Adventure Lantern

Reviews:

Editorial

When I renewed the Adventure Lantern domain in December 2009, I wasn't sure when we would publish new content again. There had been several times when I thought we would be able to resume our publication schedule, but something always got in the way. Work and school were busier than ever. I had not even spoken with most of our staff members in over a year. Maybe it was time to let it go and admit defeat. If the site quietly closed down, would anyone even notice?

I couldn't bring myself to just shut down Adventure Lantern. Far too much work had gone into the site and the magazine. It would be disrespectful toward our team and the effort they had put into each issue. I just had to wait for the appropriate moment. There would come a time we would be able to publish issues again.

Life moved on as Adventure Lantern gathered dust on the shelf. 2010 started with a wonderful event. Early in January, my daughter was born. I remember the doctor handing her over to me, her little head barely poking out of the blanket. She was awake during most of her first night. My wife and I took turns holding her in the hospital room. I had never changed a diaper or held a baby for more than ten minutes prior to that night. I was tired and unsure of what I was doing, but I was also filled with a new kind of happiness. Upon hearing the news, one of my coworkers sent me a short e-mail to offer congratulations. She simply said, "Your heart will change". I wasn't quite sure what she meant that night, but I understand it now.

Five months later, it is hard to believe how much our daughter has already grown. She can support her head and she is learning how to use her hands. One of her favorite toys is a giraffe with three rings attached to its neck. She knows how to remove the rings and she loves to suck on the giraffe's ears. The giraffe doesn't seem to mind. She likes my singing even though I can't carry a tune. She only seems to sleep peacefully when my wife is holding her. Sometimes she gets so excited when my wife or I walk into the room that all four of her limbs shake as she gives us the biggest smile. In short, she is perfect. Our little girl did change our hearts and our lives. I can't imagine loving anyone or anything else in quite the same way.

Fatherhood certainly pushed Adventure Lantern to the back of my mind. Between school, work, and taking care of our baby, there were too many commitments, too much demand on my time. But the site was never quite forgotten. Time and again I mentioned it to my wife. We discussed what could be done to bring back the magazine. An opportunity finally presented itself at the beginning of this summer. There was a bit of free time in the evenings since I had finished my undergraduate studies.

It wouldn't be like before. We couldn't publish a single issue that contained over one hundred pages and a dozen reviews. But there was enough time for something smaller. I just needed to come up with a new format and a less ambitious publication schedule that could be sustained without serious delays.

I sat in front of the computer and got to work but deliberately avoided contacting the rest of the team. We had gone for over two years without publishing a single issue. Every time I had thought Adventure Lantern was about to make a comeback, I had been wrong. I didn't want to ask for articles only to tell people the magazine was going to be delayed again or not going to be published at all. I had to put together the first issue on my own. At least this way, if it failed, I would be the only one disappointed.

It took over a month to compile four reviews and assemble the issue, but it is finally ready for you to read. Besides serving as our comeback issue after two years, the July 2010 edition also introduces the new format of our magazine. As you will see, the magazine is now divided into four sections. 'Adventurer's Ravine' is solely dedicated to commercial adventure games. Here you'll typically find reviews of games that were recently released games or previews and interviews for adventures that are still in development. In keeping with our tradition from past editions of Adventure Lantern, we'll regularly feature reviews of older games as well. After our long absence, we do have quite a backlog to cover.

'Bandit's Cove' is a new section that is dedicated to freeware games. Our previous issues had regularly featured reviews of free adventures. However, sometimes I felt like they got lost amidst the commercial releases. They will hopefully be better highlighted in this area of the magazine.

'Casual Sailing' is another new section. These days roughly one half of the PC games aisle at my local stores features various hidden object and puzzle games. Some of these casual adventures are quite entertaining with interesting storylines and fun puzzles. Our 'Casual Sailing' section will offer short reviews on the games belonging to this growing genre.

