation and Saturn by XING and released only in Japan. Due to the low resolution of the consoles, the graphics are forced into visuals equivalent to the VGA version, and there are pretty substantial load times. However, only the text is translated, and the voices were left in English, making it mostly playable if you want to avoid any potential technical headaches with the computer versions. This version is subtitled "*Jashin Kourin*", which translates to "Advent of the Wicked Gods".

Discworld

Terry Pratchett is one of Britain's most popular, and most valued, humor writers. Since he began his *Discworld* series in 1983, he's written nearly forty novels set in the same universe, providing an expansive library that outstrips other fantasy authors many times over.

Discworld is about a world, appropriately shaped like a disc, which is held on the back of four elephants, who in turn are standing on the back of a giant turtle that flies through the cosmos. The Disc is a fairly typical fantasy universe, filled with wizards and barbarians and the like, although all of the common tropes are skewed and lampooned relentlessly, and there are numerous parodies, of both other fantasy fiction and of real life figures. At the heart of the Disc is the city of Ankh-Morpork, a den of filth and villainy that most would rather steer clear of. It's a city so rank that it contains legalized Thief and Assassin guilds, because regulated crime is easier to maintain than unregulated crime, or so their logic goes. It's a funny, richly detailed world, and there are dozens of recurring characters.

Despite its popularity, *Discworld*'s transitions into other media have been relatively limited. There have been a few comic books, some radio shows, a brief animation series on Channel 4, and a handful of live action made-for-TV films released in the early 21st century. There are, however, four adventure games based in the universe, many of which take elements from various books but are largely original. The first game, a text adventure, is a pretty faithful adaptation of the first book, but the other three are graphic adventures. In fact, the games often do a better job of representing the *Discworld* universe than any of its other adaptations, making them quite unique in that case.



The Colour of Magic

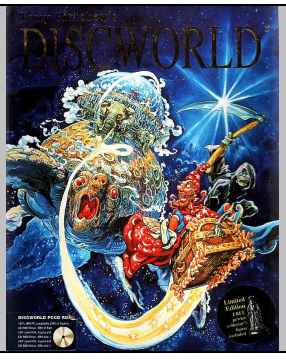
Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: Commodore 64 / Spectrum / Amstrad CPC
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Pirahna

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy proved to be one of Infocom's most successful games, so why not go down the same route and adapt *Discworld* into a text adventure? *The Colour of Magic*, based on the very first book in the series, puts you in the shoes of hapless wizard Rincewind, as he becomes a guide for the naive tourist Twoflower. The game is divided into four acts and follows the book closely, with the first two acts taking place in the city of Ankh-Morpork, the third in the upside-down dragon city of Wyrmburg, and the fourth in the country of Krull, which is perched on the edge of the disc.

There are occasional graphical portrayals of certain locations, although they're bland and ultimately pointless. The game is slightly bizarre in that it refers to the player in the third person as "Rincewind" rather than in the second person, as typical of other text adventures. It also tries to add to the flavor by requiring that you navigate via *Discworld* directions – instead of North, South, East or West, you need to use Hubward, Rimward, Turnwise or Widdershins, respectively. It purports to be clever, but it's more confusing than anything. Indeed, the whole of the text parser is pathetic. In order to converse with someone, you have to first type "TALK TO ___" and then "SAY ____", unnecessarily dividing a single command up into two. Good luck trying to get it to understand what you're talking about anyway. At one point you need to

feed milk to a cat. You'd think "GIVE MILK TO CAT" would work, but the correct solution is simply "DROP MILK". Certain events occur on a timer, and it's possible to miss them, rendering the game unwinnable. While the text captures Pratchett's prose well (and seems almost to lift from it in spots), these issues immensely hamper the enjoyment and doesn't provide anything new or interesting like the *Hitchhiker's* game did, so you're better off just reading the book instead.

Another adaptation of The *Colour of Magic* was released in 2006 for mobile phones, although it's an isometric action game rather than an adventure game.



Discworld

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation / Saturn
Designer(s): Gregg Barnett
Developer: Teeny Weeny Games /Perfect 10 Productions

In 1992, a company called Horrorsoft (later Adventure Soft) attempted to buy the rights to *Discworld* to create a fully graphical adventure game based on the license. They didn't succeed and instead made *Simon the Sorcerer*, which carried some of the same themes as the *Discworld* universe, but differentiated itself enough to stand on its own. A few years later, in 1995, two developers named Teeny Weeny Games and Perfect 10 Productions, were more successful, and released the first point-and-click *Discworld* game.

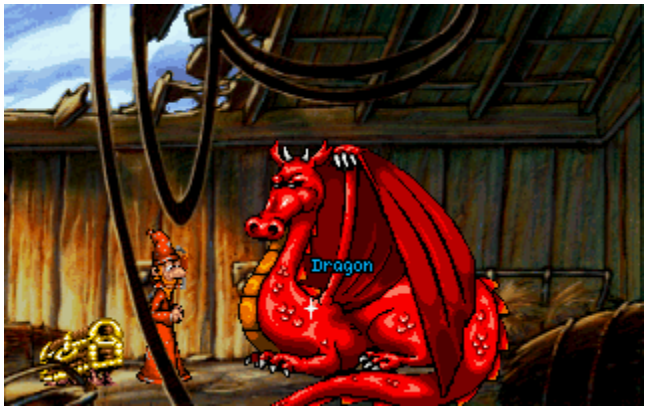
This game, simply titled *Discworld* (initially subtitled *"The Trouble With Dragons",* although this was dropped from the final release) is adapted from the 1989 book *Guards, Guards!* It involves a mysterious (and not terribly bright) order of cloaked men who summon a dragon into Ankh-Morpork, in an ill-conceived plan to instill their own king and rule the city. In the book, it was up to Captain Samuel Vimes and the City Watch to put things right, but the game does things differently. The members at Unseen University, home of some of the brightest wizards on the Disc (and a few of the stupidest), need to make some kind of effort to prove that they are not entirely useless. And so, the Arch-Chancellor elects Rincewind for the job, mostly since no one would miss him if he screwed up. Rincewind is one of the most popular *Discworld* protagonists, which makes him well suited to be the star. Beyond the initial set up and a couple of the situations, the game really doesn't follow the book that closely, although reading it makes a fine accompaniment.

Even if you're not familiar with the novels, the game serves as a fine introduction to the *Discworld* universe. Every time some bit of background lore pops up – for example, the question as to why the librarian is an orangutan – a nature show-style narrator appears and explains it, complete with diagrams. Although Pratchett's involvement in the game was minimal, most of the silliness is maintained, whether it be jabs at Rincewind's incompetence (and his girlish wizard robe) or long, silly, roundabout conversations that don't really go anywhere. Beyond Rincewind, there are a number of familiar faces, including Lord Vetinari the Patrician, the not-quite benevolent ruler of Ankh-Morpork; Nanny Ogg, a kindly witch with a thing for custard; and Dibbler, a slimy salesman who peddles some of the most questionable items known to mankind. When getting involved in precarious situations, Rincewind will be stalked by Death, a rather pleasant chap who SPEAKS DRAMATICALLY IN ALL CAPS, although since there's no way to die or get stuck, his taunts are largely for amusement. There are a number of other characters

that pop up who aren't explicitly named (including the members of City Watch) but will ring some bells with fans of the books. There are bits of fourth wall silliness, like the utterings of Rincewind when you keep poking him with the cursor (he'll eventually get agitated and take it away for a few seconds, before reluctantly relinquishing it) or he'll peer into the screen and yell a wake-up call if you let the game sit idle for too long.

For as deviously funny as it all is, *Discworld* is hard. Very hard. A good chunk of the difficulty comes from the rather freeform nature of each chapter, wherein Rincewind is sent to scour for half a dozen random objects or so. There's rarely any clue of where these objects are located, and sometimes their use isn't even apparent when you do find them. Plus, Ankh-Morpork is not a small city, with new areas constantly opening up, and each location usually consists of a handful of expansive screens. Things get even more confusing when you enter "L-Space", an alternate dimension (sort of) set approximately twelve hours in the past. That's a LOT of ground to cover, especially since obtaining one item usually requires obtaining another item or solving another puzzle somewhere else. Furthermore, the game never really leaves the city, and things change in each location after each act. It's fun to go around and see what's different and what new conversations you can have. It's not so fun to go through the same screens tediously combing them over for stuff when you're stumped.

And then the puzzles themselves are also quite nasty. For instance, in the second chapter, you need to hunt down members of the evil order and steal an item from them. You find one of them in a street, wearing a belt, and munching on some snacks. In the alley next to him, there's a toilet, and earlier in the game, you saw someone munching on a bag of prunes. At this point, the solution should be obvious enough, but no, the designers went several steps further. Before you give the man the prunes, you need to steal some of Nanny Ogg's "love custard", grab an octopus, and shove both down the toilet. Then, once you've fed the prunes to your mark and he heads to the john, he'll be unspeakably ravaged, and the belt is yours. That's all somewhat amusing, but it's also way too complicated.



He might look rather friendly, but this dragon is a huge danger to the city.

Then there are the kind of puzzles that you just sort of stumble into. In the third act, your goal to find several "heroic" objects, one of which is a mustache. During the course of the game, there's a running gag that whenever anyone gets knocked over and stunned, they proclaim "Did anyone get the number of that donkey cart?" It's not too funny, except later, when you come across a donkey and his donkey cart. They seem innocuous enough, but the license plate on the cart is smudged. You need to go through an elaborate series of hoops to clean off the plate, get the number, intentionally injure someone, and when they recite that annoying joke, you'll find that the donkey in question has been arrested. At this point, you're supposed to steal the scissors from the barber, snip the donkey's tail, and... there's your mustache!

It's true that an element of British humour is its unending amusement with the terrors of bureaucracy (Douglas Adams helped design an Infocom text adventure by that very name, it's quite good), and the inane puzzles that adventure games, especially this one, put you through for the most random objects, fits in nicely with that. It's all well and good in concept, but when you ask a player to go through all of these ridiculous steps in a game that's supposed to tickle their funny bone, not send them wandering around in confusion for several hours – well, that's an amusing bit of tragedy, really.



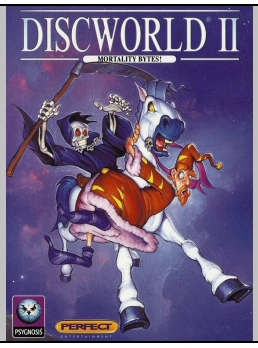
Death will often pop up in the middle of precarious situations.

One could surmise that the overwhelming puzzles were the works of amateurs – LucasArts games could be devious but never quite to this level – but the rest of the game proves otherwise. The painted background artwork is consistently fantastic, although they get old when you trudge through the same streets dozens of times. The character designs and sprite work are excellent too, capturing the silliness of the universe quite well. The music is grating and repetitive, but the voice work in the CD version is absolute top notch. Rincewind's voice is provided by Eric Idle, and he can make the most mundane lines seem absolutely hilarious. Many of the secondary characters' voices are supplied by Rob Brydon (a standup comedian), Jon Pertwee (one of the *Doctor Who*s), and Tony Robinson (Baldrick from *Blackadder*). The only problem comes with the overtly repetitive voice clips. After spending hours trying to use items together ineffectively or interacting with useless stuff, Rincewind's endless musings of "That doesn't work!" and "Nope! I can't shift it!" grow nightmarishly tiresome.

The interface is devoid of icons, as a single click on the left mouse button will command Rincewind to walk, a double click will tell him to interact, and the right mouse button will command him to look. Conversations are held much like *Sam and Max Hit the Road*, with icons to ask a question, tell a joke, make a comment, or ask about specific items or concepts. Rincewind's inventory is extremely limited, but he's followed around by his faithful Luggage, a sentient (although not terribly bright) multi-legged chest with infinite storage space. It's quite a clever way to integrate a story element into traditional adventure game design.

All in all, it's hard to hate this game – it's quite clever when it's not provoking frustration, and it's a damn fine rendition of Pratchett's books. But it really needed a lot more direction – and less convoluted puzzles – to make it work, leaving this one for the experts only.

Beyond the original PC release, *Discworld* was also released for the Saturn and PlayStation. They replicate the VGA graphics of the computer version perfectly, and while the point-and-click interface is a bit fiddly with the controller, the PlayStation version is one of the very few games to support the mouse peripheral. The loading times aren't quite as fast as the PC versions, though, although they're quite tolerable. The Tinsel engine is supported by ScummVM, so the DOS version is easy to play on a modern PC.



Discworld II: Missing Presumed..? (UK) / Discworld II: Mortality Bytes! (US)

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation / Saturn
Designer(s): Gregg Barnett
Developer: Teeny Weeny Games /Perfect 10 Productions

This sequel finds the Disc in an unfortunate situation. Death has apparently taken a vacation, leaving the Disc's residents unable to properly die. Immortality might seem enticing, but here, it doesn't quite work as expected – instead of simply living forever, the dead shamble onward as either zombies or ghosts, and none of them are too happy about it. And so, once again, Rincewind is tasked with saving the day. The basic concept is (very) loosely based on the novels *The Reaper Man* and *Mort*, with a variety of subquests consisting of a mishmash of various books, including *Lords and Ladies*, *Moving Pictures*, and *Pyramids*.



Discworld II begins during a drunken escapade with an orangutan.

The first *Discworld* game looked damn good, but this one kicks things up several notches. The graphics have been upgraded to SVGA, using cartoon-style cel graphics for all of the characters. While the art style has changed a bit from the last game – Rincewind isn't quite as cutesy, in particular – it still looks completely fantastic, and stands second only to *The Curse of Monkey Island* in regards to high quality 2D visuals. The animation isn't quite as solid, although it does fix some niggling issues found in other games. The only major problem with *Curse* was the way Guybrush's sprite scaled, often looking quite jagged when viewed from certain perspectives. *Discworld II* sidesteps this by using about half a dozen versions of Rincewind's animations that change depending on his location, rather than using sprite scaling, for an effect that's not exactly smooth but looks a bit more pleasant. All in all, it looks quite a bit better than the Channel 4 animated series. Eric Idle returns as Rincewind, and while the rest of the cast is totally new, they still do an outstanding job. Unfortunately Christopher Lee, who provided the voice of Death in the animated series and made-for-TV movies, is missing from the cast.

Discworld II openly acknowledges the complaints about the previous games and fixes nearly all of them. The interface feels less fussy, and there are dozens upon dozens of comments when

you misuse items, thus avoiding the issue of repetitive quotes. The realm of *Discworld* feels much more fleshed out here too. The first title set roughly 80% of the game in Ankh-Morpork, while this one spreads out its wings much more, letting you visit Djelibeybi (the equivalent of Egypt), XXXX (a strange take on Australia), and Holy Wood (that one is more than obvious).

Each act still involves hunting down a series of seemingly pointless items – quests which Rincewind will complain about while facing the player – but it's actually a lot more focused. The game world isn't nearly as expansive as its predecessor, and since double clicking on an exit allows for quick movement, it makes traveling between areas much faster too. Although there's still a fair share of bizarre puzzles, there are plenty of clues in the dialogue to help figure out the solution.

One of the first objects you need to find is a stench. Well, one of the men in the Shades has such a foul smell that it's taken on a physical form. Right next to him is a store selling a genie bottle, but even that can't quite hold it. Just toss in a shoe to absorb the odor, and you're set. Similarly, another task is to find some mouse blood. It's easy enough to find a mouse, but since Rincewind's far from a murderer, you need to resort to more roundabout plans. Just walk around a bit and you'll find a miserable vampire – all you need to do is find some way to steal his fanged dentures, and you're set. All in all, the puzzles are pretty well designed, and not nearly as complicated nor as infuriating as the first game.

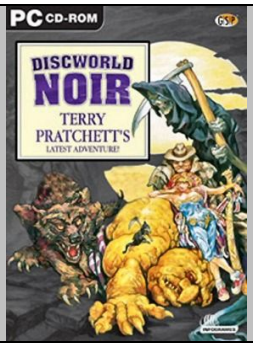


Even the dwarven women have beards, disgustingly enough.

The opening credits feature a jazzy nightclub-esque song and dance number sung by Eric Idle (and performed by a skeleton) entitled "That's Death!", whose jocular and, quite frankly, morbid tones might elicit memories of "Always Look on the Bright Side of Live" from *The Life of Brian*. That's far from the only Monty Python reference, of course, with one scene elaborating on the difference between "parroting" and "parodying". The writing is still high quality and the story takes a notably silly turn around the second act, where you need to take a number of steps to help Death star in a "flickie", the *Discworld* version of a movie. The film that they make up... well, it's certainly about as stupidly far from *The Seventh Seal* as one can possibly get. The final areas feature Death's abode, complete with a snotty butler, a rather effeminate bedroom, and a particularly bratty (and inexplicable) human granddaughter.

The only major problem with *Discworld II* stems from its brevity – the game's not nearly as huge, nor as long. It feels rather rushed by the ending too. For awhile, it seems like Rincewind is going to take over Death's position, which could've made for a whole interesting chapter, but instead it just tosses in an epilogue for something almost totally unrelated, and so the ending seems a bit disappointing. That doesn't overshadow the rest of the game though, which is easily everything the original game should have been, and absolutely essential adventure gaming.

In its original European release, *Discworld II* is subtitled *"Missing Presumed...?",* a play on the phrase "missing, presumed dead". Psygnosis, the publisher, must've felt this wouldn't work in North America, so it was changed to *"Mortality Bytes!"* In addition to the PC release, it was also released for the PlayStation and Saturn, although the Saturn version is only available in Europe. The console versions suffer a downgrade to VGA level graphics and additional load times, plus they only come on a single CD, where the PC version comes on two. This means the cinemas are more compressed, another mark against it. The PlayStation version supports the mouse once again, but since ScummVM supports the PC version there's really no need to muck with the console ports.



Discworld Noir

Initial Release Date: 1999
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation
Designer(s): Gregg Barnett, Chris Bateman
Developer: Perfect Entertainment

The third (and final) *Discworld* graphic adventure is a marked departure from the first two. While those were at least partially based on elements of the novels, *Discworld Noir* is a completely original work, one which reimagines the city of Ankh-Morpork as something out of a Raymond Chandler novel. The protagonist is a new character named Lewton, the city's first private investigator and former member of the City Watch. He's the typical noir hero – a down-on-his-luck cynic with a penchant for eloquently depressing metaphors. The game begins as he's chased through the streets, and eventually murdered by an unseen assailant. He's not quite dead, obviously, as he begins relating the events that led to his apparent demise. It started a week ago in his office, as he's approached by a luxurious dame named Carlotta who asks him to investigate a murder. Things can never be that simple, though, as Lewton finds himself entangled in a wider web of killings, conspiracies, and mysterious artifacts. It's much darker and far less wacky than the other *Discworld* games, that's for certain.

The visuals, along with the story, have received a drastic overhaul. While the game is still 2D, all of the graphics are CGI. Lewton is the only polygonal model rendered in real time, as all of the secondary characters are pre-rendered, an effect that actually doesn't look as bad as it sounds. The models aren't great, but since they're usually so shadowed in darkness it's hard to complain, and the perfectly recognized hard boiled stylings overcome any technical deficiencies. The backgrounds come off much better though, and there are tons of cinematics that blend together with the action and flesh out the city. The atmosphere is heightened with an appropriately jazzy '30s era soundtrack, complete with liberal brasses and piano. Every time you find an important clue or a new location, a few chords strike dramatically, an effect which maintains its intensity even in the final moments of the game.

It's true that *Discworld Noir* has some commonalities with the *Tex Murphy* series, as both are brooding detective mysteries with a bit of a comedy bent. But *Discworld Noir* effortlessly weaves in elements from Pratchett's books which give it a life of its own. Despite styling itself after 1930s America, the medieval atmosphere of Ankh-Morpork really doesn't feel all that out of place. The city actually feels a bit more interesting now that it doesn't rely so much on high fantasy tropes, and the traditional noir stories are a lot more interesting when you're dealing with dim-witted trolls, obnoxious dwarves and sarcastic, piano playing vampires.



The character models in Discworld Noir aren't the greatest, but the rest of the atmosphere is spot on.

Although most of the major characters were invented for this game (and never appeared in any of Pratchett's novels), there are a couple of familiar faces, including Captain Vimes and Nobby of the City Watch, as well as Gaspode the talking Wonderdog, the quirky inventor Leonard da Quirm, and, of course, Death. Beyond the usual *Discworld* references, though, is an overt love for, obviously, numerous noir films. The story of Lewton and his lost love Ilsa is taken directly from *Casablanca*. Al Khali the dwarf and Jasper Horst the hulking troll are direct parodies of Peter Lorre's Joel Cairo and Sydney Greenstreet's Kasper Gutman, respectively, from *The Maltese Falcon*. Some individual lines are referenced or even quoted nearly verbatim. "Who was that girl?" Carlotta asks Lewton when referring to Ilsa. "The one who left you with such a high opinion of women? She must have been quite a gal." It's more or less what Lauren Bacall said to Humphrey Bogart in *To Have and Have Not*. A lesser work might seem like a lazy rip-off, but in the context of *Discworld* and its strange inhabitants, it's a lovingly delicious parody. Plus, while the *Discworld* novels have featured numerous characters based on real life people or figures, *Discworld Noir* sticks in a video game parody with Laredo Cronk, an "upwardly nubile tomb evacuator" and obvious riff on Lara Croft.

Despite the change in setting and tone, this is still very much *Discworld*, as evidenced by the dialogue. The writing is as funny and snappy as ever, with Lewton holding his own as a main character against more well known folks like Rincewind. Despite his bad luck and generally poor situation, he's not nearly as incompetent, and he manages to make even the grittiest dialogue genially amusing. His sarcastic monologues and commentary are nearly always colorful, in that grey kind of way. Try examining the bored warehouse guard. "It was the kind of look that could only be achieved by someone whose job was so mind-numbingly tedious that their only pleasure came from being blistering unhelpful to everyone who came along." His interactions are just as droll. "Mr. Lewton?" Carlotta inquires in his office. "If I'm not, I should fire the guy who painted my door." Lewton dryly responds. His one weak link, though, is his voice actor. Rob Brydon manages to pull off the lines with an appropriate amount of sarcastic gravity, but his attempt at an American accent just sounds a wee bit off. The rest of the acting is also inconsistent, but generally far more good than bad.

The interface works much like the first two games, with some additions. In addition to the usual inventory, Lewton keeps tracks of various clues in his notebook. These clues are obviously for interrogation purposes, but they also function as useable "items". When used appropriately, they provoke Lewton to make some logical connection and gain more insight. Additionally, as the lunar symbolism (and cover artwork) suggests, Lewton gets turned into a werewolf about halfway through the game. Here, he can change into lupine form and gather various scents, which appear as colors amidst the dark backgrounds. You can use these colors to follow various

trails, or match up identical colors in different situations to uncover their source. While using all of these clues requires a slightly different mode of thinking, the actual puzzles are, for the most part, much easier than the first two games. Indeed, the whole first act consists mostly of interrogating people and gathering clues, rather than actually solving much of anything. When you actually do get to uncovering mysteries, it's much less obtuse than it used to be, completely doing away with the usual multi-layered fetch quests.

While moving around the city is quick and easy, the interrogation sequences are more complicated than they should be. There's an icon to introduce yourself, and several context sensitive topics that pop up as you converse. You can also talk about any of the items in your inventory or about any of the clues in your notebook. Each of the topics is classified under the various cases you happen into, and uncovering new bits of data will scribble out old ones. Actually finding relevant things to inquire about requires flipping through several sheets of paper, which grows more useless as you progress through the game. Wouldn't it have been easier to just have a single list of topics like the *Gabriel Knight* games?



Discworld Noir is a dark game, but that doesn't stop it from being quite funny.

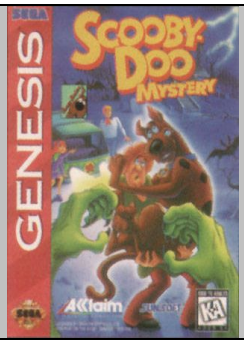
This in itself is a minor complaint. The only important issues come from the seams in its programming. The game was developed for Windows 95 and 98, but is pretty buggy. It doesn't even officially support Windows XP, much less Vista or Windows 7, although with some tweaking it will run, albeit with some glitchiness and random crashes. (It won't let you pick the "Resume Game" option from the main menu either – you have to start a New Game each time, skip through the intro, and load your game from there.) Perfect Entertainment went belly up shortly after *Discworld Noir* was published, leaving them unable to patch it properly.

The company briefly reformed under the old Teeny Weeny Games label to port *Discworld Noir* to the PlayStation. While the PC version runs in a 640x480 resolution, the console port shrinks it down by half. Lewton's character model was downgraded too, although it still looks pretty similar. Due to this version being released on a single CD rather than three like the PC release, both the sound and full motion videos are heavily compressed, and various animations and sounds are cut here and there. But the game still supports the PlayStation mouse, and will run under PlayStation emulators like ePSXe, so it might actually be easier to get working than the PC version. It's a shame that none of the versions were officially released in North America, since publisher GT Interactive had gone under, leaving it as a Europe only release.

Scooby-Doo Mysteries

Scooby-Doo was one of the many dozens of cartoons put out by Hanna Barbara in its prime, during its "throw everything against the wall and see what sticks" phase. It focused on the wacky adventures of a gang of teenagers – burnt-out hippie Shaggy, smarmy leader Fred, sexy but daft Daphne, smart but unsexy Velma – and their talking dog, Scooby-Doo, as they unraveled numerous mysteries. At the outset, each seemed to involve some kind of supernatural element, although investigation by the Scooby gang always ended up with some kind of realistic explanation behind all of the purported ghouls and ghosts. Formulaic and cheaply animated, like all of its peers, *Scooby-Doo* nonetheless became one of their most popular properties, with over 300 animated episodes and two live action movies released since its birth in 1969.

Scooby-Doo has appeared in numerous games, of course, but few have been very good. The quick and easy way to develop a game based off a licensed property, especially one aimed towards kids, is to turn it into a standard platformer. This is more or less the case with many Scooby-Doo games, except for two – *Scooby-Doo Mystery* for the Sega Genesis (the SNES version with the same name is entirely different) and *Scooby-Doo! Classic Creep Capers* for the Game Boy Color (also not to be confused with the Nintendo 64 title of the same name).



Scooby-Doo Mystery

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: Genesis
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Illusions Gaming Company

There are actually two separate chapters in *Scooby-Doo Mystery*, which can be selected at the title screen. Both follow the framework of a typical episode – the Scooby Gang are driving in their van, the Mystery Machine, to some potentially fun destination, only to discover mayhem when they get there. In "Blake's Hotel", they visit a ski lodge in hope of spending some time on the slopes, only to discover that the hotel was built on an ancient Indian burial ground, and its spirits have driven practically everyone away. In "Ha Ha Carnival" they take a trip to an amusement park, also finding it devoid of visitors due to a specter who's playing havoc. At this point in both cases everyone splits up and the player takes control of Shaggy, with Scooby tagging along for random hijinx. Although there are a handful of people to interact with, the conversations are quite brief. And strangely, after the introduction you never run across Fred, Daphne or Velma, and they only appear during the infamous unmasking scene, where the group puts together all of the pieces to identify the perpetrator and his motives.

Most of the game is spent taking on the usual graphic adventure game tasks. Each story consists of a bit more than a dozen locations, and you're usually given free roam to explore. Given that the game is ultimately geared towards youngsters, the puzzles aren't exactly difficult, except for a few item combinations that are a bit head scratching, like creating a homemade flashlight out of a battery, a soda tab and a Christmas light. Neither story is particularly long, although putting both episodes together allows for a reasonable length. Each chapter allows opportunities for at least a few classic Scooby moments. The cartoon had numerous goofy chase sequences, like ones where the purported demon would chase the characters through a series of doors, illogically warping them around and allowing for some wacky sight gags.



The graphic design is uncannily similar to LucasArts' games

All of the visuals consist of simple, solid colors, neatly sidestepping the limited color palette that tends to plague Genesis games. All of the character sprites are well animated and emote wildly during dialogue, another aspect that seems lifted wholesale from LucasArts games. The music plays constantly in the background and consists of only a few tunes, so muting comes recommended. The writing is, for better or worse, consistent with the quality of the cartoon, so at least it emulates the source material well. Beyond the graphic design the affection for adventure gaming is palpable – one of the magic words for a puzzle is "Xyzzy", a reference to *Colossal Cave*.

The setbacks are largely the fault of the game being made for a console. You control Shaggy directly with the control pad, but every time you want to interact with something you need to hit the B button to bring up the action cursor. While some actions, like looking at things or opening doors, are context sensitive, other actions require you to use the bar at the bottom of the screen, which can cycle between the verb commands and the inventory. Worse is the save game system – there's no battery backup, so instead progress is recorded in arcane 50 character passwords consisting of both letters and symbols.

In the grand scheme of adventure gaming, *Scooby-Doo Mystery* is only just beyond passable. There are dozens of games with better writing and better puzzles, so it's really only nostalgics or die hard Scooby fans that will eat this up. Still, it's clear the developers had an understanding, and even a detectable fondness, for the source material, both visually and thematically.



Scooby-Doo! Classic Creep Capers

Initial Release Date: 2001
Platforms: Game Boy Color
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Digital Eclipse

The story in *Scooby-Doo! Classic Creep Capers* is based on a 1970 episode of the cartoon entitled "Nowhere to Hyde", which finds Scooby and the gang solving the mystery of a jewel thief who resembles, of course, Mr. Hyde. The game opens with some nice animated cut scenes of the sleuths' van breaking down conveniently outside a spooky mansion. Upon entering they are

greeted by the son of famed mad scientist Dr. Jekyll who insists that the ghost they've been chasing is indeed a ghost and sends the gang on their way investigating the mansion and its grounds. From there each character can be selected to explore independent of one another a la *Maniac Mansion*. This will of course be beneficial as different characters have different skills enabling specific puzzles to be solved that would be unsolvable by the others.

The gameplay takes the form of a sort of simplified point-and-click. The D-pad controls the character directly and getting close to a hotspot will cause icons of an eye (look), a mouth (talk) and a hand (interact or take) to light up. Although this might be a bit easier than trying to locate hotspots with a mouse, it is a comfortable and logical setup for the Game Boy Color's controls. The lack of a battery save is a poor choice however, as the terrible symbol-based password system requires taking note on paper which is of course counter-intuitive to the portable nature of a handheld system.



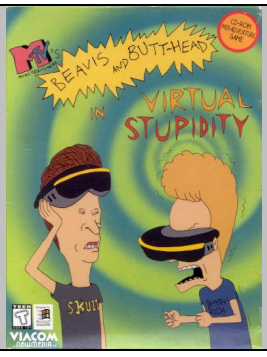
Classic Creep Capers will also appeal to fans of Maniac Mansion.

Early in the games' six chapters players will find Daphne kidnapped and Fred imprisoned, leaving only Shaggy and Scooby (who travel together at all times) and Velma to finish the game. Though the haunted mansion is mostly vacant, comical interactions with the housekeeper Helga and a young boy who spends his time glued to a game of *Pong* will eventually lead them to a secret lab where a mad scientist is using robots that bear a striking resemblance to Shaggy to guard intruders from messing with his experiments on Daphne.

The graphics are tiny, of course, but workable even on the small screen. Visually the game bears a striking resemblance to early LucasArts adventure games such as the aforementioned *Maniac Mansion*, though graphically *Classic Creep Capers* is a step-up from the NES release of that game. They obviously can't look quite as stylized as the Genesis game, but they look decent for the Game Boy Color. The sprites are also impressively emotive, similar to the ones seen in *The Secret of Monkey Island*. The few animated cut scenes throughout look great compared to their cartoon source material, though of course they unfortunately lack any sort of speech. Musically, the game does a decent job switching between chapter-specific original tunes and the cartoon's main theme.

Even from the first interaction with Dr. Jekyll it becomes immediately evident that the writing in this Game Boy Color game is above average, a bit better than the Genesis game. A crack about trying to bring a "beef frank-enstein" to life sets the tone for the type of quirky dialogue that will be found throughout. Another similar gag finds a toilet made into a teleported called the "Telepot." Unfortunately the game is tragically short, which means there won't be enough dialogue or witty writing when all is said and done. In fact even a thorough play through should only take an afternoon to complete. However there is solace in the fact that some of the puzzles will keep you busy longer than others. One particular puzzle has you combining a label maker that only has the letters "D", "N" and "A" with cow extract to make a DNA Extractor, which is a little bit out there. It rounds out an experience that still stands out on its own, especially against other Game Boy Color games.

Beavis and Butthead



Beavis and Butthead in: Virtual Stupidity

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation
Designer(s): Brian Babendererde, Brad Delaney
Developer: Viacom New Media

Released at the height of the duo's popularity, *Beavis and Butthead in Virtual Stupidity* is the opposite of a typical licensed product, a rare game that nails the essence of its source material. When compared to the pile of cheap, quickly forgotten *Beavis and Butthead* games for consoles, it ditches their stale platforming and necessarily watered down content for point-and-click-style gameplay that's much more fitting. The result is a game that feels like a natural extension of its source material.

Beavis and Butthead, of course, was an immediately popular MTV show in the mid-90s about two addle-brained, music-addicted high schoolers with little ambition beyond acting like complete morons. *Virtual Stupidity* even frames itself like an episode of the show: it starts with the "Don't try this at home" disclaimer and the title card with portraits of the duo cackling in their signature laughs. The objective of the game is as simple as all of Beavis and Butthead's goals: befriend Todd, a tough guy dropout who wins their respect by kicking their asses on a regular basis. The game progresses like a series of stories from the show loosely strung together, with the titular duo getting into one ridiculous situation after another. On the way to joining Todd's gang they escape from school, escape from prison, drive a tank, get voluntarily kidnapped by hot chicks and shut in the trunk of a car, and generally annoy people wherever they go. Despite what the cover artwork implies, there's actually nothing about virtual reality; it's just a slightly more clever way of saying "Beavis and Butthead: The Computer Game".

As they proceed through the game, Beavis and Butthead travel through familiar locations like Highland High and Burger World, and just about every character in the show makes an appearance somewhere along the line, including their cynical, bespectacled classmate Daria, the rage-filled Principal Vickers, and their easily-irritated neighbor Mr. Anderson. Events from the show also get referenced throughout, giving fans some added humor. About a dozen animated videos unique to the game serve to break up the action and as segues during the story.

While it runs at a modest VGA resolution, slightly dated for 1995, *Virtual Stupidity* has well-drawn sprite art and plenty of animation that make it look very much like the cartoon, and almost ranks up in quality next to the LucasArts games. The characters actually look like their TV counterparts, and the backgrounds of each area are faithful to the show's grainy, watercolor-ish palette. But while the game's visual fidelity is nice, its greatest strength is the enormous and unendingly funny script, which is completely voiced by the original actors. Written by two of the show's writers, almost every action in *Virtual Stupidity* triggers some sort of bantering or quip from Beavis and Butthead. Granted, if you're not a fan of the source material this won't change your mind, but fans will definitely be pleased. With that in mind, the quality of the writing is excellent and consistently funny, whether the duo are talking to a character or just screwing around and spouting ridiculous observation at the stuff they come across.

Virtual Stupidity uses a standard cursor-based point-and-click interface: right clicking opens an action wheel with a standard set of actions (and a rockin' skull and bones graphic, in true

Beavis and Butthead fashion), and left clicking performs an action. The cursor icon changes to indicate when you're over a hotspot or when you're trying to use an item, making things fairly streamlined and avoiding any "can't use X on Y" type messages. The puzzles are of the usual object-based variety, like finding a glass eye in a taxidermy shop and figuring out it needs to be given to a one-eyed man met earlier in the game. Some of the puzzles make no logical sense, but don't feel too out of place by fitting in with the silly, anything goes tone of the show. At one point you need to give a piece of soap to a crazy inmate hiding under a bed, or use a pen to deface a sign so someone will move their car. There is some pixel hunting, but not an excessive amount; a few key objects in the game have multiple hotspots that blur together in a way that makes it tough to tell that they're discrete areas. At one point in the game, for instance, you need to click the top hatch of a tank rather than the tank itself, or get a piece of gum stuck on a water fountain that isn't actually visible (you need to click the spout, rather than the body of the fountain, to get it). Thankfully, hitting the escape button allows you to fast forward through the events of an action, making it easy to skip past dialogue you've already heard when you're clicking around, although the lack of subtitles is very annoying.

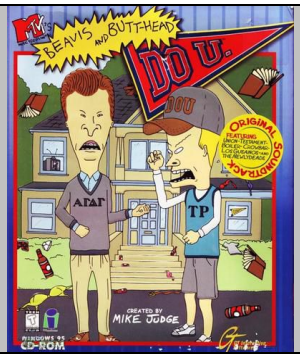


Virtual Stupidity basically puts Beavis and Butthead into a LucasArts game, and the results are ace.

Supplementing the main adventure are four minigames that have Beavis and Butthead doing things like hocking loogies from a rooftop and shooting tennis balls at yuppies. While entertaining, only the first, placed at the beginning of the game, is necessary to advance. This is a bit confusing, as there's no indication that playing them isn't part of some necessary puzzle-solving, but they do add variety amid the object-based puzzle solving.

Even for people unfamiliar with *Beavis and Butthead, Virtual Stupidity* is worth checking out. It works on its own as a hilarious, excellent game, and sits comfortably as one of the funniest, well-produced, and just plain fun adventures of the mid '90s. It was ported to the PlayStation a few years after its release, but only in Japan. This version is completely dubbed in Japanese, but otherwise nearly identical.

While *Virtual Stupidity* was well received – it won Adventure Game of the Year from PC Gamer magazine – it was followed it up with *Beavis and Butthead Do U.,* developed by Illusions Gaming Company, which did not fare nearly as well.



Beavis and Butthead Do U

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Illusions Gaming Company

At the time of *Beavis and Butthead: Do U's* release, the titular duo was on its way out of the cultural spotlight. The television show had recently ended its run, and since their previous adventure, *Virtual Stupidity*, their video game appearances had been limited to the less than respectable genres of minigame collection and interactive screensaver. It's tempting to compare *Do U* with its classic predecessor, but that would be unfair, both in terms of quality and execution. *Virtual Stupidity* was set up like an episode of the show and involved a lot of the staff who worked on it. *Do U*, with the exception of a few perfunctory nods toward the show, is a simpler game with a simple premise: pluck the characters of Beavis and Butthead out of their normal universe, and put them in a new context. In *Do U*, Beavis and Butthead head to Highland State College on a class field trip and that's pretty much all there is to it; they're naturally more interested in scoring with college sluts than the merits of higher education, and the game is mostly fetch quests to get into places where chicks might be.



Do U runs in a higher resolution than its predecessor, but somehow looks worse overall.

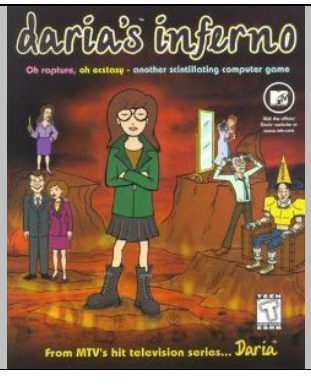
The meat of the game is solid but simple point-and-click adventuring. Moving the mouse over a hotspot calls up a thought bubble with options to talk/use or look, although both actions often have the same result. There's an unlimited inventory which is quickly filled up with all sorts of objects, some standard, some bizarre; in addition to normal things like a pair of scissors, at one point Beavis picks up a fresh cowpie and adds it to the stash. The puzzles tend toward the easy side, and while there's an occasional nonsense solution, figuring which object to use on what is mostly quick work. A couple of minigames are shoehorned into the main game, but

they're a mixed bag and don't add much to the experience. In the first, Beavis and Butthead are forced to serve food in the cafeteria, which is implemented as a very tedious game of Simon Says (and is even less fun than it sounds). The other has Beavis and Butthead running through a frat house shooting paintballs at people. It's an arcade-style shooting game, and although extremely brief, it's much more fun.

Besides the titular duo, only a few familiar characters appear – Mr. Van Driessen, their hippie teacher, as well as Stewart, the young kid who foolishly idolizes the duo, and Mr. Anderson. It's disappointing compared to the huge recurring cast from *Virtual Stupidity*. There are plenty of stock college-campus-type people to interact with, but they don't have much personality, and the dialogue and voice acting for these characters is mostly mediocre. Some, like a black woman who appears to have been voiced by a pitch-shifted man, are flat-out terrible. All the dialogue is fully voiced, and there's usually some music or sound effects to complement each area, which are also hit or miss in terms of quality.

Whereas *Virtual Stupidity* filled the world of Beavis and Butthead with character and detail, *Do U* wastes its higher resolution with somewhat dull graphics. There's nothing terrible about the game's style, per se; it's just blandly generic. The backgrounds are all pre-rendered 3D and don't have much character. They're also strangely soft, like they were run through a blurring filter, especially in comparison with the hard outlines and solid colors of the characters. The character sprites have a very flat look, like they were drawn in MS Paint. The animation also repeatedly recycles the same few frames, giving it a rough look that's not very pleasing.

The game falls very short of the high water mark that *Virtual Stupidity* set in just about every way, but it isn't a total loss. The script is occasionally very funny, although being a fan of *Beavis and Butthead* will help the jokes land. The low difficulty level also means that completing the game only takes an afternoon. Ultimately, however, there's not much to recommend *Do U*. It's a middling game without much charm, really only worth playing for the staunchest fans.



Daria's Inferno

Initial Release Date: 2000
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Simon & Schuster Interactive

While Beavis and Butthead's TV show aired its last original episode in 1997, it spawned a spin-off series based on their nerdy classmate Daria Morgendorffer. After moving away from the dimwitted duo (who are rarely even mentioned and never seen), she uses her sarcasm to deal with the pressures of high school life. Although never quite as popular with the younger crowd as *Beavis and Butthead*, *Daria* still garnered a cult following, mostly of older fans who could relate to Daria's world-weary barbs. There was only one game based on the show, entitled *Daria's Inferno*, and it takes on the mold of a (rather simplistic) point-and-click adventure game.

In the beginning, Daria is stuck in English class when the principal, Mrs. Li, barges in and proclaims that five random items have been stolen from the school, and sentences everyone to detention until they're all found. Daria then falls asleep and imagines herself in *Dante's Inferno*, requiring her to go through five locations in her town to find the missing items. It's a shame that they try to reference *Dante's Inferno*, but rather than sending you through various circles of hell, you just end up in demonic versions of schools, shopping malls and night clubs.

Rather than the standard side-view screen-by-screen structure, *Daria's Inferno*'s locations consist of relatively large rooms viewed from an isometric perspective. Essential items seem randomly strewn about, and their application is usually pretty clear. There's so little thought that it feels more like a level-based arcade game that happens to use a point-and-click interface. This feeling is further solidified by the numerous enemies throughout each stage, ranging from deranged cheerleaders to pushy salesmen. Since there is no way to attack, all you can do is avoid them. If you get hit, Daria's irritation meter lowers slightly. When it empties, you're kicked out of the screen and need to start from the entrance, which isn't too punishing, but it is unnecessarily... well, irritating.



Is there anything Daria hates more than rampant, shallow commercialism?

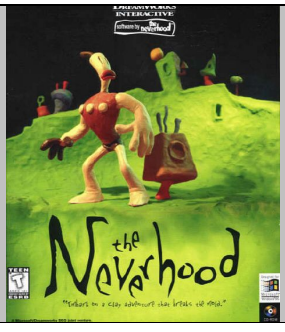
Like the *Beavis and Butthead* games, *Daria's Inferno* is largely faithful to the source material, featuring a visual style that's identical to the cartoon, contributions from all of the same voice actors, and appearances by most of the secondary characters, including Daria's pal Jane as her guide. There are still lots of sarcastic barbs, sometimes uttered seemingly at random. Still, it never quite feels right. In the *Beavis and Butthead* games, the duo got into all kinds of wacky shenanigans, which is exactly what they did in the cartoon. Daria's show, outside of some *The Simpsons Treehouse of Horror*-esque concept shows, is largely grounded in reality. In the first level of *Daria's Inferno*, you find the sadistic History teacher, Mr. DeMartino, torturing his students with electric chairs. Once you free them, Kevin, the dimwitted football player, uses his thick skull to charge ahead and break a hole in the wall. Then you climb a gigantic tower filled with elevators, flipping switches until you find the right combination. There's something that feels incredibly off about all of this – it's supposed to be written off like one big dream sequence, but it still feels far too video game-y to make sense in Daria's universe. The only really clever aspect is the hint system, which will guide you to your goal with a short clip from the amusing show-within-a-show, *Sick Sad World*.

All in all, it's a daft game, although an interesting curiosity for fans. Still, it's quite odd that *Virtual Stupidity*, a game starring two of the most dim-witted characters in animation history, has substantially more depth than the game based on a far more intellectually superior character. It's the sort of irony Daria would probably appreciate.

The Neverhood Chronicles

The Neverhood Chronicles is a brilliant little series, which was too good for this world. A loosely connected series of three games, it features a world made entirely out of clay. The art of claymation is rarely seen anymore in any medium, much less gaming, making its existence all the more special.

The Neverhood is the first and best, a point-and-click game originating on the PC. *Skullmonkeys* is the second, made exclusively for the PlayStation, and is a side-scrolling platformer that can be vaguely described as *Super Mario Bros.* on LSD. And finally, there's *Klaymen Gun Hockey,* which is a kind of unofficial side game only released in Japan. These games (excluding *Gun Hockey*) were made by The Neverhood (the name of the development team) and published by Dreamworks. This silly little world is credited to Douglas TenNapel, the insane and wonderful artist who created Earthworm Jim. Much of that weirdly insane humor also shines through in *The Neverhood* titles, filled with creative characters, goofy slapstick, and some fantastic music.