Finally, 'Uncharted Waters' will continue to offer reviews of non-adventure games. While our magazine is clearly focused on the adventure genre, many of our team members do play non-adventures. The 'Uncharted Waters' area will provide some coverage to these other games.

At least for the next several months, our issues will continue to be short like the one you are reading at the moment. However, I hope some form of sustainable output will be preferable to two years of silence. This month you are stuck with a monologue from me, but in the next few issues, that may change as well.

Here's hoping you enjoy this issue. Until next time,
-Ugur Sener

Contents

Adventurer's Ravine

Bandit's Cove

Casual Sailing

Uncharted Waters

Darkness Within 2: The Dark Lineage
review by Ugur Sener

Howard Loreid wakes up to find himself in a small cottage. He has no recollection of leaving the mental institution or arriving at this place. He looks around the room in a daze, trying to piece together what might have happened. Are the cottage and the bed he is lying in real or is this yet another lucid dream? A letter on the bedside table only raises more questions. Apparently, Howard has been brought here for his own protection. Who is seeking to harm him? Why is he in danger? The letter asks Howard take a train to the town of Arkhamend. Perhaps there he will finally find some answers. Perhaps the gloomy town will finally provide an ending to his relentless nightmare.

Developed by Zoetrope Interactive, The Dark Lineage is the second and final chapter in the Darkness Within series. Starting out as a deceptively simple police investigation, the first game had explored detective Howard Loreid's encounter with the supernatural and struggle to cling to his sanity. The second installment focuses on the detective's ancestry. In a town plagued by bizarre experiments and unholy rituals, Howard tries to stay alive and discover the truth about his family. With its interesting storyline and innovative 3D engine, The Dark Lineage starts out as a promising game. Unfortunately, a series of problems ultimately keep the game from reaching its full potential.

Like the original game, Darkness Within 2 is inspired by the work of H. P. Lovecraft. Themes of insanity, hidden knowledge, and unknowable terrors appear throughout the adventure. The decrepit buildings you

Worm's Feast – Arkhamend's only bookstore

explore, the strange contraptions you have to operate, and the ominous sounds ever present in the background feel very appropriate. The locations are rendered with great attention to detail. The game makes good use of lighting and shadow effects to create a gloomy atmosphere.

Unfortunately, it would be a stretch to call The Dark Lineage a horror adventure. There is certainly a depressing and mysterious tone about each environment you explore. However, Darkness Within 2 lacks the tension and the sense of danger that was conveyed very effectively in the first chapter. Whether you were wondering what monstrosity could be found at the bottom of a well or trying to wake up from a hellish nightmare, the original game could create and sustain a feeling of suspense. The Dark Lineage does have a compelling mystery that should keep players interested, but it lacks the original game's scariness.

Part of the problem is that Darkness Within 2 creates a lesser feeling of isolation. During the majority of the first game, Howard was alone. This sense of seclusion greatly augmented the atmosphere. After all, there is something spooky about entering a house all by yourself after you have just read a journal entry about all the dark and mysterious things that took place in the building. In the second game, Howard has more opportunities to talk to other characters. While this may be appropriate given the game's story, it does take away from the atmosphere. The eeriness gets significantly diminished when you enter an abandoned building immediately after talking to a friendly innkeeper.

The Arkhamend train station

A second issue is with the animations. At several key points in the game, you will be presented with images that are clearly intended to be scary. Yet the graphics seem to fall short during these moments. The animations that are supposed to be frightening look a little too cartoon-like to be anything but mildly startling. Howard's heavy breathing and exclamations are not a substitute for inadequate imagery. It is a shame that these few animations don't deliver in a game that otherwise boasts beautiful graphics.

This old mansion holds secrets to Howard's past

While continuing the storyline from the previous game, Darkness Within 2 introduces several new features. The most prominent change is the new 3D engine. The original Darkness Within was a point-and-click adventure game played from a first-person perspective. Moving the mouse changed the direction Howard was facing. It was not possible to move freely through the environment. Instead, the locations were divided into nodes. Players navigated between the nodes using the mouse and interacted with various objects. This system has been discarded in Darkness Within 2.

The 3D engine used in The Dark Linage gives players significantly greater freedom of movement. The WASD keys are used to walk around the environment. Howard can jump over obstacles and crouch to take a closer look at objects on the ground. The left mouse button is used to interact with objects. Howard can open doors, pick up inventory items, or use various devices. In addition, several larger objects can be pushed or pulled. For instance, Howard can pull a chair to access drawers or push away a cabinet that is blocking his way.

At the surface, the features of the 3D engine help enhance the gameplay experience. It is initially entertaining to have the opportunity to truly look at every nook and cranny of a room. The idea of moving larger objects to reveal clues is interesting. However, the actual implementation in The Dark Lineage leaves something to be desired. Sure, many rooms contain pieces of furniture you can push or pull. Unfortunately, you rarely gain anything from your redecoration efforts. Moving furniture does not necessarily help you solve puzzles or spot inventory items. Similarly, crouching down to see the floor or jumping on top of things to investigate higher surfaces is usually fruitless. Of course, since the occasional puzzle does require you to find a small hotspot on the floor or move an object out of the way, there is an obligation to perform these actions in every room. In the end, what should have been great features lead to unnecessary tedium.

Despite the significant changes in the interface, Darkness Within 2 does retain some features from its predecessor. For instance, the inventory system will be familiar to those who played the original game. The inventory is accessed with the right mouse button. Items are displayed in boxes along the top portion of the screen. Arrow buttons are available to scroll to the left and right. The 'magnifying glass' icon can be used to bring certain items up for a closer view. The 'brain' icon is used to review important clues and combine inventory items. As players proceed through the game, 'thoughts' will get added to Howard's inventory. These 'thoughts' may come from discovering important items or reading key documents. The inventory screen can be used to combine these 'thoughts', allowing Howard to make deductions about his investigation.

The friendly neighborhood inn may not be all that safe

The idea inventory is another feature of The Dark Lineage that could have been better implemented. Maintaining short summaries of all the important clues is certainly helpful. If you step away from the

game for a while, these notes can provide quick reminders as to what you were doing and help you avoid backtracking. The thought combinations on the other hand do not work quite as well. The majority of the combinations you attempt are not accepted. You may think of ways two clues are connected, but chances are Howard will disagree. By the time you visit a few locations and accumulate a significant number of clues, trying to join items from your thought inventory becomes little more than a pointless exercise.

In addition to the inventory screen, Darkness Within 2 features research puzzles that are similar to the ones found in the previous game. These puzzles allow players to underline full sentences or phrases in documents. If the underlined portion is relevant to Howard's investigation, a new clue gets added to the thought inventory. If you don't want to bother hunting down the important lines, the game also features an option to automatically search documents for clues. However, there are a few hidden clues that can only be found if you take the time to conduct the research manually. These puzzles are great at helping players focus on critical portions of documents. They force you to catch the important details that might otherwise get overlooked.

Another player-friendly feature of Darkness Within 2 is the hint system. At the beginning of the game, players are given the option to choose one of three difficulty settings. In the 'standard' mode, hints are offered as soon as they become available. Players also have access to the automatic research button. In the 'detective' mode, hints are only offered if the player has been stuck for a while and manual research is required. The hardest setting is called 'senior detective', where no hints are available. In the 'senior detective' mode, the game also hides the counter that indicates how many clues are available

in a given document. After making their initial selection, players have the option to make adjustments during the game. The options menu allows players to change how hints are delivered and whether or not automatic research should be available.