The Neverhood / Klaymen Klaymen: Neverhood no Nazo

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / PlayStation
Designer(s): Douglas TenNapel
Developer: The Neverhood

The Neverhood places you in the boots of Klaymen, a limber clay figure that looks a bit like an elongated duck. He awakens in an empty room, which would almost appear to be a prison, if it weren't so easy to escape. It's not immediately apparent what you should be doing, but the ultimate goal is to figure out what happened to make the landscape so barren.



The claymation is so gleefully silly in The Neverhood.

The Neverhood is fairly small, comprising of a handful of buildings connected through a hub. Although most of the experience is viewed from a third person perspective, it switches

briefly to a first person camera when traveling in the overworld, lending significantly to the immersion.

And it's a brilliant little world that's a total joy to inhabit. Klaymen is gorgeously animated, walking forward with a triumphant swagger. His eyes maintain a perpetually blank stare, as if constantly flummoxed, or at very least confused, at the nature of his surroundings. There are dangers, but if he gets his head snipped off, he just picks it right back up, places it on his shoulders, and resumes business as usual. Per typical animation standards, there's a whole lot of slapstick, and much of it is hilarious. Watch as he picks up a Jack-in-a-Box and excitedly turns the crank, growing frustrated when nothing pops out... until a gigantic multi-legged monster bursts out of the wall and gives chase over the land.

The clay modeling is absolutely fascinating. During the mid-90s, gaming graphics were overtaken by dull, cold, unfeeling CGI. One might say that the beautiful ruins of *Myst* and *Riven* are more attractive, but they exist only as wireframes and textures on a computer somewhere. In contrast, each building, each wall, each bump in *The Neverhood* was sculpted by someone. Its existence feels far more substantial, far more real, and walking through it is a true marvel. It's also slightly unnerving, seeing how this colorful landscape seems to be hovering in the midst of a black, empty void.

Of course, it also has some of the greatest game music known to man, largely because there's really nothing else like it in the field. The composer, Terry S. Taylor, wanted to do something a little different than most, so what we get is awesome Dixieland-style jazz, filled with horns, banjos, and some very strange, nonsensical, harmonic vocals. It's not only incredibly catchy, but at the same time fitting with the game's unique look and feel. Play it for a few minutes, and just try to walk away without humming one of the impossibly jaunty, happy songs. It's practically impossible. That being said, the upbeat music usually only plays in the third person areas – when you enter the first person sections in the hub, the music is replaced by creepy ambiance. It's almost like leaving a party and stumbling out into the cold, dark, dangerous night, and the contrast is a little bit unnerving.

In many ways, *The Neverhood* has a lot in common with *Myst* and its ilk, from both a gameplay and storytelling standpoint. Klaymen is all alone for the most part. He never speaks, except for one sole part near the end. There are a handful of other creatures, but most are unfriendly and would rather do him harm than have a chat (although there's only one way to die, and even then it's clearly telegraphed). There's not a whole lot of plot or dialogue during the course of the game, but there is an absolutely staggering amount of backstory.

One of the main goals is to find little brown tiles, which form small parts of a long cinematic narrated by Klaymen's cousin, Willie Trombone. It all involves an evil villain named Klogg who's naturally up to no good, as well as the king of the Neverhood, a strange creature named Hoborg. If you're more interested in learning the story behind the world, there's a gigantic, forty-room hallway in which the entire history is carved onto the wall. Keeping with the whole creation myth theme, many stories are somewhat silly variations of tales from the Bible, and some are quite amusing. Unfortunately, reading through them requires walking to each part the wall, panel by panel, slowing scrolling the screen up and down. Just sauntering to the end of the hall takes nearly five minutes, which is required to find a video tile, and then it takes five minutes for the return trip. Reading everything can take two hours or longer. None of it affects the game beyond background info, so you can feel free to skip it.

Sadly, *The Neverhood* falls victim to the same issue that plagues so many high concept art games – it spends so much time building up an amazing style with a fascinating world, but can't think of much interesting to do with it. Most of the obstacles are simple logic puzzles, acting only as minor roadblocks in your quest. They're easy enough that they probably won't hold you up too long, but at the same time they feel remarkably insubstantial, in that there's no real joy in solving them. Furthermore, many of the puzzles require that you go to some obscure corner of the world to find their solutions. This is why the game's manual suggests that you have a pen and paper at the ready wherever you go; there are many occasions when you'll see some strange

hieroglyphs, wonder what they are, and leave the area, only to discover much later that you should've written them down when you first saw them.

So yes, *The Neverhood* is technically a case of style over substance, at least in the gameplay department, but the world is so weirdly goofy, the atmosphere so alternately bouncy and creepy, and the characters so likable, that it will likely stick with you for your entire gaming career.



The Neverhood is a small but unique little world.

The Neverhood found a fair bit of popularity in Japan where it was released on the PlayStation under the moniker *Klaymen Klaymen.* Aside from the language, there are a few notable differences between it and the original PC version, mostly due to technical issues. It runs at a lower resolution, but it still looks pretty good, and most of the animation is intact. Unfortunately there are a lot of extra load times, which even stops the game to a standstill during Klaymen's idle motions. There is also a bit of a tutorial when you start the game. It mainly consists of little signs saying something like "Push the circle button here!", so it's not all that special. The voices are also in Japanese, but sadly, they're very monotone and completely lack the soul of the English voices. The ridiculous two-minute-long belch has been cut out, as has the entire gigantic hallway, probably because they didn't feel like translating all of that backstory. The worst of the omissions is the lack of the "fast forward" code. In the PC version, if you typed "fastforward", the action would speed up, and you could also skip the walking segments by pressing the space bar. It's not horribly detrimental to the gameplay, but it would have been nice to have, especially due to the extra loading times.



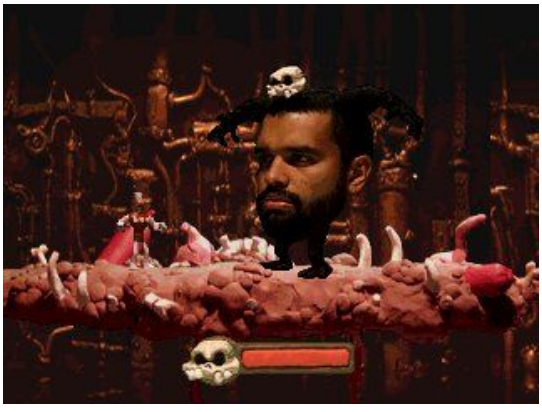
Skullmonkeys / Klaymen Klaymen 2: Skullmonkey no Gyakushuu

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: PlayStation
Designer(s): Douglas TenNapel
Developer: The Neverhood

While *The Neverhood* found some small amount of success in the world of personal computers, the designers felt they needed to tap into a bigger audience. While most gamers and critics loved the hilarious animation, the puzzles were off-putting to many players, despite their simplicity. So

for their next game, they decided to go broader and create a platformer for the PlayStation. And thus was born *Skullmonkeys*..

The evil Klogg was banished from The Neverhood at the end of the first game, but has now ended up on a planet ruled by scary-but-stupid creatures known as Skullmonkeys. Klogg becomes their leader and sets off to rule the planet, while Klaymen is brought into the scene to stop him. Like the original game, the story is told through more gorgeous claymation sequences. While there aren't nearly as many, what's there is particularly precious, especially the "beans" video after the first stage.



Yes, this large human head is one of the enemies in Skullmonkeys.

The gameplay is almost exactly like *Donkey Kong Country* – move forward, jump over pits, jump on top of bad guys, and collect icons to get 1-ups. There's a small assortment of weapons – including the ability to create a duplicate Klaymen by farting and to destroy all of the enemies on the screen with the "Universe Enema". There are also tons of secrets in each level, whether they be power-ups or hidden bonus rooms. The controls are a little bit on the loose side and the scrolling can sometimes feel a little bit haphazard. Even worse, there are lots of foreground elements that can block enemies or platforms from view. Considering that Klaymen will explode after being touched once, this can lead to tons of cheap deaths. There are plenty of respawn points and numerous opportunities to get extra lives, but it can get quite frustrating. There are tons and tons of levels, although most of them are quite short. Unfortunately, the developers decided to implement a password system rather than a save game feature, but at least it lets you cheat to see the later areas if you're bored.

Thankfully, the game's sense of humor is still intact. One of the secret levels is simply entitled "The 1970's" and is filled with shag carpet, lava lamps, funky music, and trippy visual effects. One of the later bosses is the gigantic head of one of the game designers. And Terry S. Taylor is once again back to provide the soundtrack, this time focusing on catchy drum beats mixed with some snazzy bass guitar riffs. But the real standout is the Bonus Room song, a goofy lullaby that's both hilarious and creepy at the same time. ("Here's a little bonus room, where you don't have to worry /Take your sweet time, you need not hurry /Oh, you're looking incredible, you're the bomb! /And me, I'm kind of like your dad, and a little like your mom.")

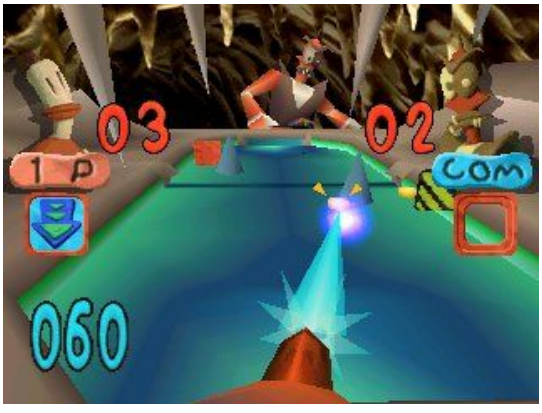
Like its predecessor, *Skullmonkeys* is so focused on the classy visuals that the gameplay never rises above the realm of "competent". And since it doesn't have same level of storytelling or atmospheric immersion, it doesn't quite succeed as a work of art either. It's still quite fun, though, especially considering any kind of 2D platformer is a rare beast on the PlayStation.



Klaymen Gun Hockey

Initial Release Date: 1999
Platforms: PlayStation
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: KIDSMIND

It's pretty strange for an American-designed game to get a spinoff specifically for the Japanese market. And yet here we are with *Klaymen Gun Hockey*, developed by a company called KIDSMIND and published by Riverhill Soft, who also published the other Klaymen games in Japan. It's pretty much just air hockey, except you shoot the puck with guns. On the playing field there are several power-ups that can block your goals, unleash multiple pucks, or speed up the movement. The player with the highest score when the time limit runs out wins. And that's pretty much it. It's incredibly simplistic, especially since the gun aims towards the puck anyway.



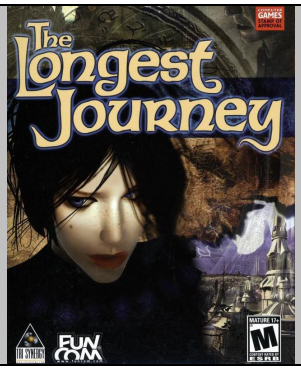
Klaymen was big in Japan for some reason, and somehow got his only Japanese exclusive game.

The whole game reeks of a cash-in. There are absolutely no claymation sequences, just some hand-drawn stills that tell the "story" of Klaymen's quest to play everyone in the Neverhood in *Gun Hockey*. There are only a handful of characters, including Klaymen, Willie, Klogg, Hoborg and Weasel (the big plant thing from the first game). The music is depressingly bland too. It's interesting to see the Klaymen characters rendered in 3D, at least. *Gun Hockey* feels like it would be a great minigame in another title, but as a standalone release (even a budget one – the retail price was set at 3800 yen), there's little of interest in *Gun Hockey* outside of it being a mere curiosity.

After *Skullmonkeys*, The Neverhood went on to make only one more game – *Boombots* for the PlayStation. Although Klaymen had a cameo as a hidden character, it was pretty far removed from everything they'd done before, and it pretty much flopped. The various members of The Neverhood are still around – Doug TenNapel has been working in cartoons, and Terry S. Taylor still composes music. Here's hoping another company will step outside the usual boundaries of computer animation and bring us something as uniquely defined as *The Neverhood Chronicles*.

The Longest Journey

By the latter half of the '80s, the adventure genre was on its last legs. By the turn of the century, it was more or less dead. Despite the frustration of its fans, at least it went out with a bang, delivering two world class titles roughly around the same time – LucasArts' *Grim Fandango*, and Funcom's *The Longest Journey*. Designed and written by Ragnar Tørnquist, *The Longest Journey* is a fantasy tale that combines classic medieval thematics with elements of science-fiction to create one of adventure gaming's most well known series.



The Longest Journey

Initial Release Date: 1999
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Ragnar Tørnquist
Developer: Funcom

Start thinking of all of the common tropes in fantasy fiction. There's an evil empire, and the rebels that fight against them. There's the ragtag group of adventurers who tread through insurmountable perils to accomplish quest. And then there's the story of a person from the "real" world crossing over into another dimension, the "chosen one" who will save this alternate world from destruction. *The Longest Journey* takes on all of these (the last one in particular) but weaves them in such a way that it almost completely overcomes its inherent clichés.

The "chosen one" here is one April Ryan, an 18-year-old girl who flees from her troubled family life to settle at an art school in Venice (not the Italian city, but rather a section of a fictional city called Newport in the United States). She begins having odd dreams of another world calling for her, which get even creepier when said dreams begin bleeding into the real world, affecting everyone around her. Under the guidance of an enigmatic vagrant named Cortez, April learns that she's a "Shifter" and can transport to this other world.

In ages past, the Earth was split into two halves by an alien race called the Drac Kin (dragons, more or less). The "real" world, April's world, is known as Stark, and is ruled by logic and science. This "other" world, called Arcadia, is comparatively ruled by magic and chaos. The two are held together by a mystical location suitably called the Balance, which is ruled over by a single human called the Guardian. Unfortunately, the Guardian has left his post for reasons unknown, causing both dimensions to collapse into each other, eventually leading to almost certain destruction. April's goal is to explore Arcadia and find pieces of a missing disc to unlock the Guardian's realm, and fulfill her prophecy to save both worlds. During her destined journey, she also has to contend with a faction known as the Vanguard. Although they hail from Arcadia, they also have a powerful presence in Stark, masquerading not only as a church, but also controlling a mega-corporation. They have plans to insert their own Guardian into the Balance, and rule the worlds as they see fit.

The Longest Journey is broken up into thirteen chapters, as April "shifts" between Stark and Arcadia to fulfill her quest. In Arcadia, she meets up with the various races of the land and befriends them, while in Stark she must somehow infiltrate of Vanguard's ranks and find out what happened to the proper Guardian. Arcadia is a fairly typical medieval world, filled with

strange creatures and possessing a strong fairy tale feel. Stark, taking place in a future several centuries from our own, is strongly influenced by *Blade Runner* and other dystopic fiction.

The contrast between the two worlds already provides a unique setting, but there's an astounding amount of depth to both of them. *The Longest Journey* beats out the *Gabriel Knight* series (which Tørnquist has admitted to have been inspired by) for possessing the most expansive amount of dialogue seen in an adventure game. Each race is fully fleshed out, possessing an extraordinary amount of history and culture, and the adventure is full of unique characters. It's all extremely well written, with just the right blend of eloquence and humor that keeps it from getting too dry.



The world of Stark may as well be ripped from a cyberpunk story.

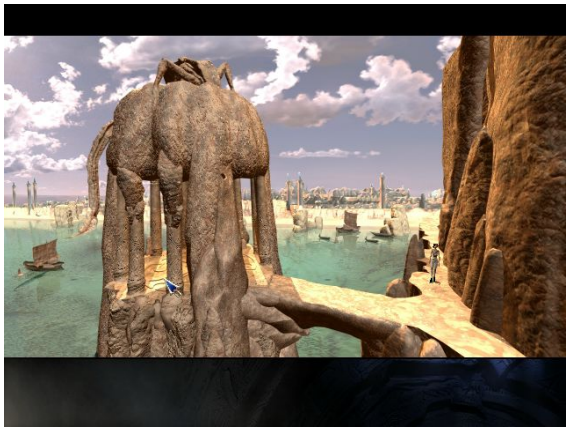
April Ryan is a lively character who initially acts as a reluctant hero, but slowly settles into her destiny. Despite her somewhat troubled past, she's fairly upbeat, often delivering commentary peppered with pop culture references or responding to dangerous situations with wisecracks. Tørnquist is also a self-admitted fan of Joss Whedon, so April has more than a little bit in common with Buffy the Vampire Slayer. April even self consciously acknowledges her role as a "chosen one", remarking to a guard: "Don't you have a prophecy that I can fulfill? Because that's how this thing usually goes." About halfway through the game April is joined by a sidekick, a wisecracking (and occasionally obnoxious) bird named Crow who, in spite of his reluctantly yammering beak, faithfully beckons to her call. One of the most memorable characters is Burns Flipper, a raving, paranoid computer hacker with a mouth of a sailor and a fairly lively demeanor, even though he's missing the entire lower half of his body. His creepiness notwithstanding – before revealing his past, he asks April if she's a virgin – he's such a damned weird fellow that it's hard not to like him at least a little bit.

The numerous secondary characters show off various oddball traits, which lead to some somewhat strange, if inventive, puzzles. When you're tasked with sneaking inside a police department to tamper with some records, you don't sneak into the place like a spy or anything – instead, you need to waltz through the front door by tricking some union workers into doing their job and distracting a police guard with their own bureaucracy. When tasked with dueling with an alchemist, a rather offbeat but still quite evil fellow named Roper Klacks, you're given the opportunity to suggest various challenges, each leading to some humorous consequences. Try challenging him to pull a rabbit out a hat and he claims he can pull a hat out a rabbit (it isn't pretty, he says). Suggest a game of hopscotch and it turns out he was the neighborhood champion three years running. Or even attempt a spelling bee, during which he requests that you spell "Anzhabecquakaleea" (it's an alchemy term, apparently). They can get tough, but per modern adventure game standards, you can't die, nor get stuck in an unwinnable situation.

Both these puzzles and the huge amount of dialogue can lead to some sluggish pacing. It's mostly notable in the beginning, as the world of April and her friends is exhaustively explored for a couple of hours before the story finally kicks into gear. It doesn't help that these beginning chapters are filled with a bunch of puzzles that feel like artificial roadblocks. Why exactly do you need to fix your apartment's boiler? Why would anyone think you need to use a duck-shaped flotation device to retrieve a key which is used in a completely different location? Why are you involved in what amounts to an extended wild goose chase just to find a character who hangs out in the most obtuse places, just to be confusing? April even remarks how ridiculous it is, effectively lampshading the whole ordeal, but it doesn't excuse it. The puzzles become more logical and fitting once you visit Arcadia (ironic, considering Stark is the world supposedly ruled by logic). It doesn't stop the fact that there's still lots of pixel hunting, and important objects are often indistinguishable from the background.

There's also a rather a nasty habit of telling rather than showing. There's so much history to both Stark and Arcadia that it's hard to fully digest all of it when it's all spoken in huge blocks by characters who amount to little more than expository tools. It's all fantastic stuff, but it's very possible to feel a bit of fatigue from all of the chatting. It's also quite an expansive game, and the title is more than appropriate. The early chapters are fairly long, but at least the pacing picks up briskly in the later half.

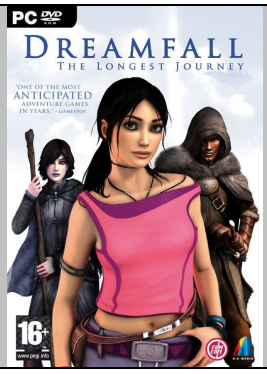
Most of *The Longest Journey*'s latter-day adventure gaming brethren, like *Gabriel Knight 3* and *Grim Fandango*, tried to integrate 3D graphics into the genre, with decidedly mixed results. In contrast, the interface here is entirely point-and-click, using moody yet stylish 640x480 2D pre-rendered backgrounds. The characters are polygonal though, which really isn't for the best. At a distance, they look alright, but anytime they approach the camera their awkward appearance becomes all the more noticeable. Some important scenes are rendered in fully animated cinemas, although they don't really look all that great.



In contrast to Stark, Arcadia is filled with natural structures and magical creations.

There's also a handy feature to not only to skip through dialogue, but also fast forward animation by hitting the Escape key. Since there's a lot of walking around to be done, being able to quickly zip from one side of the screen to the other is a God-send. The voice acting is uniformly excellent, but there's a distinct lack of music, which makes the otherwise gorgeous world of Arcadia feel rather empty.

Even though it suffers from the usual obtuse puzzles, in addition to some overly dense dialogue, *The Longest Journey* is still astounding in its detail, ranging from its expansive world to its remarkable characters. It's essential gaming for fans, as well as anyone with the slightest interest in fantasy, science fiction, or both.



Dreamfall: The Longest Journey

Initial Release Date: 2006
Platforms: IBM PC / Xbox
Designer(s): Ragnar Tørnquist
Developer: Funcom

The Longest Journey had a fairly satisfying conclusion, but given the depth of the world it was clear that Tørnquist had plenty more stories to tell. In 2006, seven years after its release, Funcom released *Dreamfall*: *The Longest Journey*, for both the PC and Xbox.

Dreamfall begins 10 years after the end of its predecessor and initially focuses on a young woman named Zoë Castillo. For reasons she's can't quite explain, she's found herself losing a sense of purpose, breaking up with her boyfriend Reza and dropping out of college, spending her days aimlessly lounging around her father's house in the city of Casablanca. Things start getting freaky when she has persistent visions of a young girl whispering at her to: "Find and save April Ryan." If that weren't creepy enough, Reza has gone missing during an investigation of WATI, a huge corporation working on several technological breakthroughs. Her quest sends her back to Venice in Newport to discover WATICorp's yet-to-be revealed product – "Dreamtime", an entertainment product that allows people to experience fully lucid dreams, completely under their control. Zoë, however, learns she is a "Dreamer", and using this product will mysteriously transport her to Arcadia without needing to Shift.

Meanwhile, Arcadia isn't exactly in the best shape. The city of Marcuria is under occupation by an outside force called the Azadi, imposing their religion on its reluctant people and criminalizing magic. April is the secret leader of the rebel movement, and she's changed quite a bit from the last game. For reasons she can't fully comprehend, she can no longer Shift between worlds, and even her participation in the rebellion is more out of self-destruction than loyalty to her people. She's confused to find Zoë, who's been transported to Arcadia without Shifting, and Zoë is equally as surprised to find the same April Ryan mentioned by the mysterious little girl. As it turns out, April believes that there's nothing she needs to be "saved" from and wants little to do with her.

Across the lands of Arcadia, a third character is introduced – Kian, an apostle who questions his empire's motivations. Compared to Zoë and April, Kian isn't nearly as fleshed out, nor does he have much of a personality. There are only few segments where you play as him, and he seems to exist mostly to provide shades of grey in the battle between Marcuria and Azadi. Eventually the stories of the three converge into one. Zoë deepens further into the conspiracy and learns more of the links between the worlds, April begins a quest of personal discovery, and Kian learns the error of his people's ways.

Technically *Dreamfall*'s plot stands alone, but there are a lot of characters from the first game, and their presence doesn't make much sense unless you've played it. One of the coolest things in *Dreamfall* is seeing how locations and characters have changed in the 10 years between the two games. Venice, once a burgeoning, beautiful college town, is now nothing more than a rainy depressing trash heap. Charlie and Emma, the friends that we spent a considerable amount of time with during the opening hours of *The Longest Journey*, only to be more or less abandoned as the story progressed, are still baffled and depressed over the mysterious loss of April. Crow, too, makes a comeback as the wisecracking sidekick and, more or less, comes off as a bit less annoying. Other returning characters include fellow Shifter Brian Westhouse and former

nemesis Roper Klacks (now a reformed potion salesman), who both play minor but welcome roles. And then there's April herself, no longer bubbly, and having long grown embittered with her life in Arcadia and the fallout from the ending of the first game. Her arc doesn't have remotely the same impact if you haven't played the original, and so she may just come off as overtly stand-offish.



The city of Casablanca is strikingly gorgeous, as is Dreamfall's heroine.

Like so many other adventure games, *Dreamfall* sheds the point-and-click interface and 2D graphics, and replaces it with direct control in a fully 3D environment. For other series, this hasn't always worked well, but *Dreamfall* remarkably pulls it off. A lot of this has to do with the atmosphere – although there's nothing amazing about the graphics from a technical standpoint, both worlds are gorgeously designed, with each of the cities possessing their own unique architecture and color palette. If nothing else, it shows how far some good art direction can make up for a lack of technical prowess. And even rendered in real-time it's certainly better than any of the cinemas from *The Longest Journey*.

As much as long time fans may hate to admit it, there's a certain special feeling that comes in actually walking through the snow covered streets of Marcuria, instead of just clicking over a static picture of it. In many ways, the sense that you're exploring an actual living breathing world evokes the moods of *Shenmue*, even if the game world isn't nearly as interactive as Sega's classic. The characters, too, feel much more alive, and the dialogue scenes are much more involving due to the close-ups and camera angle changes. The animation isn't perfect, but considering again that this also isn't a high budget project, it's more than suitable. It doesn't hurt that the dialogue itself is more straightforward, and while there's still lots of talking, it never feels extraneous.

Furthermore, Funcom has pulled off a remarkable job in both the designs and the modeling of these characters. The Japanese have long scoffed at Western character designs, especially when it comes to women, who are often derided as putrid and ugly. When Lara Croft, with her ridiculous proportions and mangled horse face, is the only recognizable sex symbol of your industry, then that's something of an issue. Zoë, along with April, and even some of the secondary characters, are actually quite attractive, demolishing that stereotype quite nicely.

While it's nice to look at, *Dreamfall* falters when it comes to the actual gameplay. Funcom acknowledged that a lot of people gave up on *The Longest Journey* due to its difficult puzzles. Instead of making them easier, their solution was simply to remove them almost completely. There are naturally obstacles to overcome, but most of them can be solved by using Zoë's mobile phone to hack them, or simply by talking to various people. There are at least a few segments that amount to little more than fetch quests, and what few puzzles do exist are extremely easy, because you never have more than a couple of items in your inventory at any

time. There are two types of hacking minigames, which are not only rare but also easily conquerable.

As some kind of replacement for puzzles, Funcom integrated some action elements, notably a few fighting and stealth sequences. Adventure gamers have groaned about these since the genre's inception, and *Dreamfall* does little to quell their concerns. The fighting segments, although brief and easy, are atrocious, with stiff movement and almost non-existent collision detection. The stealth segments are, thankfully, much less painful and equally as brief. Unlike its predecessor, you can technically be killed in *Dreamfall*, but since the game autosaves right before any dangerous situation, you don't need to worry about getting caught off guard.

It's clear that *Dreamfall* is much more about "story" than "game". If you can rationalize it like that, then *Dreamfall* easily shines as one of the best written storylines in video gaming.

Dreamfall was released simultaneously on the PC and Xbox platforms. It did well on the PC but didn't meet sales expectations on the Xbox, possibly because it just didn't jell with the system's audience. Still, it's a decent port. The PC version runs at a higher resolution, with a smoother frame-rate and faster load times, but the Xbox version is still more than respectable, and runs quite well on the Xbox 360 too. Playing with a joypad is an absolute necessity regardless, because the mouse controls in the PC version are a pain.

At its initial release, Europe got a special limited edition of *Dreamfall* which includes the game, a hardbound artbook, a four-track CD with the vocal songs used in the game by the band Magnet, and a few postcards. Beware that this edition includes the dreaded Starforce copy protection. A later collector's edition was released in the United Kingdom, featuring both *Dreamfall* and *The Longest Journey*, the soundtrack score CD, and the artbook. The Game of the Year edition released in North America is mostly the same package but omits the artbook.

Comparing and Contrasting the Storylines

Despite being so closely related, there are some pretty substantial differences in the storylines of both games. *The Longest Journey* is a classic hero's journey, spanning several lands and cultures through the magical world of Arcadia, and even a few dingy spots in the "real" world of Stark. It's full of funny and outright weird characters, and *Dreamfall* doesn't quite have that. There's not nearly as much dialogue in *Dreamfall* either, and the trees are much simpler, where you pick topics instead of direct lines. There are a few interesting characters, particularly April's Watilla, a friendly robotic gorilla toy which doubles as a personal organizer and talks with an oddly quiet demeanor similar to Teddy from Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* (he's even voiced by the same voice actor). There are a couple of other oddball characters throughout, but none of them stand out in the same way that Roper Klacks did in the first game. Most of the best characters are the ones that make recurring appearances. And while Zoë, a determined heroine with a gorgeous British accent, is a fine heroine, she lacks April's witticisms and her humor is much drier.

From a storytelling standpoint, *Dreamfall* is also far, far different, focusing primarily on Zoë's search for the truth, April's fight against the rebels, Kian's fight against his people, and all three protagonists' search for purpose and a renewal of faith. There's far less of an emphasis on Arcadia as a whole – outside of a few brief locations, the setting rarely leaves the city of Marcuria and only mentions the other races and history in passing. This isn't necessarily a bad change, because there's a mystery driving the player forward, and it's more than just tracking down MacGuffins.

Still, the world of Arcadia is so vast and densely layered that, for as much time as you spent listening about it in *The Longest Journey*, it still felt like there was more to explore. Certain important events happened off screen, like the invasion of Marcuria by an outside force, because it didn't directly involve April. *Dreamfall* expands on the existing mythology, which in turn strengthens the world, and even deals with the fallout from said invasion.

At the same time, though, *Dreamfall*'s story rapidly becomes unfocused. With three main characters and multiple threads in their stories, it tosses at lot at you. Sure, all characters are put

through journeys of faith, so they have that in common, but from a plot standpoint it's never entirely clear how it all fits together. And this is further elucidated by the ending, possibly one of the worst cliffhangers in all of video gaming.



April is quite embittered in Dreamfall, a totally changed person.

It's the "worst" not because it's technically bad or anything. It's not because it was rushed through production like the finale of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II*, nor is it a victim of crappy writing. It's intentionally set up that way, since Tørnquist always envisioned *Dreamfall* as the second part of a trilogy. If you go into it realizing this, you'll probably be less aggravated, but it still ends up unsatisfying.

Lots of people compare it to the ending of *The Empire Strikes Back*, but it's not really fitting, because *Dreamfall*'s is much, much more depressing. Furthermore, out of the half-dozen or so story threads, only one of them is really resolved, and the rest are left hanging. And then, during the ending, the writers twist the knife even further by introducing more questions for which there are (yet) no explanation. And at least everyone knew that *Return of the Jedi* would be coming. Tørnquist has been promising a sequel since *Dreamfall* came out, but given the reality of game development, it's not a certainty. It could very well go the way of *Shenmue*, which ended at the second game. But even though *Shenmue* stopped partway through its overall arc, at least the game told some kind of standalone story, whereas *Dreamfall* mostly feels like a huge setup.

If nothing else, it helps identify video gaming as a unique medium of storytelling, separate from books or film. At the beginning of *Dreamfall*, Zoë is in a coma, narrating the story in the form of a flashback. As the player, we're given hope that we can somehow save her from her rather grave condition, but no – by the end of the game, she's still bed-ridden with little hope of ever waking up. Even though there are no alternate paths or endings, it still somehow feels like we, the player, have failed her in some way, making the finale all the more heart-breaking.

Still, even if you end up aggravated by the ending, at least it shows how much you care about the worlds of Arcadia and Stark, its story, and its characters. Both games work together brilliantly, and it only makes one hungry for *The Dreamfall Chapters*, which is meant to be the second half of *Dreamfall*. Tørnquist has been largely tightlipped on details, much to everyone's frustration. It doesn't help that Funcom's concentrating on MMOs instead of making new *Dreamfall* games. So far, they're most likely going to be downloadable episodic content, similar to Telltale's games, and Tørnquist is aiming for it to be multi-platform. It's going to pick up directly from where *Dreamfall* left off, and continue the stories of Zoë, April and Kian, as well as other characters, both new and old.

Secret Files

Adventure games may have died in North America around the turn of the century, but they continued to have a healthy life in Europe. In fact, adventures may nowadays be the third pillar of PC gaming right behind MMORPGs and strategy simulations over there, and every year a number of big name releases from Germany, France and the Czech Republic guarantee that adventure game fans never run short of puzzles to solve. It is often argued that titles that even come close to the greatness of a *Monkey Island* or a *Gabriel Knight* are few and far between. Actually, the same was true in the '90s for games not made by LucasArts or Sierra.

One of the games that stood out as exceptionally good and became a true classic praised next to the genre giants was *Broken Sword* by the British company Revolution Software. The mystery thriller won the hearts of adventure game fans and casual gamers alike, not only through its many solid gold puzzles, but also an enthralling plot that took the best of both *Gabriel Knight* and *Indiana Jones*.

It only seems fitting that the one of the series that come closest to the good old times – other than Telltale Games' decent episodic LucasArts sequels – is so deeply in love with *Broken Sword*. It seems almost as if the guys at Animation Arts and Fusionsphere Systems wondered what it would be like if *Broken Sword* didn't jump the shark with the third game and become a 3D *Sokoban* clone with stealth elements. *Secret Files* relies on the same proven ingredients as its big role model: Wise cracking protagonists that constantly stumble into big mysteries and conspiracies and travel between interesting locations all around the world. But can it manage to hold up to its great ancestor?



Secret Files: Tunguska

Initial Release Date: 2006
Platforms: IBM PC / DS / Wii
Designer(s): Marco Zeugner
Developer: Animation Arts and Fusionsphere Systems

Secret Files: Tunguska betrays its plot already in the title, at least to *The X-Files* veterans and suckers for unsolved phenomena. On June 30th, 1908, a region near the Podkamennaya Tunguska River was shattered by a huge and devastating explosion, said to make the Hiroshima bomb seem like a firecracker by comparison. Reportedly, the whole night sky was illuminated in all of Europe. Fast forward a little less than a century later. Nina Kalenkov comes to visit her father at his workplace at a museum, but all she finds in his office is a huge mess. The authorities show little concern about the assumed disappearance of Vladimir Kalenkov, but Nina finds help in form of a young assistant curator named Max. Together they soon discover that all hints point to Nina's father's former research on the Tunguska event in service of the Soviet Union. Soon they find themselves in the firing line of Russian intelligence agencies while they travel – of course – all around the world in search for clues of Vladimir's whereabouts and his past research project. But how does this involve the mysterious group of people in black robes that seem to show up everywhere?

Tunguska's basic controls are exactly that: basic. A left click will trigger interaction with any object or person, while a right click is for observation. Nina's walking speed is rather slow but thankfully the next room can be usually accessed instantly by double clicking on an exit. Items

can be used and combined like in any other point-and-click adventure, so there are no surprises here. The novelty of the control system lies with its options to aid the player in times of cluelessness. One of *Secret Files*' big advertisement points is the "Snoop Key" feature. Pressing the space key will mark every hotspot on screen with a magnifier icon, sparing the player an elongated pixel hunt. Detailed high resolution background nowadays tend to make that search a major pain, though, and *Secret Files* would annoy as well with some nearly invisible items if it weren't for the Snoop Key.



The heroes occasionally change their wardrobe when the situation demands it.

Matters are further simplified by the fact that those items that can be combined with each other are recognizable as such from the beginning. So after selecting one of the items in the inventory one just needs to hover over the bar to see immediately which combinations are possible. On one hand, this saves the player a lot of tedious experimenting when stuck, but also seems a bit lazy on the writer's part. In truly great adventure classics, making the characters comment on stupid actions can be almost as satisfying as progressing, after all. Equally streamlined are the dialogues. There are hardly ever more than three or four topics to choose from during the course of an entire conversation, with very few "useless" lines. In case one misses or forgets any details, important findings are recorded in a journal, which oddly is written in the third person, despite being designed like an actual personal journal. The journal has also an additional hint system built in, but it doesn't work as well as the other features.

But now to the essence of any adventure game. Its puzzles are where the game really takes one back to the good old days. The vast majority are based around item combination, with only very rare logic puzzles thrown in for a change. Nina and Max cannot die, and while some scenes are staged to mediate a sense of urgency, there's never any time limit to your actions. Most challenges are designed better-than-average, and especially later in the game some will get your head smoking. There are no nonsensical puzzles, but make sure to take along a good portion of ye good olde adventure logic, or you'll never get ideas like taping your cell phone onto a cat to abuse her as a mobile wiretap.

If the puzzles are the meat, the writing serves as the flavoring in the art of adventure game cuisine. And this is sadly the point where most recent attempts fall short. *Secret Files: Tunguska* has its issues in that department, too, but it's not a total failure. These two heroes, especially Nina, are a written as a pair of loudmouths and smartasses, and the writers felt obligated to make them comment on everything with a clever, funny observation. The humor in these lines is pretty hit-and-miss, and loaded with pop culture references. Max and Nina are noticeably genre-savvy, not only for adventure games, but also mystery and spy thrillers. This makes for some rather nerdy comedy, which could have used a little more subtlety regarding its references.

The main plot itself, however, is written consistently well and the mystery case is genuinely intriguing until right before the end, when it pulls an *Indiana Jones* and an *X-Files* at the same time and becomes almost stupefying insane. The second patch vastly extends the ending, but did little to make it make sense. The low point of the writing is definitely the "romance" between Max and Nina, though. It just comes out of nowhere after ten lines of dialogue between the two and feels wildly misplaced.

Even the best writing (which *Secret Files* doesn't have) can only do so much when the voice acting is bad. The German dub is pretty solid with its main characters, with only the minor roles being a bit of a letdown. The English voiceover is an entirely different beast, though. The voice of an annoying Yankee brat just doesn't cut it for the educated daughter of a Russian-German immigrant, nor does the apathetic voice of Max help anyone get excited over the plot. Despite the many, mostly European locations visited, there's a total lack of accent variations, and everyone just sounds neutrally American, even the Irish (given, a similar problem exists with the German version as well).

If anything, *Secret Files* sure looks good for an adventure game. The 2D backgrounds are full of little details, and the character models fit in quite well, as long as they don't get too close to the camera and reveal their low polygon count. More care has been taken for the protagonists to make them look attractive at any angle. Some key events are shown in short prerendered clips in which the characters look slightly better than the main game, but not to an extent where it disturbs a consistent overall impression.



Nina finds her father's apartment in a mess.

So while Animation Arts and Fusionsphere System didn't create a new paragon of adventure games, *Secret Files* is still better than most of its kind in its age. It was vastly successful in Germany and at least reasonably so in the rest of Europe, enough to secure a sequel and a porting to the two "adventure game consoles", the Wii and DS. Both are identical in terms of content, but of course compromises were made on the technical side.

The Wii version runs in a lower resolution, but still looks mostly similar to the original. It offers 4:3 and widescreen modes, the former resulting in cropped backgrounds that require scrolling even when they fit on one screen on the PC. Additionally, Nina can be controlled directly with the nunchuk. Backgrounds on the DS look surprisingly good, but the characters are hardly recognizable. Instead, their faces are displayed as still images on the upper screen during dialogues. As there's no right clicking with the stylus, the desired action has to be selected with an extra click. The biggest difference in the portable version, though, is the lack of voiceover. At least with the English version, this isn't too big a loss.



Secret Files 2: Puritas Cordis

Initial Release Date: 2008
Platforms: IBM PC / DS / Wii
Designer(s): Marco Zeugner
Developer: Animation Arts and Fusionsphere Systems

It's two years after *Secret Files: Tunguska*. Nina's relationship with Max has ended as abruptly as it started, and now the poor girl goes on a cruise to deal with it. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. The prologue is played in the role of Bishop Parrey, who finds himself in possession of an illegible parchment that seems important enough to kill for, as the priest who sent the parchment to him is found dead. Now the Sam Fisher-look-a-like killers are going for the Bishop's life. Parrey just manages to hide the document and make sure it gets to his friend and translator William Patterson before sharing the fate of his dead colleague. Patterson doesn't live long enough to decipher the document either, but he manages to secretly swap bags with Nina before she boards the cruise ship, setting the terrorist organization on her trail. From the inevitable attack, she only barely escapes from the sinking ship together with the theologist David Korell. Meanwhile in the Indonesian Jungle, Max fashions himself as a photojournalist to document an expedition of his old friend Sam Peters, during which – you've guessed it – they run into terrorists. Soon, all threads run together into a plot about a religious sect called Puritas Cordis and their suspiciously accurate predictions of a series of devastating natural disasters.

One could say that that first paragraph gives away a bit much of the plot, but it's all so obvious and much less mysterious than the first game, there are hardly any surprises to be spoiled. Mystery isn't any concern with the sequel, as this time suspense is created through an atmosphere of threat, and it is even possible to die at a few points (which lead to a restart immediately before the wrong decision). Sadly, the story ends only after a few hours, and the final parts feel decidedly rushed. Globetrotters are also in for a disappointment: after the described opening scenarios, there are only three main areas in France visited.

At least the few available areas are filled with interesting characters. While the villain in the first *Secret Files* makes himself scarce until the very end, the lunatic leader of the Puritas Cordis sect acts much less subtle and even broadcasts advertisements with a pirate TV station. The supporting cast sports more personality than before, with consistently high quality voice acting in the German version, and at least a significantly improved dub in English (with a completely new cast, while Nina and Max keep their voices in German). The English version still suffers from too few actors, with only 12 having to share over 30 roles, less than half as much as in the German one. The number of playable characters have increased to five, but the new ones are still clearly minor roles, with Nina and Max once again in the spotlight.

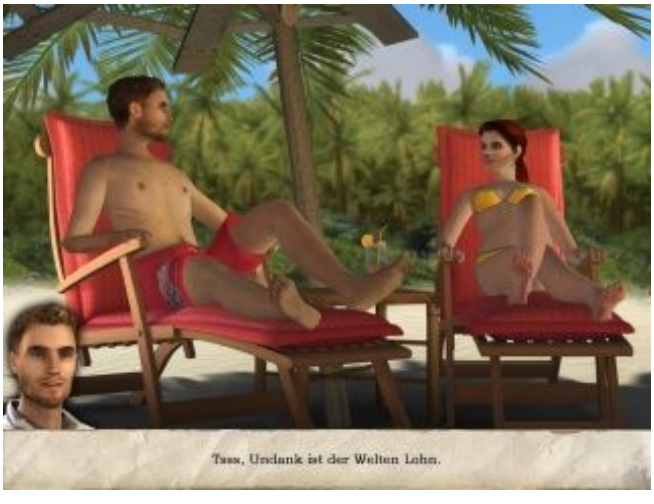
The overall puzzle quality is almost as good as in the first game, but once in a while non-interactive items in the backgrounds suggest easy solutions, but are strangely unavailable. Some puzzles also put suspension of disbelief under some serious stress. Hardly anything has changed about the way the game is played. The protagonists now run to more distant targets, but everything else is just the same. The Snoop Key makes its return, together with all other convenient conventions. The presentation has been beefed up for a more "cinematic" feel, the camera now zooms in for conversations, which works surprisingly well despite the 2D backgrounds, and there is a bunch of new visual effects, like the transparent face of the late priest talking while Parrey reads his letter. The models for recurring characters (read: Nina and Max) have been reworked, and Nina's derrière lost at least a pound or two.



The new playable characters in the sequel are as secondary as the few visits to more exotic locations.

Tunguska wasn't much about acoustic accompaniment – aside from a title and end music and scarce ambient sound, there never was much to hear. *Puritas Cordis* rectifies this with a full cinematic soundtrack played in key scenes and certain areas, which was also sold as a standalone soundtrack. The title theme is very catchy and especially memorable, and has potential to become an identifying cue for the series if used properly.

The second game in the *Secret Files* series doesn't quite hold up to the standards set by its predecessor. Even though it improves on some of its weaknesses, the new problems weigh heavier in the end. One cannot help but think that the team was lacking budget or time to make the story arc more complete, or maybe they grew tired of the series sometime in between. That could be the reason why their next game, titled *Lost Horizon*, chooses a different road, in many aspects, featuring hand drawn backgrounds and a more classic scenario. Though still in the "traveling adventurer" genre, it draws all its inspiration from *Indiana Jones* and similar movies, thus taking place in 1936. Nonetheless, a third *Secret Files*, subtitled *The Archimedes Code*, is planned for future release.



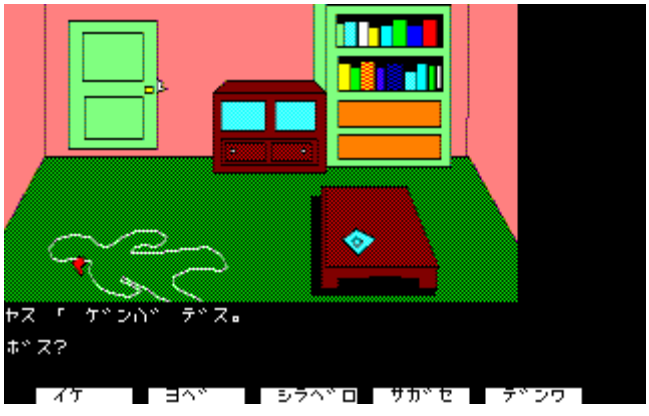
Max and Nina chill out in the sun.



Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken

Initial Release Date: 1983
Platforms: PC-88 / PC-6001 / Sharp X1 / MSX / Famicom / Mobile
Designer(s): Yuji Horii
Developer: Enix (PCs) / Chunsoft (Famicom)

Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken, translated as "*The Portopia Serial Murder Case,*" is the first Japanese adventure game from which all others followed, and helped Japan fall in love with the genre. Ironically it was created by Yuji Horii, who would also later go on to make *Dragon Quest* and foster Japan's obsession with the RPG, thereby enshrining him as godfather of two of his nation's most prominent genres. In 1981 Horii was 27 and bought his first computer, teaching himself to program by correcting other people's work. It was in 1983 when the idea for an adventure game came to him, thanks in part to the US. In an interview with the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum he revealed: "During that time, I read an article in a PC magazine about a US computer game genre called 'adventure games', which allowed players to read stories on their PCs. We still didn't have them in Japan, and I took it upon myself to make one. That was how *Portopia* came about. It was a program in which the story would develop through entering a command and receiving an answer to it."