The map is handy for quick travel between locations

The availability of three difficulty settings and the customization options are certainly a nice touch. However, it is worth noting that the hints you receive may not be particularly useful. While The Dark Lineage is not overly difficult, the game does have a couple of fairly obscure puzzles. You'll need to read a few documents, find the right inventory items, and rely on your deductive reasoning skills to get past many of the challenges. A few more direct hints could have alleviated some potential player frustration.

Darkness Within 2 is a rather short game for a commercial release. My first playthrough took a little less than seven and a half hours. The game does include a number of secrets and Easter eggs, which may provide some replay value if you miss some of them during your first attempt. You can find these by solving extra puzzles that are not essential to the story. A scorecard presented at the end of the game tells you how many of the secrets you were able to find. It is worth mentioning that the game has more than one ending as well. Nevertheless, no amount of extra content is replacement for a richer storyline with more locations to explore, characters to meet, and puzzles that matter to the plot.

The conclusion of Howard's adventure is particularly disappointing. Sure, the central storyline gets resolved and you will have an idea about what happens to the main characters. The developments in Darkness Within 2 also explain the conclusion of the first game. But The Dark Lineage does not provide answers for a number of questions raised during

the course of the adventure. Granted, there isn't anything wrong with a vague ending that leaves a few things to interpretation. Every single question does not need to be answered with immaculate detail. Yet when the box itself says this will be the final installment in the series, it seems reasonable to expect a more satisfying conclusion.

Overall, Darkness Within 2: The Dark Lineage feels like a missed opportunity. Here is a game that has all the elements that could make a great adventure. There is an interesting mystery surrounding Howard and his family. The gloomy town with its dark history makes an enticing place to explore. The graphics are excellent and the interface has promising features. A couple of devious puzzles show the Zoetrope team knows how to provide a challenge. The hint system and the ability to customize difficulty options are great ways to make the game accessible to newer players.

Unfortunately, despite all the positives, a number of issues significantly detract from the overall experience. The game ends too soon with too many questions left unanswered. The thought inventory and the ability to move larger objects turn into chores rather than adding depth to the game. It might explore some dark themes, but what is supposed to be a horror adventure fails to be scary. The Dark Lineage could have been a truly great adventure. It is still worth considering if you think you can overlook its issues. However, it might be best suited for those who enjoyed the original game and would like to see the conclusion to Howard's story.

Darkness Within 2: The Dark Lineage   Scorecard

Bright moments:
Great locations to explore. The interface allows for unique puzzles.

Fumbles in the dark:
Too short. The conclusion is not very satisfying. Combining 'thoughts' and pushing furniture around gets tedious.

Verdict:
The Dark Lineage is a compelling adventure that fails to realize its full potential.

★★★☆☆

Developer: Zoetrope Interactive
Publisher: Iceberg Interactive
Release Date: May 2010
System Requirements:
- Windows® 2000/XP/Vista™/7
- 1.5GHz Intel® Pentium® or equivalent
- 512 MB RAM (1GB for Vista)
- 256MB DirectX® 9.0c compatible video card
- 4X speed PC-DVD-ROM
  3 GB HD space
- DirectX® 9.0c compatible sound card

Nelly Cootalot: Spoonbeaks Ahoy!

review by Ugur Sener

It is a beautiful day out on the open seas. The sky is clear and the ocean is peaceful. Nelly is taking a nap as the waves gently rock her boat. Unfortunately, she will have to finish her siesta later. There is no time to rest when innocent animals are in peril. The waters start to churn and the specter of Captain Bloodbeard appears. Bloodbeard tells Nelly that spoonbeaks have vanished from the isle of Meeth. The disappearance of the birds is surely an ill omen. Nelly must immediately travel to the island and find out what happened.