Pictured is the 1983 PC-88 release – note the blood stain, which is absent from the Famicom port.

The result was a simple though elegant murder mystery, released across a range of Japanese computers. Taking place in a suburb of Kobe, it features a text parser and around eight NPCs in a handful of locations such as a harbor, a strip parlor, and a mansion where the alleged murder took place. As the chief investigator you are accompanied by your subordinate Yasu, who narrates most of the action. To succeed you collect evidence while questioning the locals. As such, there's not much in the way of puzzle solving. It's also impossible to lose. You can prematurely conclude things but the chief will demand you reopen and finish the case. It's a fairly adult story involving loan-sharking and revenge, featuring at least two suicides, drug deals, plus police violence during interrogations. In November 1985 it was ported to the Nintendo Famicom by Chunsoft, with a menu interface plus a magnifying glass pointer for hotspots and a hammer to hit objects, including suspects. (This most likely influenced the first person segments

from Konami's *The Goonies II*, which let you do similar things.) A *Wizardry*-style maze was also added to make the quest a bit more substantial. This Famicom port is when *Portopia* really succeeded, since despite lacking a save function most Japanese regard it as the definitive version. In 2003 it was voted the 32nd best Famicom game (out of 1252) by Famitsu readers, and was later ported with improved graphics to various mobile platforms.

There is no better proof of its popularity than the number of Japanese developers who cite *Portopia*'s Famicom port as being influential – most notably Hideo Kojima. In playing *Snatcher* his love of *Portopia* is evident, since both feature menu-based controls, comedic side-kicks, telephone usage, secrets hidden behind paintings and a big surprise at the end.

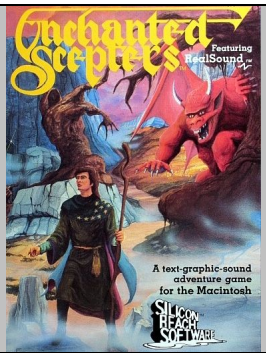
In the years after its Famicom release Horii continued to make Famicom adventures (such as *Hokkaido Rensa Satsujin Ohotsuku ni Kiyu*) and several others dabbled in the genre, notably Nintendo with its *Famicom Tantei Club* series (April 1988 onwards) and Hudson with *Salad no Kuni no Tomato-hime*, which was localized into English as *Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom*. By the Famicom's end in 1994 it had a massive library of adventures, from those featuring real comedian celebrities (*Sanma no Meitantei*) and pop bands (*Hikaru Genji Roller Panic*), to intra-office simulators fronted by an actual congressman (*Masuzoe Youichi Asa Made Famicom*). Japanese computers received an even greater number of adventures, since there were less restrictions on sexual content compared to consoles. Whatever the hardware, Japan was now obsessed with adventure games, even localizing some Western releases (such as *Murder on the Mississippi*).



The fan-translated Famicom version: try looking into the sun with the magnifying glass.

Although *Portopia* was never officially localized, it did receive a fan-translation courtesy of DvD Translations. *Portopia*'s only flaw is that with the Famicom's inclusion of magnifying and hammer pointers for hotspots, it's extremely easy to miss something and get stuck. Outside the mansion, for example, it's essential to collect the invisible engagement ring on the floor, but no clue is given that it's even there.

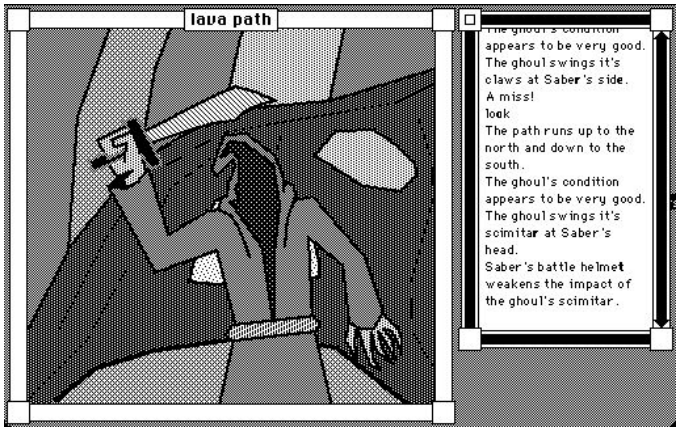
If you've never played a Japanese adventure you're better off with *Snatcher* being your first experience. It contains many of the same mechanics, albeit with voice acting, a slightly cooler cyberpunk story and shooting sections. The exclusive use of menus also makes it considerably easier. But for everyone else, *Portopia* is a worthy and accomplished historical gem; flawed but a pleasant way to spend a few hours seeing how Japan's unique take on the adventure game genre got started.



Enchanted Scepters

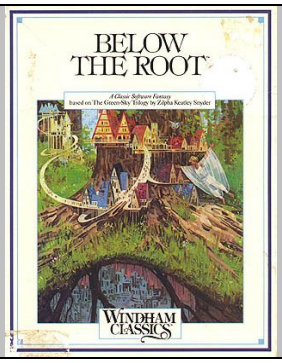
Initial Release Date: 1984
Platforms: Macintosh
Designer(s): William C. Appleton, Martin E. Funderlic, Charles Jackson, Glen Arnold
Developer: Silicon Beach Software

Enchanted Scepters, released in 1984 by Silicon Beach Software, is technically the first point-and-click adventure game ever made, even if it's just a graphical text adventure grafted on to the standard Macintosh interface. As a hero named Saber, you're tasked with finding four elemental scepters and returning them to the wizard Elron. It's a fairly standard adventure for its time, with a large world to explore but sparse descriptions. There are also some light RPG elements, as you'll routinely come in contact with enemies and need to use the weapons you've found to defeat them, though there aren't any stats beyond Saber's health. Like the early *Ultima* games, it tosses thematic cohesion to the wind in favor of amusingly clashing aesthetics – one moment you're wandering through caves and swinging axes at trolls, the next moment you're piloting a submarine to a computer-filled fortress and fighting robots with blaster guns.



Enchanted Scepters is full is silly looking enemies waiting to carve you a new one.

While advanced for the time, the interface has a number of foibles. Although you can click on the image to interact with the world in a limited capacity, like picking up items and opening doors, you can't actually move or fight anything with the arrow cursor, which is what you'll be doing most of the time. Instead, you either pick a command from the menu bar or use a key combination. You can still type stuff in, but the game can barely parse anything other than the built-in actions. It's still playable though, and the simple black and white graphics are leagues beyond what other computers could do at the time. It also laid the groundwork for better implementations, like in ICOM's MacVenture series. The authoring system used to create the game was also released to the public two years later as *World Builder*, which saw several games produced, largely by amateurs.



Below the Root

Initial Release Date: 1984
Platforms: Apple II / Commodore 64 / IBM PC
Designer(s): Dale DeSharone (*né* Disharoon)
Developer: Windham Classics

Below the Root is mighty impressive for its era. It functions as a canonical sequel to the *Green Sky* fantasy series of books by Zilpha Keatley Snyder, sharing its title with the first book in that series, and it continues the series' themes of social and ecological awareness. The player can choose between five characters from two races, and your choice strongly affects the game. The player character navigates a two-dimensional platformer world and interacts with it through a menu of over a dozen commands, similar to LucasArts games like *Maniac Mansion.* These commands include a selection of mental abilities called spirit skills. However, there is no mouse support, and everything is controlled by the keyboard.



No stealing here – you have to ask permission to pillage an NPC's house.

The game has a well-written plot due to the extensive involvement of the books' original author. The story centers on a quest to bring peace to two conflicting societies, the tree-dwelling Kindar and the Erdlings, who both live under the ground. To accomplish this, the player explores villages built in enormous trees as well as an expansive subterranean world. Your character has hit points which can be lost to environmental dangers and, rarely, to combat. Aside from being taken back to the starting point, there is no penalty for having one's hit points reduced to zero. The protagonist can also be captured by enemies. Even if the imprisoned player has no way to escape, there is the option to "renew," resulting in one's hit points being reduced to zero and the character returning to the starting point. The inability to permanently die makes exploration very forgiving.

Below the Root undoubtedly had a large influence on future games, especially with its extensive interactive menu, platform adventuring and character customization. It was released across multiple platforms, but the best graphics and controls are on the Commodore 64 version.

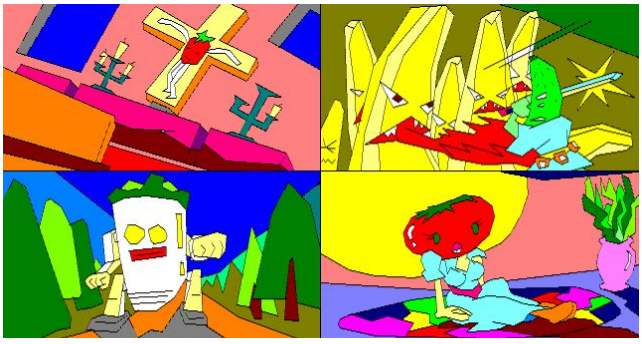


Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom (US) / Salad no Kuni no Tomato-hime (Japan)

Initial Release Date: 1984
Platforms: PC-88 / PC-6001 / MZ-1500/2000 / Sharp X1 / MSX / SMC-777 / IBM PC (Windows) / Nintendo Entertainment System / Mobile
Designer(s): Megupyon, Tetsuya. A
Developer: Hudson

Most early text adventures were developed in America, where the genre was practically invented. Naturally, as they began to be exported overseas, the local cultures began to take the concept and run off in their own direction. In Japan, Hudson's were amongst the more interesting, if only because the guys developing their titles were certifiably insane. Their most well known is *Salad no Kuni no Tomato-hime*, translated as *Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom* – it was also their only adventure game to be translated into English.

The Salad Kingdom, as one might expect, is populated almost entirely by anthropomorphic vegetables. As the story goes, the evil Minister Pumpkin kidnapped the beautiful Princess Tomato, causing her father, King Broccoli, to perish out of grief. And so, the kingdom's greatest knight, Sir Cucumber, sets off on a journey to save her.



The PC-88 version of Princess Tomato has some fantastically silly visuals.

The game was first released on several Japanese home computers, including the Sharp X1, MSX, and PC-88. The PC-88 version is by far the best looking, with colorful, high resolution graphics. The artists at Hudson were totally brilliant, and while the angular lines make them look like fancy MS Paint drawings, there's such a goofy sense of style that it's utterly compelling. Despite its age and although it's restricted to a 16-color dithered palette, it's still an incredibly bright, attractive game, and visually is leaps beyond most English text adventures of the time.

All user interaction in the computer release is handled through a text parser. While most of the text is in Japanese, input is understood in English text; the "look" command is kind enough to translate all objects into English so they can be easily interacted with. The parser is extremely basic though, and can't even handle prepositions, so a command like "hit watermelon with tree" will need to be typed as "hit watermelon tree". And strangely, while most English text adventures required that you use the cardinal directions for movement – (N)orth, (S)outh, (E)ast and (W)est – Hudson's games instead use (F)orward, (B)ackward, (L)eft and (R)ight.

In 1988, Hudson ported *Salad no Kuni no Tomato-hime* to the Famicom, which in turn was translated into English and released in 1991 for the Nintendo Entertainment System. It's a near

ground-up overhaul, drastically expanding the adventure while retaining a few core elements. The basic plot is the same, although in addition to rescuing the Princess, you also need to obtain the royal emblem, which has been stolen. The text parser obviously wouldn't work with a controller, so instead there are various commands on the side of the screen to move, use items, talk, and so forth. Due to the decreased resolution and memory space, the graphics have been entirely redrawn and squeezed into a tiny window in the middle of screen. While still goofy, they lack the colorful charm of the original drawings. You also can't interact directly with the visuals, as all items you can interact with are listed at the bottom of the screen.

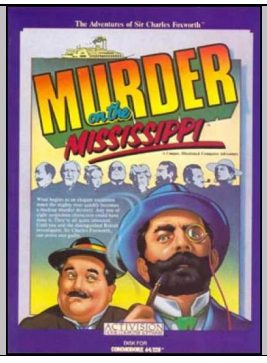


The NES localization retained the weird sense of humor – Saladoria indeed!

The story has been significantly overhauled, with a total of 8 chapters versus 4 in the original. The first two areas are roughly the same, with a few new puzzles added in. One of the first characters you meet in both versions is an injured baby persimmon. In the computer version he just gives you some info, but in the NES version he's named Percy and joins you, acting as a squire. He has his own command on the menu and is useful for puzzles, but mostly he just loses various (unneeded) items between chapter breaks.

However, the story takes a drastic turn once you leave the town of Saladoria. In the NES version, you end up getting captured and escaping from prison, and exploring a second town called Sopville while disguised as the enemy. It hits most of the same plot points as the computer version, like when you take command of a gigantic robot called a Dice-o-Matic and face off against other similar machinations. You also need to destroy a squad of evil bananas, using a sword in the PC version and a peanut bomb in the NES version. The NES game adds even more weird sequences, like when you meet Princess Tomato's sister Lisa, who is a human. And in a rather creepy scene, you even end up spying on a nubile young orange in the shower. Unfortunately, it's missing the part where you come across a crucified strawberry. The NES port also introduces three mazes, as well as combat sequences which take the form of Rock-Paper-Scissors battles, here dubbed "Finger Wars." While most of the additions in this port are welcome, these light RPG elements feel shoehorned in. The Famicom version was used as a basis for the mobile phone versions, which were released in 2004 and featured upgraded graphics. The PC-88 version was ported to Windows as part of Project EGG. The Famicom version was also featured in the *Hudson Collection Vol. 4* for the Game Boy Advance.

Compared to other NES adventures like *Shadowgate* and *Déjà Vu*, *Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom* is fairly easy, especially since there's no way to die or get stuck. There's no battery save either, requiring that you use passwords. Even though the interface is a bit cumbersome, it's a cute, quirky, and worthwhile game.



Murder on the Mississippi: The Adventures of Sir Charles Foxworth

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: Commodore 64 / Apple II / Famicom / MSX2
Designer(s): Adam Bellin
Developer: Activision

In Activision's *Murder on the Mississippi* you control the Sherlock Holmes-esque detective Sir Charles Foxworth, who is sharing a peaceful boat ride from St Louis to New Orleans with his dumpy pal Regis. Things go awry when a dead body turns up, and Sir Charles is honor bound to find the killer before the boat reaches its destination. There are seven other people on board, all of whom have potential motives, but only one is the true killer. The investigation involves questioning people, searching their rooms for evidence, and eventually building a case against the perpetrator. There are twenty four passenger rooms to explore on two decks of the ship, including the port and starboard side, as well as the captain's location on the bridge and a few areas down in the engine room. It's a small but contained game world.

This relatively progressive game was one of the first adventures to avoid the text parser of Sierra games for something more intuitive. Charles is controlled with the joystick – press a button and a menu pops up with all possible commands. It's quite friendly, but it stumbles due to other reasons. Controlling the characters is somewhat slow and clumsy, which isn't a big deal. But when you're searching through beds and dressers, it's not always clear if you're positioned properly, making it quite possible to miss valuable evidence. Certain rooms have traps which are impossible to avoid unless you know about them beforehand. The pitfall in Room 1, where a hole appears out of nowhere and drops Charles into an infinite darkness, looks particularly silly.



The Commodore 64 version is preferable to the Apple II version.

But the most aggravating element is the way the game handles questioning. There are a lot of ways to communicate with the various people – you can ask them about the other passengers, about specific evidence, or even get them to follow you. But you also need to take down specific keywords in your in-game notebook, which are used for further questioning. And since

characters won't repeat themselves after being questioned, it leads to sticky situations where you can't properly interrogate other people. For the most part these are the only real puzzles in the game, and they're remarkably difficult to deduce unless you spend a lot of time in the save/load menu. *Murder on the Mississippi* is a fairly short game, and the writing is actually quite good compared to its contemporaries, but issues like these prevent it from becoming a real classic.

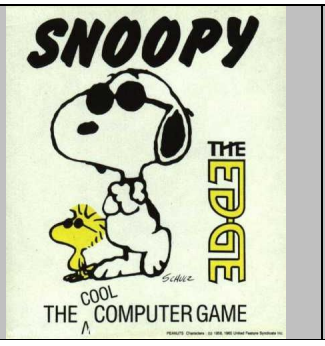


The Japanese Famicom version is cleaned up from the computer ports, but still looks basic.

Murder on the Mississippi was initially released on the Commodore 64 and Apple II computers. It was licensed by Jaleco and ported to the Nintendo Famicom and MSX2 computer under the name *Mississippi Satsujin Jiken* ("*Mississippi Murder Case*"), perhaps to capitalize on the success of the Famicom's *Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken* ("*Portopia Serial Murder Case*") title, but was only released in Japan. The graphics are slightly better than the Commodore 64 version, although the scrolling is quite choppy. It changes the names of most of the passengers – for example, Regis is now known as Watson, if his inspiration wasn't already clear. Some puzzles are changed and simplified too, as many doors are no longer locked, so you don't need to fetch the worker to unlock them. Thankfully the interrogation system has been fixed so you only need to record whole testimonies instead of individual words, correcting one of the biggest aggravations of the original game, although they still won't repeat them. Unfortunately, since the game's entirely in Japanese, it's pretty difficult to play without knowledge of the language.



This is the finale in the Commodore version, where you implicate the murderer.



Snoopy: The Cool Computer Game / Snoopy and Peanuts

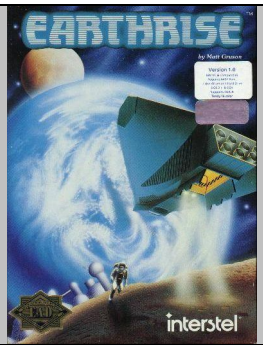
Initial Release Date: 1989
Platforms: Amiga /Amstrad CPC / Atari ST /IBM PC / ZX Spectrum
Designer(s): Justin Garvanovic, Sean Griffiths, Glyn Kendall
Developer: The Edge

Snoopy: The Cool Computer Game features the characters from Charles M. Schulz' *Peanuts* comic strip. You play as Snoopy the dog, tasked with helping Linus recover his security blanket. The game world is somewhat large, comprising 29 screens. There are even familiar locations, like the Kite-Eating Tree and the baseball field – well, at least the scoreboard from the baseball field. There are quite a few *Peanuts* characters as well, such as Charlie Brown, Lucy, Peppermint Patty, and Woodstock. The controls are simple: you wander the neighborhood with Snoopy, pick up or drop items, use those items, and occasionally interact with other characters by giving them said objects. The pick-up and deliver gameplay leaves you with plenty to do, as there are nearly two dozen items with which you can interact and two different paths you can follow on the fetch-carry quest.



That kid really falls apart without his blanket.

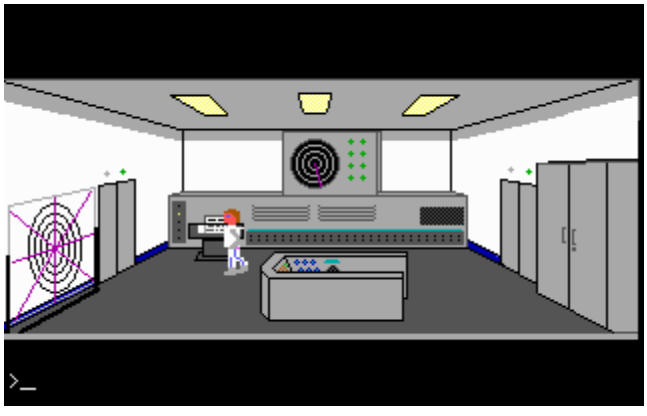
The graphics are very well done – especially for the time – and they are surprisingly true to Schulz' recognizable artwork. In the Amiga, Atari and DOS versions they also possess very bright, attractive colors. The Amiga version looks and sounds the best, with improved animations and an up-beat soundtrack. This game falls into a strange area, as it is too difficult for very young players, and a little too simple for more experienced gamers. And although the game can be beaten in under half an hour, Snoopy's slow walking pace will leave you wanting to jump everywhere to speed things up. The gameplay and graphics hold up extremely well, and this game serves as an excellent example of a simple adventure game made well. It can be enjoyed by *Peanuts* fans or for those looking to find a quick retro fix.



Earthrise

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Matt Gruson
Developer: Interstel Corporation

Considering how prolific Sierra was during the late '80s, it's a little bit surprising that there weren't many games that ripped them off, other than the *Hugo* games. *Earthrise*, released in 1991, is slightly late to the party – it's practically identical to the AGI era games, right down to the keyboard-controlled characters, text input and lack of mouse control. Despite running at a higher resolution it actually looks worse, probably because it was the work of two people, one of whom (Matt Gruson) went on to develop adventure games for MicroProse.



This Sierra-style title doesn't quite have the character of an authentic Sierra game.

As for the game itself, you are a nameless protagonist sent to investigate a base on the asteroid Solus, which has suspiciously gone silent. Comprised of numerous corridors linked by a main hub (and confusing to navigate without the enclosed map), the place is mostly deserted, except for the occasional odd creatures, like giant spiders, praying mantises and flesh-melting blobs. You also have to worry about your oxygen supply. You can conserve it by taking off your helmet, but then it's too easy to wander into a dangerous area and have your head explode. The whole experience is dry and not terribly interesting, although objectively it's not drastically worse than the average Sierra game of the day. It's just that those titles spawned a legacy which made playing their earlier games worthwhile. If you're looking for something similar but original, you'd be better off trying one of the numerous fanmade AGI games, most of which at least have some kind of character.



Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure

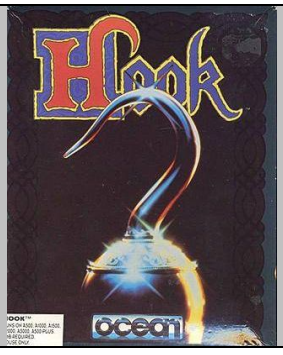
Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: Amiga / Commodore 64 / IBM PC
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Off The Wall Productions

Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure, a film telling the story of two teenage slackers time-traveling in a phone booth, spawned many spin-offs, including a television series, toys, and video games. In addition to lousy games for the NES and the Lynx, it was also turned into an adventure game for home computer. It's a simplified retelling of the movie's plot – Bill and Ted are required to pass their history project or face terrible consequences, which will adversely affect the future of the entire human race. A man from the future gives them a time-traveling phone booth to help collect enough historical figures to help them pass their project. It contains the same characters from the film, like Abraham Lincoln and Jean D'Arc, with the addition of a few new ones like Marie Antoinette and Albert Einstein. The graphics were horrible for the time, and age has not helped them. Both Bill and Ted are essentially one muddy sprite, and the backgrounds and other characters range from adequate to poor. The sound is even worse; in an attempt to avoid the typical MIDI style of the time, recorded audio is used. The soundtrack sounds like an old cassette tape that was run over by a car.



This looks non-non-non-non heinous.

On the plus side, the gameplay is simple but enjoyable. It consists almost entirely of visiting different time periods with the phone booth, gathering items, and using them to recruit historical figures. The game predates mouse controls so everything is handled by the keyboard, though there is no text parser. On occasion there are simple action sections. In one, you work through a maze while avoiding guards and in another you punch cowboys until they disappear. The original game came with essential materials to play, including a humorous phonebook containing the telephone numbers used to travel in time. Like most licensed tie-ins, *Bill & Ted* is recommended for die-hard fans of the original movies and for those looking a quick retro challenge, seeing as it can be completed in a sitting or two. For anyone else, it's a bit pointless.



Hook

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Ocean Software

Steven Spielberg's 1991 movie *Hook* told the story of a grown-up Peter Pan, who had left behind Neverland for the world of adulthood, only to be dragged back to save his kids. Of all the numerous video game adaptations, the console versions are typical side-scrolling platformers, while the arcade game is, bizarrely enough, a *Final Fight*-style beat-em-up. The computer version, published by Ocean, is a point-and-click adventure game. This decision was probably made to capitalize on the popularity of *Monkey Island*, although it doesn't have even a miniscule fraction of that game's charm.



The Amiga-style visuals look quite nice, at least.

The graphics are excellent at least, although clearly the developers didn't have the license to use Robin Williams' likeness, so Peter looks like a standard weenie. The music is decent too, at least in the Amiga version. It's also amusing to see the image of Captain Hook in the interface bar shake his hand... err, hook, whenever you solve a puzzle. The quest is remarkably short, though, as the whole game can probably be beaten in less than an hour. Nearly half the game consists of obtaining proper pirate attire (including a painful sequence where you need to visit the dentist to get a gold molar pulled in order to barter for something else). The rest consists of a brief jaunt through a maze-like jungle before entering the hideout of the Lost Boys, and then you're confronted with Captain Hook before you know it. It's not terrible, but for a game based on a movie about rediscovering the wonders of childhood, the *Hook* game totally misses the point and ends up as yet another run-of-the-mill product.



Plan 9 from Outer Space

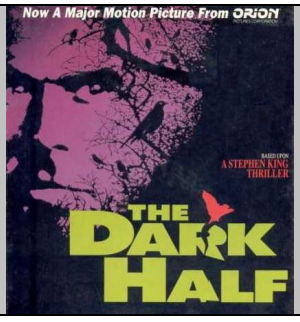
Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: Amiga / Atari ST / IBM PC
Designer(s): John McLaughlin
Developer: Gremlin Ireland

The film *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959) is often considered one of the worst films of all time. Created by Ed Wood, it features terrible acting, cardboard sets, and UFOs on visible strings, as well as a ludicrous plot involving interplanetary grave robbers. In 1992, an adventure game was created to cash in on the film's infamy, and originally even came with a copy of the film on VHS. The game uses an action-select menu, where you click on a word option and then an item onscreen. You are able to do something with almost everything, even if it is just to examine it. Unfortunately, almost nothing is worth doing, and in order to uncover items you will waste time trying to hit everything. This game would have benefited by a single cursor interface, seeing as navigation is horrible. There is usually nothing to show the possible presence of an accessible location. And due to the first person viewpoint, there are times that the directions get switched: you will enter a screen going left, and then need to go left again to return the way that you came. Combine this with travel to four continents, and you have a difficult map to keep in your head.



Sorry, Tor, there isn't a button for "Obey".

The inventory is a source of agony for the player. Missing an item is easy, leading to backtracking or death, but inventory space is limited, so it is therefore necessary to be clairvoyant to prepare. In an amusing design decision, dropping an item causes an imp to appear and return the item to its original location. The graphics serve their purpose, and contain several jokes. Most characters are played by Tor Johnson and Vampira, actors Ed Wood used in *Plan 9* and other films. There are references to Wood's other movies, such as a poster for *Glen or Glenda*. The game's soundtrack is quite good and strangely ominous; it gives you the feeling something exciting will happen, although nothing ever does. Overall, it's a huge pain to play, and most people will want to skip this one. The movie *Plan 9 from Outer Space* might be horrible, but at least it's entertaining, while the game isn't even really worth the novelty factor.



The Dark Half

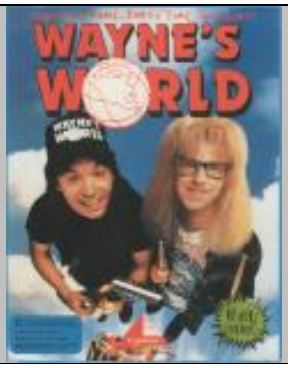
Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Kelcey Simpson
Developer: Simtus

Thad Beaumont is an author who specializes in intellectual fiction, but moonlights writing trashy horror novels under the pseudonym George Stark. Someone finds out and threatens to blackmail Thad into revealing his secret, but instead of taking the bait, he comes out and holds a public funeral for his fictional persona, proclaiming it dead and buried. On the night this happens, various townspeople are murdered, and Thad ends up the prime suspect. Apparently Thad's alternate persona wasn't so happy about being killed off, and is now seeking to re-emerge. This flashes back to before Thad's birth, where he shared his mother's womb with a twin brother. He was absorbed into Thad and manifested itself as a tumor, which was surgically removed, but elements of his personality may still remain. Hence, psychologically speaking, he is Thad's dark half.



What's this dog doing in the closet, and why was there a tear gas canister outside this apartment?

Based on the movie, which was in turn based on the Stephen King novel, which in turn was inspired with King's own experiences in being outed as Richard Bachman, Simtus' adventure game rendition of *The Dark Half* is painfully mediocre. The graphics, despite being VGA, are quite boring, the writing is terse, and the interface is glitchy. The puzzles aren't necessarily difficult so much as stupid. In order to progress the plot and receive a note from Stark, you need to start working on your book, but Thad refuses to write without a smoke. Despite having a secret office dedicated to this, you instead need to head down to the diner, search under the seat cushion for a lighter, then steal some cigarette butts from the truck parked in the next lot. Most of the time is spent covering up the tracks for the murders you didn't commit, but even this is stupid – you're supposed to hide stuff in your closet, but surely the police would think to look there? The book itself isn't even one of King's better works, as it's an amalgamation of his other, better stories. It's not unplayable, but it's hard to think of an adventure game as outright lazy as this one.



Wayne's World

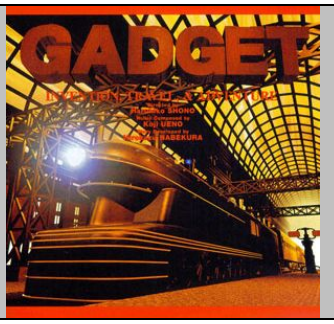
Initial Release Date: 1993
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Kelcey Simpson, Brent Smith
Developer: Capstone Software

Not to be confused with the console platformer, the *Wayne's World* PC game is a point-and-click game based on the 1992 film and developed by Capstone, who specialized in mediocre-to-awful licensed adventures. The plot involves Wayne and Garth attempting to raise money to save their cable access show by throwing a pizza-thon. At the outset, the characters brainstorm a list of everything they need to accomplish their mission, which helps provide a bit of structure. Some the locations, like Stan Mikita's donut shop, make an appearance, although most of the characters from the movie are missing. And while this was released in a time before games were filled with audible dialogue, there are numerous audio samples of catch phrases from the film. The graphics and gameplay are similar to *Monkey Island*, with an emphasis on humor, dialogue selection, and solving problems using collected inventory items. The controls are easy to use, but the interface is unresponsive and movement is a pain.



That looks like Wayne's basement. But that's not Wayne's basement. Isn't that weird?

The team of Wayne and Garth is handled in an intriguing way. The player can switch between the two, choosing which one is active and which one follows along. They each have separate inventories, and some conversations and situations will play out differently depending on which character is selected. Unfortunately, there are only a handful of times that the game actually makes use of this great idea, and there's generally no indicator when to choose whom. Like with many of the puzzles in the game, blind guessing is the only option. While not as disappointing as the majority of licensed games, *Wayne's World* still falls short of its potential. The source material wasn't exactly highbrow, but it had its charms, which are mostly eluded here due to some daft writing. Still, at least it has the common sense to include an "Extreme Closeup" command, even if it's rarely used.



Gadget: Invention, Travel, & Adventure (Initial Release) / Gadget: Past as Future (Rerelease)

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / PlayStation / iOS
Designer(s): Haruhiko Shono, Hirokazu Nabekura
Developer: Synergy

Gadget stretches the idea of what it means to be an adventure game. Many would prefer to call it an interactive movie. But however you choose to label it, *Gadget* is among the most atmospheric and immersive experiences one can have on a computer. Its design legacy can be seen in such games as *Bioshock* and *Syberia*, and director Guillermo del Toro claimed in an Edge Magazine interview that the game influenced such films as *The Matrix* and *Dark City*.

"A day eighteen years before the end," in an alternate future or present, it seems that the microchip was never developed. Everything is made of vacuum tubes and Bakelite. The protagonist is a silent agent of his government, given the assignment of finding a missing scientist, Horselover Frost. The government claims that Frost is a subversive, brainwashing people and intending to cause widespread panic with the false claim that a massive comet is on a collision course with earth. Of course, Frost's colleagues swear that the government is trying to cover up the danger of the comet, and that their brainwashing machine is actually intended to draw out a person's latent abilities. Your character takes train after train, attempting to track down the pieces of Frost's machine, and hopefully decipher the truth in the meantime. The passengers and railroad workers around you grow more and more unbalanced as reality itself begins to fall apart. As the terror level rises, everything is in doubt. Is the world really in danger? Who is telling the truth? Whose side are you actually on?

Although the aesthetics look Eastern European, *Gadget* was developed in Japan by Haruhiko Shono, the director of *Alice: An Interactive Museum* and *L-Zone*. Shono was heralded as a major pioneer in the area of interactive entertainment by Newsweek and Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry. *Gadget* was his last major creation for the personal computer. In 2004, he worked on the film *Casshern*, serving as the CG supervisor and conceptual designer.

Gadget is presented in a slideshow format with animated linkages, but to an amazing effect. It uses consistent rules for its navigation, and it is always apparent through the cursor which directions you can go. While the textures and details are somewhat simple by today's standards, the visual design of the game is still absolutely stunning. There is an intense retro-futurist look to everything, with giant radios, *Buck Rogers* airplanes and art deco locomotives. The trains are a focal point, as most of your time is spent either on them or at one of the stops along their routes, and the work that went into their design is more than evident. The most bizarre piece of machinery is the Sensorama, a massive device that uses light and motion to cause hallucinations in a human subject. It is central to the plot, and you are forced to use it numerous times. These psychedelic episodes are one of the highlights of the experience. The characters all look a bit creepy and obviously artificial, but almost stylistically so.

The game has a similar atmosphere to Steven Soderbergh's *Kafka*, as it contains a clever blend of science fiction elements and *Kafka*'s paranoia. The dialogue is subtle but creepy, and the lighting used on the faces of characters gives them an otherworldly look. The game's soundtrack, which was done mostly in an ambient style, elevates the feeling of mystery and fear that the game tries to evoke. When you throw into the mix frightening, reoccurring symbols and the increasingly nightmarish scenarios, you end up with an unnerving package.

This is all driven home by the inevitability of the gameplay, but most players would question *Gadget*'s validity as a game. On the surface, it has all the ingredients of an excellent

adventure game: a well-crafted plot, interesting areas to explore, items to be gathered and used from an inventory, and plenty of things on which to click. But *Gadget* is more often considered an interactive movie, as the story is entirely linear and everything is set in stone, even the finale. You are incapable of ending the game by making a mistake, and with the exception of one small maze, the game is completely devoid of puzzles. In fact, the sudden appearance of that maze is completely jarring.



The human characters look awfully disconcerting.

Although the game might be billed as an interactive movie, some would criticize the lack of decision making. When it comes to most adventure games, it's easy to be frustrated by a game putting up boundaries where they should not be. *Gadget* is lacking in such artificial constructs. It begs one to ask, "Would this be more interesting if I had to solve a complex puzzle in base thirteen to turn on this gizmo?", as in most other *Myst*-style games. And the answer is no, because the game already does a fantastic job of entrancing the player and urging them to become enveloped in its world. When you use your inventory, it's never bothersome that the game chooses the appropriate item for you; it's always fairly obvious, anyway. *Gadget* is almost comparable to a rail shooter like *Time Crisis*. It is an adventure game on rails, or, more accurately, an adventure game on train tracks.

The game was first released as a single disc in 1994 as *Gadget: Invention, Travel & Adventure*. In 1997 and 1998 it was rereleased as a four-disc set under the title *Gadget: Past as Future*, published by Cryo Interactive outside of Japan. The newer version uses the extra space to feature improved graphics and animations, and was also released for the PlayStation, although with lower resolution visuals. In 2011 it was ported to the iOS under the name *iGadget*, with a regular version of iPhones and iPods, and an HD version of iPads. A companion book was published in 1996, *Inside Out with Gadget*. It features images from the game accompanied by diary entries and other fictional text to flesh out the world of *Gadget*. Images and animations from the game were remixed and released on a DVD, *Gadget Trips: Mindscapes*. There is even a novel entitled *The Third Force: A Novel of Gadget* by sci-fi writer Marc Laidlaw.

While not for everyone – certainly not for those who crave puzzles or exploration – *Gadget* is an interesting piece of art for those looking for a wonderful story that unfolds through an exceptional presentation. Every developer should take the short time needed to play through this one, as one can only imagine how it could inspire and influence them.



DreamWeb

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: Amiga / IBM PC
Designer(s): Neil Dodwell
Developer: Creative Reality

DreamWeb, a dark, cyberpunk adventure, just might be the most depressing game ever made. As a down-on-his-luck ex-bartender named Ryan, it's your duty to hunt through the bleak streets of the city and brutally murder seven different people. Ryan knows this because he's constantly haunted by visions of the "Dreamweb", a place inhabited by monks who instruct him that these seven souls are going to cause an imbalance and doom the world

It's a little creepy. For all intents and purposes, you are playing as a serial killer. Overt violence is nothing new in electronic gaming, but never so much as *DreamWeb*. For as much controversy as *Mortal Kombat* and *Grand Theft Auto* caused, they're so cartoonishly silly that they lack any serious impact. Darker games like *Manhunt* and *Hitman* are vaguely justified by their scenarios ("kill or be killed" in the former, paid work in the latter), but never has a game put you in a character so dramatically unhinged that they think they're saving the world, when in reality, they're hunting and gunning down people in cold blood.

But are these victims truly innocent? Is the Dreamweb a mere hallucination, a strange rationalization for Ryan to unleash whatever demon lies within? The answer is never explicitly given, which is part of why the concept is so brilliant. The original release came with a supplementary book called "Diary of a (Mad?) Man", which includes a variety of insane scribbles. In the game, Ryan never questions his motives, and even if the player does, not murdering means not proceeding. Beyond the seven targets, for which they need to die for their future sins, there is one innocent person you need to kill. It is a security guard and it is not out of self defense – you just pull out your gun, shoot him, and move on. Ryan doesn't even comment on it. Perhaps it's rationalized that this bystander needed to die for the greater good. Perhaps it's more that Ryan has no use or regard for human life to begin with. And yet there are a few small bits that suggest that Ryan may not be hallucinating – an item, a glowing crystal obtained in the Dreamweb, is required for one of the missions. And after each murder, Ryan is sucked into the Dreamweb and spit out at some other random location in the city, always avoiding arrest. By the time the adventure reaches its logical conclusion, the player has to make up their mind: is Ryan a tragic hero or a deranged lunatic?

For those looking for an entirely original storytelling experiences, *DreamWeb* is an absolute must. It does take awhile to get used to interface, though. It's a point-and-click adventure, although a non-standard one that uses a strict overhead perspective. The action takes place in a window roughly half the size of the screen, with a status bar on top and Ryan's largely unchanging portrait on the side – he looks a bit like Rufus Sewell in *Dark City*. Since the main window is so small, there's a secondary window which shows a chunky magnification of whatever's below the cursor, along with a text description, bringing the term "pixel hunting" to a new level. Even then you need to comb each area thoroughly, mostly to find the 2x2 blotches that constitute keypads and control panels. Needless to say, it's incredibly easy to skip over an item and find yourself running back and forth across the whole city to find it. There are a couple of areas where you can find yourself in a dead end, though mostly if you don't pay attention. Obviously Ryan can get killed, but dangerous situations are always made clear, and nearly all of them can be solved by diving into your inventory and grabbing your gun.

Nearly everything can be interacted with on some level, which provides an impressive level of detail, but also causes a case of inventory overload. Puzzles in adventure games only really work when the goal is clear and the tools are restricted, so one can use the process of elimination to figure out how to solve them. In a standard adventure game context, *DreamWeb* has fairly easy puzzles – disable control boxes, etcetera – but you can pick up almost anything, and when you have limited inventory space, it becomes way too confusing. Beyond this, the quest isn't terribly long. The early stages drag a bit, as Ryan needs to obtain a gun and find his first victim, but all of the later ones are quite brief.

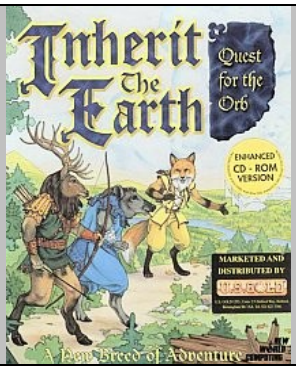


The uncensored version has a bit of nudity. All versions have tons of gore.

DreamWeb had two releases on the Amiga, with the AGA version having 256 color graphics and an extra song over the standard version. It was also released on the PC, first on disk format. It's mostly the same, although the soundtracks are different. The Amiga version features extraordinarily moody electronic music, which is something the MOD format pulls off perfectly. The PC version is similar in style, although some of the compositions are different. They're all short, looping, streaming sound files, although they suffer from low-fi encoding. Either way, the soundtracks are fantastic, similar to any number of John Carpenter films.

A CD version was also released for the PC, which is mostly the same except for some scattered voice acting. Only the actual dialogue has voices – most of Ryan's internal monologue is still text only. It's hard to tell if the actors are trying to sound depressed or merely disinterested, but in the end, it still works towards enhancing the downtrodden mood of the whole experience. Unfortunately the soundtrack is still low quality, although there's a bonus CD audio track featuring remixed music.

However, certain re-releases of *DreamWeb* are censored. When it was originally released, it featured a rather notorious scene where Ryan barges in on his first target to find him having sex with a groupie. Both are completely naked, as the girl crawls off and hides under the bed, revealing some male frontal nudity. This scene alone was enough to get the game banned in Australia. The game was censored and then approved for release, but to perhaps numb the controversy, most other CD releases worldwide are bowdlerized. These versions put some clothes on the couple, but the scene is otherwise the same. There are other minor bits of nudity which were left untouched, like Ryan's girlfriend in a bathtub. But it's still quite odd that this scene alone was called out for controversy, when the rest of the game features a variety of extraordinarily bloody deaths, ranging from shootings to explosions to characters getting pummeled by trains. As one point you have a conversation with a woman whose lower half has been blown across the room. This sort of "violence OK, sex BAD" thing is the same issue that got *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* in trouble with the "Hot Coffee" incident years later, which feels slightly backwards.



Inherit the Earth: Quest for the Orb

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Mac / Linux / iOS
Designer(s): Carolly Hauksdottir, Robert McNally, David Joiner
Developer: The Dreamers Guild

Inherit the Earth: Quest for the Orb, designed by The Dreamers Guild and published by New World Computing, tells the story of our planet far in the future, when humans have gone extinct. In their stead are "morphs", or anthropomorphic – walking and talking – versions of various animals. All of the different animal tribes live together in a rather tense balance, because each of their inherent characteristics causes tension. The elks are proud warriors, while the boars are loud, messy and stupid. The rats are old and wise, and the dogs are loveable, although a bit dim. The foxes are sly and clever, which is exactly what gets them into trouble at the outset.

In the midst of a festival, it is announced that the Orb, a mystical object from ages long past, has gone missing. Despite having only circumstantial evidence, Rif the fox is accused of being the perpetrator, for his race is known for being sneaky. He maintains his innocence, but his ladyfriend Rhene is taken hostage by the Boar King, as an "incentive" to stay on track as he attempts to get the Orb back. Still not quite trusting him, the Boar and Elk tribe send their own members, Eeah and Okk, to travel along with Rif to not only provide aid, but to keep him in check. Right at the beginning the trio discovers that the Orb was actually stolen by a member of the Raccoon tribe, which has long since disappeared, so their adventure takes them far away from home as they search the land for the mysterious thief. Along the way, they'll run in with the other races on the planet, and explore the ruins of the long departed humans.

The point-and-click interface is pretty standard, although *Inherit the Earth* sets itself apart through its fairly large game world. Many adventure games consist of static screens, which are also in *Inherit the Earth*, but many of the towns and caves are expansive areas constructed with tiles, making them feel more like an RPG. There's also an overworld map which is used to travel between locations. Although this provides a sense of scale, all of the running around feels remarkably tedious. Rif moves awfully slowly for a fox, and much of the time is spent meandering through dead space. The towns consist of a handful of buildings, most of which are useless, and the few important ones are unmarked. There are townspeople, too, although they rarely have anything useful to say. What's worse is the game's proclivity towards mazes. Not including the towns, there are four of them, and even the easier ones aren't so much difficult as just really long, especially the ones you need to navigate through multiple times. There's no doubt that this is all padding, because the game would be really short without these.

That's not to say the game is all bad though. *Inherit the Earth* has maintained some measure of cult popularity, largely with the furry fanbase, for obvious reasons. According to one of the developers, the publisher was unaware that there was an adult population that might be interested in something like this, so the game was largely cut back and aimed at a younger audience. It's pretty easy to tell, because the puzzles are quite straightforward and simplistic. Eeah and Okk serve little purpose, because the few times when they're needed, the game automatically commands them to act.

Thematically, some of the violence had to be cut out, and some of the backstory involving the disappearance of the humans had to be removed, considering it had originally involved a nuclear holocaust. This is unfortunate, because the last third of the game, when you leave

behind the Renaissance faire trappings of the rest of the world and delve into the depths of a run-down military base, is where the story really starts to get interesting.