Nelly Cootalot: Spoonbeaks Ahoy! begins as the young pirate arrives at Meeth. Nelly immediately sets out in search of the spoonbeaks, but her task will not be easy. She will have to face unfriendly pirates, a primate voodoo master, and an obnoxious baron with an almighty beard. Nelly will need all her wits and charm to unlock the mystery of the spoonbeaks. It is a good thing she remembered to put on her adventuring corset this morning…

Nelly's boat has no sails

Developed by Alasdair Beckett, Nelly Cootalot is a point-and-click adventure game that uses the Adventure Game Studio engine. The game takes place at the island of Meeth as players take control of Nelly and look for the missing birds. The premise might be simple, but with its humorous tone and amusing puzzles, Spoonbeaks Ahoy delivers an excellent adventure gaming experience.

For starters, Nelly is a remarkably likable lead character. Her pink cheeks and purple dress do not exactly invoke the image of a fearsome pirate. At times she is a little inexperienced, maybe even gullible. Her innocent demeanor stands out against the callous characters she has to face during the

adventure. But that doesn't mean she is a helpless. She is quick-witted and definitely not afraid to speak her mind when needed. She can craft elaborate lies and put together a masterful disguise. She has a great mix of naiveté and resourcefulness that makes her endearing.

The remainder of the cast is quite amusing as well. Living up to his name, Baron Widebeard has enough facial hair to provide shelter for a small family of woodland creatures. Full of himself and more than a little delusional, Widebeard makes a great antagonist. Shopkeepers Bjorn and Olafssen are happy to go on about their powder-monkey grooming kits or brand new iHook. Whether you are trying to convince Captain Rehab that you are a real pirate or discussing the latest fashion trends with the baron's wife, the quirky characters are consistently entertaining.

Nelly's investigation primarily unfolds through conversations with other characters and inventory-based puzzles. The dialogs offer plenty of humor while staying true to the game's pirate theme. There were several times during the game where the absurdity of the conversation or weirdness of the characters brought a smile to my face. You may not exactly fall out of your chair with laughter, but you can expect at least a couple of chuckles thanks to the colorful cast and great dialog in Spoonbeaks Ahoy.

The puzzles are also fairly amusing. The majority of the challenges involve obtaining and using the correct inventory item on the right hotspot. These puzzles are not exceptionally difficult, but you do need to be creative about how you use certain inventory items. There are also a couple of hotspots that are a little too blended into the background. You may need to visit some locations multiple times before you find all the interactive areas. In addition to the inventory-driven challenges, the game features a couple of logic puzzles. You will need to decode an encrypted message and figure out how to correctly operate a piece of machinery. These puzzles offer a nice break from the regular challenges.

Nelly Cootalot is played from a third-person perspective. If you have played a Lucas Arts adventure game such as Full Throttle, the interface

should be very familiar. The left mouse button is used to move Nelly around the screen. Nelly can interact with other characters and certain objects in the environment. When you bring the mouse over one of these hotspots, a short description appears at the bottom of the screen. Holding the left mouse button while hovering on hotspots opens the 'action compass'. The compass has three icons that can be used to interact with objects in the environment. The 'speech bubble' is used to talk to other characters. Clicking on the 'porthole' causes Nelly to look at the selected object and provide some commentary. The 'hook' icon is used to perform actions. Nelly can pick up inventory items or try to operate various devices. The inventory is accessed with the right mouse button. Players can combine items or try to use them on objects in the environment. The game also features a map that can be used to quickly travel between the different locations.

Considering that it is a freeware adventure, Nelly Cootalot offers plenty of play time. The island has several locations to explore and a good number of puzzles to solve. It should take several hours to get through the game in your first play-through. The game is also effective at communicating your objectives. The conversations and Nelly's monologues provide fairly clear instructions as to what you should be trying to do next.

The graphics, sound effects, and music are more than adequate as well. The character models and backgrounds help augment the game's lighthearted atmosphere. The oddly shaped buildings and contraptions feel very appropriate. Mr. Beckett has clearly put some time into designing each location. One minor issue with the presentation is the absence of color at certain locations. For instance, the shelves

at one of the island's stores are stacked with a large variety of items. However, all of the items and the shelves themselves are colored brown. It would have been nice to see a few more vibrant colors on these objects. Thankfully, this is not a prominent issue and does not truly detract from the experience.

What could be hiding behind the gate?

Composed by Mark Lovegrove, the music seems well suited for the tone of the game. The cheerful themes enhance the mood without becoming overbearing. The only issue with the soundtrack is that it can become a little repetitive if you spend too much time at one location. Fortunately, since the game uses different tracks for different portions of the island and this is not a serious problem.

Overall, Nelly Cootalot is an excellent adventure game. With its likable main character, witty humor, and fun puzzles, the game is very easy to recommend. There are a few minor issues, but they do not significantly affect the experience. If you enjoy pirate-themed games and like dialog-heavy adventures, do not miss Nelly Cootalot. A free copy can be obtained from the [Adventure Game Studio Web site](#).

Nelly Cootalot: Spoonbeaks Ahoy!   Scorecard

Bright moments:
Charming lead character. Great dialogs. Amusing puzzles.

Fumbles in the dark:
A couple of hotspots are easy to miss. A few locations could have used more color..

Verdict:
A solid, lighthearted game recommended to all pirates looking for a pleasant evening.

⭐⭐⭐⭐½

Developer: Alasdair Beckett
Release Date: March 2007
System Requirements:
- 500 Mhz Pentium Processor
- 128 Mb RAM
- Windows 95 OSR2, 98, ME, 2000 or XP with DirectX 5+
- DirectX compatible video card that supports 16 bit 640x480 resolution
- DirectX compatible sound card

Alabama Smith in Escape from Pompeii
review by Ugur Sener

Alabama Smith is thrilled to hear the news. The gifted archeology student has been selected to participate in a summer program at the University of Naples. Alabama will join Professor Fairchild in the search for an ancient artifact. Known as the Amulet of the Ages, the artifact is believed allow its bearer to travel through time. While Alabama does not believe the amulet's supernatural powers, discovering the item would be an excellent start to his career. However, the young archeologist's job will not be easy. A secret society is rumored to have an interest in the item. If he wants to find the Amulet of the Ages and survive his summer program, Alabama will have to remain vigilant.

Alabama Smith in Escape from Pompeii is a casual adventure game that puts players in the role of the young archeology student. The game is divided into three chapters. The quest for the amulet begins at the University of Naples. During the first chapter, Alabama searches the campus for clues about the artifact's location. The second chapter takes the archaeologist to several excavation sites as he continues to hunt for the amulet. The final chapter offers a few surprises. As the story picks up, the game also utilizes some fairly novel puzzles to keep things interesting. Escape from Pompeii may not be a groundbreaking achievement for the genre. However, despite its flaws, the game manages to be entertaining throughout and could be worth trying if you are in the mood for a quick adventure fix.

The chapters are divided into small segments that typically involve a single room. In each area, the game provides some instructions about what to do on the bottom right portion of the screen. In order to advance to the next area, players are asked to locate several hidden objects and use them to solve puzzles. There are also several documents that provide clues for solving puzzles. In general, the items are not exceptionally difficult to locate. The game also offers a hint system to help with the task. Clicking on the question mark icon on the bottom left portion of the screen causes a hidden object to flash, making one item easier to spot. Once you use the icon, it takes a few moments to recharge.

The puzzles come in several different varieties. Some of them simply involve using an inventory item on an object in the environment. The game also features several types of logic puzzles, including a couple of jigsaw puzzles and one slider puzzle. Each time you encounter a logic puzzle, the game provides a short set of instructions outlining how it works.

Alabama visits several excavation sites

In addition to the object finding and puzzle solving segments, Escape from Pompeii contains several matching sequences. After completing all the puzzles in certain areas, players are asked to hide evidence of their visit. This is accomplished by presenting two views of the location. The left side of the screen represents what the room looked like before you started collecting items and solving puzzles. The right side represents the current state of the room. You are supposed to find the differences and click on the appropriate areas to correct them. You may need to clean handprints or put inventory items to the spots where you found them.