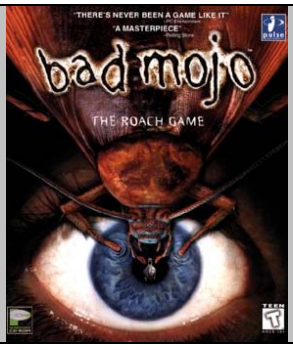
Even though *Inherit the Earth* purports to be a kiddie game, it's still far better than the average edutainment software, and in spite of its relative simplicity, maintains some appeal for an older crowd. Despite some of the repetitive scenery, the background artwork is excellent, full of lush greenery in the beginning stages, switching to a modern technological backdrop in later segments. The writing is decent, with each race possessing its own mannerisms, and the voice acting in the CD-ROM release is surprisingly professional. Rif is a likeable leader, and there are more than a few references that kids probably wouldn't appreciate, including an homage to the Abbott and Costello "Who's on First?" bit and a scene with poker-playing dogs. A good amount of the humor stems from the way Rif tricks his opponents, which is best exemplified when he needs to grab some clay from the mud pool in the hall of the Boar King. He charges in and grovels: "I was going to come in here and beg for mercy. I was going to plead for clemency. I was going to grovel at your feet and appeal to you for the release of my friend. I was going to strip myself of every vestige of dignity I have left for your pleasure! But now... " – Rif covertly pockets some of the clay he needs – "I don't think I'm going to." He then promptly takes off. The Boar King blinks, perplexed. "Did I miss something?"



Rif attempts to outwit the dogs. Which isn't hard, because they aren't all that smart.

As a whole, *Inherit the Earth* is a fairly decent game, albeit one that could've probably used some trimming to improve the pacing. The developers intended for a sequel – the ending even featured a "To Be Continued" line – which never actually happened. Still, the developers have maintained an extreme amount of devotion to this little game. In 2000, they formed a company called Wyrmkeep Entertainment and ported the game, originally released for DOS and Amiga platforms, to Windows, Macintosh and Linux. These versions are still available on sale from the company's website, and the game has also since been added to ScummVM.

In 2005, the artist started up a webcomic that acts as a follow-up, which focuses on the adventures of Rif and Rhene and includes many of the same characters. Their website even has a little minigame using upgraded graphics from *Inherit the Earth*, although it's a simple Flash matching puzzle. In 2009 the game was ported to iOS, and the developers have even expressed interest in a true sequel, should the opportunity arise.



Bad Mojo

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Vincent Carrella, Phill Simon
Developer: Drew Pictures

Bad Mojo is one gloriously screwed up game. Loosely inspired by Franz Kafka's trippy short novel *The Metamorphosis*, *Bad Mojo* tells the story of a young man named Roger Samms, who is transferred into the body of a tiny cockroach by a strange pendant. To regain his human form, he must journey through his dilapidated apartment to find his unconscious body, a fairly troublesome task given his state as a creepy crawly little bug.

The concept defies any traditional kind of genre classification. Your roach is controlled entirely by the keyboard: up to move forward, down to move backwards, right and left to turn. A roach can't carry anything, nor communicate, nor wield any weapons – about the only thing it can do is crawl up and around surfaces, and occasionally move very small objects like cigarettes and bottle caps. Therefore, most of the game simply involves navigating the overtly dangerous environments. The pathways are mostly linear, although given the sense of scale it's easy to get confused in regards to your bearings. You'll find other roaches scattering about, and while you can't directly interact with them, they can help point you in the right direction.

Video games have often played with the concept of being a small character in a large world, although usually in a lighthearted context a la *Toy Story*. *Bad Mojo*, on the other hand is pretty much the polar opposite. Roger's apartment is, for the lack of a kinder word, a total shithole, crumbling at every corner and infested with any number of vermin. The visuals are rendered with a combination of computer graphics and digitized photography, for that authentic feel. The floors are filled with mouse traps and roach hotels, with their dead carcasses copiously spread throughout. The game goes for intentional gross-outs time and time again, like when you crawl over a TV dinner and find one of your deceased brethren lying dead in the mashed potatoes.

The kitchen is a mess of blood, grease, maggots, and some of the grossest looking chili imaginable. Vacuum cleaners will suck you up and send you flying across the room. Rats and spiders prove formidable foes, and throughout the game a wrong move will get you eaten by your pet cat, appropriately named Franz. The atmosphere is aided with the help of an impressive creepy score by Xorcist, a talented industrial electronica group. Most of the game is viewed from a cramped overhead perspective that moves screen by screen, although occasionally it will change angles for dramatic purposes. There's a disturbing claustrophobic feel throughout, as if at any moment you could immediately be stomped out of existence.

That never actually happens (although there are some scary insta-deaths – make sure to stay away from the rats, no matter how dead they look!) though dying is indeed quite prevalent. In this, *Bad Mojo* pulls a rather arcade-style trick and gives you five lives. Every time you get too stuck in the scenery or otherwise disposed off, you lose one and are reassembled safely elsewhere on the screen. Lose all of your lives and you're reincarnated back in the apartment's plumbing system. These pipes act as a hub between the six areas – the basement, the bathroom, the kitchen, the bar, the living room and the den – and progressing through them will open up new passages, allowing you to travel back and forth between them, even after dying. Still, you can save on any screen at any time, which is definitely the better method of handling your screw-ups. Most of the game is quite linear, although there's an annoying situation involving a fuse box early in the game. You're supposed to short it out, but in order to do this, you're meant

to piece together a code during your journeys and revisit it later. Not only is this solution incredibly obscure – it's only hinted at in several documents found around the department – but it requires a huge amount of backtracking, to the point where it's much easier just to read a FAQ to get the code. Besides, the game is quite short – you can potentially beat in a few hours.

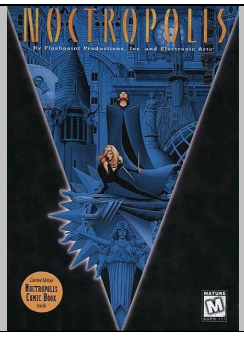


One puzzle involves killing one of these rats with a shaving razor. Here is the result.

There are other puzzles, too, although they're usually quite simple – use a peanut as a boat, use the bodies of dead roaches as bridges, and so on. Most of them involve moving or turning something, which is troublesome given the sputtery controls, but not impossible. A few of the more complicated ones are quite creative though. Late in the game when you're in your office, you find yourself unable to reach the ground. You need to muck with the electrical wires on the fan to turn it on, which will cause some paper to fly and land in the fax machine below. Then, hit the "copy" button on the fax machine to create a stream of paper, which acts as a bridge to the floor. Most of your goals are given away by the spirit of your dead mother (the owner of the pendant that got you into this situation in the first place), who, despite speaking in enigmatic riddles, will also show you videos of exactly what you're supposed to be doing. Other helpful allies include the voice of a suffocating catfish, which is even more bizarre.

Even though you're a tiny bug through most of the game, there's a solid plot being told, mostly related through live action cutscenes. Roger is a research scientist dealing in pesticides (how karmically appropriate) who has stolen a huge sum of money and is about to skip the country before his mishap occurs. When venturing around, you'll occasionally trigger visions, many involving Roger's landlord, a sad old drunk named Eddie Battito. At first the focus on him seems a bit odd, since he appears only tangentially related to everything, but the connection between Roger and Eddie quickly grows evident. The final revelation is thoroughly ridiculous, but the developers were well aware of this, because everything is incredibly overacted. Beyond the visions, much of the backstory is told through newspaper clippings, letters, faxes, bank statements, and other bits of scenery that you'll find yourself crawling over, a rather forward-thinking way to develop the narrative. There are also four different endings, depending on the actions you take in the final (timed) sequence.

Bad Mojo was developed by Drew Pictures, the same guys behind the FMV game *Iron Helix*, and it's a shame they more or less disappeared after this game. Nowadays it's something of a cult classic, as there's really nothing else like it. It was reissued in 2004 under the name *Bad Mojo Redux*, and while the core game is the same, it updates the videos to use an improved version of Quicktime, allowing for nicer FMVs and proper compatibility on modern computers.



Noctropolis

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Brent Erickson
Developer: Flashpoint Productions

Here's a pretty common fantasy trope – a despondent boy or girl finds themselves swept into an alternate world, where they find both adventure and a fulfilling sense of purpose missing from their own everyday lives. *Noctropolis*, developed by Flashpoint Productions and published by Electronics Arts, toys with this a bit. Instead of featuring a young character and casting it as a coming-of-age story, *Noctropolis* features a middle-aged man named Peter Grey, the divorced owner of a failing book store. He ends up winning a mysterious contest which transports him into the world of *Darksheer*, his favorite comic book series. Sadly, its hero, the titular Darksheer has retired, so it's up to Grey to take up his cape and defend Noctropolis, a city perpetually in a state of darkness, from a series of super villains.

The concept is an interesting inversion, if mainly because it suggests a lot of potential – how can the world of fantasy fiction heal the soul by invoking one's inner manchild? Sadly, it never even approaches that territory, and uses the "maturity" as an excuse for violence, naughty language and an occasional set of bare breasts. The game was published in the mid-90s, as the CD-ROM craze was coming into full swing, and games like *Ripper, Hell: A Cyberpunk Adventure*, and *Phantasmagoria* were purporting to elevate gaming to a new level, with dark storylines and legitimate actors. *Noctropolis* is better than any of those, although not by much.



The background artwork is often quite stunning.

Indeed, there's a lot that just seems off about *Noctropolis*. The developers obviously had a love for comic books, which shows through in both the two issues of the *Darksheer* comic found in-game (and included in the packaging) and the gorgeously painted backgrounds. The visuals are rendered in SVGA and it does tend to look quite stunning, particularly in its attention to gothic architecture. Then it goes and shatters all of that by relying on digitized actors, which completely clashes with everything.

The interface is weird, too. Even though the game is displayed in the third person perspective, you can't just move anywhere on the screen, and can only walk to certain predetermined points. Everything is controlled by the mouse, but you can't cycle through verbs. Instead, you need to right-click every time and pick a verb from a menu. The cursor does not indicate hotspots, and nearly everything you need to pick up is either really tiny or shrouded in darkness. On the other hand, when you use an item from your inventory, the game will take over and solve any puzzles automatically, reducing the need to click everywhere on the screen. As a result, the puzzles are not particularly difficult, but the most frustrating ones are the kind where you missed a tiny bit of pixels in some scenario hours before. You can retrace your steps at any point, but it still feels tedious.

In many ways, both with its obsession with FMV and its interface, *Noctropolis* feels a lot like the spiritual successor to Access' *Martian Memorandum*. (The designer, Brent Erickson, worked on both games, solidifying the links between them.) Conversations are displayed in full motion video, usually in a small window, each with a number of dialogue choices. Assuming you navigate these trees correctly, you can interrogate the character about the two dozen or so topics. These are handled without video or voice, and are relayed only in text, presumably to save space. As one might guess, the actors aren't exactly great, and it's all quite cheesy.



Nothing screams "adult" like filling your game with blood and hookers.

And then there's Darksheer himself. In the comics Darksheer seems like a badass, but you do a totally pathetic job of filling his shoes. His only powers include wearing a cape – not even with a mask! – and his special tools include an item that can make him temporarily invisible, and a grenade. Yes, a single grenade. (Although to be fair, the grenade can be recharged, although you use each of these items precisely once.) Throughout the whole game, you'll run into each of the city's old nemeses, including Succubus, a sultry vampiress with a taste for lingerie; Greenthumb, who is covered completely in plants; Tophat, an actress with a fetish for torture; Drealmer, who can infest people's dreams; Master Macabre, a sadistic doctor; and Flux, the mysterious character who brings them all together. Some are decent homages – Tophat is a bit like a female version of The Joker, and Drealmer is Freddy Krueger with a lisp. On the other hand, Greenthumb may as well have been taken from *Darkwing Duck*.

In almost every one of your encounters with these baddies, you get the tar kicked out of you, usually quite embarrassingly. When you run in with Tophat, she ties you to a board, surrounds you with flames and throws daggers right into your legs. Your only escape is to wait until the dopey janitor comes up and lets you down. It doesn't help that most of the time, you don't even get to truly defeat your enemy – even getting to nail them in the face would've been somewhat gratifying. Many of them end up escaping safely, robbing you of any sense of heroic catharsis, and leaving you badly beaten up. In any of these situations when you're mortally

wounded (all of which are part of the scenario and are unavoidable), a timer pops up and begins to count down. You need to reach your headquarters to heal yourself, or else you'll die. Usually these time limits are pretty generous, ranging from five to twenty minutes. Surprisingly, other than the timed segments, there are very few other spots where you can die. The most frustrating part is one where you need to sneak into an observatory and avoid a series of spotlights, but since you move so slowly and the interface is so cumbersome, it's hard to properly complete without dying dozens of times.

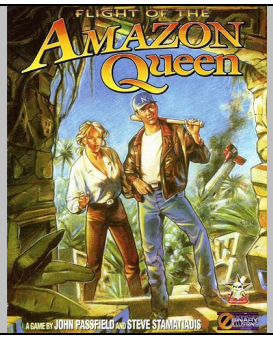
Darksheer is a weenie, true, but then there's Stiletto, his sexy fair-haired sidekick. When you first meet her, she's a lousy drunk mourning the loss of the old Darksheer, but she quickly warms up to you once she realizes you can handle yourself in a fight. She wears a tight black latex catsuit which shows off her ample cleavage, and is played by an ex-Playboy Playmate, Hope Marie Carlton, AKA Miss July 1985. Her only super powers include playing up her sluttier qualities to get men to comply, and getting kidnapped. In other words, even though she follows Darksheer more or less everywhere (when she's not being held hostage, anyway), she doesn't do a whole lot, other than fulfilling the Electronic Arts marketing department's promise of naked boobies. Which, to be honest, are pretty disappointing.

In spite of the lousy main characters, there are actually a few pretty decent scenarios that stand out pretty well, although they're buried in the second half of the game. One involves Darksheer and Stiletto exploring a labyrinth beneath the city, and another takes place in a dark dreamscape. Neither would be compelling without the absolutely outstanding background artwork, especially in the nightmare level. In one area, there's a series of gigantic wine glasses filled with bloodied organs. There's also an unnerving obsession with humongous clown heads. The twist at the end of the game isn't particularly surprising, but elements of it are well orchestrated, enough that it bolsters the overall storyline once you've completed it.



The in-game comic actually has some alright artwork, despite being largely terrible otherwise.

Although it has its moments, it's really hard to tell if *Noctropolis* is supposed to be a parody, or if it's just sloppily done. The writing, while decent, is quite self-serious and doesn't suggest any real sense of comedy, but the high school drama club acting and the sad-sack storyline suggest otherwise. Even as a C-level multimedia production, it never quite reaches the "so-bad-it's-good" level, and it never embraces its low production values the way the *Tex Murphy* games do.



Flight of the Amazon Queen

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / iOS
Designer(s): Interactive Binary Illusions
Developer: John Passfield, Steve Stamatiadis

Flight of the Amazon Queen so desperately wants to be a LucasArts game. Largely designed by two guys out of Brisbane, Australia, it's best described as *Indiana Jones* meets *Monkey Island*. It's hard to hold it against them, since it emulates the style and humor so remarkably well that it quickly squashes any potential cries of plagiarism and emerges as an entertaining game in its own right.

The player controls Joe King (Pilot for Hire), who is contracted to fly the beautiful actress Faye Russell to a photo shoot in South America. They never quite make it to their destination, though, as they end up crashing in the middle of the Amazon rain forest. Leaving behind both Faye and his trusty mechanic, Joe sets off on his own to try to find a way to repair his airplane.

That never quite happens, though, as Joe gets caught up in a number of offbeat adventures. The Amazon, at least the spot you've crashed into, as quite populated, as you'll run into explorers, missionaries, and a pygmy village that just happens to have a 24 hour convenience store. More important, however, is the village of gorgeous Amazon women, who initially imprison Joe for a series of mating rituals. But they actually have more pressing concerns – an evil scientist, masquerading as a lederhosen manufacturer, has been kidnapping the locals and running horrible experiments on them. At the head of this scheme is Dr. Ironstein, an evil German scientist who's melding dinosaur DNA with humans to create an army of super mutants, in a dastardly plot to take over the world.



Hot Amazon babes briefly distract Joe from the task(s) at hand.

There's a lot of silliness to be had, much of which comes from affectionate parodies of '50s pulp serials. Of course, there are the *Indiana Jones* similarities – the evil German bad guys, for instance, although they aren't technically Nazis. At one point Joe emphatically remarks about how much he isn't afraid of snakes, and one of the main goals of the game is to find the mystical Crystal Skull, a concept predating the actual *Indy* movie by more than a decade. There's also a hidden valley like *The Lost World*, which is still populated by dinosaurs, and the game's climatic

moment takes place amidst a Godzilla-style kaiju battle. There are references to cheesy superhero comics, and one of the major puzzles involves assembling the necessary materials to build a jetpack.

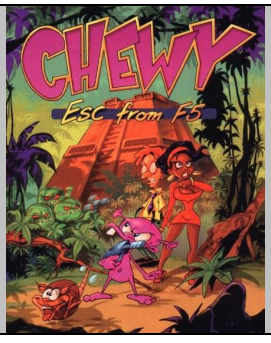
Flight of the Amazon Queen also sometimes subverts the formula in clever ways. One of the first obstacles you need to get past is a gigantic gorilla. Not more than a few screens away, across a broken bridge, is a banana. It's easy enough to fix the bridge and grab it, but if you hand it over to the gorilla, he'll just eat it, smile, and refuse to budge. Instead, you're supposed to talk to him a bit, eventually revealing that he can speak English. You need to convince him that gorillas live in African jungles, not South American ones, which causes him to disappear in a puff of logic. In another segment, infiltrating the underground fortress doesn't involve any matter of punching or even sneaking. Instead you need to distract the guards through other, goofier means. To get past one of them, you need to deliver him a breakup letter from his girlfriend, causing him to become too distraught to do his job. And while the beginning of the game seems to set up Faye as a potential love interest for Joe, instead he ends up hooking up with Azula, the Amazon Queen.



The talking gorilla is one of the game's most memorable characters.

It's certainly got a good sense of humor, although the dialogue isn't quite up to *Monkey Island* levels. Still, even if the writing is missing that certainly witty snap, it's well sold by the cast of voice actors. Joe has an almost ridiculously thick Brooklyn accent, and approaches each halfway ludicrous situation with a certain amount of innocuous bravado. Most of the artwork is, again, in the style of *Monkey Island*, although the comic book style close-ups during cinema scenes are far from attractive. The interface condenses the actions into a series of icons, but only four items are displayed at once, and since you have a few dozen by the end of the game, it's a pain cycling through all of them. The font is the same one used in many LucasArts titles, if the similarities weren't already abundantly clear.

Flight of the Amazon Queen deserves far more respect than it gets. While Interactive Binary Illusions was reportedly in talks with LucasArts to publish their game in the United States, those plans fell through. Instead, they teamed up with Warner Bros, who shuffled out the game under the radar in small quantities. In some ways it's understandable, since it was released in 1995 and looked a bit dated compared to other similar games of the year. But its look is ultimately timeless, and it definitely warrants an examination today. In 2004, it was released as freeware and is compatible with ScummVM. It's also available for purchase on the iPhone and iPad.



Chewy: ESC from F5

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Carsten Wieland
Developer: Blue Byte Software

No, this game has absolutely nothing to do with Chewbacca from *Star Wars*, and yes, the title is a keyboard joke. The titular Chewy is a short bucktoothed pink alien pulling a heist on the gross green aliens known as the Borx. During their escape, his buddy Clint ends up spiraling out of control into a black hole, while Chewy himself is captured and imprisoned on their ship, the F5. After escaping, he follows Clint's trail to Earth, finding himself in the dopey burg of Smalltown USA. Here, he teams up with Howard, a failed writer, to get his awful manuscript published. This then takes them to Big City, where they meet up with the gorgeous Nichelle, before taking off to the Amazonian Jungle to find Clint.



Yeah, you just keep telling that to yourself, Chewy.

Like most European games not initially written in English, the dialogue never quite feels right, and Chewy, with his weird, squeaky voice and dopey wisecracks, embarrassing attempts at street slang and dated pop culture references, often comes off as more obnoxious than cute. Still, it's hard to hate a game that looks and sounds as fantastic as this one. The VGA visuals have held up extraordinarily well, with a colorful, unique style and fantastic animation. The digitally streamed music is also excellent, a mixture of '70s funk and '80s pop. The puzzles are silly and slapsticky – one involves flattening an alien with an anvil so you can use its paper-thin corpse on a body scanner; another involves kidnapping a highly flatulent rodent to shock some foes into a coma. It's mostly juvenile but it's surprisingly fun, since it has a sense of energy missing from most LucasArts comic adventure clones and the well-telegraphed puzzle solutions are clever without being obtuse. Blue Byte, the German developer, was mostly known for their *The Settlers* series, and this was their only adventure game – a real shame, that.



Kingdom O' Magic

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Sales Curve Interactive
Developers: Fergus McNeill, Matthew Sansam

SCI's *Kingdom O'Magic* is about as close as anyone got to a Monty Python skit in video game form. Oh, sure, they were actual Monty Python computer titles, but most of them were barely games. And while the likes of *Discworld* and *Simon the Sorcerer* did a pretty good job of fulfilling the "wacky fantasy humour" quotient, they don't quite capture the anarchist Dadaism of the famous British troupe in the same way that *Kingdom O' Magic* does. It was designed in part by Fergus McNeill, who also developed a handful of parody text adventures back in the ZX Spectrum days, including *Bored of the Rings* and *The Boggit*.

The heroes of this sublimely silly adventure are Shah-Ron, the absurdly buxom and incredibly clumsy female barbarian, and Thidney (should be "Sidney", but he's got a lisp), a giant ugly talking lizard. At the beginning, you are presented with the choice of three different quests. The Good Old Fashioned Traditional Quest is purportedly the easiest, and involves the slaying of a big, nasty dragon. The Magnificent 7-11 Quest puts you on a journey across the kingdom to draft between seven and eleven warriors to defend the kingdom. And the Bizarre and Slightly Twisted Quest tasks you with saving the world by hunting down the Lost Lava Lamp of the Ancients and saving the entire world by destroying the Dark Lord.

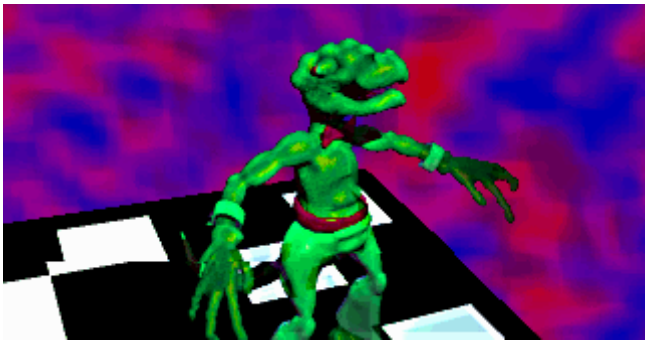
Once you've made your selections, it becomes clear that *Kingdom O' Magic* isn't a straight adventure game so much as a low level role-playing game in adventure game trappings. It uses a standard point-and-click interface, and there are lots of items to grab and characters to converse with, but ultimately the game is less about solving puzzles and more about running fetch quests.

The core of the experience, though, lies in the comedy. One of the first objects you can find is a cellphone, which can used to dial the official hint line for a clue, at the cost of a single gold coin. The manual is more of a joke book than a legitimate guide, as the troubleshooting Q&A uses the opportunity to go off on ridiculous tangents. ("I was really looking forward to *Kingdom O' Magic*. Imagine by disappointment then, when I discovered I couldn't bring my wife to climax.") Even the interface is comical – upon confirming an action, you are asked to respond with "Yes, I know what I want!" or "No, I am filled with doubts.")

Examining any of the characters will bring up their data sheets, including hit points, their items, their serial numbers and where they were manufactured (as if they were action figures), and some kind of useless special skill ("Maths!", "X-Ray hearing!"). Most of the major characters are invincible, as occasionally denoted by their HP reading "IDDQD", also known as the God Mode cheat from *Doom*. Yes, there are lots of exclamation points. The game is just that exuberant.

Common fantasy and RPG tropes are mocked ruthlessly. The elves are sissy weird-looking weenies who gather in a treehouse. Dwarves are stout little jerks that can think (and speak) only of war. Orcs are dressed in American football helmets and speak like proper British gentlemen. Ring Wraiths are fearsome but confused, because while they seek out Magic Rings, there are none in the kingdom, rendering their existence pointless. Other character types are perhaps even more bizarre, like the paranoid ninja baker, or the funky King Afro. Locations include the land of Riverndull and the Kingdom of De-Lorean.

Parodies aside, it's simply a damned weird game. Instead of politely climbing up a ladder, Shah-ron does a fancy backflip complete with *Bionic Woman* sound effects. In the countryside, you come across an elevator in the side of the mountain. Press the button for the top floor and the compartment will rocket into the sky, out into space, and calmly explode. One of the major quests involves infiltrating a nightclub and winning a disco dance contest. Your quest to kill the dragon isn't fulfilled by finding a magical sword or anything, but rather putting a hit on it with the Elvish mafia.



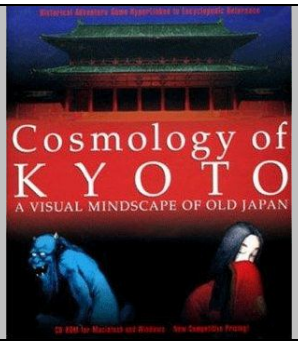
Disco dancing lizards? Why not?

But while it's a hilarious game, it's a huge pain to actually play. The kingdom is absolutely huge, consisting of nearly a dozen major locations with a wide wilderness connecting them, and almost a hundred screens in total. It's an open experience, one that's meant to simulate an actual world rather than tell a stringently linear story, but there's no real direction, and the sense of aimlessness can quickly grow tiring. And there are tons upon tons of red herrings – the game world doesn't really change based on which quest you've chosen, resulting in whole areas, characters and events which are completely unrelated to your overall goal.

Despite the nature of exploration, the rest of the RPG elements are really quite shallow too. At any given time, there are NPCs trotting around, some minding their own business, others looking for fights. Combat doesn't involve anything more than sitting back and watching the combatants get into a cartoonish scuffle, complete with dust clouds and wacky sound effects, as the two life bars drain. Thidney is hardier and is better at straightforward combat, while Shah-ron has better magic spells. Certain tasks and dialogue also differ slightly, so at least there's a whole lot to see and do.

Alas, the graphics have not aged well. They're all computer rendered and run in clunky low resolution VGA. Character conversations are handled with gigantic close-ups, and nearly everyone in the universe is distasteful to look at. The voice acting is pretty good, with Scottish comedian John Sessions acting as Thidney, but due to the 70,000+ lines of dialogue, it's all incredibly downsampled and difficult to listen to.

Sitting down with *Kingdom O' Magic* with the intent of getting anywhere is a recipe for disappointment. Instead, it's simply more fun to stumble around, talk to the different characters, and soak in the comedy. Once you've fully seen the game world, the tasks and their solutions begin to fall into place, and at that point it becomes halfway playable, despite all of the backtracking you need to do. At any rate, appreciation for this style of lunacy is an absolute prerequisite to get any enjoyment out of *Kingdom O' Magic*, because that's the only thing that will keep you going through its more tedious aspects.



Cosmology of Kyoto: A Visual Mindscape of Old Japan

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Komatsu Kazuhiko
Developer: SOFTEDGE

The only video game Roger Ebert ever reviewed and enjoyed, *Cosmology of Kyoto* is a striking blend of history, philosophy, religion and myth. Intriguing and unsettling, the simple gameplay and rich storytelling lead to an experience that is sure to be long remembered.

The setting is 10th century Japan in the city of Kyoto. It is a time of unrest among humans, demons and ghosts alike. Portions of the city are beautiful, while others lay in shambles. Human life is cheap, and death comes easily at the end of a sword or by the jaws of a monster. The game makes no attempt to hide sex or violence, and it features many mature themes and situations. Thankfully, most of the graphics are hand drawn rather than computer generated, and they manage to hold up very well. The vast majority of the game is seen from a first-person perspective, and the graphics are mostly static, with only light touches of animation. Whether you encounter a beautiful woman, a pitiful beggar or an enraged demon, the game more than manages to get its point across. Music and sound effects in the game are extremely subtle, adding small accents to various events. The speech is in the original Japanese with English subtitles, which adds to the sense of authenticity permeating the whole experience.



The artwork here is quite strange.

Cosmology of Kyoto opens with options for character creation. It is important to remember the name you give your character, because it doubles as the password when you restore a saved game. You are then able to choose what your avatar will look like, but don't be too picky – you will die sooner or later and be reincarnated as a completely different person, complete with an entirely new look. If you possess the game's actual written instructions or the included map, they will do you little good. For all intents and purposes, you are thrown outside the city gates without a dime to your name or a stitch of clothing. In the absence of any stated goals, you proceed to explore the city.

Gameplay is extremely basic, using the simplest of point-and-click systems. It all boils down to exploring Kyoto and living out legends, conversations, and everyday experiences of the time. There are also occasionally easy puzzles or short conversations where you must type in your response. Inventory items are mostly useless, or only used in otherwise nonessential plotlines. There is only one item that is absolutely essential for the completion of the game. As for the story, there is a decent balance between the presentation of events from recorded history and those from myths. For instance, at one point you witness the destruction of a building, which actually happened, and speak to a historic ruler. You are also shown the metaphysical side of the disaster, that demons or ghosts were ultimately responsible.



Cosmology of Kyoto is undoubtedly one of the most unique games ever created.

The most common supernatural tales in the game are classic ghost stories. Your character meets a woman, is led to a dark place, and then something horrible happens. Variations on this theme occur several times, and each one is related to actual Japanese folklore. *Cosmology of Kyoto* is full of these side-stories. There is an overall plot in only the loosest sense; to progress, there are certain events that must be triggered, but between these events you are welcome to do whatever you like. You can give your alms to the poor or lose them in a cock fight; it's entirely up to you. But it's only when you journey deeper and deeper into the city that you find your ultimate destiny, experiencing the circle of death and rebirth as you go.

Throughout the game and even outside of it, you have access to a reference file that explains aspects of ancient Kyoto, including its history and its culture. The entire library is always available, but it first gives you topics related specifically to what you are currently witnessing. For instance, if you see a flaming rock crashing down from the sky, clicking on the reference button will bring up an article about the Kanzan Stone, a sacred meteorite that is still worshipped today. These tidbits are in no way necessary to continue in the game itself, but they are extremely interesting. This simple attempt to enlighten the player would be a welcome addition to many games.

One of the most brilliant elements in the game is its handling of character death. When you die, and you most assuredly will, you experience one of a variety of hells as described in Buddhism. In these hells, your character is tortured in a wide variety of gruesome ways. You are then reincarnated either as another human or as something else. At one point, you witness a dog eating the entrails of a corpse before being devoured itself by a larger dog. You might very well find yourself reincarnated as that doomed dog, and then the cycle repeats itself.

Made at a time when designers were still figuring out how to utilize the CD-ROM format, *Cosmology of Kyoto* attempts to be many things: a game, an educational tool, and a work of art. Unbelievably, it manages to be all of these and more.



Snow Job

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: 3DO
Designer(s): N/A
Developer: Studio 3DO

Thinking about it, FMV content always seemed best suited to adventure games, where there is plenty of dialogue and interesting characters. Just look at the *Tex Murphy* and *Gabriel Knight* games for proof that the genre can do great things with FMV. It's a sad fact then that one of the better games to make good use of FMV was released only for the 3DO and then promptly overlooked by everyone.

The ridiculously titled *Snow Job* sees you as ex-cop Jock LaMonte returning to New York in order to track down and protect your former lover Lara Calabreze, the city's DA, after a tip-off that she's to be murdered by mysterious drug dealer Snowman. There's a conspiracy afoot, and it's your job to uncover all the dirty details. It's a typical detective mystery where you need to meet up with an old cop buddy (who just so happens to be now running a bar with exotic dancers), question suspects, solve puzzles, fight enemies, all while doing seemingly mundane things like buying the daily newspaper, rolling some dice for money, catching the subway, and generally wandering around New York City.



It's almost more real than NYC itself.

What makes it interesting is that everything (with the exception of some minigames such as the 3D maze) is FMV based. Each location you can visit is based on a photographic, panoramic 360 degree view of a single point (such as a busy New York street corner), with clues and people to click on. These scenes aren't animated, and are essentially just a single screen which wraps around at the ends. But when combined with background audio from a busy city street, it does a reasonable job of conveying atmosphere. Clicking on people will initiate a short video of

dialogue, followed the chance to question them and more video. It's all done unobtrusively, and the acting is comparatively good B-movie fare (and if you like B-movies, it's fantastic).

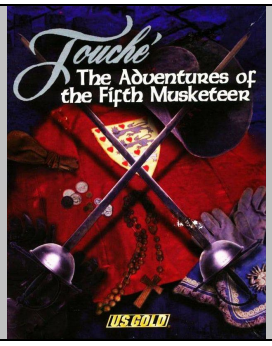
Puzzles center around realistic actions – such as buying the daily newspaper to solve the crossword, which yields a password to hack into an enemy server. After hacking the computer you gain clues to track down suspects, or meet people in the park at night, and try to find out why someone wants your ex-lover dead. Time and money are the game's resources, and all actions cause the minutes to tick by, with night following day. You've only got about a week to solve everything, so swiftness is essential.



Crack the case and get the girl – if you're able to.

For all the atmosphere *Snow Job* conveys, and the praiseworthy uniqueness of its underlying mechanics, it does suffer from some of the particularly irksome problems. A lot of puzzles (such as when breaking into an enemy's secret hideout) are strictly timed, forcing judicious use of the save function since you'll get a Game Over if you dawdle. This also means you can miss something essential needed for later on – just try working out which single item you need to grab from a cluttered desk before someone barges in the office to shoot you. It's almost guaranteed that a few days into the investigation you'll wake up to find yourself and your roommate hacker friend being shot dead by the criminals you're investigating. The game does helpfully inform you at the end of each day if you missed something vital, but unfortunately it won't explain which flag you forgot to trigger. It's also all too easy to waste what precious time and money you have, rendering the case unsolvable and you unquestionably dead.

Despite these design problems, which seem archaic and unforgivable in today's age, there is a tremendous amount of intrigue in *Snow Job*. It conveys the atmosphere of being a city detective arguably better than a game like *Heavy Rain* does, it's non-linear to a fault, and the puzzles involving newspapers, computer hacking and rewiring circuit boards are all impressively contemporary and play out excellently, especially compared to the surreal nature of other adventure games with their non-obvious and wacky item combinations. *Snow Job* focuses on logic and the realism offered by FMV and – assuming you can deal with the instant deaths – works extremely well for it. Besides, how many games feature film footage of strippers in New York bars? Its exclusivity to the 3DO is a tremendous shame.

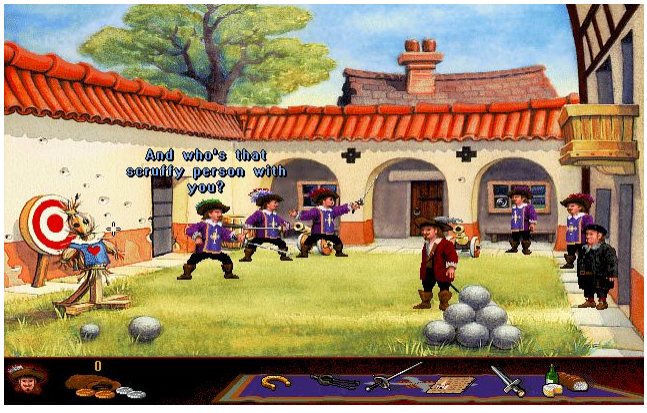


Touché: The Adventures of the Fifth Musketeer

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Graham Lilley, Paul Cockburn, Susan de Nimes
Developer: Clipper Software

Oh, the glories of the public domain. For decades, movies and games alike have adapted works of classic literature into a variety of forms, all royalty free. Perhaps more interesting is when they work to create an original sequel (which isn't as contradictory as it sounds), telling new stories in an established world. As such, there have been a number of adaptations of Alexandre Dumas' trilogy about *The Three Musketeers*, the gallant, sword fighting warriors of the French. Also not uncommon are made-up tales of a mystical fifth musketeer. And that's exactly the premise behind *Touché*, a pleasant little adventure game that purports to tell the long lost story of Ensign Geoffroi le Brun.

The game begins in a dark alleyway, with the brutal murder of the Lord De Peuple. While it initially appears to be a standard nighttime mugging, the wishfully heroic Geoffroi learns that it's actually connected to an evil cardinal with a diabolical plan to take over France. With the accompaniment of his hobo-turned-manservant Henri, the forgotten fifth musketeer will travel across the French cities of Rouen, Paris, Le Mans, St Quentin, and a few others. He'll also take time to romance the lovely lady Juliette, competing for her favor with that jerkwad D'Artagnan.



Geoffroi isn't exactly the most popular chap around the Musketeer base.

The folks at Clipper Software definitely had *Monkey Island* on the brain when they made this, as the visual style is very close, to the point where Geoffroi might as well as be a French, 17th century Guybrush. On the upside, all of the graphics are SVGA and quite a bit crisper than the LucasArts games at the time. On the downside, the animation is dull and the backgrounds are remarkably repetitive. There's little visual distinction between any of the cities, and some areas, like the taverns, stores and stables, are very clearly recycled. The characters make note of how familiar everything looks, but that doesn't necessarily excuse it.

The writing really isn't up to the same level either. Geoffroi is a fine chap, overtly enthusiastic and a bit naive, often plotting ill-conceived schemes and botching them even

further. To contrast, Henri is fat, pathetic and mostly useless, only serving as an additional inventory bag and aiding in a puzzle or two. The developers put a lot of effort into their odd-couple relationship, as they banter constantly when entering and exiting different areas. It's a good way to establish their personalities, but the same dialogues repeat over and over when you revisit locations and it gets old quickly. Yes, Henri, we know you're hungry. Yes, we know you smell. And yes, for the twentieth time we are, in fact, leaving Rouen for Paris.

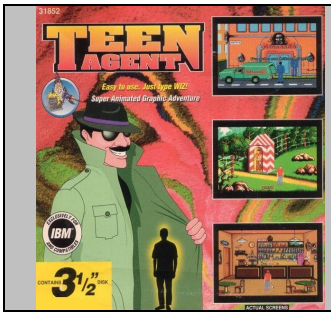
The secondary characters are rarely distinct and, much like the backgrounds, are often just copies of each other. Beyond Geoffroi, Henri and Juliette, there's the cranky squad captain, as well as Michelangelo da Vinci, the halfway demented nephew of Leonardo, who takes you down a river in a positively stupid (and halfway functional) boat, but otherwise everyone else is unremarkable.



Geoffroi formulates a not-so-cunning plan.

The dialogue is only occasionally chuckle worthy, but it's well sold by the surprisingly talented voice acting in the CD-ROM version. Geoffroi sounds a bit like Cary Elwes circa *The Princess Bride*, announcing every heroic intention with a forceful amount of pomposity, while remarking to Henri with an appropriately exasperated tone. Henri sounds stupidly amusing enough that his character remains likeable without becoming too annoying, despite the repetitive chatter. The rest of the cast meanwhile, however bland, sell their roles well. It is rather funny that most of them avoid French accents in favor of British ones, a bit silly considering the Musketeers are actively fighting English invaders, and when you confront them, they really don't sound any different.

The interface is similar to the one eventually used in the third *Monkey Island* game, where holding the right button on a hotspot will bring up a bunch of contextually sensitive commands. It works well enough, although the hotspot indicator is more than a bit touchy, and makes some solutions more obtuse than they need to be. There's not much in the way of structure and you can accomplish many minor goals in any order. The puzzles aren't particularly remarkable or overwhelmingly stupid, despite some occasional head-scratchers. (How do we distract some soldiers in front of a tavern? Why, just throw a melon in the water, obviously.) They're in line with the experience as a whole – *Touché* is a slightly funny, slightly charming little game that aspires to greatness, but lacks the polish that would put it in the bigger leagues. When it was initially released in 1995 it came and went without notice – perhaps because the publisher, US Gold, wasn't exactly known for adventure games – so it's pretty difficult to find. It is, however, quite compatible with ScummVM.



Teenagent

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga
Designer(s): Adrienne Chmielarz, Grzegorz Miechowski, Andrzej Sawicki
Developer: Metropolis Software

Not unlike *Maniac Mansion*, *Teenagent* (typically spelled without the space) is another adventure game that focuses on surprisingly mundane and realistic affairs, with the juxtaposition of a few elements of wackiness providing most of the humor. Largely the only adventure game offering of Metropolis Software, a Polish development studio, it gained some renown in the '80s courtesy of a demo version that generously consisted of the first third of the game.

Teenagent is the story of one Mark Hopper, who is literally plucked randomly from his everyday life by a secretive intelligence organization. He's their last hope when it comes to solving a bizarre series of bank robberies in which guards watched helplessly as stacks of gold bars vanished into thin air. The first chapter consists of Mark's efforts to prove himself at the organization's training camp and to overcome his amusingly incompetent trainer. The next chapter is spent trying to infiltrate the mansion of a secretive millionaire located in a quaint country village; once inside, he finally gets to the bottom of the mysterious thefts.



Mark's trainer isn't the sharpest sword in the box.

Although it's fairly short, *Teenagent* is competently done in almost all respects, although there are some baffling puzzles and the usual annoying pixel hunting. The bright, slightly cartoonish graphics are clean, timeless VGA sprites, and everything looks like it should, with almost every action yielding a surprisingly detailed animation.

If anything leads *Teenagent* to rise above mere competence, it's the truly stellar quality of the writing. It's hard to believe that the game was originally in Polish, though it does have its share of typos and grammar errors. Teenager though he may be, Mark is not at all edgy or obnoxious; he's just a perfectly wholesome, good-natured slacker-type more akin to Guybrush Threepwood. He even gets smitten with a girl along the way. There's also the occasional light '80s pop culture reference (the rapping robo-safe is particularly amusing) or commentary on the need to pick everything up. The game might yet have been improved with a voice track, but the only talkie version ever released was Polish-only. It is now available as freeware.



Blazing Dragons

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: PlayStation / Saturn
Designer(s): Matthew Seymour, Frederick J. Schiller, Russel Lingo, Darren Bartlett
Developer: Illusions Gaming Company

Blazing Dragons is based on the relatively obscure Canadian cartoon of the same name and is the brainchild of Terry Jones of Monty Python fame. In an upheaval of common tropes, *Blazing Dragons* reverses the usual knights/dragons dynamic by turning the chivalrous knights into villains and turning the dragons into heroes. The story takes place in Camelhot, in the center of Dragondom. It's all silly, of course, and is similar to Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*, both being fantasy series full of oddball characters and off-kilter quirks. Although *Blazing Dragons* seems to aim for a slightly younger audience, it's got enough cleverness that it reaches beyond its Saturday morning origins and manages to be quite entertaining regardless of one's age.

Both the game and the cartoon star Flicker, a rather intelligent dragon who works in the castle as an inventor. As he gets up out of bed, having successfully invented and tested the world's first alarm clock, he's summoned to meet with the Knights of the Square Table, who are discussing a Royal Tournament. The prize? The winner takes the hand of the beautiful (in dragon terms) Princess Flame. Their meeting is interrupted by the portly knight Sir George, who wishes to enter the tournament as part of a halfway elaborate revenge scheme. Of course, humans aren't technically allowed to compete, but instead he enters a mysterious black dragon to compete in his stead. The Knights set off to gather intelligence on this new foe, while Flicker is sentenced to wash a huge pile of dishes, since he is essentially a nobody. Instead, he needs to outwit both his bumbling king and the evil knights to win the tournament for himself.

After using his genius to escape KP duty, Flicker must convince one of the Knights to train him so he can become a squire and enter the tournament. This is not easy, because as it turns out, they're all idiots, more or less, and have all gotten wrapped up in a variety of bizarre situations. Take, for example, the supposedly brilliant Sir Burnavere, who convinced the kingdom that the world is shaped like a duck, and was awarded a ribbon due to this amazing discovery. All of the fancy words in the world won't save him from the chair of the wicked Dr. Fraud. Meanwhile, the pretty boy Sir Blaze is so enchanted with his own reflection in the lake that he's completely forgotten his duties. Sir Gasflame has eyesight so terrible that he's mistaken the Camelhot castle for the enemy's and insists on attacking it, while Sir Loungealot is far too lazy to actually fight the black dragon and insists that it come to him. Instead, Flame is then kidnapped by the humans, and Flicker must be off to rescue her.

Beyond the dimwitted Knights of the Square Table, the kingdom of Camelhot is home to a variety of bizarre and silly folks. Outside of the Home of the Grimly Insane, a clinic for psychotic storybook characters, you run into a balding Rapunzel who sufferers from Chaetophobia, otherwise known as a crippling fear of hair. She shrieks, claws at her head, and goes absolutely bonkers when you use some hair tonic on her. Inside the asylum you'll meet a Pied Piper who plays endlessly due to a compulsive fear of rats, and a confused frog that has mistakenly been transformed into a prince. Recurring foes include redneck hunters, one of whom manages to capture the Lady of the Lake, mistaking her for a mere fish. There are plenty of good jokes, a few double entendres, and some amusing self referential humor. During the ending credits, Trivet the Jester is backstage yelling at his agent for putting him in this terrible game, and how Flicker appeared in more scenes than he did. It is quite odd, given that Trivet is featured on the cover despite not at all being the main character of the game.

There are quite a few differences between the game and the cartoon, which is probably for the better. The character artwork in the game is quite a bit different and much improved over the somewhat hasty designs of the cartoon. Rather than taking footage from the cartoons, the artists redrew everything in pixel artwork in the style of the LucasArts games. The VGA quality graphics are low res compared to PC adventures games of 1996, but it's still quality 2D artwork, which means it's aged much better than 95% of the PlayStation's library.

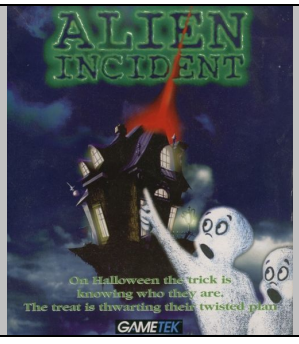


Flicker visits the Grimly Insane Asylum.

Most of *Blazing Dragons*' puzzles take advantage of Flicker's skill as an inventor and require assembling multi-part machines out of random items. This is usually frustrating in adventure games, but Flicker's already invented everything you need and has it all handily drawn out in his notebook. All you need to do is find bits of equipment and you're set. The first puzzle has you creating an automatic dishwasher with the help of a boiling tea kettle, a candle holder, a knitted tail warmer and a mop. The rest are quite easy, and the manual even gives explicit hints on how to solve pretty much everything. There are also a handful of crazy minigames. In the Cat-a-Pult minigame, you launch – what else? – a cat at a variety of targets. It's particularly silly because instead of firing multiple cats, you simply fire the same cat over and over, who faithfully runs back to you despite being smashed repeatedly into the scenery. Another vaguely rhythm based game is a dancing contest against an Arnold Schwarzenegger look (and sound)-a-like. The most aggravating is the thumb wrestling game, which amounts to barely more than button mashing. Overall, these aren't terrible, but they could've been ditched and not been missed.

The voice acting is top tier. The cover notes the presence of Terry Jones and Cheech Marin, the former playing Trivet, while the latter does Sir George. A number of other cartoon vets round out the rest of the cast, including Jim Cummings, Kath Soucie, Harry Shearer, and Charlie Adler. Newcomer Joseph Rye pulls off the role of Flicker admirably, while the actor who plays Loungealot, Jeff Bennet, does an admirable John Cleese impression.

One has to wonder why exactly *Blazing Dragons* was made only for consoles with no computer release, although it's still quite functional. Controlling the cursor with the joypad is not exactly ideal, and while there are annoying load segments between screens, at least they're brief. It's a pleasant, funny game that's only somewhat held back by its incredibly short length. The entirety of the game is maybe only slightly longer than a single act in a *Monkey Island* game, and it's over far too soon. On the other hand, maybe it's for the best, because to contrast it there's the *Discworld* adventure game. That game not only went on for far too long, but was also stupidly difficult. *Blazing Dragons* is much friendlier, and does a better job with this style of British humour without resorting to frustration.



Alien Incident

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Mikko Miettinen, Mare Ollinkari, Petteri Putkonen
Developer: Housemarque Ltd.

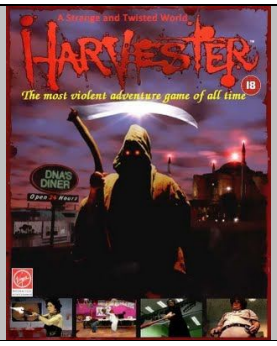
Developed by small Finnish studio Housemarque, *Alien Incident* begins with your typical science-fiction experiment gone wrong: Benjamin is in a lab with his uncle, Alberto Einstone, as he prepares to start up his latest invention, the Worm Hole Spawner. At that precise moment lightning strikes, causing its range to increase by several light years and inadvertently pull an alien cruiser into Earth's orbit. Predictably the aliens are unhappy, immediately converge on the lab and capture Ben's uncle while completely missing Ben himself. So it's up to Ben to figure out how to get aboard the alien ship, get his beloved uncle out, and get back to Earth safely.



Just what are you doing wearing a pumpkin on your head, exactly?

This is definitely a light-hearted game, so naturally the aliens are closer to a typical "Grey" alien (oddly, the UK cover depicts them as looking like *Casper the Friendly Ghost*). The game's got a silly sense humor, as Ben wonders aloud who keeps the torches lit in an underground maze, what his friend Sluggs plans to do with a mailbox stuffed full of dynamite, and makes sarcastic remarks about the processing power of his uncle's lab computer (styled after the classic Commodore 64 – amusingly it takes several seconds to accesses its floppy disk).

In terms of graphics, the game's origins from the European demoscene are clear. Most of the environments are rendered 3D, but have that extra touch of polish that most similar graphics lack. The environmental detail is excellent, aided by the great ambient soundtrack from Future Crew musician Jonne "Purple Motion" Valtonen. What's odd is that the background artwork for this game is very dark and moody, especially inside the Einstone mansion, which one might imagine clashes with the light-hearted story, but actually seems to fit it quite nicely. Overall, *Alien Incident* comes most certainly recommended, as even if the puzzles might be too easy for those used to Sierra-level kludgery, it's still surprisingly well-written, and there are a number of amusing moments to be seen.



Harvester

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Gilbert P. Austin
Developer: DigiFX Interactive, Inc.

Harvester looks like it was deliberately crafted after Senator Liebermann's 1991 hearings about violence in video games. It is intensely bloody, and on the surface, utterly depraved. While it was originally announced in 1994, it didn't actually hit shelves until 1996, having been beaten to the market by other horror adventure games like Sierra's *Phantasmagoria* and Cyberdreams' *Dark Seed II*. However, while both of those titles tried to play it seriously, *Harvester* is a much weirder, off-the-wall experience, one which revels in its absurdity.

Steve Mason wakes up one day with no recollection of who he is, but finds himself in the middle of '50s suburban America, in the small town of Harvest. His kid brother is watching Cowboys and Indians on their black and white TV set, while his mother is dressed like June Cleaver and perpetually stays in the kitchen baking cookies. Expressions like "shucks!" and "gee willikers!" are still spoken unironically. Steve has no idea who any of these people are, and everyone believes he's simply faking his amnesia, repeatedly emphasizing that he was always a kidder.



Your fake mom has a very distressing sex life. Suggest something kinky and she may profess some interest.

The story is divided up into five days, with the first spent exploring the town and getting to know the insane inhabitants of the town of Harvest. Movement is quick and expedient, since you can double click on exits to zap from locale to locale. The conversation system is frustrating, as it adds and subtracts topics for seemingly arbitrary reasons. You're given the option to type in topics, although functionally it's almost useless, and never actually required. It's slow going at first, but it's all deliberately done to introduce you to this unsettling version of reality. There is an influx of hobos and vagrants, whom the town seems to welcome, but they all seem to disappear under mysterious circumstances. The kids in school are kept in line with a blood-stained baseball bat. There is an army base filled with nuclear missiles, which are at the

disposal of a single deranged army general, who is missing the entire lower half of his body. The human intestinal tract is three miles long, he tells you. He used this to measure the distance he crawled when escaping from the enemy in World War II. If you even suggest that you might be a pinko Commie bastard, he'll shoot you in the head, then accidentally sit on The Button, bringing annihilation to everything.



Your fake girlfriend is surprisingly sweet.

The other inhabitants of Harvest range from silly to downright disturbing. Deputy Loomis has an extraordinary taste for pornography. One of the puzzles involves distracting him with a dirty magazine so he can sneak off to a jail cell and have a wank. Meanwhile, his boss walks in and ruthlessly beats him like a dog with a rolled up magazine. The sheriff himself is no saint, either. One poor resident is brutally murdered, leaving only their bloody spinal cord. She died of natural causes, he concludes, while eating a healthy serving of blood-red pie. You can't live without a spine, his logic goes. If you end up getting arrested, and have a "Get Out of Jail Free" card, he takes you home, tucks you into bed, and gives you a good night kiss. Mr. Pottsdam has a strange psychotic obsession with meat, and shows a particular interest in Steve, since his family runs the town's butcher facility. He also casually molests and buries one of the town's children, and no one else seems to pay it any mind.

Not all of it is quite so dark, but it sure is bizarre. When buying the adult mag, the general store manager proclaims that they promote healthy interest in woman, because you wouldn't want to end up as a fireman. What seems like an off-color gay joke ends up being strangely literal when you later walk into the fire station and find a bikini brief-clad male model, who merely sits around all day and waits to be sketched.

Undoubtedly the strangest thing is the town's obsession with the Lodge, a gigantic building in the center of the town. More than a mere Masonic society, its medieval appearance greatly clashes with the deranged Norman Rockwell Americana that surrounds it. It is run by monks in robes, and everyone wants to be a part of it. Membership is not simply as easy as filling out an application, although the first chapter of the game involves untangling that bit of bureaucracy. A good chunk of *Harvester*'s play time is spent as part of the Lodge's initiation rituals, which involve various acts of burglary and vandalism. As weirdly creative as the setting is, it's disappointing that so much of the puzzles revolve around breaking-and-entering, but there's an eventual justification for it, at least. While keying cars is relatively innocuous, soon Steve's reign of terror has much more severe consequences for the residents.

The only sane townsperson is Stephanie, the comely girl next door. She is engaged to Steve, so everyone seems to say, but she's in the same situation you are, unable to remember anything and clearly uncomfortable with the situation. She is confined to her room by her parents

though, unable to actually do much other than sitting around. Instead, she acts as the moral center of *Harvester*, discussing the various events around town with you. You can confess to your crimes, if you want, although it doesn't actually have much of a bearing on anything, except maybe to clear the player's own conscience. (You can also have sex with her, although her creepy father takes the liberty of peeping through the hole in the wall.)

Once you've finally made it into the Lodge in the last third of the game, *Harvester* totally shifts gears and focuses on the depths of the mysterious building and the evil society that dwells within it. The box advertises *Harvester* as "the most violent adventure game of all time", and it's here that it really fulfills that title. It is also the second game (after the first *Leisure Suit Larry*) where you can die from an STD.

From here on out, *Harvester* focuses more on killing than puzzle solving. There are numerous weapons, including a shotgun, a nail gun, and a scythe. You can also find food to replenish your health, which is indicated by your portrait on the inventory screen. But like most adventure games that shift into action territory, it's all very badly handled. Since character movement is so sketchily implemented, it's really just a matter of equipping a weapon and repeatedly right clicking to attack, and reloading if you fail. Certain enemies pretty much require that you use a ranged weapon, and you can easily run out of ammo, which is in limited supply.

All of the characters are digitized actors, and while the package comes on 3 CDs, full motion video sequences are relatively sparse, as most scenes are simply carried out with static portraits and voiceovers. The FMV is mostly used in the more violent sequences, often to absurd effect. Rather than using traditional gore special effects, like *Phantasmagoria* did, nearly all of it is done with CGI. It actually looks even cheesier than most Z-grade flicks, if that were possible, although it's appropriate given the nature of the story.



Yes, that is you ripping out someone's spinal cord. This is actually not the grossest thing in Harvester.

Your handling of Stephanie's fate determines which finale you'll receive. In truly cynical fashion, neither are actually considered "good", although which is preferable is a matter of opinion. Both are satisfying in ways that most horror games aren't.

At the end of the day, *Harvester* definitely feels like it's satirizing something, but exactly what is anyone's guess. Beyond the broad parody of the idyllic '50s lifestyle, and some vague commentary about violence in media, the overt shock value makes it hard to get a grasp of what it's actually trying to say, if anything. But beyond its crass exterior, there's actually a bit of heart at the core of *Harvester*, something atypical of much popular horror fiction. Combined with the weirdly memorably characters, it fulfills its role as a cult classic rather nicely.



Toonstruck

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Richard Hare, Jennifer McWilliams
Developer: Burst Studios

Drew Blanc is miserable. Despite being an immensely talented animator working on one of the most popular cartoons of its time, he's overworked, unchallenged, unsatisfied. He wants nothing more than to turn his own personal creation, Flux Wildly, into a superstar, but instead he's stuck working on *The Fluffy Fluffy Bun Bun Show*, a disgustingly adorable bit of saccharine that would make Hello Kitty puke. Drew's fortune takes a wild turn when he falls asleep and is sucked into Cutopia, the world of his own design. The cartoon world is under attack by the neighboring country of Malevolands, led by the dark Count Nefarious. He has a device called the Malevolator, which can turn anything cute and cuddly into something dark and nightmarish. It's up to Drew, accompanied by Flux, who is now taking on a life of his own, to stop the Count and bring peace back to the land.

It's very apparent that Burst Studios, the developer of *Toonstruck*, so very desperately wanted it to be an interactive version of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*?, although conceptually it has more in common with Ralph Bakshi's *Cool World*, a considerably more obscure (and substantially worse) film. Here, Christopher Lloyd plays Drew, who remains the only live action character in the world of Cutopia, while the rest of the world is rendered completely as a brightly colored hand drawn cartoon. There are numerous full motion video sequences as well, integrating Lloyd with the bizarre fantasy world. It's never as convincing as *Roger Rabbit*, but it's functional.

Burst Studios clearly had an affection for Chuck Jones-era Warner Bros, although other influences from the wide world of animation shine through. When the short, bearded, surly clerk puts on a tutu and launches a bowling ball down the alley with his butt, it's hard not to be reminded of John Kricfalusi, and the overtly violent cat-and-dog duo, who run their own store and demonstrate their goods on each other, heavily channel Matt Groening's *Itchy and Scratchy*, although that in turn was a satire of *Tom and Jerry*. The art style is varied yet unique, clearly recalling the golden era of animation while still maintaining its own sense of style.

Toonstruck's adventure is broken up into two acts. In the first, you need to collect roughly a dozen items to create an item called a Cutifier to counter the effects of the Malevolator. The rub is, you don't technically know what the items are – you do know all of the ingredients for the Malevator, though, so you need to find items that are the "opposite", or rather, items that accompany them in some way. The first one is a gimme as an example: Sugar goes with Spice. Some are quite obvious – the Arrow goes with a Bow – while a few others are a bit punnier.

The game makes no bones about this being one gigantic, multi-tiered fetch quest, which might bring up nightmares of the first *Discworld* game, with its humongous world, expansive inventory, and nauseatingly difficult puzzles. Superficially *Toonstruck* shares the same structure, but after a bit of exploration, your goals eventually become apparent, even if it's not entirely clear how to approach them. The journey initially begins in Cutopia, and quickly spreads into the neighboring kingdom of Zanydu, which is governed by insane wackos and *Looney Tunes*-style logic. Eventually you're allowed into the depressingly dark Malevolands, which is a stark contrast to either of the other two worlds. The game world is quite expansive, although quick

travelling, enabled by right clicking on any exit, makes navigation relatively painless. In true cartoon style, you also get a portable hole which can be used to transport over the map.

Once they've assembled the Cutifier, Drew and Flux are captured by Count Nefarious, with Drew breaking out of the cell and escaping on his own. The second half of the game is substantially darker, being that most of the wackier characters from the first half are missing, but it's a traditional, structured experience, and delivers some of the better puzzles. The heightened reality and twisted logic makes some of the more difficult ones forgivable, especially since many rely on slapstick – in other words, devising the most fiendishly painful ways to punish your opponents. When distracting the guards in Nefarious' castle, you need to flood the sink and turn down the heat, turning the bathroom into an impromptu skating rink, causing your would-be assailants to break out into a figure skating dance before harmlessly flying out the window. The other squadron is bested through a pile of Thanksgiving turkeys and creative use of dynamite. There are plenty of references to common animation tropes, like when you need to intentionally find some way to knock Drew out and pick up the resulting stars that swirl over his head.



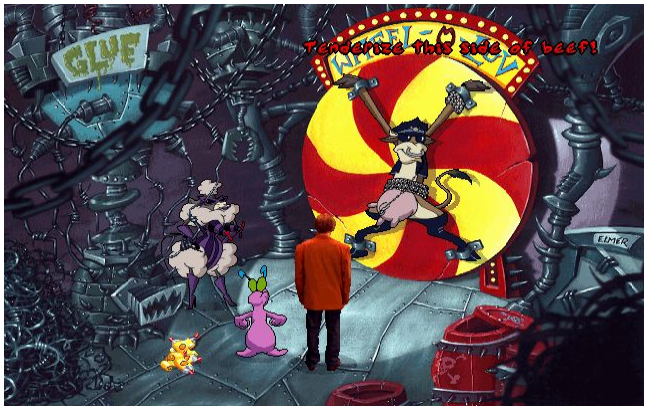
Drew and Flux face off with a Tex Avery-style Big Bad Wolf.

Toonstruck also has an astoundingly talented voice cast. Dan Castellaneta (Homer from *The Simpsons*) takes up the role as Flux, and Tim Curry does his best sinister evil guy act as Count Nefarious, while Fluffy Fluffy Bun Bun is voiced by Tress MacNeille, who channels her work as Dot from *Animaniacs*. Corey Burton, Jim Cummings, Rob Paulsen, Dom DeLuise, Jeff Bennett, April Winchell, David Ogden Stiers and Frank Welker, all among the best voice actors of the modern era, provide voices for the few dozen other characters, with Ben Stein joining Christopher Lloyd in the live action scenes as his corporate drone boss. Drew Blanc, other than being a somewhat stupid pun, is also a reference to Mel Blanc, the original voice of practically every major *Looney Tunes* character. The rest of the sound design is just as inspired. The music is a mixture of classical music, cheerfully piped into every scene, and the sound effects are all delightfully accurate. There's a huge understanding of what made classic *Looney Tunes* so classic, and *Toonstruck* does a remarkable job of emulating them.

Artistically *Toonstruck* is right on the mark, but it's really the inhabitants of the three worlds that make the journey as memorable as it is. You'll meet a not-quite-menacing chap named B. B. Wolf, who may have well been drawn by Tex Avery and talks in an overtly suave manner despite speaking in malapropisms and wearing one extremely sad toupee. There's a slightly flamboyant scarecrow – or should we say, Carecrow – with a finely tuned sense for fashion, and a diminutive Austrian bulldog with an obsession for pumping himself – and you – up. Fluffy Fluffy Bun Bun herself is a bipolar disaster, smiling and cooing one minute, bawling obsessively the next. On the Cutopian side, the castle is patrolled by an extremely cheery pair of armadillos, whose love of song and dance overshadows their competence as guards, while a legion of easily

outwitted crocodiles serves as the army of the Malevolands. Throughout the later sections you're tracked by a trio of *Three Stooges*-esque goons, whose abilities as tough guys are marred by infighting. Alas, the guard dog that talks like Ross Perot is a reference that hasn't aged well.

The one scene that Virgin's PR folks always used to show that this game totally wasn't for kids is the one where a genial group of barnyard animals is turned to the dark side by the Malevolator. Sure, the resident cow had a bit of a creepy affection for the milking machine, but that's nothing compared to her "evil" state, where she's pinned to the wall in full leather bondage gear, complete with pierced udders, and begs for punishment at the hands of a dominatrix sheep. It's not as shocking as it thinks it is, but some of the dialogue is amusing.



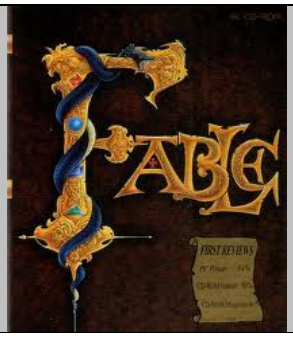
The infamous sheep-in-dominatrix-clothing scene.

But for all of the clever characters and strange puzzles and outstanding voice acting, it's pretty disappointing that most of the writing just isn't terribly good. There's an awful lot of dialogue, but rather than enhancing the mood, it brings the pace to a screeching halt. It's never insufferable, it's just rarely any funny, at least compared to a good LucasArts or Sierra game. It's actually the second half of the game which shines in this regard, since there's far less yammering.

A good portion of the blame can be shifted on Drew himself, who, as a straight man, is more a pill than anything. Christopher Lloyd is an amazingly talented actor, with his roles in *Taxi* and *Back to the Future* being some of the most memorable in the past several decades, but he delivers his lines with a curious lack of enthusiasm. It's also never entirely clear why Drew is so invested in saving Cutopia. Sure, he wants to escape, but he hates Fluffy Fluffy Bun Bun and all her friends. And for all of the dramatic weight that the introduction places behind Flux in being a truly amazing breakout character, like his creator, he's also pretty boring.

There's also the annoying fact that the game just isn't finished. *Toonstruck* was meant to encompass four CDs, but was cut in half fairly late in development. Despite creating many of the art assets, Virgin, the publisher, just figured that they'd put those to use in the sequel. Alas, *Toonstruck* flopped big time at retail, and any plans for a follow up were completely squashed. As such, the game ends on a cliffhanger, with several threads left dangling. There's a recurring danger of Drew becoming a cartoon himself, which apparently means he's trapped in the animation world forever, but other than flirting with the concept during a prolonged run-in with a psychotically dangerous clown, it's never really explored. You never even get to really face Nefarious. One of the artists has put up some concept artwork, which shows Drew visiting an Old West style setting, and apparently Drew was meant to meet his idol Vincent Van Gogh.

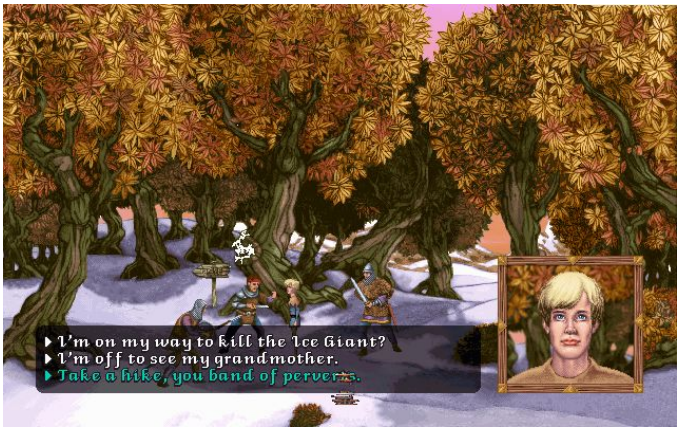
Even though *Toonstruck* can't quite shake its feelings of incompleteness, it still functions, however crippled, as a standalone game. Animation fans are obviously going to be in heaven, and while it's not quite an unquestionable classic, it's still a gorgeous looking game with a lot of spirit and imagination, and one that deserved a better fate.



Fable

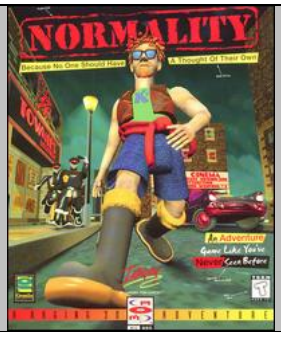
Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Alexander Jacobs, Laurent Cluzel, Jens Hultgren
Developer: Simbiosis Interactive

It's hard to get a grip on Simbiosis Interactive's *Fable* (absolutely no relation to Microsoft/Lionhead's action-RPG released in the mid-2000s). As naive young lad Quickthorpe, it's your job to explore the troubled land of Belkhane, traveling through the four lands to defeat a group of corrupted mages who have been terrifying the land. It's a pretty standard fantasy adventure with some fairly decent high resolution artwork and a cast of slightly off-kilter characters, dragged down by some obtuse interface issues and numerous death sequences.



Quickthorpe is endearing, in a short bus kind of way.

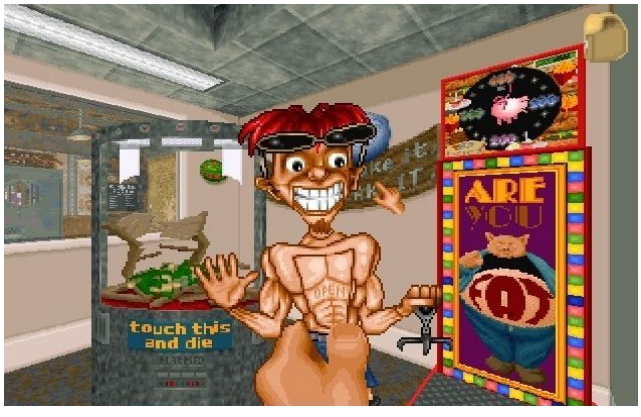
There's a strange sense of humor about *Fable* that keeps it from being too much of a *King's Quest* clone. Quickthorpe is something of a befuddled dolt, with dialogue options that are, more often than not, total non-sequiturs. Upon meeting a vaguely threatening bandit by a river, he can suggest that you both strip down to your skivvies and hop in the river, before remembering that, oh right, you can't swim. Upon rescuing a spirit he can suggest that the both of you get naked. Pick up a dead opossum and he muses about how cute it looks. Numerous lines are filled with totally random sexual innuendo, intentional or not, and it's all sold very well by the droll English accents. It's extremely bizarre, because outside of these not entirely isolated incidents, the rest of the story and dialogue is played relatively straight – except for the ending, anyway. In the original European version, it's revealed the whole trek was a mad fever dream of an imprisoned lunatic. This being a bit too dark, Sir-Tech, the American publisher, demanded a new one, which is less depressing although still rather unsatisfying.



Normality

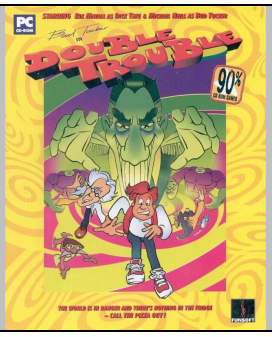
Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Adrienne Carless, Mark Glossop
Developer: Gremlin Interactive

Normality tells the story of Kent Knutson, who looks like he fell right out of a music video for the Spin Doctors. In fact, the entire game looks like a film version of George Orwell's *1984* as produced by MTV in 1992. In a disappointing future, Kent is one of the few human beings capable of rebelling against a horrible mind-controlling dictator and saving an enslaved humanity. The game uses a *Doom*-like first person engine which was later improved upon for the rather decent FPS/adventure game hybrid *Realms of the Haunting*. The graphics are bright and simple, and the cut scenes are well done. You explore a 3D world searching for items and clickable spots, which feels very similar to the *Tex Murphy* series. Movement is intuitive, with the exception of looking up and down using the Page Up and Page Down keys. Interaction is done by right-clicking and using an interesting onscreen menu: an action figure of Kent. To use an object, you click on the figure's closed right fist. Clicking on its left hand – holding a crane machine claw – allows you to pick up items. You can also look at things by clicking on its sunglasses, talk to people (or the disembodied brains floating around) by clicking on its mouth, and open things by clicking on a door in its chest.



This game just bleeds '90s.

There is a decent plot, just don't expect any twists or turns. The characters themselves are memorable, although they lack depth. Even Kent has no real backstory, and we end the game not knowing much more about his world and the other characters than when we started. Puzzles in the game almost always revolve around inventory objects, and the actions you have to take to proceed are generally logical, although there are plenty of times where trial and error is the only method. *Normality* is partially remembered for featuring the voice of Corey Feldman (*The Goonies, The Lost Boys*) as Kent in the English release. Violet Berlin (*Bad Influences!*) also makes an appearance. It's an amusingly weird game, sort of like the '90s version of *Tass Times in Tonetown*, although ultimately everything it does has been done better elsewhere.



Bud Tucker in Double Trouble

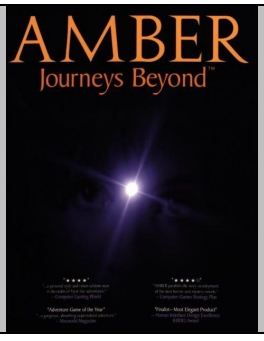
Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): David Taylor, Tim Haywood, Kev Shaw
Developer: Merit Studios

Bud Tucker is an ordinary teenager, a pizza delivery boy by day and a lab assistant by night. His friend, the Professor, has invented a machine that can clone pretty much anything, but he is shortly kidnapped by Dick Tate, the local megalomaniacal villain who seeks to exploit this technology to take over the world. The quest to rescue him is split into three acts – first off, you try to find the Professor; secondly, you end up getting kidnapped too and need to escape; and thirdly, you track down a laundry list of items to defeat Mr. Tate.



What's with the grinning weirdo? Why is there a giant tick on the wall? And why the bathtub motif?

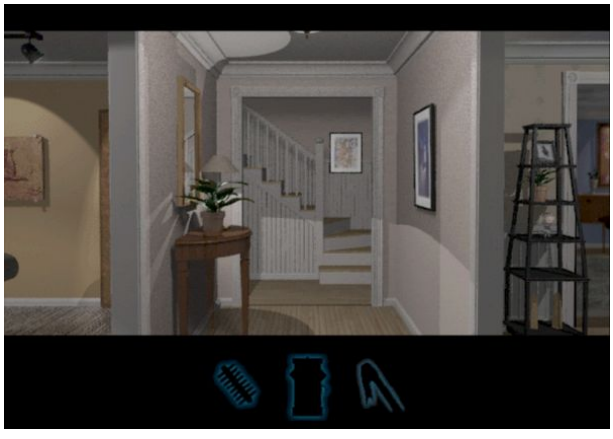
The look and feel of *Bud Tucker* is much like a LucasArts game, though the graphics are a bit dated from the time when it came out, and the humor is slightly bawdier. It comes complete with a similar looking interface, with the big difference being that the right mouse button cycles through verbs instead of activating a context sensitive action. It's easy to make mistakes, and thus you'll be hearing the same half-dozen obnoxious insults from Bud over and over. But while he's an unfunny dweeb, the bizarre residents of Barryville really make the game. Take the local mall, where the information kiosk is staffed by a gigantic, talking brain who has a penchant for rambling incoherently. There's a store called "Plugs!" which is designed to look like someone's bathroom, while the fast food joint literally shoots burgers out of a gigantic tube. The local park is the home of an upper-class bum, whose cardboard box somehow hides an expansive, opulent dwelling, similar to Snoopy's doghouse in *Peanuts*. It's all so damned weird that it's a shame that the dialogue is filled with stupid jokes, and the voice acting resorts to lousy stereotyping. The puzzles aren't too bad, if a bit random (why does the strip club bouncer ask for a pretty tie, and why does the local drug dealer offer to sell you one?), although the pixel hunting is aggravating. All in all, it's about on the level as other second-tier LucasArts clones.



AMBER: Journeys Beyond

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Susan Wimmer, Frank Wimmer
Developer: Hue Forest Entertainment

Amber: Journeys Beyond sort of looks and controls like *Myst* at the outset, although it's got enough to distinguish itself from most of its ilk. As the story goes, your computer is working on a product that will allow communication with the dead. Your co-worker Dr. Roxanne Westbridge rents a spooky, purportedly haunted house out by a lake and begins testing one such device, known as AMBER (Astral Mobility By Electromagnetic Resonance). You are summoned out to the cabin to discuss some fantastic new findings, but during the car ride, a ghost pops out and causes you to crash. Luckily enough you awaken safely outside the house, though you find that the AMBER device has knocked Roxy into a coma. However, the device does indeed work, and the house is indeed haunted. Your goal is to use a variety of paranormal tools to uncover the spirits of the house and act as an impromptu Ghostbuster. Rather than trapping them, though, you end up taking over their consciousnesses and attempt to resolve the issues that have kept them in the earthly realm. There are three ghosts in total. Brice is a gardener who murdered his would-be lover and her parents before taking his own life; Margaret is a World War II widow who couldn't cope with her loss; and Edwin is a child who perished in a sledding accident and really just wants his toys.



The house looks normal, but things get quite surreal when you go on your astral journeys.

There's a lot about the basic setup that's reminiscent of ICOM's classic *Uninvited*. It is, for the most part, sufficiently lacking in scares, unless you find scenes of knives and other stuff being juggled by invisible ghosts to be scary. But the spirit of Roxy, who simply refuses to believe that she's been separated from her body, along with the general concept of inhabiting ghosts and resolving their trauma, proves to be an intriguingly creepy experience. The game is largely devoid of standard logic/mechanical/inventory puzzles, and it's quite short, but there's more than enough here to make the experience worthwhile.



9: The Last Resort

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: Macintosh / Windows
Designer(s): Buzz Hays
Developer: Tribeca Interactive

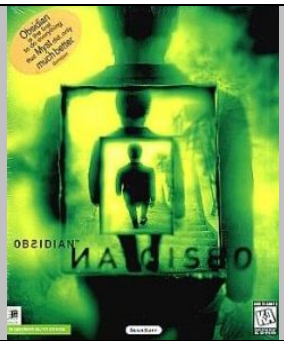
Designed by Robert De Niro's Tribeca Interactive, *9: The Last Resort* is a game that you want to enjoy – it's lavishly produced, has an amazingly weird visual style, and features Cher as a voice actor. However, the game is mostly forgotten due to its lackluster execution. When it is remembered, it is as a monumental flop. It is a first person adventure with rendered graphics, similar to *Myst*.

The protagonist has inherited a surreal resort after the death of an uncle. Upon arrival, it is soon apparent that the nightmarish locale is no longer habitable. The twist is that the building is the home to nine muses of Greek mythology and it's up to the player to defeat them. *9*'s claim to fame is its amazing collection of recognizable talent. Along with De Niro and Cher, it features the voice work of Jim Belushi, Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, and Christopher Reeve. And under the art direction of Mark Ryden, the rock and roll, carnival sideshow visual style is the highlight of the game. However, the artistic elements are packed in so tightly together, it is intentionally overwhelming.



The Grunting Four-Armed King Monkey Organ: it will haunt you forever.

There are some interesting puzzles, many with an emphasis on sound. Unfortunately, the game suffers from unnecessary difficulty, game-breaking bugs, and overall bad game design. It should tell you something that a game with this impressive set of bizarre qualities lacks a cult following. Those interested in the intriguing graphics may want to give it a glance, and it may be worth a look for fans of the celebrities involved. But for most players, this is one to skip. It is no surprise that *9: The Last Resort* was the first and only game produced by Tribeca Interactive.

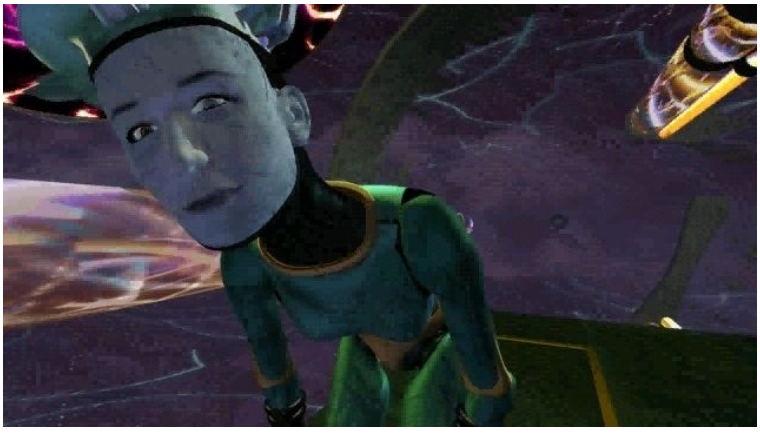


Obsidian

Initial Release Date: 1996
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Adam Wolff, Howard Cushnir, Scott Kim
Developer: Rocket Science Games

The unprecedented success of *Myst* inspired dozens of first-person adventure games with brain-teasing puzzles. Most of these were forgettable attempts to cash in on *Myst*'s popularity, but occasionally a title rose above the rabble. *Obsidian* is one of these games.

The world of *Obsidian* is seen through the eyes of Lilah Kerlin. Along with her partner, Max, she has created the Ceres satellite, which is designed to orbit the Earth and correct environmental problems through the use of nanobots. The satellite is deemed self-sufficient, and Lilah and Max celebrate by going camping. It is on this excursion that Lilah realizes something is wrong. Max goes missing, and Lilah sees a massive, newly-created structure of black stone. She is pulled inside, where she must explore a bizarre and beautiful world constructed by Ceres. Lilah must work her way through a series of realms, each filled with fiendish puzzles that will test every brain cell she possesses.



The humanoid figures are remarkably creepy in Obsidian.

As soon as the player enters this surreal world, the astounding quality of the visual design and its implementation is obvious, with the look of the game still stunning over fifteen years after its release. With the environment presented in a series of still images linked by animated transitions, *Obsidian* is one of the finest examples of this type of first person adventure. The use of full-motion video is refreshingly unobtrusive and the acting ranges from decent to great. The game's appearance is complemented by a first-rate soundtrack from Thomas Dolby.

But the heart of *Obsidian* is the puzzles. They are what fans of this specific subgenre will care the most about, and players will not be disappointed. Puzzles are on a similar difficulty scale as those of the *Myst* series, and you can tell that consideration went into offering a variety of puzzles and love went into their design. There are logic puzzles, visual puzzles, mechanical puzzles, and more, though most are quite original. The difficulty varies wildly as well, as some

might take a player a few minutes while others might leave someone baffled for days. In one memorable (and challenging) section early in the game, you are given a small supply of colored keycards that are used to navigate a series of nine interconnected rooms with several entry points. Different doors require different combinations of cards and also reward different cards. Despite the very clear goal and several hints, this clever use of resource management can prove puzzling. The use of inventory is limited, with the player occasionally carrying one item at a time. These items serve more to progress the plot than as the solutions to brain-teasers. There is also very little information to be kept track of, although in very rare instances it is important to remember a phrase or set of numbers for a short period of time.

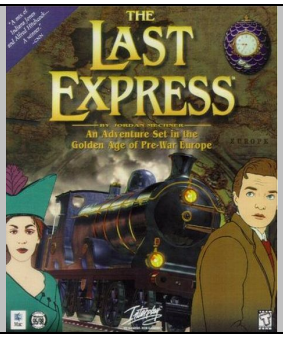
Ceres' realms function as a hub to the game's puzzles, and each realm has its own distinct look and feel. For example, the first area is an enormous, beautiful room containing a bureaucratic nightmare. As you explore the room, your relative gravity shifts so that you find yourself walking on the walls and ceiling. It would leave M. C. Escher feeling disoriented. The realms are based on the dreams of Lilah and Max and there is dream logic at work in how they function. For instance, you can walk through a doorway into a beautiful open field, and turn around to see the doorway hanging in the air. There is also one point where you shrink down and walk into a sandcastle as if it's a perfectly normal thing to do. Fortunately, this *Alice in Wonderland* way of thinking does not carry over into the puzzles, which are as fair as they are difficult. There are a few interesting areas that exist only to be enjoyed, such as an art gallery with framed production artwork. To give an idea of the designers' attention to detail, two files from a massive filing system are needed to advance, but hundreds of other files contain amusing illustrations just for flavor. As you explore, you'll discover vidbots: stick-figured robots with television sets in place of a head. When you communicate with them, the screen shows a close-up of a human mouth. Many serve no purpose other than to spout witty dialogue, and one even contains a *Breakout*-style game.



Obsidian has a style all its own, apart from most Myst clones.

This is not to say that the game is perfect. The limitations of the slideshow environment are occasionally frustrating. Several rooms are round, and require two screens for every step you take, making it feel like you are moving in slow motion. Like other similar games, more freedom in movement would have been nice, as some puzzles and areas are made more difficult by the limited perspective. For the most part, however, the game remains immersive and elegant.

While not commercially successful, *Obsidian* is an exceptional game, worth the time of anyone who enjoys an engaging story that showcases challenging, interesting puzzles. Rocket Science Games produced a landmark game with *Obsidian,* and they obviously had talent and creativity to spare.



The Last Express

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Jordan Mechner
Developer: Smoking Car Productions

The Last Express might be one of the most fascinating games ever made. Developed by a studio called Smoking Car Productions, it was helmed by Jordan Mechner, who up until this point was mostly known for the classic computer games *Karateka* and *Prince of Persia*. While these were action side-scrollers, both had a stronger cinematic bent that most other similar games, particular *Karateka*, where the camera would focus on an approaching enemy before your hero would fight him. Mechner's heart was clearly in storytelling, which inspired him to create an adventure game. But the problem with most adventure games is that they rarely embrace their one big asset – their interactivity. They are often static and linear, with your character's only real role being to listen to dialogue and move the plot forward. In the past, a handful of other games had tried to give the player a more active role in shaping the story, yet nearly all had failed in one way or another, simply because they're too hard to develop. *The Last Express* attempts this admirably, and while it has its share of flaws, it succeeds more than all that have come before it, and probably most since.



Robert Cath, our hero, takes a drag of a cigarette. The detail aboard the train is absolutely incredible.

The events of *The Last Express* begin on July 14th, 1914. Tensions are mounting all over Europe as the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary had been assassinated by Serbian nationalists just weeks before. The Orient Express is setting out on its two-and-a-half day run from Paris to Constantinople, and while no one knows it yet, it's the last time the journey will be made – the line was decommissioned after the beginning of World War I, hence the title *The Last Express*. It also wears its inspirations on its sleeve, obviously drawing from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*.

The hero of *The Last Express* is an American doctor named Robert Cath. Without any introduction, we find him riding on a motorcycle parallel to the train just outside of Paris,

leaping aboard while both are still in motion. We learn quickly that he is a wanted man, though the charges against him are purportedly false. He is called aboard the train to meet up with one Tyler Whitney, a longtime friend, although no reasons are given for their rendezvous. When Cath finds him, he is lying dead in his room, having apparently been murdered. After disposing the body and assuming his identity, Cath learns of the holes that Whitney has dug for himself. Not only is he in the middle of an arms deal with a weaselly German named August Schmidt, but he was also smuggling a precious artifact known as the Firebird, which has completely disappeared from his possession. Cath must not only fulfill the obligations of his departed friend, but foil other threats aboard the train as a result of the exploding pressure of a continent on the verge of war. As a period piece, each character (or group of characters) represents a nationality, and not all of them get along.

Many speak English, but many do not. Since most assume that Cath is the typically ignorant American, they are content to speak in their native tongues without reserve, sometimes speaking directly about him. Cath can understand French, Russian and German, which are subtitled at the bottom of the screen. However, he has no knowledge of Arabic or Serbo-Croatian, leaving both him, and the player, in the dark. Many conversations are simply about politics, or the economic climate, or just about random things. Not all of it is necessarily important to the core plotline, but it does greatly flesh out the narrative.

There are numerous threads that run throughout the whole journey. The young student Tatiana Obolensky of Russia is traveling with her sickly grandfather Vassili, a wealthy aristocrat and staunch supporter of the monarchy. Also aboard the train is Alexei Dolnikov, a childhood friend of Tatiana's who dreams of freedom from their country's oppression. While at times it seems like their romance may bloom, they are split apart by Alexei's anarchist philosophies, a tragic element that ensures the two will never be together. It's a subplot that plays off well because neither side is completely in the right – Alexei has very real reasons behind his anger, but at the same time, he's also seen preparing a bomb to set the train ablaze. Although it's ultimately not a big part of the story, it's an important representation of the political fighting that led to the outbreak of the First World War

Other characters are less important to the central plot, but help maintain a sense of realism. The Boutral family is traveling from their homeland of France to Turkey for the father's job, and the resentment among them is quite evident. Mahmud Makita is transporting a harem of four young women who may not been seen nor disturbed. George Abbot is a British businessman, eminently likable in spite of him sticking his nose in deeper than anyone really finds comfortable. One of the travelers is a young American woman who keeps a diary. It can be read in her absence, as her private thoughts give a different perspective on the events than our own. (It also serves as a quick epilogue in certain Game Over sequences.) You can rifle through the belongings of one of the conductors, and amidst the manifests and job-related stuff, you find a sketchbook filled with drawings of the train's passengers. Strewn around the cars are newspapers which relate the real-life events and help place the story in the proper historical context. Touches such as these quaintly add to the realism of the location, and the depths of the characters, which would otherwise go unnoticed.

The core elements of the plot are intriguing from the outset. Anna Wolff, the famous (and beautiful) Austrian violin player who is accompanied everywhere by her dog, shows a curious interest in August Schmidt, himself a rotund, balding mongrel way below her standards. There is obviously something quite suspicious about that. And at the end of the train is an overtly luxurious private car belonging to Kronos, a mysterious African prince who also has some dealings with Tyler Whitney. While his demeanor is friendly, his stoic bodyguard – and the knives she carries – makes it evident that he is not a man to be trifled with.

At the center of this is Cath, who, as an American, is technically an outsider to the conflict, having been drawn in by matters of fate. He is also a complete and total badass. To contrast the reservations of some of the European passengers, Cath is much more forward and confrontational, a true man of action. He possesses a dash of intelligence, him being both a

skilled doctor and speaker of numerous languages. However, it is never over-the-top, in the way so many action movie heroes are. There are a few fight scenes – which are solely tests of reflexes, as you click the mouse button to dodge or attack foes – and a single swipe of a sword will kill him. He's cunning but vulnerable, likeable but realistic. There's quite a lot of off-screen character building. It's inferred that Whitney and Cath had plenty of adventures in the past, but their history is mostly left unexplained, adding an aura of mystery to both of them.

With all of this, Mechner has created an extremely detailed story, far more stunningly written than most adventure games by itself, but that's not what makes *The Last Express* so special. Rather, it's how you interact with the world he's created. *The Last Express* is played much like *Myst* and its ilk, using a first person perspective and a single cursor icon. The train is not large, consisting of a dining car, a parlor, and two sleeping cars, as well as Kronos' car and the baggage room, both of which are generally off-limits. What's unusual is that the game works on an accelerated real time scale, with the clock counting down even as you stand still.

The use of a real time clock is not new amongst adventure games – even some of the early *King's Quest* games did it – but they usually acted as little more than simple time limits. Its implementation in *The Last Express* is far more complicated, as it governs the entire flow of the narrative. Each of the characters acts according to a script, moving to and from certain locations, eating dinner, chatting in the smoking car, or simply relaxing in their room.

In a lot of ways, *The Last Express* is a more modern implementation of Sierra's *The Colonel's Bequest*, another mystery game from nearly a decade prior. That game worked on a similar principle, in that the story took place in a confined environment and was largely character driven. However, it did not operate in real time, instead moving forward in "time blocks" triggered by certain actions, an element which was abstract and confusing.



Cath grows wary of Anna and her canine companion.

But for as much as *The Last Express* improves on Sierra's almost-classic, it falls into the same basic problems – there is very little actual direction, and most of the game is spent simply clicking back and forth through the train cars, hoping to stumble upon something. Indeed, most of your time aboard the train consists of listening to the passengers converse. There are very few adventure game-style puzzles, and their appearances are jarring when they do pop up.