While these matching sequences can be entertaining, the game contains too many of them. It seems as though they exist for the sole purpose of padding gameplay time. To make matters worse, some of the differences between the two images seem entirely arbitrary. Items you could not pick up when you were solving puzzles in the room suddenly appear in your inventory. Evidently, objects he didn't even touch have a way of spontaneously jumping into Alabama's pockets during cutscenes. The game would have been better off with fewer matching sequences and a couple more rooms to explore. Fortunately, the matching segments do not last long enough to significantly detract from the overall experience.

Finding the amulet may require a bit of alchemy

As with many other casual adventure games, Escape from Pompeii has a score system. Players earn points by finding hidden objects and solving puzzles. The game uses a score multiplier to discourage players from randomly clicking on everything on the screen. Each time you correctly perform an action, the multiplier bar at the top of the screen is filled by a small amount. When the full portion of the bar reaches the sections marked with 2X, 3X, 5X, and 10X, the corresponding multiplier is applied to next set of points you earn. However, if you click on an incorrect spot, the bar recedes, taking a few seconds to reach its previous position. If you continue to perform incorrect sections, the score multiplier eventually reaches zero and you have to restart the accumulation process.

Your score also depends on the difficulty setting. Escape from Pompeii features two difficulty settings. In the 'Casual' mode, players earn fewer points for each correct action. However, the game displays a list of the hidden objects you need to find at the top of the screen. Players are also given the option to skip puzzle sequences. In the 'Expert' mode, it is possible to earn more points, but things are more challenging. The object lists and skip options are not available. The hint icon also takes longer to recharge. It is possible to switch between the two difficulty modes at any time during the game.

Alabama Smith in Escape from Pompeii certainly has its share of issues. The hiding evidence segments can become repetitive. Even for a casual adventure, the game is on the short side and there is little reason to play it more than once. My initial playthrough took less than three hours. However, despite its shortcomings, the game still manages to provide a fun and relaxing experience. The hint icon and the 'Casual' difficulty setting make the game accessible to new adventurers, while the 'Expert' mode will keep things interesting for more seasoned gamers. The puzzles are entertaining throughout the adventure. In particular, the final chapter contains a couple of fun surprises. It may not deliver the most memorable adventure-gaming experience, but if you are looking for a simple game for a relaxing evening, Escape from Pompeii is worth considering.

Alabama Smith in Escape from Pompeii   Scorecard

Bright moments:
Accessible to new adventure gamers. Some interesting puzzles, especially toward the end.

Fumbles in the dark:
Short & offers little replay value. Repetitive puzzles.

Verdict:
An entertaining adventure that is over a little too soon. Consider buying if you can find it at a low price.

⭐⭐⭐⭐☆

Developer: Alawar Entertainment
Release Date: December 2008
System Requirements:
- OS: Windows XP/Vista
- CPU: 800 Mhz
- RAM: 512 MB
- DirectX: 7.0
- Hard Drive: 76 MB

Majesty 2: The Fantasy Kingdom Sim

review by Ugur Sener

The kingdom of Ardania had enjoyed peace and prosperity for many years. The citizens lived without fear. Evil necromancers and ruthless liches seemed to be a thing of the past. Unfortunately, that was not good enough for the old king. He wanted a chance to prove his mettle on the battlefield. He wanted the bards to sing of his heroic deeds. Thus, he ordered the court magicians to summon a powerful demon. Slaying such a mighty opponent would surely make him a champion in the eyes of the people. The king arrogantly welcomed the demon as it appeared in a cloud of ash and fire. He was certain that he would be victorious, but he had greatly underestimated the creature's power. The battle lasted for five days. The demon ultimately defeated the king and took over the throne.