There are, of course, a handful of key moments where you need to take action – recovering the Firebird during a concert, defusing Alexei's bomb, saving the train from terrorists – but it's not always clear what you're supposed to be doing until it's too late. That's kind of how the game is structured to work, oddly enough – at any point you can rewind time as far as you want, allowing you to fix any screw-ups, up to and including your own deaths. (This feature was later reused, to an extent, in the 2003 *Prince of Persia* reboot, *The Sands of Time*.) As established in the

opening segments, when you need to get rid of Whitney's body, you're almost expected to lose and then travel back in time to find a workaround. Whenever you do get a Game Over, the game will automatically rewind time to a point where you can fix your mistakes, giving you some kind of a clue of what you're supposed to be doing. As a result of the action running in real time, there are moments where there simply isn't anything happening. There is no way to speed up time, so the only option is to wait it out. But there's still a sense of aimlessness that's hard to overcome, and it can easily frustrate.

While major plot events occur at set times, you can accomplish certain tasks in any order, and conversations can potentially change based on who you've talked to or where you're talking with them. Right from the beginning, there are two ways to handle Whitney's corpse. You can chuck him right out the window at the outset, but since you're so close to Paris, it will alert the cops, who board the train and cause an extra bit of trouble. Or, you can go through some extra steps to hide Whitney's body and make sure the conductor doesn't find it, and then dispose of it once you're out in the countryside. Even though *The Last Express* isn't an incredibly long game, it's far more replayable than most, offering numerous dialogues to discover, or events that play out slightly differently based on your actions. Subsequent playthroughs actually become easier once you have a grasp on what you're supposed to do and when. But even those don't work consistently. The game is very particular about what you can and can't do – you can only speak to characters when and where the game allows you, rendering them solely as background elements when you can't. Amidst all of the clearly bad endings, which result in either the train blowing up, or Cath either getting killed or arrested, there are a handful of other possible outcomes based on your actions. In spite of them not being "bad", per say, there is only one correct conclusion, and it would've been nice if they expanded on the others rather than railroading you into one particular finale. It's a restrictive but essential evil, giving how difficult it would be to predict every single possible approach.

The narrative and structure are not the only elements unique to *The Last Express*, because it is also a strikingly stunning visual experience. Like *Myst*, the backgrounds are all computer rendered. But while many of those types of games sought to establish fantastic environments, *The Last Express* instead seeks to replicate the look and feel of the actual Orient Express. The development team found an old car in Europe and used it to meticulously model the virtual one in the game, resulting in a feeling of genuine authenticity.

However, the beauty of the environments is often overshadowed by the gorgeous character artwork. Conscious of the fact that CGI rendered humans looked awful and FMV was often hokey, *The Last Express* instead uses rotoscoped animation. The process, also used in Mechner's previous games, is where a human is filmed performing various actions, then traced and recolored by a computer. In both of his earlier games, the sprites were quite small and indistinct. Here the rotoscoping is used as if it were for a whole movie – or, perhaps more accurately, a comic book. The animation is inconsistent, most often moving at about a frame a second, but it is occasionally smoother during certain scenes. The effect is slightly jarring, as single frames blend into each other in attempt to simulate movement, but the awkwardness fades once you become accustomed to it. When it is fully animated – when passing characters in the train hallways and during fight scenes – it looks completely amazing, but considering it already took the developers five years to put out this game, a full motion effort was undoubtedly far out of reach.

It still looks incredible, though. Whenever any character brushes up against you, they excuse themselves and look straight into your eyes, often giving you a quick and friendly nod. It's a subtle touch that more wholly immerses you in the environment, an important element when so many other games seem to relegate the player as a floating entity. It helps *The Last Express* stand out from its peers, and while the technique has since shown up in a few movies – most notably, *A Scanner Darkly* and *Waking Life* – it does little to lessen the visual impact.

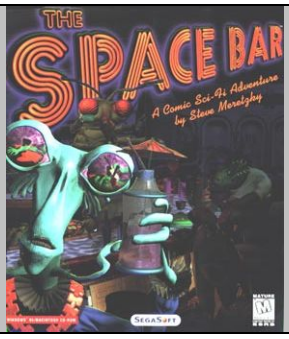
Historical fiction is rare in the gaming medium, beyond the endless recycling of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* or alternate universes a la *Command and Conquer: Red Alert*, which are only

used as background for fighting anyway. Reading up on the background of World War I is imperative to fully understand it, something which the official hintbook politely provides. Beneath that surface lies one of the most immersive environments committed to a digital medium. Sure, there are those who will hate the game for its unconventional structure. The huge limitations are undeniable, of course, but within the framework it establishes, it becomes incredibly, deeply involving, one that truly takes advantage of interactive storytelling in ways that very few even attempt.



The lives of the passengers and the crew are in your hands.

But for all of the effort that went into *The Last Express* – and all of the praise lavished upon it by critics at the time – it was a huge commercial flop. Part of it was the general state of the adventure game industry, which was ailing back in 1997. And another part of it was the fact that the marketing department at Brøderbund, the publisher, had quit right before it was released, resulting in a game with no real advertising. Together with numerous other factors, it spelled the death for Smoking Car Productions. They went out with a helluva bang, considering that single game is widely considered one of the hallmarks of the genre.



The Space Bar

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Steve Meretzky
Developer: Boffo Games

Designed and written by veteran text adventure game creator Steve Meretzky (*Planetfall, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*), *The Space Bar* is a large, well-crafted adventure game with creative puzzles, an excellent story and a large cast of interesting characters. You play as Alias Node, an investigator working for an alien corporation. He is the only human on the planet, which is teeming with a wide variety of sentient life from across the universe. Node gets caught up in a mystery involving murder and espionage. While searching for answers in a seedy bar, the Thirsty Tentacle, his partner is kidnapped. Somewhere in the bar is the being he is looking for, but there's only one problem: the alien is a shapeshifter, and could be posing as anyone. Fortunately, Alias possesses an empathic ability that allows him to relive the experiences of others, which aids him in finding the culprit.

Like *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*, another adventure game set in a bar, the Thirsty Tentacle functions as a hub leading to multiple adventuring excursions. But instead of playing the same character in each of these sections, Alias uses his ability to work through the memories of the bar's inhabitants. As the player, you explore the bar and interact with its dozens of aliens. Upon chatting with some aliens, you will trigger a mind meld with them. These short vignettes each play quite differently; for instance, when playing as insect-like soldier, you see the world through segmented eyes, and when you play as one of the living plants, you are rooted to the spot.



By talking to this plant... thing, you can inhabit its memories.

Actions taken in the bar itself are on a strict timer, with a four hour time limit. The clock advances by one minute each time you move locations. A few of the mind meld sections are also on such a schedule, but others allow you to take a leisurely pace. The timer gives the game a sense of urgency and allows the plot to advance in an interesting way, but adds an artificial

difficulty in trying to complete the game – for instance, some interactions can be missed, and you lose if you haven't made an arrest by the end of the night.

The game's main story is intriguing, and there is a good possibility you will begin to care for the characters involved, especially Node's kidnapped partner. The side stories add a layer of depth, and their unique nature keeps you on your toes. And the timed nature of the game makes keeping multiple saves a necessity, and there is always the chance that you will have to return to the beginning and make a more educated second attempt.

The visual design is absolutely first rate. The different alien species are bizarre and unique, including tentacled green creatures, robots, chittering bug people, and talking dinosaurs. Plenty of thought went into the different alien environments, each of which manages to have a personality of their own. It was explicitly designed to recall the Mos Eisley Cantina scene in *Star Wars: A New Hope*, and Boffo Games even recruited visual artist Ron Cobb, who originally worked on the films with George Lucas to lend to its authenticity. The soundtrack sounds like the score from *Blade Runner*, and it gives the feel of a good movie. The voice acting is also well done, giving life to an eclectic group of creatures, including a talking houseplant.

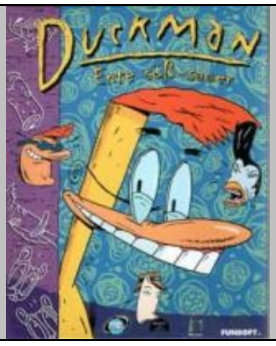
Each larger location is made up of several smaller areas where the player character stands on a fixed point but can turn 360 degrees to look around with a first-person perspective. This is similar to the use of pre-rendered areas in *The Journeyman Project 3: Legacy of Time* and *Zork: Nemesis*, but is done using panoramic shots and a fisheye lens to simulate perspective. Each location is linked by a nice animated flythrough to represent moving place to place.



The save/load screen shows off some of the weird aliens in The Space Bar.

The interface is clean and straightforward, with a short list of appropriate options popping up when you click on an active person or object. Your character also carries a sentient computer that provides access to a map, your inventory, clues already gathered and more. The snarky computer also speaks with you concerning events in the game, providing background and hints. In your inventory, you carry investigative tools – tissue and audio samplers – that aid in your search. The puzzles are quite refreshing; they actually make sense. Trial and error are still necessary on occasion, but they do not need to be the primary method of progressing. There's generally a strong sense of what needs to be accomplished and an inkling of how to make it happen. While they can be extremely complex and difficult, at least they are fair.

While its difficulty might be a turn off to some, and elements of its visual style may not have the same impact today as they did back in 1997, *The Space Bar* is perfect for those seasoned gamers looking for a game that is both challenging and well produced.



Duckman: The Graphic Adventures of a Private Dick

Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Darren Bartlett, Fred Schiller, Matthew Seymour
Developer: Illusion Gaming Company

One of the many adult-oriented cartoon series that appeared in the wake of *The Simpsons*, *Duckman* aired for four seasons on the USA Network in the mid-90s. The star is, obviously, Duckman, a foul-mouthed private detective who solves crimes while balancing his insane family life, consisting of three sons (that's including the two-headed one), his sister-in-law, and a farting grandma. The double entendre in the title should indicate the level of classiness therein. The plotline is adorably meta, as the success of Duckman's TV show has gone to his head, causing him to shirk his acting duties, resulting in replacement by a beefy superhero caricature dubbed the "new" Duckman. The main goal is to ruin this guy, who has not only stolen the original Duckman's job but also his family. The plot is narrated by Duckman's partner Cornfed, a dry-witted talking pig who seems to have stepped straight out of *Dragnet*.



Success has gone to Duckman's head.

While the visuals are VGA resolution, the sketchy art style is mimicked perfectly, and the animation looks fantastic. Most of the original voice cast returns, and while Jason Alexander, the show's actor for Duckman, is missing, his replacement does an excellent job. The writing is on par with the show, for better or worse. It relies too much on juvenile humor, and its pop culture references are painfully dated (The Menendez Brothers! Alicia Silverstone!) but can still provoke laughs. Take Fluffy and Uranus, Duckman's adorably gooey employees, whom he will happily stuff in the microwave if commanded. However, the game is stupidly easy and incredibly short, barely lasting more than a few hours. The command icons are reduced to "nice" and "angry" interactions, along with the inventory items, and practically any puzzle can be solved with minimal trial and error. It's a decent game, but was barely distributed and is very difficult to find.



Jack Orlando: A Cinematic Adventure

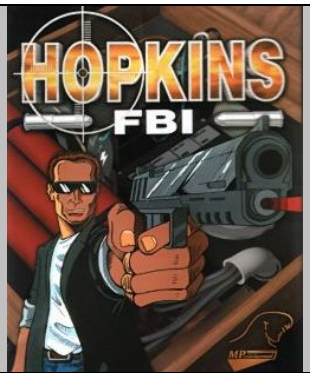
Initial Release Date: 1997
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Jarosław Parchański
Developer: TopWare Interactive

Jack Orlando claims to be a cinematic adventure and does its best to live up to that promise. It was released twice, the second time labeled as a Director's Cut and including new areas to explore, updated graphics and sound, and an easy mode where the player cannot die. It features a story that is true to its film noir roots. You play the part of Jack Orlando, a private eye at the end of Prohibition in the United States. Once known as a hero, he is now just a washed-up drunk. He happens to witness a murder and becomes the prime suspect. He has forty-eight hours to prove his innocence, but his quest to clear his name takes him further than solving a single crime. The cartoon-style graphics look excellent and make good use of color. The voice acting is mediocre, but the soundtrack composed by Harold Faltermeyer (*Beverly Hills Cop*, *Top Gun*) is terrific. The story draws you in, and within a few minutes you are using the fist icon to extort information.



Meet your femme fatale: the friendly, flower-selling old lady.

The inventory-based puzzles are intricate and challenging. However, there are numerous tiny items that have to be found without the benefit of mouseover text, and there are many red herring items; it almost feels like you are picking up litter. The dialogue is well written, but half the conversations are dead ends. As far as the game's story goes, it's generally pretty good, but the conclusion is underwhelming, and the ethnic caricatures, such as the Chinese launderer, are somewhat offensive. The game contains technical problems as well. Accessing the inventory is the only action not accessible with the mouse, and curiously, all sounds are muted by default when you begin the game. There are also at least two instances where the game can be rendered unbeatable, one of which occurs randomly. Overall, *Jack Orlando* gets as much wrong as it manages to get right, even in the rerelease. But despite these blunders, its noir style and challenging puzzles will help some players overlook its faults.



Hopkins FBI

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: OS/2 Warp / IBM PC / Linux
Designer(s): Jean-Christophe Jacquet
Developer: MP Entertainment

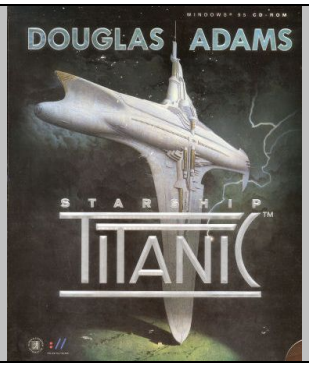
One of the first commercial games released for the Linux operating system, *Hopkins FBI* is an attempt at a mature point-and-click adventure game for adult players – the uncensored version is full of nudity and over-the-top gore. You play as the titular character, a supercop FBI agent who lives on the edge, because that's the way he likes it. A vicious killer he put behind bars has escaped, and is leaving a trail of corpses for Hopkins to follow. It leads Hopkins further than anyone would expect.

There are a number of positive aspects. The controls work well and are easy to handle. And although the *Heavy Metal*-style illustrations have not translated well to being pixilated, they are generally well drawn by French comic artists such as Thierry Segur and Masin Sandroed. The soundtrack is especially good; it features rocking tunes from the '60s by The Troggs, The Blues Magoos, and Rare Earth. But overall the game comes up short, feeling unfinished and amateurish. The story, despite a few genuinely fun and original ideas, never engages the player. The dialogue sections are mostly boring and the action sequences, including a poor man's *Doom* clone, were dated from the moment they were released. And *Hopkins* constantly tries to shock with copious violence and nudity, which means of course that it fails to do so.



Spoiler alert: she doesn't make it.

Saddest of all is the way they chose to portray women. They serve little purpose beyond eye candy or – just as often – dead eye candy. Rather than being mature, artsy, or titillating, the developers' fetish for the corpses of partially nude ladies comes off as monumentally creepy. So unless you're looking for something that might fall into the so-bad-it's-awful category, this one is not worth seeking out.



Starship Titanic

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Douglas Adams, Adam Shaikh, Emma Westecott
Developer: Drew Pictures

On paper, *Starship Titanic* sounds completely fantastic. The game was conceived by Douglas Adams, not only one of the most well regarded comedy/sci-fi writers of our time, but also the man associated with Infocom's *The Hitchhiker's Guide of the Galaxy*, based off his book series and well known as one of the genre's best text adventures. And yet, somewhere along the line, something went terribly wrong.

The idea for *Starship Titanic* came from a throwaway line in *Life, The Universe, and Everything,* the third *Hitchhiker's* book, which described a luxurious intergalactic cruiser that suffered from Spontaneous Massive Existence Failure (i.e. promptly disappeared into nothingness) on its first journey. Although not officially part of the *Hitchhiker* universe, the game picks up with that detail, as the Starship *Titanic* has somehow ended up right in the middle of your living room. You are invited onboard as its first (and only) guest to repair the ship, and try to figure out exactly what went wrong in the first place.

The Starship *Titanic* is a gorgeous vessel. In keeping with its namesake, it has an astoundingly beautiful futuristic art deco design. The whole game is viewed from the first person perspective, with a single cursor to indicate movement and interaction. It's a bit like *Myst*, with the computer generated graphics and all. But rather than consisting of static screens, when you move from node to node, there's a very quick transitional video that's sped up and extremely blurry, as if you were stumbling drunkenly through the ship's corridors. It's actually pretty fun to watch, except for how often you'll see them, since most of the puzzles revolve around ferrying items from one corner of the ship to the other. Beyond the initial embarkation lobby and a hallway that connects a few other areas, the staterooms are all accessed by elevators, and the rest of the ship is only accessible through a transportation vehicle called a Pellerator. While this was probably done to make the game world larger, and therefore more realistic, it also makes most of the ship feel strangely disconnected. And while you can skip through the short walking transitions by holding down the Shift button, you can't skip the long elevator or Pellerator rides, which again, makes navigation remarkably tedious.

Once you get your bearings, your goal, at first, is to upgrade your ticket a few times to higher classes, and then eventually find all of the missing pieces of Titania, the computer that controls the ship. You're never actually told this, though. Right at the beginning you're given a ticket and instructed to find your room, a task which is far more monumentally confusing than it should be. First you need to find the elevators, which are practically camouflaged in the middle of the ships' main hallway. Once you actually reach the correct floor, you need to find your room – not an easy task, because the rooms are not actually numbered. Instead, you need to walk up next to a door and read the message at the bottom of the screen which identifies the room you're in. Whenever you enter any of the rooms, it tells you, "This is your Stateroom." If you've entered the wrong room and try to interact with it, it will then immediately contradict itself and say, "This is not your Stateroom, please do not enjoy." It's also not entirely clear, but the rooms are also stacked vertically, and there are elevators next to each door to take you between them.

Once you've found the proper room, you've stumbled onto the game's first real puzzle, where you need to rearrange the pull-out furniture in a way that you can actually reach your TV (why you need to reach your TV isn't entirely clear at first, but just roll with it). But isn't just getting to this point kind of a puzzle? It really shouldn't be, because all you're doing is struggling with the game's vague sense of direction and halfway nonsensical structure.

Starship Titanic also seems to hold a grudge against interacting directly with the environment. Unlike, oh, nearly every single mouse-driven adventure game ever made, you can't simply click on an item to interact with it – instead, there's a special part of the status bar, nonsensically dubbed the Remote Thingummy, which you need to pull up every time you need to, say, call an elevator. But even this is handled inconsistently, because some objects you can interact with directly, including most of the items you need to pick up.



The robot designs are remarkably cool, despite their general ineptitude.

For as beautiful as the ship is, you can't examine much of anything. What a complete waste! Douglas Adams was the master of creating strange and weird universes, with long and hilarious tangents on whatever weird bit of technology had evolved. This should have made for some excellent writing when looking at some of the odd stuff onboard, but nope. Nothing.

The only characters throughout the entire game are the six robots that staff the ship. In keeping with the text parser roots of Infocom games, you speak to them by typing, theoretically opening up a whole world of amusing interactions. Of course, since all of the dialogue was pre-recorded, there's no way you can hold an actual conversation with any of them. There are some funny bits, as the robots are quite well animated and are voiced by some very talented folks. The first time you tell them to "piss off" and they promptly walk off the screen without so much as a word, it's a bit funny. But most of the time it seems they have no idea what you're saying and just reply with one of their (many) "I don't understand" responses, which are usually just random nonsense. Purportedly they hold the answers, or at least clues, to some of the more obscure puzzles, but good luck trying to pry any of that information out of them.

There is also a talking parrot, who spits out the same handful of phrases over and over. It's voiced by Terry Jones, former member of Monty Python, and if you haven't gotten tired of his many shrill-voiced woman characters (the SPAM lady, Brian's mother, and so forth) you will now. John Cleese also supplies the voice of a bomb, which is largely harmless because it keeps distracting itself in the middle of its countdown. Its presence, outside of giving a job to a famed British actor, is largely pointless, as you don't need to interact with it or even defuse it, if you don't feel like it. There's also an optional side-quest to uncover some e-mails to discover why the Starship *Titanic* is in such a sad state, but that's the only semblance of plot you'll find.

Most of the puzzles are a mixture between logic and inventory-based, but they all involve lots of running and fetching. At least a few revolve around the use of the Succ-U-Bus, a huge, inter-ship series of pneumatic tubes which can transport items from one spot of the ship to another. Usage of these is also largely dependent on understanding how to program the key cards, which have different patterns on them denoting different parts of the ship.

These puzzles aren't too bad, but some become all the more difficult because of the reliance on the robots, and therefore the text entry. To create a certain drink, you need a broken television. You can't actually pick up any of the many TVs yourself, though – you need to ask one of the robots to pick one up, carry it to a balcony, and tell them to toss it off. It's puzzles like these that are meant to recall the days of text adventuring, but when you can otherwise interact with the world by a mouse cursor, moving outside of that feels incredibly incongruent,. The publisher's must have realized how confusing the whole package is, because they included a fairly large hint book ("$20 value!") which, like the game itself, is badly structured, full of unnecessary information, and difficult to use.



The watery canals of the ship are patterned after Venice.

While most Infocom fans know Douglas Adams through the *Hitchhiker's* game, he also penned a lesser known title called *Bureaucracy*, a journey detailing the perils of red tape. *Starship Titanic* sort of feels like that: you're caught in the middle of a confusing and largely unnecessary set of procedures designed explicitly to frustrate you. There's a lot of value to be found in satire, but it's really no fun when it's happening to you, especially when you're playing a game you're supposed to be enjoying, and perhaps have even paid money for. And when that aggravation is really the only source of humor... well, that is an issue. Most of this probably isn't what Adams intended – there are a lot of interjections from him in the strategy guide on his inspirations and ideas, and a lot of them sound pretty great. But they all got lost by the time it was coded into a game, and the result is an astounding disappointment.

Starship Titanic was also turned into a novel, released around the same time as the game. According to the foreword, Adams was too busy working on the game, so he got his pal, Terry Jones, to do it. There's a bit more of a plot this time around, and some actual characters. The first 50 pages or so focus on Leovinus, the designer of the Starship *Titanic*, as it becomes clear that his beautiful creation has a number of snags. The story then begins properly when three humans end up on board. They're joined by an alien journalist, and have a number of wacky adventures, some of which tie in with the game. Some of the robots make appearances, as does the deranged parrot and the forgetful bomb. It does elaborate on the small bit of backstory that you can read in the game, but it's missing Adams' way with words, and is ultimately a bit dull.



Nightlong: Union City Conspiracy

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: Amiga, IBM PC
Designer(s): Edoardo Gervino
Developer: Trecision

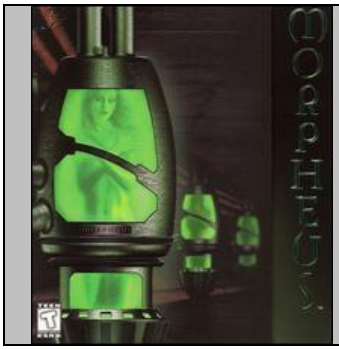
In *Nightlong: Union City Conspiracy*, a cyberpunk detective mystery, you play as Joshua Reeve, an investigator in a dystopian future. He is hired to infiltrate a terrorist group – a fake journalist has already done so and has gone missing. With only a baggie containing objects from the journalist's car, Reeve attempts to uncover the truth.



A public fax machine? This must be The Future.

Nightlong looks promising at first. The controls are simple, it's generally obvious what you need to do, and the visual design is excellent. The music and voice acting get the job done, and puzzles generally make sense. You don't need to worry about randomly dying and losing your progress either. However, the ball is constantly dropped. The mouse controls work inconsistently. One button looks and one touches, but not always. For instance, sometimes looking at a shelf will search it for items, but other times you must touch the shelf. This makes experimentation tedious, like trying to guess the verb in an early text adventure.

The plot is predicable and the characters are uninteresting. Joshua Reeve must be a smooth operator because he always wears sunglasses. Characters die or are forgotten and no one cares, least of all the player. At one point you enter cyberspace. Instead of giving variety to the gameplay, it looks and plays like the real world. At one point you can use a virtual sleeping drug to knock out a guard. How was this guard programmed? Is the drug a virus? The game never elaborates. The final puzzle is a complex math problem. While nearly every other challenge is solved with items or hitting it with a stick, this puzzle requires the player to break out pencil and paper. Disbelief is unsuspended when Reeve refuses to ask the genius in the next room for help. With better writing and some polish, *Nightlong* could have been a classic. As it is, this game is only for the desperate.



Morpheus

Initial Release Date: 1998
Platforms: IBM PC / Windows
Designer(s): Glenn and Jack Dean
Developer: Soap Bubble Productions

In 1928, Theodore Holmes attempted to cross the North Pole in a hot air balloon and was lost. Now, years later, his son Matthew Holmes attempts to uncover the fate of his father. Stranded alone on the ice, Matthew discovers a deserted ship, the *Herculania*. Inside, he finds strange technology and the dreams of restless phantoms.

The only game developed by Soap Bubble Productions, *Morpheus* is a quality *Myst*-style adventure. The visuals, soundtrack, writing and puzzles make this a game that puzzle fans will want to experience. The graphics are clear and the game has a well-designed, distinct look. There is live action full-motion video, but in this case it is well executed and impressively integrated into the game. The acting is not the game's greatest asset, but it is more than adequate and often quite good.



You'll be walking up and down stairs a lot in this game.

The *Herculania* itself is a joy to explore. The single cursor changes when an action is possible, and interaction is intuitive and smooth. A downside is the use of the mouse to pan around your character for a panoramic effect. This would be perfect if you could adjust the mouse sensitivity, since you occasionally find yourself in a dizzying tailspin. There is also some difficulty in navigating, as you are thrown into a large unmapped area. The puzzles are challenging, clever, and fun to solve. Rather than just being a series of odd gadgets and logic puzzles, you are required to pay attention to the story, gathering information as you play. Players without a perfect memory will need to physically write things down. Due to its lavish presentation, outstanding plot and clever puzzles, *Morpheus* is a must-play for fans of this type of adventure.



The Fish Files

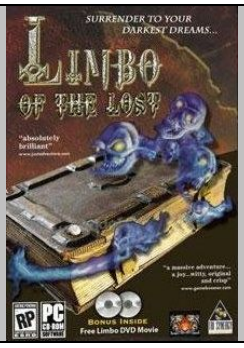
Initial Release Date: 2001
Platforms: Game Boy Color
Designer(s): Andrea Interguglielmi, Vincenzo Alagna, Amedeo Margarese, Paolo Gallo
Developer: 7th Sense

When hardware is starved of a genre it's easy to label an example as the "best" on that system. With not much else available *The Fish Files* has developed a cult reputation as a revered example of the genre on Game Boy Color. The styling and story are excellent, with the developers clearly being fans of LucasArts games like *Sam & Max*. Everything has a goofy caricaturized look to it, with skewed doors and freaky characters. You control Dante, an Italian student whose pet fish has disappeared. As it turns out all the fish in town are missing and, after meeting up with two faux-FBI agents who look like Mulder and Scully, you're arbitrarily given the task of solving their case and stopping the alien invaders responsible. Most of the humour is based on pop-culture, which dates it somewhat, but they managed to squeeze in enough gags about racial stereotypes, lap-dancing, and cigarette smoking to keep things amusing. Controls are easy and well suited to a handheld, with direct control over Dante and hotspots highlighted by arrows.



The FBI agent on the left is called Folder – he lumps you with this case.

What kills *The Fish Files* is that it's poorly designed and, even within the warped logic of the game world, many puzzles are counter-intuitive. Using a lighter on a fire alarm makes sense, but another early example sees Dante wanting the Bonkémon a kid has (it's a *Pokémon* parody). To get it he needs to make his own, but there's half a dozen items which look like they could make a Bonkémon (tennis balls and a mop rag may see logical but are wrong). To solve it you need to bring a glass of water to a dog, twice, and afterwards use a food baster on his drool to create Droolmon. Although hinted at, this solution still requires a massive leap of logic. To highlight how arbitrary some puzzles are, after receiving the multi-tool item (basically a Swiss army knife containing everything) the store owner claims "half the puzzles in the game can be solved with it". And sure enough, many can. But while opening a tin of sauerkraut makes sense, and it's hinted that you should add milk afterwards, it's not very intuitive that you then again need to use the multi-tool to blend the contents into a cream. In the end you're likely to combine the multi-tool with absolutely every other item – just in case. Overall, *The Fish Files* is a reasonably long adventure which looks impressive for a GBC title, and you can't die or waste essential items, but whether you can be bothered to solve the puzzles by trial-and-error is another matter.



Limbo of the Lost

Initial Release Date: 2008
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Steve Bovis
Developer: Majestic Studios

Initially conceived as an Atari ST game in 1993 and finally released in 2008 for the PC, *Limbo of the Lost* reached a certain level of infamy for its blatant plagiarism. What were the developers doing in the fifteen years between conception and publication? Apparently they were busy running around the likes of *Enclave*, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, *Oblivion*, and *Painkiller*, hitting the Print Screen button and using the results as background artwork. It's not just the backgrounds, either. Some voice samples were nabbed from *Thief*. One of the trailers uses music from *Hexen*. Some of the title card backgrounds were stolen from *The Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle Earth* and *Diablo II*. The gargoyle on the options menu was traced from an advertisement for the movie *Beetlejuice*. Part of the intro movie was recorded straight from the *Spawn* movie, while another cinema was yanked from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* computer game.



So there's the ripped off background, the sign with the Photoshopped text, and the ridiculous facial animation.

The rest of the visuals seems be, ironically, winning a contest for laziness. Text is not actually incorporated on to any textures – it is merely pasted on the image itself, presumably in Photoshop (or perhaps even MS Paint) in the same font, for every object, without regard for shape or depth. Some of the torch flame flickers seem to be taken from the animated GIFs from every web page in the '90s. The subtitles are filled with grammatical malfeasances and miscapitalized words. Nearly every sentence is divided by a series of a dozen periods or more, and occasionally sprinkled with insane laughter, whether it's vocalized or not. The main character is a default model from the animation program Poser. The camera has a strange obsession with extreme close-ups, dramatically zooming right up to the subject's nostrils and back. The animation is deliriously amateurish, with some facial expressions practically custom made for message board macros.

The story begins with the brotherly gods of Fate and Destiny, who are warring over mankind. Fate wants to destroy the world, while Destiny wishes mankind to prosper. Caught in the middle of this is Captain Benjamin Spooner Briggs, whose ship, the *Mary Celeste*, recently sank in a horrible storm. He awakens, not quite dead, in The Keep of Lost Souls, floating somewhere out in limbo. His goal? To climb the tower, face off against the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, and seal the book of Sufferance, allowing humanity to survive. Most of this backstory isn't actually told in the game, but rather in a cinematic on the supplementary DVD included in the package, for whatever reason. The name, along with the basic scenario, was inspired by (or plagiarized from, depending on your point of view) John Wallace Spencer's 1969 novel, which was about unexplained disappearances at sea, including that of the *Mary Celeste*.

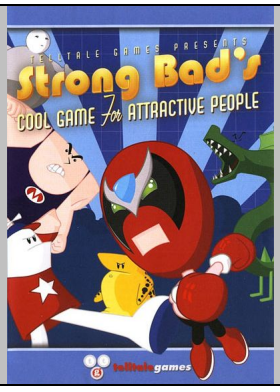
Upon viewing the intro and the title screens, one could easily assume that this is simply a self-important horror game, but a few seconds of playing reveals that it really doesn't take itself seriously at all, as it fashions itself after something like the cult classic movie *The Evil Dead*. Like *Simon the Sorcerer*, *Limbo of the Lost* is filled with wacky and stupid supporting characters. Unlike *Simon the Sorcerer*, none of them are legitimately funny, as they tend to ramble on pointlessly. Outside of Captain Briggs, most of the rest of the cast speaks with approximately the same voice, that being a Jar Jar Binks imitation with a strange British-Cajun accent. There's actually a character Cranny Faggot, a spooneristic reference to famed chef Fanny Craddock, which is about as insultingly clever as this game gets.

If stealing and butchering artistic assets were its only sin, *Limbo of the Lost* would have already been cast into hell, but as an adventure game it fails on pretty much every crucial level. The dark hallways are long and seemingly endless – if they were going to pilfer so many backgrounds, why did they steal the most boring ones? The camera deliberately hides important objects, when they're not concealed by the lighting. The puzzles aren't technically the worst the genre has seen, although at one point it challenges you to "create" tequila by taking some rancid sewer water and sticking a worm in it.



At least the ending is probably one for the books.

There's a lot of evidence that *Limbo of the Lost* really is a slapped together comedy, full of brazen, "what the hell, screw the man!" spirit, as if it were a high schooler's programming final that somehow got released as a commercial project. The game's official site was actually hosted on Geocities, and the epilogue also suggests as much – it ends up with all of the secondary characters gathered in a bar, mumbling through a song dubbing the hero "The King of Limbo". It's quite catchy in its insanity, and practically reveals the whole project as a gigantic prank.



Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People

Initial Release Date: 2008
Platforms: IBM PC / Wii / PlayStation 3
Designer(s): Mark Darin, Michael Stemmle, Charles Jordan, Brendan Q. Ferguson, Jake Rodkin, Matt Chapman, Mike Chapman
Developer: Telltale Games

"Everybody loves the Homestar Runner. He is a terrific athlete." These two sentences kick off the children's book, *The Homestar Runner Enters the Strongest Man in the World Contest* by Mike Chapman and R. Craig Zobel. After recruiting Matt Chapman, Mike's younger brother, and thereby forming The Brother Chap (or TBC), they decided to take their characters to the internet in the form of Flash animations. These silly little cartoons slowly evolved into a website which exhibited the goofy misadventures of Homestar and his friends.

Homestar Runner is a white humanoid figure-thing with long legs, a bright red shirt, and no apparent arms. He is ostensibly the main character, but he was quickly overshadowed in popularity by his self-proclaimed nemesis, the sarcastic smack-talking miscreant Strong Bad. Strong Bad wears a mask and boxing gloves and was modeled after a character in Data East's *Tag Team Pro Wrestling* game for the NES. He started out as a stereotypically evil villain who wanted to fight Homestar just to prove how bad he is, but he became less of a nemesis and more of a basically harmless jerk. The interplay between Homestar Runner and Strong Bad alone could make for a nigh-endless string of cartoons, but the universe grew to include a colorful and bizarre cast of nearly a dozen other regular characters and a massive amount of bit characters who often show up more than once. However, TBC would find their main claim to *H*R*'s fame through the *Strong Bad Emails*, a massive set of short toons based on Strong Bad checking his email and making hilarious responses. The SBEmails would eventually grow beyond snarky responses and become crazy cartoons based on the daily life of Strong Bad.

Homestar Runner is undoubtedly a very strange series. The humor is aimed at a college/young adult demographic with its jokes about pop culture, movies, music, the internet, and video games. While its surreal nature may incite some comparisons to Cartoon Network's Adult Swim line of programs, *Homestar Runner* is much more innocuous and child-like, preferring that its absurdist humor lie strictly in PG-rated territory. It loves making up words and reveling in grammatical awkwardness, with its brightly colored cast of characters delivering insane non-sequiturs that are somehow immensely quotable. The soundtrack consists of looping Casiotone keyboard music, and there's a distinct sense of '80s retro nostalgia.

Homestar Runner became an underground media sensation to the point where The Brothers Chaps' merchandise store on the website earned them enough profits to make that a job in and of itself. On top of that, it grew to include several actually good Flash games available for play on the website courtesy of TBC's programmer friend, Jonathan Howe. These games would be "made" by the fictional video game company Videlectrix, apparently run by two guys with mustaches obsessed with good graphics. The most notable game featured on the site is *Peasant's Quest*, an outright parody and homage of Sierra's *King's Quest* series. Considering The Brothers Chaps' love for video games, it would only be a matter of time before a full-fledged game would be based upon the *Homestar Runner* universe. It was decided that a graphic adventure game would be best to explore the Homestarverse, and who better to create the game than Telltale Games. The game became *Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People*, or *SBCG4AP* for short.

SBCG4AP takes place in five episodes based around the zany misadventures of Strong Bad and the people he is forced to interact with day-to-day. Each episode of *SBCG4AP* is more or less isolated and tells its own story without linking into one great big overall narrative. However, they share the same gameplay and familiar locales from the universe. It's neat to be able to explore them in full, especially the overall House of Strong, the dwelling whose architecture has been ambiguous up until the game's release. It may get a bit monotonous to traipse through The Field for five games straight, but it's also interesting to see how circumstances for each episode change the terrain creatively. Each episode also has its own minigame, made by Videlectrix.



Cool Tapes stars Marzipan, The Cheat and Strong Mad, with Strong Sad as a pretentious rock journalist.

SBCG4AP uses the same simple single-icon point-and-click interface as Telltale's other earlier games. The map screen allows Strong Bad to instantly move to an area based on his own crudely-drawn styles, and you can even arrange the areas in order of convenience. However, the dynamic 3D environments move along with Strong Bad as the cursor stays in place, which can lead to some erroneous clicking while Strong Bad is moving and makes item interaction slippery.

While Strong Bad obviously takes the center stage, the world of *Homestar Runner* is nothing without their band of friends... sort of. Strong Bad is often accompanied by a little yellow fellow known as The Cheat (yes, his first name is The). He may look adorable on the outside, but within his squat stature lies a mischievous prankster who will do almost anything for his fearless leader. Strong Bad also has two siblings. Strong Mad is a square-shaped no-necked juggernaut and the older brother of Strong Bad, who has the mindset of a child and a tenuous grasp on the English language. Strong Sad is the oft-downtrodden younger brother of Strong Bad, embodying the stereotype of emo college nerds with his fondness for alternative rock and independent films. Together, they cohabit the House of Strong, where they live without any real responsibilities outside of screwing around all day.

Outside of the house is Marzipan, Homestar's overbearing hippie-esque kinda-sorta girlfriend, who cares about voting for whales, saving the environment from poor computer use, and a plethora of other liberal issues that she pesters other characters about. She's also a bit insane and refers to inanimate objects as living beings, like her plant Credenza and her guitar Carol. Bubs is the local (and only) businessman of Free Country USA and runs Bubs' Concession Stand. He manages to accrue all sorts of weird items for sale, not all of it legal. He is apparently licensed in various other trades, such as paranormal investigator, normal investigator, and a not-medical doctor of TV/VCR repair. Coach Z is Homestar's coach and the all-around sports guy who knows, ironically, very little about sports. And Pom Pom is Homestar's rotund best friend who only communicates using bubble noises. He serves as the cool no-nonsense yin to Homestar's idiot yang in addition to being a ladies' man and a bona fide martial artist.

Outside of this group of friends is The King of Town, the apparent ruler of Free Country USA. He's thought of as a loser by local citizens, probably because he's never shown to care about any sort of democracy or monarchy or whatever. The only thing he's really concerned with is eating, and... even more eating. By his side is The Poopsmith, a mute government employee who apparently does nothing but shovel crap (dubbed "whatsit" here) for a living.

These guys are all pretty weird, but then there's Homsar. Homsar is a flagrantly bizarre little man whom almost no one can understand. Homsar's existence is based on a typo of "Homestar", as he looks like a squat, demented version of the hero, complete with a goofy bowler hat. He speaks in a ridiculous dopey voice and often says incomprehensible babble to the other characters, with phrases such as "Climb aboard, I brought my best foot flowered," and "Here comes the yogurt patrol!", and, perhaps most lovably, "I was raised by a cup of coffee!"

In episode 1, *Homestar Ruiner,* Strong Bad wakes up from the basement couch and gets right to the SBEmail checkin' for the day. He receives an email that asks him, "If you hate Homestar so much, why don't you beat the snot out of him?" Strong Bad accepts this as a challenge and meets Homestar down at the track, where he declares his intentions and is quickly brushed off. Instead, Strong Bad decides to beat Homestar in the Free Country USA Triannual Race to the End of the Race but unfortunately his athletic skills aren't quite up to his rival's prowess. Instead, he works to disguise himself as Homestar and blow the race on purpose. After Homestar loses the race and becomes a wanted felon for public nudity (don't ask), he becomes so depressed that he crashes on the couch in Strong Bad's basement and refuses to leave until his glory and pride are reclaimed. Strong Bad has to redeem Homestar's reputation so that he'll leave the House of Strong, but it will take some serious guts and gumption to set things right.

The minigame for this episode is *Snake Boxer*, an overhead puncher somewhat reminiscent of *Boxing* for the Atari 2600. Playing as Snake Boxer Joe, you fight increasingly powerful snakes in fist-to-fang matches which increase in speed with the more snakes you KO. Inputting a secret code (found in a torn-off manual page) allows you to play as a giant cobra which strikes faster than Joe and breathes fire to boot.

The second episode, *Strong Badia the Free*, begins with Strong Bad answering an e-mail about the dumbest law that the King of Town has ever passed when, at an appropriately inappropriate moment, the King of Town waltzes into the room and tells SB that he is in violation of the new email tax he just passed: one snack cake for every email sent or received. For refusing to pay the toll, the King of Town orders Strong Bad to be placed under house arrest. It's not long before he escapes, retreats to the self-made nation of Strong Badia and declares outright war on the Municipality. The ultimate goal is to perform tasks for the leaders of each country and ally them to the Strong Badian cause to wage a battle against the Castle. This leads into the last puzzle of the game, which is unique from the rest in the episodes in that it plays out like a simplified strategy game, which is a neat change of interface and acts as a suitable final challenge.

The minigame for this one is *Math Kickers*, a hilarious spoof of *Double Dragon* where the Algebros, Dex and Ryu, duke it out with various ninjas and mathematical formulas. A simple algebraic equation appears at the top of the screen and ninjas appear on both sides. You can either send Dex to the left to subtract the amount of ninjas or have Ryu add the ninjas on the right side. Amusingly enough, the bosses are complex equations which are "solved" simply by punching them until the right answer is found.

With the third episode, *Baddest of the Bands,* Strong Bad tries to play one of his favorite games on the Fun Machine game console: *Limozeen's Hot Babelian Odyssey*, based on his favorite band. Unfortunately, the console totally malfunctions and Strong Bad needs to take it to Bubs' Concession Stand for repair. Without the proper cash, Strong Bad decides to call on the power of ROCK to help his predicament. He decides to hold a "Battle of the Bands" contest and subsequently win said contest to obtain that one big sack of cash, and he will get the money with the sponsorship of the band! All he has to do is send in a totally kick-awesome album cover, which he makes out of a cool car on fire, a starfish, and a hot The Cheat... erm, a hot blonde, rather. He wins the contest and gets the sponsorship, but now he has to find three

bands to compete against. After tracking down the appropriate competition, Strong Bad reluctantly forms "DOI" with them, a name whose initials vary depending on choices provided by the three band members (for example, Degenerate Oliveloaf Incorporated). Unfortunately, DOI totally sucks and Strong Bad reasons that the only way he'll win is to sabotage the other three bands he helped to recruit. Even after all the sabotage, Strong Bad still needs to find a way to make his ragtag band rock harder, but if not through the music they play... then how?

After clearing the episode and fixing the Fun Machine, you can finally play *Limozeen's Hot Babelian Odyssey*, a space shoot-em-up which is certainly inspired by the classic Williams title *Defender*. You control Limozeen's galactic tour bus and use its tractor beam to pull in Babelians to score points. However, you lose points if Nebulons (bad aliens with style that nobody likes) whisk the Babelians up through the top of the screen.

The fourth episode is the confusingly named *Dangeresque 3: The Criminal Projective*. Many an SBEmail ago, Strong Bad showed off the trailer for his action film, *Dangeresque 2: This Time, It's Not Dangeresque 1* with the promise of *Dangeresque 3: The Criminal Projective* on the horizon. Now, at long last, the thrilling hold-on-to-the-seat-of-your-edge conclusion to what is now the *Dangeresque* trilogy is finally done and Strong Bad invites his not-so friends to watch it with him. For this episode, you play in the fictional role of Dangeresque as you travel around "the world", although you can easily see which areas of Free Country USA each location is supposed to be. Strong Bad himself wrote the entire script, which is filled with numerous plot holes and errors. He also directed, and the actors keep botching up their lines during the production.



Peasant's Quest should look more than familiar to fans of AGI-era Sierra games.

This episode's game-within-a-movie-within-a-game is *Space Circus Catastrophe*, a 3D space flight simulator thingy involving a crazy circus... in space. You have to avoid the stale circus treats (cotton candy, circus peanuts, popcorn balls) by pressing the opposite direction from which they fly in, and you have to blast the evil space clowns with your laser. However, you must not blast apart the circus performers (ringmaster, tiger, juggler, bear), but use your capture button to snag them in a bubble.

The fifth and final episode is *8-Bit is Enough*. As a result of a failed attempt to escape an angry mob of viewers who thought *Dangeresque 3* sucked, Strong Bad whams his head on his Trogdor arcade game cabinet. This causes it to have the most awesome malfunction ever – the console sprouts Trogdor's legs, wings, and beefy arm as it runs out of the room, terrorizing Strong Sad! Strong Bad thinks this is incredibly cool at first, but he can't play it until it gets fixed. Through a series of typically bizarre events, the cabinet malfunctions further, causing a fluctuation in the universe and completely transforming Free Country USA into a video game!

Strong Bad only finds this transformation awesome up until Strong Badia is burninated by the now-real Trogdor! Also, Homestar has been captured by Trogdor but can still communicate with Strong Bad via a pop-up window, which Strong Bad calls "HomeSpam". The other citizens of Free Country USA have also been affected by the transformation, like The Poopsmith having become construction game character Mista Fixit. Marzipan is now Lady Crate Ape (a parody of *Donkey Kong*) and has kidnapped Bubs on the roof of his own concession stand. The Trogdor machine itself contains the gateway to several other games, like *Stinkoman 20X6* (a *Mega Man* parody and one of the playable games on the site), which is an import game that requires some fixing to get around its region lockout. Naturally, Trogdor is hiding out in his own game, *Peasant's Quest*. Strong Bad gets to recruit several video game characters as items to help him, including characters from the previous four episodes' minigames. But he'll have a tough time getting into Trogdor's stronghold, as he has to brave through the gluttonous scorpion monster Munchox, the evil wizard/princess Sluushfuund, and the dastardly Copy Protection Wheel. The path through Trogdor's castle in FPS perspective is a definite homage to *Wolfenstein 3D*.

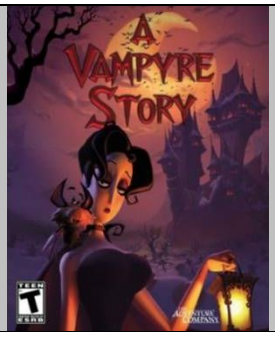
The minigame for this time around is *Gel-Arshie's Pro Fruitboarder*, a licensed shovelware title based on Gel-Arshie, an even more horrific mutation of the Fluffy Puff Marshmallow Company's already disturbing mascot, Marshie. The goal is to rack up points by jumping up from the crimson fruit wave to snag various red fruit in midair. Grabbing fruit creates a red bubble around Gel-Arshie which slows his decent and allows him to keep jumping in midair. However, the nefarious Professor Pineapple keeps shooting pineapple slices at you, and those are absolutely not red fruit. Getting hit by a slice destroys your gravity bubble, and getting hit without the shield takes away one of your lives. What's especially interesting about this one is that Strong Bad has to go into the game itself from the Videlectrix Mainframe at some point.

And thus ends the five episode saga of Strong Bad, at least in computer gaming form. On the whole, most puzzles are not too difficult, but in fitting with the tone of *H**R, some of them tend to be abstract and bizarre. Still, the stranger puzzles often fit in with the quirky feel of the series, and there's nothing here that's as unfair to deduce as older Sierra games. Furthermore, there is a hint gauge which you can set to one of three "obviousness" levels. There are also several bonus items and tasks which go towards an achievement percentage. Unfortunately, a few of these are easy to miss and can be lost forever, requiring a restart to achieve 100%.

The graphics are quite simple and generally do a decent job of translating the 2D drawings into 3D polygons, and from a distance it looks almost exactly like the cartoons. However, there are some instances where it just plain looks weird. Homestar particularly seems odd with his 3D mouth movements and his underbite not quite being accurately modeled, but this is not a game that relies on its technical details. The sound design is lifted straight from the website, with strangely charming Casiotone keyboard melodies accompanying Strong Bad on his travels. The voice work is spot-on from the website with almost all character voices done by Matt Chapman, except with Missy Palmer as Marzipan and Mike Chapman doing a few voices to boot.

All five episodes sort of assume some kind of familiarity with the material. There are tons of in-jokes and references that will just sound silly and random if you're not familiar with them. Then again, Homestar Runner is a silly and random series anyway, even if you've watched the Strong Bad e-mails over and over and have bought the DVDs. It can take awhile for acolytes to become accustomed to the humor, but the longtime fanatics who have checked the Strong Bad Emails since the Tandy 400 days will undoubtedly love it. Obviously, fans of '80s nostalgia parodies – hair metal, cop movies, video games, and beyond – will have a blast with it, too.

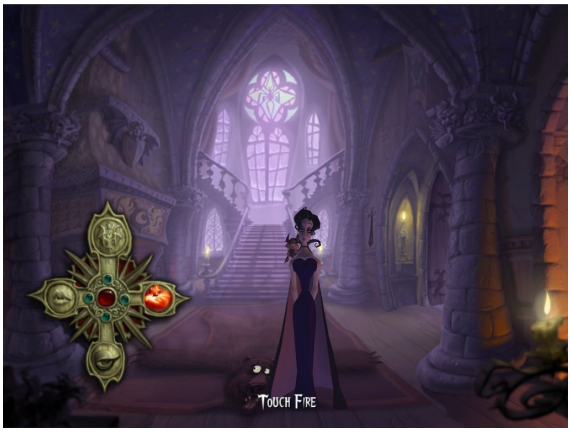
The differences between the PC, Wii and PlayStation 3 releases are few. *SBCG4AP* runs on reasonably low-powered technology for a recent PC title and the framerate is slightly better compared to the console versions. The clicking controls are also more precise, but the Wii and PS3 are good alternatives regardless, as the differences are negligible.



A Vampyre Story

Initial Release Date: 2008
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): Bill Tiller, Dave Harris, William L. Eaken
Developer: Autumn Moon

A Vampyre Story is the first title out of Autumn Moon Entertainment, a studio founded by ex-LucasArts artist Bill Tiller. It tells the tale of young Mona de Lafitte, a French opera singer who has been kidnapped by the nebbish vampire Shrowdy von Kieffer, where she too is turned into the living dead and forced to live in his castle. As the game begins, Shrowdy has been killed and so Mona is free to escape, but not before conquering numerous obstacles in the Castle Warg, least amongst them the ghost of her former captor.



The background artwork is routinely gorgeous, but they don't make up for the tepid writing.

As to be expected from the man who illustrated *The Curse of Monkey Island*, still one of the best looking adventure games ever made, *A Vampyre Story* looks stunning. The characters may be a bit low poly, but the breathtaking artwork and stylized designs more than make up for it. Unfortunately, the rest of the game just doesn't follow suit. The puzzles aren't anything special, and a bit on the easy side, while the writing is almost uniformly weak. Mona is probably meant to be cute, but the way her voice actress screeches with an extremely grating French accent does little to ingratiate herself to the player. There's a running joke that Mona is in denial about being turned into a vampire, that she believes the blood she's been drinking is actually wine. It's supposed to be tragic, but it makes her come across as dim. Froderick, her bat companion, is meant to be the standard snarky sidekick, but his wisecracks lack bite, and thus fall flat. The supporting characters, like an upbeat iron maiden, a group of mafia-esque rats, and gargoyle who sounds like Ozzy Osbourne, are one-note, and their drawn out conversations would have been worthwhile if they were actually funny. The only amusing part is the fact that Shrowdy is so pathetic he still lives with his mother. What's more, the game is only two acts long, much of it confined to the castle, and ends on a cliffhanger. A sequel was announced almost immediately, but it seems to be in limbo.



Gray Matter

Initial Release Date: 2010
Platforms: IBM PC / Xbox 360
Designer(s): Jane Jensen
Developer: Tonuzaba / WizarBox

More than any other genre in video game history, the graphic adventure has always been carried by significant personalities, the fictional characters on screen as well as the creative heads that brought them to life. Most adventure games are identified with definitive auteurs, names that mean much to fans even today. The late '80s changed all that though. The desire to destroy was greater than ever before, while solving problems using one's brain was out of fashion. Then the second half of the 2000s came and the global video game market regained its ability to sustain niches beyond all that ever-so-marketable slaughtering.

Yet when previously popular adventure series also made a comeback, disappointment often followed. For example the return of *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* creators Noah Falstein and Hal Barwood, with *Mata Hari,* received a lukewarm reception from fans and critics thanks to plot holes and light puzzles. Understandably then, gamers' feelings towards Jane Jensen's big new game shifted between hype and fear. Her classic trio of *Gabriel Knight* mystery thrillers stands as one of the most outstanding examples of storytelling in video games. Jensen's year-long work in casual games, however, instilled worries in those who valued the *Gabriel Knight* series for its well researched plots, believable characters and challenging puzzles. Despite her casual gaming venture, a number of well-received mystery novels she wrote in the meantime served as proof that Jensen never lost her touch.

Her new game was codenamed "Project Jane-J", but after being announced at E3 2003 through The Adventure Company, it was suddenly left hanging. According to Jensen most of the story was already finished. It would take three more years before the game resurfaced as *Gray Matter*, now under the wing of German publisher dtp Entertainment, who had made a name for themselves by releasing many prestigious adventures from all over Europe.

The actual development was outsourced to Tonuzaba in Hungary, but after several delays the publisher decided that they didn't have what it took to deliver what was possibly becoming the most anticipated adventure game of the decade. After another period of uncertainty, the French developer WizarBox was hired to complete Jensen's vision. With an adventure portfolio consisting solely of *So Blonde*, WizarBox didn't inspire confidence.

More delays followed, but the game started to make steady progress and in November 2010 finally saw its release. Initially only in Germany, international versions followed in early 2011. The question was: after all those years of development could *Gray Matter* – perceived as the spiritual successor to *Gabriel Knight* – fulfill gamers' expectations? Or had Jensen's intuition for deep plots and clever puzzles been spoiled by years of casual game development?

Initially things don't look promising. We see a woman on a motorbike trying to reach London. It's raining as if the big flood has just begun, and the storm turns around a signpost, leading her in the wrong direction. The woman's motorbike breaks down, of course, just in front of a dark and spooky mansion. Stepping up to the gates our heroine arrives just in time to witness a girl standing outside and practicing her introduction line: "Hello, I'm the new assistant of Dr. Styles." But something scares her so much that she immediately takes to her heels.

Anyone who knows horror films, and recognizes the signs, would do the same as the girl. Yet astonishingly our protagonist, despite the atmosphere of immediate threat, decides to take the fleeing girl's place as Dr. Styles' assistant – not for long, of course, just until she finds out where the girl ended up. Although it seems ridiculous to cram so many clichés into the first few minutes of the game, *Gray Matter* knows exactly what it's doing.



Christ Church in Oxford.

Samantha Everett is our protagonist's name. A runaway orphan from the United States and a street magician, she has traveled through all of Europe on her own, heading for London to find the world's most secret society of magicians, the Daedalus Club. She plans her stay at the Dread Hill House – as the aforementioned assistant – to be only temporary. The job, however, pays fantastically and, arranged as it was through a student job agency, the residents know next to nothing about the applicant. Such auspicious conditions seduce Sam to stay just a while longer. First repelled by Dr. Styles' gruff mannerisms, she is soon intrigued by the unique and tragic fate of her new employer, and feels a certain connection to her own past.

Dr. David Styles takes over as the playable character for the shorter three of the game's eight chapters, to deal with his inner demons and push forward his experiments. He used to have it all: wealth, popularity, a promising career as the world's top neurobiologist, and a beautiful wife. But a car accident which happened under mysterious circumstances, three years before the events of the game, ended all that. With his wife Laura dead and the doctor himself disfigured by severe burns, he retired from the university and locked himself up in his mansion, ordering his housekeeper Mrs. Dalton never to change anything in the house that serves his memory of Laura. Convinced that Laura's mind still remains around him, he has become obsessed with the desire to get through to her. Despite having the reputation of a mad scientist, he decides to continue his former research on the potential of the human mind to directly alter the physical world, in the hope that it will help him to find a way to communicate with Laura.

After a tutorial to familiarize player with the game's controls, Sam's first assignment in her new position as David's assistant is to find six voluntary human test subjects. Not an easy task, given how infamous Dr. Styles has become among students over the years. Yet she soon finds her targets among the university's freshmen, who are ignorant of his reputation. She convinces fellow American and amateur filmmaker Harvey Kinderman, the vain rich kid Helena Beauregard, the shy but incredibly good-looking mummy's boy Charles Ettington, and the superstitious Scottish bumpkin Angela Mulholland to participate. Though they are not as many as asked for, Dr. Styles can't hide his surprise that Sam found anyone at all. He himself has recruited another test subject, a quiet student from abroad named Malik, while the sixth is going

to be Sam herself. Through their connection as the mad scientist's guinea pigs the six former loners form a kind of clique: The Lambs' Club.

Sam's method of winning the hearts of her acquaintances is magic tricks brought from her "profession" as a street magician. These account for a good portion of the puzzles and are supposed to be *Gray Matter*'s big new thing. When it's time to "trick" a person, the talking icon switches to a magic hat. Sam then has to select the appropriate trick out of a dozen from her spell book, and apply it to the given situation by using commands to "palm" items in her hand, "vanish" them up her sleeve and so on.

Unfortunately, most of the time the solution is quite simple, and demands no more than following the instructions in the trick description. To help Harvey get back his documentary from a girl he filmed in an unfavorable situation, for example, Sam has to switch it with an empty tape while casually playing around with it, then destroy this fake tape in front of the girl's eyes. This kind of puzzle would open a lot of interesting opportunities if its setup was less dogmatic and more demanding of adaptive thinking. The way it's implemented, however, the trickery is no more than a nice but unexciting distraction.

For some of her tricks Sam needs special props from a magician's supply store, where she stumbles upon a link to her original goal of contacting the Daedalus Club. She meets the sly and charismatic Mephistopheles, who tells her a lot about the society, including the "Grand Game" anyone who hopes to enter has to perform: a large scale scheme of remarkable trickery. In his store Sam also finds one of the club's puzzle boxes, which sends her on a scavenger hunt to win her spurs in the eyes of the club. There are two such hunts in the game, each of which stretches over two chapters and focuses on traditional riddles like rebuses and word play.

There are also "normal" adventure puzzles in *Gray Matter* that revolve around the manipulation and combination of items. The solution is almost always practical and requires little outside-the-box thinking (on the plus side though this means the puzzles don't feel too constructed). Apart from the few harder puzzles in the final stages of the game, veteran players might mourn the lack of a truly brain-teasing challenge. Here's probably where Jensen's casual game influence comes into play, since in contrast to the sometimes really tricky puzzles in *Gabriel Knight*, pretty much everyone should be able to complete *Gray Matter* without a walkthrough – but not without stopping to think every once in a while, mind you.

While the solutions to puzzles often lead back to previously visited places, backtracking is never much of a hassle as a map of Oxford allows for fast travel. On the map, names of locations still relevant to the main plot are rendered golden and places finished for the current chapter are grey, narrowing things down. Some names appear in silver/white, which means that there are still bonus points to be gained there even though they don't serve to advance the main plot anymore. At one point (in chapter 6), it's possible to sequence-break by using the map, which doesn't break the game but makes for a weird backwards progression of certain events.

Bonus points represent an updated return of the scoring system from the Sierra days of adventure games: every correct action is rewarded with points, some of which are completely optional. In chapter 2, for example, Sam can buy flowers from an old lady in town, which she may use to decorate certain places in Dread Hill House to make the place less dreadful. While such simple things don't affect the main plot at all, they can feel quite rewarding in themselves.

But what about the story? After throwing players into the setting quite abruptly (although Jensen wrote a story introducing readers to Sam's life in 2008), the plot develops rather slowly. But after strange phenomena start appearing during Dr. Styles' laboratory "mind exercises", *Gray Matter* has one captured entirely under its spell. Not much in video game storytelling has ever been as intriguing as the way Sam and David discover links between past and present incidents. While David is looking for messages from his deceased wife in those "pranks", Sam is wavering between suspecting a plot against Styles and the assumption that one of the students might be conducting a Grand Game to gain entry to the Daedalus Club.

What soon ensues is a masterful character-driven mystery that manages to play out the personalities of the cast to great effect. Switching between two protagonists brings interesting

insights from their perspectives, which is especially noticeable when the two meet in direct confrontation. The at first awkward dynamics between the outspoken street artist and the embittered scientist that grow closer over time ever so subtly are certainly the high points of the writing, but the supporting characters are no slouches either, even if some have a slight tendency to devolve into stereotypes. The extensive research which made the *Gabriel Knight* games such convincing pieces of fiction also shouldn't go unmentioned. At the end of *Gray Matter*, the player will have learned quite a bit about the history of Oxford, mythology and parapsychology.



Taken out of context, the grand finale almost looks like it's from a fantasy game.

Humor is when a supposedly serious game like *Gray Matter* sets out to school all the other "funny" games about humor. Despite its often grievous topics, the story always finds time for the bright side of life, and many of the characters are blessed with a genuine sense of humor. Their jokes are always in-character, which sets them apart from the one-liner machinations many adventure game protagonists have degraded to.

However, even the greatest adventure games developed in France, Germany or the Czech Republic suffer on the international stage from lackluster English localization. Here *Gray Matter* thankfully is on the safe side thanks to Jane Jensen's authorship. Not only is there no such thing as a translation loss, but Jensen personally took care in the quality of the English dub, overseeing both the casting and production. With very few exceptions even the smallest characters deliver their roles convincingly. With its fairly international cast, a lot of care has also been placed on the various accents, often a sore thumb in adventure game dubs.

Like in all three *Gabriel Knight* games, the adventuring is once again accompanied by a soundtrack composed by Jensen's husband Robert Holmes. Most of the time the arrangements are decidedly low-key, but fit the scenes on screen extraordinarily well. The three major themes in the game are performed by Holmes' band The Scarlet Furies, which couldn't have been chosen more perfectly. Their moody, sometimes melancholy sound hits the nail on the head when it comes to complementing the game's emotions.

Polygonal characters in front of mostly static bitmap backgrounds have become kind of a standard for the adventure genre, and *Gray Matter* makes no exception here. Elaborate lighting techniques do a great job to set the mood and create a rather convincing illusion that both layers belong to the same world; only on a few screens does it become visible that the characters are hovering in front of a flat plane. Despite the whole game taking place in and around Oxford, Sam and David visit many locations with very different scenery and atmosphere. Some bathe in grandeur like the stunning view in Headley's office or the top of Carfax Tower, while others feel deserted and claustrophobic. In the endgame it gets all crazy and surreal, too. The game also

conveys a strong sense of authenticity. One can hold photographs next to the more famous locations in Oxford and try to spot the differences.

On the downside, there are a few obviously unfinished animations. At times there are also clipping errors when characters directly interact with the 2D background. All of these are few and far between, but constitute the most disturbing failures in the visuals. The cinematic direction outside of cutscenes also feels dated – it's grating when screens constantly fade in and out because doors are immovable. There isn't much to see in terms of facial expressions, either.

The controls take the inevitable streamlined single-button approach, complete with all comforts the genre has developed over the past decade. A double click causes the protagonists to hurry to their destinations, while inventory items are readied with a right click and then used automatically when interacting with the right object. Sam and David also each maintain a notebook, but it just documents all the dialogue lines. *Gray Matter* also makes use of the space key as a toggle to show all hotspots on screen.

Nowadays even adventure game publishers have to take consoles into account to grant their games commercial viability, but instead of going for the obvious Wii port in addition to a Windows version, *Gray Matter* was co-developed for Xbox 360. This was only available in Europe and dtp lamented the lack of publisher interest in releasing the Xbox 360 port stateside.

The inferior lighting effects for the console version are criticized much, but while the game looks better with the highest settings on PC, the differences are marginal. The real problem of the console port lies with the controls; the designers really went out of their way to create the most stupid control scheme imaginable. Characters are controlled directly with the left analog stick, which only works as long as one never changes direction, otherwise they get caught on nothing but thin air. In order to interact with hotspots, a radial menu for the nearest hotspot is opened by holding the right trigger. The game tries to arrange the allocation so that it corresponds with the actual hotspot's location, but given that there are only 16 slots available at fixed angles, more often than not it doesn't work out at all. All this is made even more ridiculous by the many close-up screens for things like drawings and letters, which use perfectly functional point-and-click controls that are of course unavailable for the core gameplay. When given the choice between the two platforms, the PC is strongly recommended.

Unlike the Xbox 360, the PC was also graced with a special Collector's Edition, containing the excellent soundtrack on an extra CD, a poster which is unfortunately folded in a way that makes it useless, a deck of 55 *Gray Matter*-themed playing cards and a few postcards with motives from the game and concept art. Not the most bombastic special edition ever, even less so as the manual is ugly black and white, but the soundtrack alone is enough to make the package worthwhile. Granted, it's also available separately via digital distribution for less than the price difference of the CE. Unfortunately, the special package was only published in Germany, but the disc contains full English text and voiceover, so there's always importing.

Contrary to what some may have secretly wished for, *Gray Matter* is not a *Gabriel Knight 4* in disguise. Its story sets a different tone, and the puzzles take a more accessible approach than those from the golden age of graphic adventures. Those who dared hope for the perfect adventure game will also be disappointed, as the title is not without its fair share of rough edges. Although more driven through its fascinating plot and vivid writing than by genius puzzles, *Gray Matter* is nonetheless above far among its contemporaries in either discipline. While there have been quite a few adventure games with decent puzzles over the last couple of years, what the genre was really starving for was a new excellently written game, and that's exactly what is delivered here. Everyone who's into adventure games is finally in for a real treat.

What's left is to hope is that we won't have to wait another 11 years for the next full-blown adventure by Jane Jensen. The ending of *Gray Matter* does indeed hint at a possible sequel and leaves enough open ends to follow up on the story. The author herself has proclaimed interest in making this the start of a new series. If what this game achieves is any indication of the things to come, and its commercial success secures more follow-ups, the future of the genre might look a little brighter than it did in the past dozen years.

The Chzo Mythos

Amongst indie adventure games, *The Chzo Mythos* is likely one of the most recognized series for several reasons, with perhaps the most notable factor being that they're just plain disturbing. The chief developer is Ben Croshaw, whom most know as Yahtzee, the humorously cynical machine-gun-mouthed host of Zero Punctuation. While Yahtzee takes a generally lighthearted approach to his work as a reviewer, he brings down the house lights when it comes to making games; some are laden with his recognizable brand of humor, but *The Chzo Mythos* shows a delectably darker side of Yahtzee with which ZP fans might not be familiar. The first two games in the series (*5 Days a Stranger* and *7 Days a Skeptic*) start out as straightforward horror stories which revolve around a mysterious supernatural element. The origins of this element are fully explained in the third game, *Trilby's Notes*, where it becomes apparent that a force from another dimension named Chzo is the root of all evil. The final game, *6 Days a Sacrifice*, wraps up the series in a suitably Lovecraft-esque fashion. They have all the elements of a good horror yarn: Suspense, fear, blood, and an antagonist who refuses to die.



5 Days a Stranger

Initial Release Date: 2003
Platforms: IBM PC / Linux
Designer(s): Ben Croshaw
Developer: Ben Croshaw

The first of the series lays down the basis for the rest of the plot to come, even if it could qualify for a self-contained story. The protagonist is Trilby, a gentleman thief who breaks into the DeFoe mansion after hearing about it on the news. Clarence DeFoe, the house's last owner, died under mysterious circumstances, and Trilby thinks it the perfect chance to loot the house for its valuables. However, he finds that after breaking in, all windows and doors mysteriously become locked, and there is nothing particularly valuable in the mansion anyway. Trilby is more than annoyed that he has been ripped off and is being held prisoner by a nameless force, but he soon finds three other inhabitants who all came to the DeFoe manor for their own reasons: Philip Harty, a paranoid smartass "treasure hunter" (a job similar to Trilby's but significantly less gentlemanly); Simone Taylor, a BBC news correspondent who had heard stories of the DeFoe lineage and wanted to study the house; and Jim Fowler, a boarding school student who enters the creepy manor on a dare. There is also a fifth guest by the name of A.J., but not much is found out about him before his corpse is found at the bottom of the mansion's swimming pool. Trilby finds that these foul happenings are tied to the house's original owner, Roderick DeFoe, and a child whom he hated so intensely.

Without blowing open the rest of the plot, suffice it to say that the mansion is jinxed. It's a straightforward horror plot, but presented in an entertaining narrative fashion that builds upon a growing sense of distrust among the characters. A figure known at first as "The Welder" starts antagonizing the house, clad in a welding mask, leather apron, and a fantastically bloody machete. A constant presence of the ethereal is kept as random sound effects pipe up every ten or so seconds. Most of the game is played in ambience, and the few pieces of music that exist are taken from *RPG Maker 2000*, but it fits the mood when appropriate. The art style has a decidedly old-school early '90s feel to it. It does not look at all dazzling, and a few of the color choices are garish, but if anything, it could be said that the juxtaposition of the simple visuals against the mature nature of the game makes it even more disturbing.



Trilby faces off against a nightmarish being known as The Welder.

The control scheme is a simple point-and-click interface with a submenu (activated via right-click) containing several straightforward commands. It's a bit clunky, but it's no less contrived (and is in fact simpler) than most early LucasArts point-and-clicks. The scale of the mansion is rather small with a little less than twenty rooms to explore, but the claustrophobic feel of the place does add a bit to the pressure of the ambience. The bulk of the game consists of roaming about the mansion, keeping in touch with the other three survivors, finding out more about the house's history, and solving a few puzzles until something really catastrophic occurs. The puzzles are relatively light "use item A on object B" affairs and are not too difficult, though one infamous point requires you to essentially craft an impromptu corpse compass out of a stick, cable cord, and teddy bear dipped in salt. It's not so difficult to form the item if you think about the instructions that describe it, but a certain step is easy to miss in activating its power. It does not get too much more complex from this aside from a similar puzzle close to the game's end. There are also two points where you can die, and you will need to reload a prior save in this case, so keep several saves handy for posterity's sake.

The appeal of *5DaS* lies in its setting and characters at the core of a simple yet effectively entertaining narrative. Many point-and-click adventure titles employ a quirky sense of humor to keep their players entertained, but *5DaS* goes in a far different direction by keeping the dialogue mature and straightforward. There is little humor save for some of Trilby's snarky thoughts and comments, but the story stays serious all throughout and it actually works quite well. There is a constant sense of tension as evidenced by Philip's growing paranoia and distrust of the others, and while Simone and Jim do their best to stay calm, the disturbing climax breaks everyone apart at a time when team solidarity is most needed. Trilby himself is an affable and rational man who's almost impossible to dislike, and he attempts to stay calm despite several points where the supernatural evils of the house take their toll on his psyche.

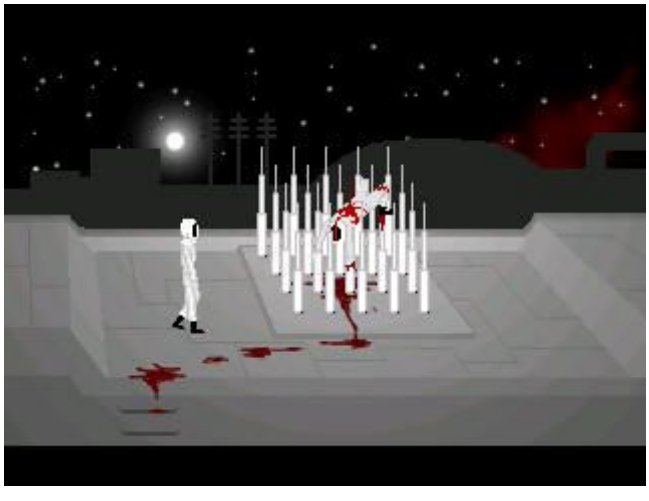
If you can get past the minimalist design, *5DaS* comes recommended to satisfy any cravings you might have for indie adventure games. It can be beaten within an hour, but it's a fun and dark ride all the way to the finish. The game can be downloaded for play off of Yahtzee's website, Fully Ramblomatic, free of charge. For the longest time, the game's special edition was available via donation, but Yahtzee has now put special editions of all games in *The Chzo Mythos* quadrilogy up for free. Included with the deluxe *5DaS* are some concept sketches, the game's music in MIDI files, a hilarious bonus scene, and most importantly, an author commentary track to be ideally activated after having played through the game once lest spoilers be revealed. The commentary talks about what Yahtzee felt worked out very well, what didn't work as well, what

tricks he employed to make things as they are, explanations for decisions in gameplay and plot, and spelling out plot points clearly for gamers too dense to pick up on them. It's definitely worth replaying *5DaS* to see what was in Yahtzee's head during the development process.

7 Days a Skeptic

Initial Release Date: 2004
Platforms: IBM PC / Linux
Designer(s): Ben Croshaw
Developer: Ben Croshaw

What ostensibly appears to be the sequel to *5 Days a Stranger* doesn't seem to have a lot to do with its predecessor aside from a similar title. However, it is clearly the successor to the storyline set forth by Trilby's ill-fated romp through the house of DeFoe, even if Trilby himself does not directly appear in this game. Set 400 years after the events of *5DaS*, you play as Dr. Jonathan Somerset, the psychologist onboard the Mephistopheles, a scout ship on its last journey which picks up an unidentified object in the cargo bay. The crew finds it to be a large metal box with a warning engraved in its side, inscribed by a man identifiable only by the symbol of a hat. It is the decision of Captain Barry Chahal to leave it the hell alone until another ship comes by to take it away. After Somerset has a nightmare about how the box opens itself, the captain is reported missing. Somerset eventually finds Chahal's corpse, somehow impaled on the ship's stalagmite-esque radio masts. The crew starts to suspect each other as the captain's potential murderers, and it only gets worse when a hand falls out of the food dispenser. As the crew falls victim to dark forces one by one, Somerset finds out who opened the box, what was inside, and why it's causing a strange set of murders akin to a similar situation so far back in the past.



This all looks quite painful.

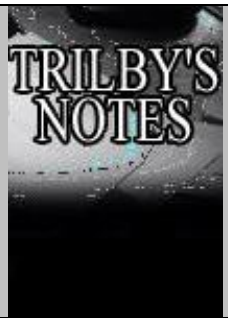
It could be argued that *7DaS* is essentially *5DaS* in space, but the characters have decidedly different personalities, and the situation is different as the evil presence comes to them instead of the victims coming to it. The Welder, having acquired the name "John DeFoe" by designation of a certain gentleman thief, somehow returns after a deep sleep in space, though it

does not appear at first but rather manifests its evil through a certain blighted artifact that should be very familiar from *5DaS*. John DeFoe and the contents of his coffin are the only link between the events of *5DaS* and Dr. Somerset's nightmare, and it is interesting to see how another group of victims deals with a terror long dormant for nearly four centuries. The interface is improved from *5DaS*, as all commands are activated by right-clicking on an object first instead of opening the menu to choose the appropriate command. The Mephistopheles is a little bit larger than DeFoe Manor, though it's still relatively easy to navigate. The graphical style of both the backgrounds and character sprites are similar to *5DaS*, and the few sparse bits of music are once again taken from *RPG Maker 2000*.

Aside from the improved interface, the game more or less plays like *5DaS*, though the game is overall a bit longer than its predecessor due to a slightly increased quantity in puzzles. Unfortunately, *7DaS* wedges in a couple of clunky action segments where you have to run from your pursuer while figuring out how to dispose of them permanently. The first of these segments also involves what is probably the most obtuse puzzle in the game, where you have to somehow figure out that luring the bad guy into the engine room and hitting him off the bridge with a heavy towel rack rod is the way to kill him off for good. Another such segment right at the end of the game requires some fast movement to dupe your pursuer, and one wrong turn gets you a Game Over.

7DaS is slightly inferior to its predecessor in terms of puzzles and character interaction, which are respectively more frustrating and less interesting in comparison to *5DaS*, albeit marginally. There's nothing on the level of typical Sierra moon logic in terms of puzzles, and the aforementioned curtain rod scheme is really as bad as it gets. The character interplay is a bit less solid due to Dr. Somerset himself not being as interesting a protagonist as Trilby. A slight de-emphasis on character communication seems the price to pay for an even darker story than *5DaS*, one that feels more bleak and pressuring in comparison. Even if the above-mentioned action scenes are not great from a gameplay perspective, they at least drive home a terribly effective sense of fear that really makes the player feel inadequate to drive back the evil. *7DaS* is significantly gorier than previous installments, with one scene in particular consisting of multiple hacked-apart bodies being sewn together in a neo-Frankenstein sort of fashion.

7DaS is comparatively the weakest of the series, but it is still a solid title well worth playing. While the next game, *Trilby's Notes*, really expands on the reasons behind the Welder's chaos, *7DaS* keeps it simple with the slasher on the starship and comes off as a hell of a lot less hokey than *Jason X*. Despite being chronologically the "last" game in the fictional world of the mythos, anyone who plays this as the fourth game is a danged fool. As with *5DaS*, the now-free special edition comes with the game's music tracks, hilarious outtakes of certain scenes in the game, a bonus comedy scene that shows if you play the game on Yahtzee's birthday, and the ever-fascinating creator commentary track. It also makes the action segments less annoying by adding an early warning system for when danger's about to appear.



Trilby's Notes

Initial Release Date: 2006
Platforms: IBM PC / Linux
Designer(s): Ben Croshaw
Developer: Ben Croshaw

Considered by many to be the best of the series, *Trilby's Notes* brings back fan favorite Trilby as the protagonist, as obviously denoted by the title. Now working for the government, Trilby is

tasked to follow the location of the wooden idol housing the soul of John DeFoe after discovering the unfortunate murder of Simone Taylor. Trilby's investigation brings him to the Clanbronwyn Hotel, ostensibly a pleasant resort located by the seaside. The hotel is hosting an exhibit on ancient artifacts, with the idol naturally being one of them. Trilby converses with the curator, Professor Abed Chahal, and his undergraduate assistant, Siobhan O'Malley. However, when Trilby brings up the DeFoe manor incident, the room takes on a grotesque transformation apropos of absolutely nothing. Siobhan and Abed turn into charred skeletons, the bed becomes a torture rack, blood is smeared all over the dilapidated room, and the word "CHZO" is bloodily scrawled at the top of the wall. The most disturbing thing is a ghastly looking humanoid dressed in a black cloak, with a completely blank white face like a Styrofoam dummy head, and a very tall and slim body that makes it look as if it has been unnaturally stretched out from its original size. Trilby exits the room to find all hell having broken loose throughout the now-ruined hotel, and there is little doubt in his mind that this is somehow connected to the evil of the idol. However, he will find that there's a lot more to this small piece of wood than the angry ghost of an insane child.

The biggest difference in terms of gameplay is the addition of a text parser, making the game feel more like an SCI0-era Sierra games as opposed to the LucasArts-style command icons of the previous two. Trilby walks around with the use of arrow keys, and simply typing in phrases to common him to perform different actions. The graphical and sound design are improved over the first two games, with the general art style sleeker and less amateurish. There is a lot more music this time around, all originally composed for the game by Mark "Mods" Lovegrove, and the soundtrack is incredibly effective in accordance with the situations in Trilby's quest. Arguably the most memorable track is the frightening "danger" music that plays when the game's chief antagonist starts killing anyone who offends it. *Trilby's Notes* has the most successfully disturbing atmosphere of the entire series thus far, primarily thanks to the "dark world" into which Trilby keeps slipping. If Trilby wanders around the hotel for several screens, he will eventually return to the ruined version of the hotel, where corpses and blood deck the walls and a horribly dissonant music track plays with several inaudible whispers layered over each other. It's all very similar to both *Dark Seed* and *Silent Hill*.



The use of an alternate "dark world" is vaguely akin to Silent Hill.

The only way to return to the "light world" is to take pills (of which the supply is infinite) provided by a shady operative called Agent Lenkmann. Interacting with objects in the dark hotel is actually necessary to get through the game, as some occurrences in the dark world unlock new

pathways in the light world. However, even when Trilby is in the light world, he might suffer one of several hallucinations meant to seriously freak out the player, rattling their sense of security by telling them not even the "normal" world is safe. If you try to open a door only to be told "it hurts" or suddenly find yourself chained in the DeFoe manor basement while the Welder slowly advances towards you, just keep in mind that it's the game trying to screw with your head, much like Silicon Knights' *Eternal Darkness*. These freakout moments cannot harm you, thankfully, though there are a few select points elsewhere at which you can die. *Trilby's Notes* is about on par with the length of *7DaS* if not a little longer, though it does not stick to the day-by-day structure of its predecessors. The Clanbronwyn Hotel is more or less the same size as the locales from the previous two games, and the only irritating part is the somewhat slow times it takes to scale the stairway. Its layout is simple and straightforward, and after you play long enough, adapting to the jarring transitions from the peaceful quiet of the light world into the disturbing whispers of the dark world becomes second nature.

This time around, the Welder is not the main antagonist, but the arguably far more disturbing "Tall Man" essays his role. This faceless bastard is also known as "The Prince" and by one other name which you will find out close to the end of the game. By interacting with several key artifacts in the hotel, Trilby falls into flashbacks that detail the carnage the Tall Man has wrought in the past. These scenes are accompanied with excerpts from the "Book of Victims," apparently scripture detailing the reasons for the Tall Man's appearances. The flashbacks are arguably the most fascinating part of the game, as while they are short, linear, and usually fairly obvious in terms of gameplay solutions, the chronicles of how these people are linked to this violent ghoul work backward to reveal the root of all evil that has been seen in the previous two games. Only now does it become apparent that the series title of the "*The Chzo Mythos*" is itself owed to Chzo, a pan-dimensional being of inconceivable horror, and the Tall Man is its dutiful servant.

Whether or not Yahtzee was planning this cosmic horror element from *5DaS* or if he simply adapted it to fit what began as a humble ghost story is unknown, but whatever the case, it just fits so well into the terrifying atmosphere of *Trilby's Notes* that it's not difficult to digest this new layer of complexity in the overarching plot of the quadrilogy. Trilby is as fascinating a protagonist as ever, and while the amount of interaction he has with other characters isn't as strong as in *5DaS*, the overall deep story and the chilling atmosphere more than make up for this. The special edition of *Trilby's Notes* comes with the full soundtrack, including several prototype tracks and a commentary file by composer Mods. It also includes text files of the full Books of Chzo, the gospel written on Chzo's history which provides insight into the great creature's madness. There's also the obligatory commentary track and an extended ending which better details one of the game's most ambiguous moments.



6 Days a Sacrifice

Initial Release Date: 2007
Platforms: IBM PC / Linux
Designer(s): Ben Croshaw
Developer: Ben Croshaw

In the past, Trilby cremated the body of John DeFoe. In the future, Jonathan Somerset destroyed John's soul, manifested in the evil wooden idol carved from the cursed tree that housed the spirit of Cabadath. In the year 2189, exactly 196 years between the destructions of the "Body" and "Soul" of John, the only aspect left of his is the Mind, and it's up to perhaps the least likely protagonist ever to terminate that as well. The unassuming Theo DeCabe, a dorky-looking building instructor who wears blue suede boots, investigates an apparently illegal zoning

expansion at the unsubtly-named Church of Optimology. The acolyte who greets him at the lobby unceremoniously shoves Theo down an empty elevator shaft, leaving his wrecked body in the care of acerbic scientist Samantha Harty. Theo learns from Samantha and journalist Janine Orzechowski that Optimology is a front for the Order of the Blessed Agonies, a violent cult who worships Chzo, the alter-dimensional dark god of magic. The Order is apparently planning a big event on the 28th day of July, a special time when the bridge between the realms of Technology and Magick are weakened and elements from one could easily pass through into the other. Poor Theo is involuntarily caught in the crux of a diabolical plan that presents him with a lot of questions. For one, why is the fabled Trilby somehow still alive? Why is the terrible Tall Man killing Trilby repeatedly? Why is the Order's complex slowly devolving into a decrepit dungeon with cryptic words scrawled in blood? What's with the ruins concealed behind a giant blast door? And who the hell is the bald red-robed man who keeps appearing out of nowhere? John DeFoe is somehow at the center of it all, and for better or worse, his reign of evil will be brought to a close.

Depending on who is asked, *6DaS* is either the richest and most involved plot of the series, or the most baffling with a particularly head-scratching ending. It could be seen as both at the same time, but if there are any questions left open at the end, it is a purposeful confusion. *6DaS* wraps up the whole quadrilogy in a fantastically gory little bow, showing the eventual fates of former protagonists Trilby and Dr. Somerset. Theo is involuntarily dragged into the Order's plot, and his reactions throughout the story range from confused, frightened, hopeful, and angry, though not necessarily in that order. He's not as fascinating a protagonist as Trilby, but he is not meant to be, and his role as a neutral observer effectively conveys the madness Chzo can inflict on absolutely anyone. The cast of characters is the largest it's ever been and no one feels out of place, not even Trilby, whose role is somewhat controversial in the game's context. The most fascinating role is that of the Caretaker, a seemingly omniscient bald man in torn crimson robes whose role manages to tie in *7DaS* despite the events of that game taking place nearly 200 years after *6DaS*. The graphics are on par with *Trilby's Notes* and also contains several gruesome death scenes. Mark "Mods" Lovegrove has once again composed the soundtrack, and every track fits their appropriate situation like an aural glove.



Your character spends much of the adventure limping around.

As for gameplay, the interface is very similar to that of *7 Days a Skeptic*, an interesting return to form after the text parser of *Trilby's Notes*. There are also two new functions that make gameplay slightly less frustrating. "Journal" collects all important story-related documents that

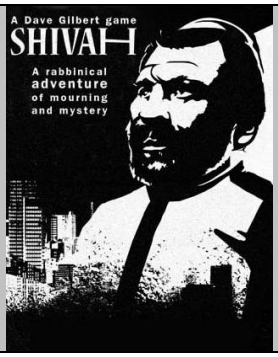
you may want to review instead of listing them as separate items in your inventory, and "Phone" allows you to communicate with Samantha and Janine when necessary instead of manually walking to their location. This is useful due to the fact that Theo is worse for wear after plunging down a large elevator pit, and due to his crippling injuries, he hobbles around at a slow gait. This may seem like an obnoxious method to deliberately slow the game to a pace, but Theo's disability is actually a crucial point in the holistic plot and factors into a few of the game's puzzles. The Order's compound is not too sizable and, perhaps except for the lengthy main hall, Theo's speed never really becomes an issue. As in previous games, there are no truly difficult or illogical puzzles, though some later on in the game require a bit of abstract thinking once chaos takes the reins. The overall frustration factor is curbed by removing all situations where dying forces you to reload a prior save. There are some bits where Theo can die, but these situations simply reset Theo's position to the compound barracks.

Back on the game's plot: *6 Days a Sacrifice* must never be played on its own. It has to be played after the other games are beaten or else it will confuse you to the degree where you might have a brain embolism. On its own, it is a suitably frightening and violent game with an utterly baffling story. As the finale of *The Chzo Mythos*, it is a suitably frightening and violent game with only a somewhat baffling story. All loose ends are tied up by the conclusion, though some aspects can be a bit tough to grasp. The part likely most up for debate is Chzo's motivations for doing what it does in the course of the game, but it can be argued that as Chzo is a cosmic entity akin to H.P. Lovecraft's Great Old Ones, and its motivations are incomprehensible by mere human minds. The plot seems to get a bit too thick and some of the resolutions feel as if they have not been planned from the series' beginning, but that as much effort was put into it impressive for an independent title. The important thing is not that you understand everything by the end, but only that you understand enough and feel disturbed after all is said and dead.

All in all, *6DaS* is a hell of a conclusion to *The Chzo Mythos*. As an adventure title, it performs well, and as the grand finale, it ends the series on a suitable downer. *Trilby's Notes* might be better on the whole, but *6DaS* is still a great adventure title that upholds the status quo of being outright disturbing. If you don't have at least one nightmare about the series after the end of it all, either the games failed to do their job or you have a steel psyche. The special edition comes along with the entire soundtrack and Mods' comments on each tracks, several files from the STP (the organization for which Trilby worked in *Trilby's Notes*) on many of the series' key items, the ever-present author commentary track, and a fascinating expansion to the game's ending which helps to make sense of exactly what happens.

Spinoff: Trilby: The Art of Theft

Trilby is an awesome character: witty, dapper, and visibly distraught by the hell he goes through in all of the *Chzo* games. It is strange, though, that we don't get to see him do too much thieving in the series despite it being his raison d'être. Hence, Yahtzee saw it fit to have him star in *The Art of Theft*, a 2D action-stealth game that fully exhibits what Trilby does best. Likely inspired by the fantastic *Thief* series, the goal of the game's seven stages is for Trilby to steal a certain quota of valuable goodies and complete special tasks to boot. Guards, security cameras, laser tripwires, and other potential hazards all trigger alarms if they discover Trilby, and if the alarm sounds too many times, Trilby aborts the heist under his own volition. Trilby is able to hide in the shadows, pull himself up to ledges with his grappling hook umbrella (otherwise known as the "grolly"), and shock guards with a taser built into his umbrella. As he collects loot and breaks through security defenses in each stage, Trilby gains points which he can allocate towards new abilities, such as being able to roll across the ground and sidle around while clinging to the shadows. The graphical style is akin to *Trilby's Notes* and *6 Days a Sacrifice* (though much less gorier, obviously) and Mods returns to compose the outstanding musical accompaniment. While reasonably short at seven stages (and a bonus run of all stages back to back), *The Art of Theft* is an incredibly fun title that can be played standalone from *The Chzo Mythos*.



The Shivah

Initial Release Date: 2006
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): David Gilbert
Developer: Wadjet Eye Games

Rabbi Russell Stone is in a bad place. As the leader of the B'Nai Ben-Zion synagogue in Manhattan, he's become bitter and morose, delivering gloom and doom sermons that have scared away most of his followers. The temple is falling apart, bills are piling up, and there seems to be no escape. Feeling overwhelmed in his loss of faith, Stone quits mid-sermon, unceremoniously dumping his only attendee. But then the unexpected happens – a police offer pays a visit and questions the rabbi about a man named Lauder, who has been brutally murdered. The bright side is: Lauder has left Stone's synagogue with a sizable sum of money, more than enough to fancy up the place. On the not-so-bright side, this has also implicated Stone as a possible murder suspect. Stone is quite confused – Lauder had long departed from the temple, and their relationship did not end on good terms. Deeply unsettled and unwilling to take money tainted with blood, Stone decides to investigate the murder for himself. His first step is to visit Lauder's widow under the guise of a Shivah call, the Jewish ritual of mourning. And thus begins a tale of death and betrayal that brings Stone up against members of his own faith, as he continues to question his own.

The whole "rabbi as a film noir detective" thing might sound like a setup for a lousy joke, or at least a Jewish variation of the old TV series *Father Dowling Mysteries*, but it's actually played straight here, and due to some really bang-up writing tells a story that's not only gripping but fantastically unique, thanks to its blending with Jewish culture. Rabbi Stone is a remarkably convincing character, wise yet bitter, and easy to anger.

There's almost no real inventory and only a handful of "clues", which can be used during questioning. Any of the real puzzle solving comes from hacking into computers by guessing passwords, not exactly something you'd expect a technologically impaired rabbi to do, but it's effective nonetheless. It's pretty unsettling going through Stone's accounts and reading all of the cold letters directed to him, each and every one of them having left the synagogue due to his depressing demeanor. Even though it's technically addressing Stone, they're all written in the second person, addressing "you" directly, and it's pretty cold. Then you hack into another rabbi's account and read all of the glowing adulations, and it stings that much more.

The Shivah was developed using Adventure Game Studio and features a single icon interface. It was originally released free of charge, but after winning the Monthly Adventure Game Studio 5th Anniversary Competition in 2006, was slightly revamped as a deluxe edition. This version includes a few minor changes, as well as voice acting for all of the dialogue. It also includes a "Kibbitz Mode", where designer Dave Gilbert will pop up at various times to discuss elements of the game's design. This version is sold on the Wadjet Eye Games site for a mere $5.

This being an independently developed game, largely done by three people, it's obviously not the best looking game on the planet. The sprite and background work is simple and would look dated even back in the early '90s, but it functions. The jazzy soundtrack is remarkably classy, emulating the film noir movies it pines after, and the excellent voice acting in the deluxe version is leagues beyond what you'd expect from an amateur effort.

The only time the cracks start to show are with some inconsistent puzzle design. At one point, you obtain two sets of clues – a set of initials, and a name. You need to combine these two clues in your inventory to logically deduce that they're referring to the same person, and thus open up a new line of questioning. That makes sense. Later on there's a similar situation where you find two names: a first name and a last initial, and a first initial and a last name. Again, it's obvious that they're referring to the same thing, but you can't combine the clues this way – instead, you're supposed to type the full name in the computer search engine, which then unlocks the next topic of questioning.



Rabbi Stone expresses bitterness at the luxury of a neighboring synagogue.

During conversations, there are three responses – two options that change depending on the situation, and a "Rabbinical Response", which answers a question with a question. There are two fight scenes where your success is dependent on your responses, although you're never actually told this, and it's only ever implied after you've lost. It doesn't really make sense how this somehow invokes some kind of mysterious rabbi strength, but it's still a slightly clever take on the insult sword fighting scenes from *Monkey Island*.

The Shivah is a short game. The storyline is simplistic enough to fit in a typical hour long crime drama, there are only about a half-dozen locations, and it can be beaten in about an hour or so. There are a few different endings though, depending on decisions made late in the game, and all are worth experiencing. It's remarkable how well this works given the format – it never overstays its welcome, and characters are developed enough to invoke quite a bit of sympathy despite the game's brevity. It's a well-written, remarkably strong little game, definitely one of the better ones to come out of the independent development scene, and worthy to stand up next to the classics.



Emerald City Confidential

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer(s): David Gilbert
Developer: Wadjet Eye Games

The Wizard of Oz has been a gold mine for alternate interpretations. Beyond the world famous 1939 film, there have been numerous adaptations to stage plays, cartoons and television series. From a video game perspective, there's an early text adventure for various home computers, a bog standard side-scrolling platformer for the SNES, a Japanese fantasy RPG for the DS (*RIZ-ZOAWD*, known as *The Wizard of Oz: Beyond the Yellow Brick Road* in America), and a *Castlevania*-ish hack-and-slasher for the *PlayStation 2* (*OZ*, known as *The Sword of Etheria* in Europe). With all of these somewhat off-kilter reimaginings, it almost feels like *Emerald City Confidential*, Wadjet Eye's detective noir take on the world of Oz, is the least crazy of the bunch.

The heroine is Petra, a down-on-her-luck ex-military woman who's taken to the private detective business in hopes of finding her missing brother. She is propositioned by Dorothy Gale (yes, that Dorothy) to find her missing fiancé, a man by the name of Anzel. As to be expected, the story goes much deeper than a missing persons case, as soon Petra learns that the entire kingdom of Oz is in a state of unbalance due to the deaths of the witches. (Most will remember the famous "I'm melting!" death of the Wicked Witch of the West, but Glinda the Good Witch has also passed away sometime in between.) Only by resurrecting these fallen figures can the magical power of the kingdom be restored, and help stave off a war with the Phanfasms, a race of savage beast-humans.

The major of appeal of *Emerald City Confidential* is seeing how all of the famed characters from the Oz universe have been reinvented. The Lion is now a high powered lawyer who works for criminals. The Tin Man is a cynical drunk. The Scarecrow is an enigmatic royal advisor clad in a classy white suit. The Wizard of Oz has been reduced to coaching magic fights at a low class coliseum outside the city. While most will be familiar with the characters from the Judy Garland film, Frank L. Baum wrote over a dozen books set in the same universe, and *Emerald City Confidential* makes good use of them. The city is ruled by Queen Ozma, and her police force is led by Jinjur, who has a long standing grudge against Petra. The Nome King is now a (mostly) reformed barkeep, Jack Pumpkinhead is a smuggler, and the Shaggy Man is a mechanic. Transportation is handled by flying creatures called Gumps, which here have a head of an elk and the body of a sofa. Petra, on the other hand, is an entirely original character, which works in introducing unfamiliar players to the expanded universe of Oz. There's a good amount of exposition to play catch up for the major events of the novels, and the numerous supporting characters are amusing enough to stand on their own without being familiar with their backgrounds. It's not like it matters in most cases – while some characters are similar to their canon counterparts, many others are the same in name only. Longtime fans will either be amused or horrified at their reimaginings.

While most other Wadjet Eye games go for a classic early '90s look, *Emerald City Confidential* is much more modern, using high res artwork and a bright, cartoony style for its characters. In general it looks fantastic, although the animation is underdone. It uses a single icon interface, and it's extremely quick and easy to traverse the city.

While *Emerald City Confidential* gets points for its trying, on some level the very concept of a cartoony noir story just doesn't quite work. Sure, from a storytelling standpoint it hits most of

the high notes – Petra is a down-on-her-luck outcast, the entire story takes place at night, and the land of Oz is basically ruled by criminals. It is, of course, somewhat sanitized, because while there are references to violence and drugs, it's all handled in a very Disney-esque way. But one of the major aspects of noir is its atmosphere, something that's practically impossible to replicate when the heroine, not to mention the whole city, is sparkling green. When you remove the darkness from noir, it really can't be noir anymore, and so much of the appeal is lost. Furthermore, while Petra is a decent leading lady, she doesn't quite have the personality of other video game noir heroes like Tex Murphy or Max Payne. She is self-conscious about her hat, but that's really about it. Of course, Baum's books were meant for children and it seems like this game is too, so it's likely the target audience won't even notice.



Petra takes on a case for the one and only Dorothy Gale. She's certainly grown up.

Published by casual gaming portal PlayFirst, *Emerald City Confidential* is clearly meant for people who have never played an adventure game before (or perhaps, any game before), because it's one of the easiest ever made. At practically every single step of the investigation, you are alerted of your next goal in gigantic letters, which is then displayed at the bottom of the screen. These goals aren't always even puzzles, as they tend to be a "talk to this person" type of task. When you do this, you're congratulated with more gigantic letters and awarded gems, which denote your progress. There are hidden buttons around the city, which can be exchanged for concept art. There are also in-game console-like achievements for clearing certain goals. To a newbie, these will be likeable signposts – to anyone else, it can't help but feel slightly condescending. The puzzles that are present aren't even particularly difficult – although the magic fight against Mombi the witch is amusing – and there's a built-in hint function as well.

While the interface and puzzle solving talks down to the player, thankfully the rest of the game doesn't, and the story is still fairly decent. It's definitely a cute and likeable game, and its concept is strong enough to make it worth playing through even for veterans. But it can't help but feel like something's missing. A huge chunk of the game is spent clicking through dialogue – dialogue that's well written and very well acted, but there's barely any exploration or puzzle solving. For as pretty as the backgrounds are, there are very few hotspots, and the non-dialogue narrative text isn't even voiced. As such, it really requires that the player puts themselves in the role of a novice gamer in order to fully appreciate.

Ben There, Dan That! / Time Gentlemen, Please!

Even though Sierra and LucasArts gave up on adventure games around the turn of the century, many other outfits tried to pick up the slack. There are numerous other purportedly humorous games to come out of Europe, like *Runaway*, *Ankh*, *Jack Keene* and others, but more often than not, they fall flat on the faces. As such, games that replicate the feel of old LucasArts games are exceeding rare. Sure, Tim Schafer's *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend* were both hilarious despite not being adventure games, while Telltale Games, formed with some of the other LucasArts staff, comes close to the glory days of the genre. But for a variety of reasons, they're not quite the same.

So it was more or less out of nowhere that a tiny group of Brits called Zombie Cow Studios brought out two of the funniest adventures since... well, since ever, perhaps. *Ben There, Dan That!* and its sequel, *Time Gentlemen Please!*, are both low budget hits made with Adventure Game Studio and have a graphical style most consistent with elementary school notebook doodles, but succeed tremendously because they're so brilliantly written. One could call it "The British version of South Park!" and that wouldn't entirely be wrong, but that's a glib summation of it. While both creations have uber low-fi visuals, subversive plotting, and more than just a bit of toilet humor, Zombie Cow's games replace *South Park*'s libertarian cynicism with a self aware affection for adventure games, LucasArts in particular. They're loving self-parodies that have their own voice and never copies LucasArts style, despite obviously being in love with them. By the virtue of being independent games that nebulous quality defined as "soul" permeates both experiences, in ways that their prettier, more "professional" comrades sometimes lack.



Ben There, Dan That!

Initial Release Date: 2007
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Dan Marshall, Ben Ward
Developer: Zombie Cow Studios

Ben and Dan are two London flatmates, and quite experienced adventurers. Though both are a bit off, Ben is the leader and the smarter of the two (and the one the player directly controls), while Dan is his partner, dodgy pathfinding routine and all. Dan is acknowledged as being Max to Ben's Sam, and is controlled via a specific icon for specific purposes, usually flipping light switches or other tasks that Ben deems too gross, menial, or otherwise beneath him. Both the heroes are quite aware of the nature of adventure gaming and, being how it's essentially a self-insertion fic, fans of the genre itself. There are posters of *Maniac Mansion* and *Full Throttle* that adorn their walls. The font is even lifted straight from *Day of the Tentacle*.

In the beginning, we join our heroes in the middle of a dire situation – Dan has gone off and gotten himself killed, while Ben has rigged an overcomplicated and particularly adventure-game-y contraption that will somehow bring him back to life. Thankfully, since this puzzle comes pre-solved, all you need to do is push Dan to trigger the device, eventually bringing our heroes back to stodgy old England. Desperately wishing to catch the *Magnum P.I.* marathon but aggravated at their lack of decent reception, they stick a wire hanger out the window, only to be abducted by mysterious aliens.

Left to their own devices aboard the spaceship, Ben and Dan discover a series of doorways that lead into different parallel dimensions. In one, you'll find a land overwhelmed with a rampant zombie infestation. In another, you'll enter a video game development studio

populated by dinosaurs. In yet another, you'll find a land where England has been annexed as the 51st United State of America, where the local population complains about the crappy beer and lack of proper footie, while a group of washed-up, self-important video game journalists complain about lousy games and scheme to destroy the world. And then there's the dimension where everyone has their own, mostly marginal, super power. Somewhere along the line, the developers just got tired and tacked on typical fire and ice worlds. Each of the doors leading to these dimensions is initially closed, and can only be unlocked by finding some arbitrary item in one of the other dimensions. It's a very loose, slipshod way of connecting together the whole thing, but it's suitable given the intentionally low quality graphics.



The love towards LucasArts games is palpable.

Ben and Dan have definable faces and bodies, but their appendages are sticks, and they animate with two mere frames. The backgrounds are coarse, scribbly, and not at all in proportion. One gets the feeling it's not entirely unintentional. Yes, this game was done cheaply by two blokes in their spare time, so why not consciously admit it, use it in the game's favor to carve a completely silly atmosphere, and move on with it?

And so, most of the strength lies in the writing. Ben and Dan are the typical comedy duo, and their constantly self-aware exchanges are what drive most everything forward. Your tolerance level to their ironic dialogue may depend on how many similar AGS games you've played before, but it usually still manages to be quite funny regardless. In addition to its particularly British verbiage, it's also a bit more ribald than usual, and the humor is much more contemporary. Although LucasArts games were primarily aimed at adults, there was rarely anything particularly offensive about them, at least as language, sex or violence was concerned. This game isn't overwhelmingly dirty, but you can expect occasional exchanges like:

Ben: "Do you want to go on a date with me?"
Supergirl: "That depends, honey. What's your superpower?"
Ben: "HAVING A VERY LARGE PENIS."
Supergirl: "Oh, that's a shame. Another of my powers is having a very small vagina."

There's also the recurring joke that whatever method Ben uses to further their adventures, they always somehow end up killing (mostly) innocent folks in the process, an amusing aside to the occasionally sociopathic tendencies of adventure game protagonists. It's also prepared a response for interacting with nearly everything, making the feel quite rich. If there's a sore point, it's that the writing is so damn good that it begs to be properly voice acted. Given its status as a freeware game, though, that would be asking a bit too much, and the text-only dialogue does

channel the quaint era of 3.5' 1.44MB floppy disks. As it stands, it's easy to imagine the two blokes with their off-kilter British accents, slang and mannerisms. Also, other than a few bits of music, the whole game is almost depressingly silent, which runs opposite of the goofiness throughout.



These British gents are none too pleased with the state of American bars.

Compared to their obvious inspirations, the puzzles are actually quite easy and straightforward, at least one of which involves activating a fully functional miniature model Death Star. It's a short game, too, and one that ends on a twist and a pseudo-cliffhanger, nicely leading into its sequel. But it's all so masterfully executed that it stands out proudly amongst its freeware peers.



Time Gentlemen, Please!

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Dan Marshall, Ben Ward
Developer: Zombie Cow Studios

Time Gentlemen, Please! begins with an intro cinematic that slightly embellishes some of the events of its predecessor, before picking up right where it left off. At the end of *Ben There, Done That!*, our heroes learn that the aliens that kidnapped them were really versions of themselves from the future, who were carrying out a particularly diabolical plan of world domination. Due to the flimsy nature of time travel, Future Ben and Dan vanish into a puff of paradox, leaving Present Ben and Den, unwilling to rule the world, to pick up their pieces. With the powers of the Time Stick, the two devise a brilliant plan to travel to the past and stop the invention of the coat hanger, thereby eliminating the item that got them in this very predicament in the first place. Through a series of misadventures which aren't entirely explained, the Time Stick somehow winds up in the hands of Adolf Hitler, who uses it to screw up history even further. The entire game is spent climbing out of the hole our boys have dug for themselves, mostly by skipping through the ages via a series of rips in the fabric of space and time.

Time Gentlemen, Please! is certainly much more involving and better structured than its predecessor, which created an (intentionally) flimsy excuse to get Ben and Dan into wacky predicaments. Here, it's a bit more focused, with about a dozen locations in total, easily

accessible from a map screen. The ultimate goal is to infiltrate Big Ben which, in the future, has been converted into a vicious, trap-filled tower. Technologically it's a bit improved too, with the game running in 800x600 resolution, plus nicer icons and bigger fonts. The visuals still maintain the same slapdash look, but the backgrounds are more refined. There's actual music in each location too, which does a lot to make everything feel more alive.



Ben and Dan are hardly a match for Hitler's dinosaur army and giant mecha.

There's a laundry list of oddball things, from dinosaurs to robots to Nazis to Nazi dinosaur robots and so forth, and a lazier game would be content that its wacky quotient was suitably through the roof. *Time Gentlemen, Please!* goes pleasantly over the top, though, such as their portrayal of Herr Hitler. How do you make the most despicable human being in history even worse? By turning him into a pedophiliac vampire, apparently. One of the kookiest gags is the "Racism" slider in the Options menu, which doesn't really seem to do much of anything, although it's impossible to set to absolute zero – a self acknowledgment that yes, Germans probably shouldn't take this too seriously.

But like its predecessor, it keeps its spirit through both affectionate parodies and cleverness. There are still plenty of LucasArts references – apparently with all of the time travelling, *Star Wars* is now a 1940s cult film directed by Ed Wood, and there are even references to *Labyrinth*, a film which Lucas and company have been happy to ignore. At one point, Dan suggests different ways to proceed through the adventure, based on WITS, FISTS and STEALTH, a reference to the three paths in *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*. (Fans will recall that the trio should be WITS, FISTS and TEAM, which Dan will note despondently.) Your choice doesn't actually affect the flow of the game, although it does change a few running gags.

The most clever parodies aren't the ones where Ben and Dan acknowledge their wacky situations aloud, but rather when the wacky situations acknowledge themselves. Upon talking with a guard dinosaur who needs to be disposed of, he mentions that he can't go back to his house because it's infested with a rat. No problem – give him a mouse trap and he marches right off, only to be replaced immediately by another dinosaur who proudly announces, "Man, I love spanners!", making for a quick and easy puzzle. Ben even refuses to get into a conversation, claiming, "I don't want to get roped into a conversation about spanners."

There's a bit more to distinguish the leading characters this time around, who sort of blended together in their first adventure. The highlight is when Ben finds himself disabled and Dan is put in the limelight – he immediately panics and fumbles his way through the next set of solutions, until deciding that it's probably best he stay as a sidekick. Some of the sillier secondary

characters include Eckles, a sad old war prisoner who seems predestined to be shot in the cock, and the Sex-Ed Clown, who teaches about the horrors of unprotected sex via balloon models. (For fun, ask him for one in the shape of AIDS.)

This being a story revolving around time travel, there are a few instances where you need to change the past to fix something in the future, with the usual bizarre effects. There's also a strange machine which can age or de-age any item, either returning it to its original state (presuming it's worn or broken) or inflicting upon it the ravages of time. So, flip it to "age" and stick in a pig to turn it to leather, or flip it to "de-age" to turn a severed skeleton arm to a severed fleshy arm. The results are intentionally unpredictable, which is why it's such a weird device, but its over usage causes it to become a bit tedious throughout.

The cleverest bit is when the duo discovers an unfinished text adventure, *The Space Adventures of W. T. Pal, A Human.* Their shenanigans puncture an even deeper hole in the time-space fabric, eventually plunging them right into a visual representation of this game-within-a-game. The hero is an intrepid Victorian-era explorer named William, who is ultimately helpless without Ben and Dan's intervention, and can only be controlled by zapping back to the "real world" and taking on his persona through the text adventure on the computer. It's all very pleasantly meta. There's also another retro point-and-click adventure game where you control Hitler, one of the many puzzles to conquer the innards of Big Ben. Of particular note is the "Invade" verb, distressingly amusing when used on the toilet. (Something about having already invaded "poo-land". Awful, yes.)



Ben and Dan get into some crazily metafictional situations.

There's no doubt – this is one of the funniest, most clever adventure games ever made. With *Time Gentlemen, Please!,* Zombie Cow Studios elected to go "professional" and charge £3 (or $5-ish) for it. It's more than a fair trade. Sadly, a planned third game, *Revenge of the Balloon-Headed Mexican,* was cancelled due to creative issues, but better to let it go out on a bang that die a slow, dragged out death.



Machinarium

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / Linux
Designer(s): Jakub Dvorský
Developer: Amanita Design

There are few games so gorgeously understated as *Machinarium*, an exquisite little adventure game by Amanita Design, a small team of seven from the Czech Republic who also developed the *Samorost* series. Beyond the title screen and the option bar there is no writing, no dialogue, and no words to be found anywhere. There is no real introduction beyond the immediate plight of our hero, a cute little robot who's unceremoniously dumped in the midst of a junkyard. His name is Josef, after writer Josef Capek, who coined the term "robot". We also know that he's more than a bit distraught at waking up amidst a pile of discarded rubbish, having to reassemble his poor little body piecemeal. His goal, it seems, is merely to return home, although additional bits of the story are related through animated thought bubbles, sketched like a flip book. Leave Josef standing still and he'll reminisce about his missing friend (purportedly a female, but it's a bit hard to tell with robots, isn't it?). When Josef meets a rotund robot, he recalls a scene from his childhood where this portly fellow cruelly knocks over his sandcastle. Further adventuring will reveal that this gang – named The Black Cap Brotherhood – is causing significant troubles for the other residents of the city, and your paths will cross more than once. It appears aimless at first, coming together only in the final segments, although the experience is more about exploring its world than following a story.

It's fascinating, because *Machinarium* is a world of strange, conflicting beauty. It's dirty and dilapidated, walls are cracked and rusting, and yet every single background is a work of technical mastery. It seems like a contradiction, then, that a world so dingy manages to come off so colorful. Much of the style draws from steampunk, as if the robots were powered by gears rather than circuit boards, and made of tin rather than steel. Many older Sierra and Lucasarts games had painted backgrounds, but were mostly limited to 256 color VGA graphics. By the time technology had allowed for something more advanced, they were ditched in favor of computer rendered graphics, before 2D was tossed out wholesale for fully 3D environments. *Machinarium* stands as evidence that there's still an amazing potential for 2D artwork.

It's easy to draw comparisons between *Machinarium* and Pixar's *Wall-E*, although more than a few elements – particularly the robot design – seem to channel *Futurama*, even if not intentionally. Josef himself might be a cuter, tinier version of Bender. He's impossibly adorable, with bulging eyes like a fish and a gaze that's never quite centered. His only real special skill is the ability to extend his body upwards and scrunch himself downwards, necessary to reach high objects or fit through small holes. He spins his head in disapproval at impossible actions, he'll slide down railings, he'll teeter haphazardly while moving when vertically extended. His only audible sound is a cross between a honk and a bark. The soundtrack matches up with the visuals, and while minimalistic through most of the journey, it comes remarkably to life in certain areas.

Much of the atmosphere comes not only from the music and artwork but the very design, some of which is bizarrely humorous. There's a robot who looks perhaps a bit stereotypically Jewish (what with the large-ish nose and Hasidic curls), and who must be diverted by drawing him into a temple. There's a strangely cockeyed owl that has a fascination with mimicking Josef's every movement. There's a hulking guard robot who really wants nothing more than batteries for his little bunny pet. And one has to wonder what use a robot has for a toilet, much

less toilet paper. (The fact that the bathroom, up high in a skyscraper, seems to empty out into open air is more than a bit distressing.)

There's also a healthy appreciation for old school arcade games, as evidenced by the mini-*Space Invaders* clone. One of the final puzzles involves an old-school maze action game, where you control a tiny little blue robot shooting other tiny little red robots, which is made a bit annoying due to the awkward mouse control. The built-in walkthrough also requires that you play through a short side-scrolling shooter segment, guiding a key through various environments to a lock at the end. This hint guide, too, is completely visual, illustrating the solutions with comic book panels, which are worth unlocking even if you've already figured out what to do.



It might look dismal, but the attention to detail in every corner is simply astounding.

With its emphasis on atmosphere over exposition, it might seem like *Machinarium* shares more in common with *Myst* and its ilk, as compared to traditional point-and-click adventures, but the game never feels empty, and there's a healthy balance of puzzles, both inventory and logic based. The first few puzzles restrict you to a single screen, making it fairly easy to figure out the solutions via the process of elimination. Once you make your way back into the city, the game opens up a bit, presenting you with multiple screens and ongoing puzzles, but they never become overwhelming. The logic puzzles are also not particularly obtuse, largely avoiding the math textbook conundrums that too many such games have. You'll light up tiles to form a path around obstacles, draw stars without crossing lines, or play variations on box moving puzzles.

Undoubtedly one of the most inspired is a quiz game, delivered by a sentient ventilation system. It will give you an equation with visuals and ask you to pick an answer from a series of three selections. It's actually easier to get these right than wrong, but that's the point. You need to overthink to continuously get the wrong answer, causing your opponent to get so furious that it blows a gasket and spits its fan across the screen, allowing you into its tunnels.

The interface is the only element that proves problematic. It's not always responsive, and it can be tricky to move Josef exactly where you want him. Furthermore, hotspots won't activate unless Josef is standing next to them, making it impossible to comb the entire screen with the cursor. And while it should seem natural to right click to disable a selected inventory object, instead the Adobe Flash options menu pops up, an unfortunate intrusion into the impeccably designed world.

Machinarium strikes a balance that few adventure games can claim. Its puzzles can satisfy all kinds of genre fans without overwhelming newbies, and its visual style, both in motion and in stills, is a work of art in and of itself. It's gorgeous, eminently playable, and fascinating throughout.



Gemini Rue

Initial Release Date: 2011
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer(s): Joshua Nuernberger
Developer: Joshua Nuernberger

Gemini Rue begins with a sullen young man strapped to a rather scary-looking chair. He is surrounded by doctors and they are about to erase his memory. The player is given control over a cursor and allowed to attempt breaking free, but it's futile, and the screen will soon fade to black. The game then switches to Azriel Odin (ignore the slightly silly name) on the perpetually rainy planet of Barracus. He used to be an assassin for a mafia-esque organization known as the Boryokudan, which controls much of the galaxy, but has since switched sides and now works for the police. Hunting down criminals isn't his prerogative, at least for the time being – instead, he is looking for his brother, who has been kidnapped and taken to a prison called Center 7, which is at an unknown location somewhere in the galaxy.

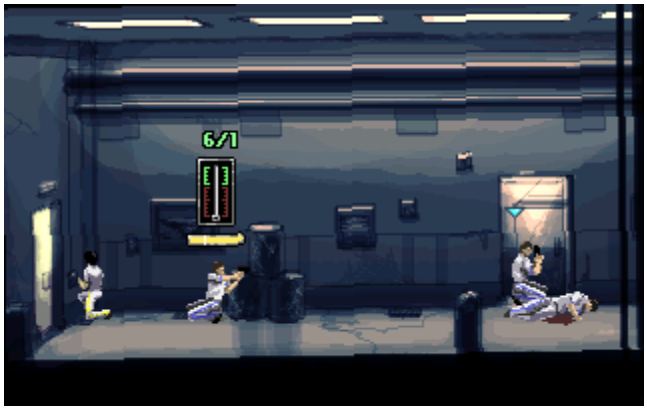
The viewpoint then switches back to the man in the beginning who, of course, remembers practically nothing. His name is Delta-Six, but he prefers to be known as Charlie. He is trapped in a facility – the very same Center 7 that Azriel is searching for – which takes criminals and "rehabilitates" them into soldiers. He had his memory blanked due to an escape attempt, or so it appears from his talks with his fellow prisoners. In between target practice sessions, he continues again to conspire to break out. As the story progresses, the viewpoint shifts back and forth between Charlie and Azriel, until eventually their stories converge at the climax.



The rain-soaked planet of Barracus evokes an appropriately gritty atmosphere.

Gemini Rue is a brilliant little independent work, a piece of video game noir that obviously channels the likes of *Blade Runner* but manages to tell an original story without ripping it off. Like most titles created using the Adventure Game Studio, it runs at a low resolution of 320x200, but manages to avoid the cheapness that usually affects such products. The dark, dank backgrounds aren't technically all that impressive, but they work to enhance the sullen atmosphere. The characters, with their blank-slate faces, look like something out of an early Delphine game like *Flashback*. The only negative is the character portraits, whose comic book stylings don't quite mesh with the rest of the visuals.

It's also got some amazing sound work. The score, provided by Nathan Allan Pinard, again channels some of Vangelis' work on the *Blade Runner* soundtrack: ambient and moody but appropriately upbeat when it needs to be, with a prominent motif in many songs. If anything it's underutilized, as much of the game is spent with just the sound of rain flooding the city. This is hardly a fault, though, considering it works splendidly to enhance the atmosphere. The voice acting, provided by the folks at Wadjet Eye, the game's publisher, is inconsistent in quality, but the actor playing Azriel, who has by far the most speaking lines, does a commendable job.



The cover-based shooter segments are, surprisingly, not terrible at all.

The interface is taken more or less straight from *Full Throttle* – right-click on an object and it brings up a menu allowing you to look at, interact, speak with, or kick something. In a similar fashion, it's also a fairly easy game, one that tends to favor direct approaches over fancy brainteasing. There are a few action scenes which take the form of shoot-outs, all handled entirely through the keyboard. It's a bit cumbersome, as there are numerous commands to duck under cover, jump out of cover, change targets, fire, reload, and control your breathing to set up headshots. But compared to the arcade sequences of old, they're easy to get a grasp on, and not terribly difficult to beat. Besides, the threat of death is needed in a game like this to provoke a sense of danger, even though the game politely autosaves before any threatening situation.

The story is well written, although the dialogue and descriptive text is often sparse. Azriel's segments are the more interesting of the two, as he narrates each action and inspection, although his personality rarely ventures beyond "gruff". There are sparks of dry humor throughout (and a few extremely subtle allusions to a few classic adventure games, as well as a cameo by some *Cowboy Bebop* characters) but it's perhaps not enough to make Azriel sympathetic to the player. Charlie, however, is even less interesting. His observations are not voiced, perhaps to stress the fact that he's merely a blank slate, and he is largely a sullen figure who is defined primarily by the manipulations of his fellow prisoners. Center 7 isn't as oppressively engaging as Barracus either, and his puzzles tend to consist of dull maintenance tasks instead of detective work. As with any game featuring amnesiacs, there are a number of twists, but they're pulled off cleverly. It leads towards a probable outcome, subverts it, and then subverts it again. As the opening suggests, the themes of pre-destination are examined, as well as the argument of nature versus nurture. There are also some musings on the existence of the soul, and it does so (mostly) without being ham-handed about it.

And that's why *Gemini Rue* is so fascinating. The look and feel is something out of the '80s, but while the genre back then tried to tell mature stories, those attempts almost always completely stumbled over themselves. Here, designer Joshua Nuernberger manages to succeed where numerous professional developers failed, making it seem like it's from an alternate history where adventuring gaming evolved artfully and didn't collapse in upon itself.

Further Adventure Gaming

There are numerous excellent adventure games which we were unable to fully cover in this book, but the following are worth checking out.

For early text adventures, *Adventure* (also known as *Colossal Cave*) is a must. The Adventure International games by Scott Adams are interesting relics, including *Adventureland* and *Mystery Fun House*, as well as a series based off various Marvel Comics superheroes. Practically everything by Infocom is worthwhile, including but not limited to *Planetfall* and its sequel *Stationfall*, two humorous sci-fi tales; *Bureaucracy*, an incredibly goofy story by Douglas Adams; *The Lurking Horror*, a modern Lovecraft-inspired horror tale; *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, a politically charged simulation; and *Trinity*, which questions the nature of nuclear warfare. There is also a number of interesting adventure-action hybrids for the ZX Spectrum, including Gargoyle Games' *Heavy on the Magick*, and their Celtic themed *Tir Na Nog* and *Dun Darach* titles; Dorcas Software's *Runes of Zendos*; and the Magic Knight series: *Spellbound*, *Knight Tyme* and *Stormbringer*.

As for older PC titles, *Star Control II* and *3* are not technically adventure games (they defy genre classification) but they have some completely fantastic writing. *B.A.T.* and its sequel *The Koshan Conspiracy* are worth checking out, although they fall more on the RPG side of things. *Azrael's Tear* claims to be an adventure game, although it's a real time first person game more in the line with Looking Glass' *System Shock*. Fans of *Myst*-style games will find dozens of similar titles – some of the more noteworthy ones include *Scratche*s, the *Dark Fall* series, *Timelapse*, the two *Mysterious Journey* games, the *Atlantis* series (begun by Cryo and finished by The Adventure Company), *The Riddle of the Sphinx* and its sequel *The Omega Stone*, and iNSCAPE's *Drowned God*.

For more recent Western developed games, check out Microïds' moody crime thriller *Post Mortem* and its two pseudo-sequels, *Still Life* and *Still Life 2*. Telltales' other licensed adventures, *Wallace & Gromit's Grand Adventures* and *Back to the Future*, are quite faithful to their original properties. (*Bone* is good too, but sadly remains unfinished.) The German company Daedalic Entertainment puts out a number of great games, including *The Whispering World* and *Edna and Harvey: The Breakout*, though like many European titles they suffer from terrible English localizations. Benoît Sokal helmed a few games after *Syberia*, including *Sinking Island*, *Paradise* and *Nikopol: Secrets of the Immortals*. The iOS has a number of decent games too, including *Scarlett and the Spark of Life*, and *Hector: Badge of Carnage* (which has also been ported to the PC and published by Telltale). On the independent side, the *Blackwell* series by Wadjet Eye Games, consisting of four brief (but excellent) mystery titles, is quite good. *Digital: A Love Story* and *Don't Take It Personally* are two incredibly innovative English native visual novels by Christine Love.

Capcom has developed a number of interesting adventure games in the recent years. These include the *Ace Attorney* series, encompassing the original *Phoenix Wright* trilogy; the fourth game, *Apollo Justice*; and the two games starring Miles Edgeworth. *Ghost Trick*, also for the DS and created by the same folks as the *Ace Attorney* games, is a brilliant puzzler with a unique style, as is *Zack & Wiki: Quest for Barbaros' Treasure*, a Wii title with bright graphic and cute characters. The *Professor Layton* series for the DS by Level 5 is a modern update of *The 7th Guest* and features lots of logic and math puzzles, with classy European-style cartoon characters replacing CG animations. (See also: *Puzzle Agent*, Telltale Games' similar take on the concept.) Also see Cing's *Hotel Dusk* (two games for the DS) and *Trace Memory*, AKA *Another Code* (one for the DS, one of the Wii) series, although the second game in each series was only released in English in Europe.

There are hundreds of visual novels released in Japan, though very few are translated. Check out *Ever17: The Out of Infinity*, localized by the defunct Hirameki International, and its spiritual successor on the DS, 999: *Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors*, both written by Kotaro Uchikoshi. Also try *Higurashi When They Cry* (known also *Higurashi no Naku Koro ni*), several episodes of which have been translated by MangaGamer. (The series has also been adapted into an anime and a manga series.) Nintendo's *Famicom Tantei Club* series for the Famicom Disk System, released back in the late '80s, is cool, but only a few have been fan translated.

Index

11th Hour, The, 592
5 Days a Stranger, 748
6 Days a Sacrifice, 753
7 Days a Skeptic, 750
7th Guest, The, 589
9: The Last Resort, 716
Adventure of Willy Beamish, The, 192
Alien Incident, 705
Altered Destiny, 459
Amazon: Guardians of Eden, 428
AMBER: Journeys Beyond, 715
Amerzone: The Explorer's Legacy, 552
Bad Day on the Midway, 546
Bad Mojo, 686
Bargon Attack, 205
Beast Within, The: A Gabriel Knight Mystery, 158
Beavis and Butthead Do U, 645
Beavis and Butthead in: Virtual Stupidity, 643
Below the Root, 668
Ben There, Dan That!, 760
Beneath a Steel Sky, 481
Beyond Zork, 349
Big Red Adventure, The, 537
Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure, 675
Bizarre Adventures of Woodruff and the Schnibble, The, 209
Black Cauldron, The, 53
Black Dahlia, 534
Blackstone Chronicles, 330
Blade Runner, 452
Blazing Dragons, 703
BloodNet: A Cyberpunk Gothic, 513
Blue Force, 102
Borrowed Time, 393
Broken Sword 2.5: The Return of the Templars, 493
Broken Sword II: The Smoking Mirror, 488
Broken Sword: The Angel of Death, 491
Broken Sword: The Shadow of the Templars, 484
Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon, 489
Bud Tucker in Double Trouble, 714
Bureau 13, 531
Call of Cthulhu: Shadow of the Comet, 627
Callahan's Crosstime Saloon, 326
Chamber of the Sci-Mutant Priestess, 461
Chewy: ESC From F5, 693
Chronomaster, 539
Circle of Blood, 484
Circuit's Edge, 443
Clandestiny, 594
Codename: Iceman, 118
Colonel's Bequest, The, 112
Colour of Magic, The, 631
Companions of Xanth, 313
Conquest of the Longbow, 123
Conquests of Camelot, 121
Conspiracy: Starring Donald Sutherland, 463
Cosmology of Kyoto, 696
Countdown, 427
Cruise for a Corpse, 475
Curse of Enchantia, 477
Curse of Monkey Island, The, 253
Dagger of Amon Ra, The, 115
Daria's Inferno, 646
Dark Eye, The, 543
Dark Half, The, 678
Dark Seed, 497
Dark Seed II, 499
Day of the Tentacle, 221
Death Gate, 320
Déjà Vu, 376
Déjà Vu II: Lost in Las Vegas, 379
Dig, The, 286
Discworld, 632
Discworld II, 635
Discworld Noir, 637
Dragon Lore II: Heart of the Dragon Man, 467
Dragon Lore: The Legend Begins, 466
Dragonsphere, 511
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey, 656
DreamWeb, 682
Duckman: The Graphic Adventures of a Private Dick, 726
Dune, 462
Earthrise, 674
EcoQuest, 150
EcoQuest 2, 151
Emerald City Confidential, 758
Enchanted Scepters, 667
Enchanter, 345
Eric the Unready, 310
Escape from Monkey Island, 256
Fable, 712
Fascination, 203
Feeble Files, The, 441
Fish Files, The, 734
Flight of the Amazon Queen, 691
Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist, 152
Frederik Pohl's Gateway, 306
Full Throttle, 282
Future Wars, 471
Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned, 161
Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Father, 155
Gadget: Invention, Travel, & Adventure, 680
Gadget: Past as Future, 680
Gateway, 306
Gateway II: Homeworld, 308
Gemini Rue, 767
Gene Machine, The, 526
Gobliiins, 197
Gobliiins 4, 201
Gobliins 2, 198
Goblins Quest 3, 200
Gold and Glory: The Road to El Dorado, 495
Gold Rush!, 104
Gray Matter, 743

Grim Fandango, 290
Guilty, 523
Harvester, 706
Heart of China, 190
Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller, 528
Hero's Quest, 129
Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, The, 365
Hook, 676
Hopkins FBI, 728
Hugo 3: Jungle of Doom, 564
Hugo II: Whodunit, 562
Hugo's House of Horrors, 560
I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream, 502
Igor: Objective Uikokahonia, 514
Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis, 232
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, 229
Inherit the Earth, 684
Innocent Until Caught, 522
Jack Orlando: A Cinematic Adventure, 727
James Bond: The Stealth Affair, 473
John Saul's Blackstone Chronicles, 330
Journeyman Project 2, The: Buried in Time, 569
Journeyman Project 3, The: Legacy of Time, 573
Journeyman Project, The, 567
Journeyman Project, The: Pegasus Prime, 571
KGB, 463
King's Quest II: Romancing the Throne, 20
King's Quest III: To Heir is Human, 22
King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella, 24
King's Quest V: Absence Makes the Heart Go Yonder!, 26
King's Quest VI: Heir Today, Gone Tomorrow, 30
King's Quest VII: The Princeless Bride, 33
King's Quest: Mask of Eternity, 35
King's Quest: Quest for the Crown, 17
Kingdom O' Magic, 694
Klaymen Gun Hockey, 652
KULT: The Temple of Flying Saucers, 461
Labyrinth: The Computer Game, 213
Laffer Utilities, The, 78
Lane Mastodon vs. The Blubberman, 373
Last Express, The, 719
Leather Goddesses of Phobos, 369
Leather Goddesses of Phobos 2: Gas Pump Girls Meet the Pulsating Inconvenience from Planet X, 371
Legend of Kyrandia, The, 445
Legend of Kyrandia, The: Book Three: Malcolm's Revenge, 449
Legend of Kyrandia, The: Book Two: The Hand of Fate, 447
Legends of Zork, 362
Leisure Suit Larry 5: Passionate Patti Does a Little Undercover Work, 66
Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!, 68
Leisure Suit Larry 7: Love for Sail, 70
Leisure Suit Larry goes Looking for Love (In Several Wrong Places), 60
Leisure Suit Larry III: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of Pulsating Pectorals, 63
Leisure Suit Larry in The Land of the Lounge Lizards, 57
Leisure Suit Larry: Bikini Beach Volleyball, 80
Leisure Suit Larry: Box Office Bust, 76
Leisure Suit Larry: Kühle Drinks und Heiße Girls, 79
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude, 73
Leisure Suit Larry's Sexy Pinball, 80
Leisure Suit Larry's Casino, 78
Les Manley in: Lost in LA, 457
Les Manley in: Search for the King, 456
Lighthouse, 178
Limbo of the Lost, 735
Longest Journey, The, 653
Loom, 237
Lost Eden, 469
Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes, The: The Case of the Rose Tattoo, 577
Lost Files of Sherlock Holmes, The: The Case of the Serrated Scalpel, 575
Lost in Time, 207
Lure of the Temptress, 479
Machinarium, 765
Manhunter 2: San Francisco, 109
Manhunter: New York, 106
Maniac Mansion, 216
Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle, 221
Martian Memorandum, 418
Maupiti Island, 559
Mean Streets, 416
Mindshadow, 392
Mission Critical, 322
Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge, 249
Morpheus, 733
Mortville Manor, 558
Murder on the Mississippi, 671
Myst, 599
Myst III: Exile, 605
Myst IV: Revelation, 608
Myst V: End of Ages, 611
Mystery House, 110
Neuromancer, 396
Neverhood, The, 648
Nightlong: Union City Conspiracy, 732
Nightmare 3D, 565
Nippon Safes, Inc, 536
Noctropolis, 688
Normality, 713
Obsidian, 717
Operation Stealth, 473
Orion Burger, 550
Orion Conspiracy. The, 525
Pandora Directive, The, 422
Pepper's Adventures in Time, 165
Personal Nightmare, 429
Phantasmagoria, 167
Phantasmagoria: Puzzle of Flesh, 170
Plan 9 from Outer Space, 677
Police Quest 2: The Vengeance, 92
Police Quest 3: The Kindred, 95
Police Quest: In Pursuit of the Death Angel, 89
Police Quest: Open Season, 97
Police Quest: SWAT, 99
Policenauts, 407
Portopia Renzoku Satsujin Jiken, 665

Princess Tomato in the Salad Kingdom, 669
Prisoner of Ice, 629
Prophecy, The, 206
Pyst, 625
Quest for Glory I: So You Want to Be a Hero, 129
Quest for Glory II: Trial by Fire, 131
Quest for Glory III: Wages of War, 135
Quest for Glory V: Dragon Fire, 140
Quest for Glory: Shadows of Darkness, 137
Rama, 195
Residents, The: Bad Day on the Midway, 546
Return of the Phantom, 509
Return to Ringworld, 580
Return to Zork, 353
Rex Nebular and the Cosmic Gender Bender, 507
Riddle of Master Lu, The, 548
Ringworld: Revenge of the Patriarch, 579
Ripley's Believe It or Not! The Riddle of Master Lu, The, 548
Ripper, 532
Rise of the Dragon, 187
Riven: The Sequel to Myst, 602
Runaway, 515
Runaway 2: Dream of the Turtle, 517
Runaway 3: Twist of Fate, 519
Sam & Mac: Freelance Police, 269
Sam & Max Hit the Road, 266
Sam & Max Season One: Save the World, 270
Sam & Max Season Three: The Devil's Playhouse, 276
Sam & Max Season Two: Beyond Time and Space, 273
Sanitarium, 540
Scooby-Doo Mystery, 640
Scooby-Doo! Classic Creep Capers, 641
SD Snatcher, 405
Secret Files 2: Puritas Cordis, 663
Secret Files: Tunguska, 660
Secret of Monkey Island, The, 243
Secrets of the Ark: A Broken Sword Game, 491
Shadow of Destiny, 412
Shadow of the Comet, 627
Shadowgate, 383
Shadows of Memories, 412
Shannara, 324
Shivah, The, 756
Shivers, 176
Shivers Two: Harvest of Souls, 177
Silver Lining, The, 36
Simon the Sorcerer, 430
Simon the Sorcerer 3D, 435
Simon the Sorcerer 4: Chaos Happens, 437
Simon the Sorcerer II: The Lion, The Wizard and the Wardrobe, 433
Simon the Sorcerer: Who'd Even Want Contact?, 439
Skullmonkeys, 650
Snatcher, 400
Snoopy: The Cool Computer Game, 673
Snow Job, 698
Softporn Adventure, 56
Sorcerer, 346
Space Bar, The, 724
Space Quest 6: Roger Wilco in the Spinal Frontier, 50
Space Quest II: Chapter II: Vohaul's Revenge, 42
Space Quest III: The Pirates of Pestulon, 43
Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco and the Time Rippers, 45
Space Quest V: Roger Wilco: The Next Mutation, 48
Space Quest: Episode I: The Sarien Encounter, 40
Spellbreaker, 347
Spellcasting 101: Sorcerers Get All the Girls, 298
Spellcasting 201: The Sorcerer's Appliance, 299
Spellcasting 301: Spring Break, 300
Star Trek 25th Anniversary, 582
Star Trek Deep Space Nine: Harbinger, 586
Star Trek Judgment Rites, 584
Star Trek The Next Generation: A Final Unity, 585
Starship Titanic, 729
Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People, 737
Superhero League of Hoboken, 316
Syberia, 553
Syberia 2, 556
Tales of Monkey Island, 260
Tass Times in Tonetown, 394
Teenagent, 702
Tequila & Boom Boom, 538
Tex Murphy: Overseer, 424
Time Gentlemen, Please!, 762
Timequest, 303
Toonstruck, 709
Torin's Passage, 173
Touché, 700
Trilby: The Art of Theft, 755
Trilby's Notes, 751
Under a Killing Moon, 419
Uninvited, 381
Universe, 478
Uru: Ages Beyond Myst, 614
Vampyre Story, A, 742
Wayne's World, 679
Ween: The Prophecy, 206
Wishbringer, 349
Wizard and the Princess, 16
Woodruff and the Schnibble of Azimuth, 209
Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders, 226
Zork, 340
Zork Grand Inquisitor, 359
Zork II, 342
Zork III, 343
Zork Nemesis: The Forbidden Lands, 357
Zork Zero, 351
Zork: The Undiscovered Underground, 358
ZorkQuest: Assault on Egreth Castle, 361
ZorkQuest: The Crystal of Doom, 362