Taking back the kingdom won't be easy

Now, beautiful Ardania is in a state of turmoil. Citizens flee in terror as giant ogres and fiery dragons roam the land. An army of overgrown rats has started an invasion to the west. An evil wizard has staked his claim on the eastern lands, his tower defiantly reaching into the skies. Vampires and dark wizards are growing stronger. Yet even as Ardania withers under the demon's reign, there is a small glimmer of hope. The last descendant of Ardania's great kings still lives. With the proper training, a new king could be able to stand against the demon. With mighty heroes on his side, a new king could have a chance to restore Ardania's former glory.

In Majesty 2, players assume the role of the young king and attempt to regain control of Ardania from the demon. As the monarch, players do not have direct control of the kingdom and its armies. It is not possible to select a group of heroes and tell them to attack a specific monster or a building. Instead, Majesty 2 uses an indirect control system. Players are given several types of reward flags that can be set on the map, creatures, or buildings. For instance, 'attack' flags can be used to target enemy buildings. Upon placing the flag, players can set a gold reward that will be given to the heroes who participate in the destruction of the building. If the reward is high enough, one or more heroes will be interested. They will attack the targeted building and claim the reward when the structure is successfully demolished. Similar flags are used to encourage heroes to explore the map, protect a character, or defend a building.

The indirect control system is what sets the Majesty series apart from other real-time strategy games. Players cannot sacrifice troops solely for the sake of exploring the map or testing the opponent's defenses. The heroes act independently. They choose which rewards to pursue. They try to run away from fights when they realize they are not strong enough to defeat the enemies. They also make their own decisions about how to spend the gold they earn. Visiting the various buildings you construct for them, the heroes can learn new skills, purchase potions, or upgrade their equipment. They also gain experience and become more powerful as they continue to fight for your kingdom.

The palace is the heart of your kingdom

The player takes a step back from the immediate action and oversees the development of the kingdom. At the beginning of a typical mission, players are given a small sum of gold and a palace. There will also be a number of houses in the vicinity. Tax collectors will periodically leave the palace and visit

the houses, providing income. Players then have to make decisions about which buildings to construct.

Economic buildings include the marketplace and the blacksmith. The marketplace provides potions and protective charms for your heroes. The blacksmith is used to research and sell upgraded armor and weapons. Players can also construct trade posts at special spots on the map. These trade posts periodically dispatch caravans, bringing more income to your kingdom.

Constructing guilds allow players to hire heroes and research new skills. Each guild has a specific type of hero associated with it. Rangers are highly effective with their bows. They also eagerly respond to 'explore' flags, helping you reveal hidden portions of the map. Warriors specialize in melee combat and most readily respond to 'attack' flags. Clerics can heal your other heroes. They are also good at fighting undead monsters. Players can also hire elven archers and dwarven warriors. Accomplishing the mission objectives typically requires using a mixture of different types of heroes.

In later missions, players also have access to specialized heroes through temples. The temples can only be constructed at 'holy' sites spread throughout the map. The temples are dedicated to the various gods worshiped in Ardania. For instance, the Temple of Krypta honors the goddess of death. The 'Sisters of Krypta' you can hire from these temples fight by summoning undead creatures to their aid. On the other hand, the Temple of Dauros provides paladins that are extremely durable and adept at melee combat. Since there are a limited number of special sites available on each map, players have to consider which temples will provide the heroes that would be most effective at completing the mission objectives.

Temple of Fervus for hiring beastmasters

Majesty 2 also gives players access to a number of spells. These spells are available to research at guilds and temples. Casting them can improve your heroes' effectiveness in combat, repair your buildings, or inflict damage on enemy creatures. While the spells require a significant amount of gold to cast, they can be occasionally effective at turning the tide of a battle and help you achieve victory.

The guilds allow you to hire heroes

The process of constructing buildings, conducting research, and hiring heroes will be instantly familiar to gamers who played the original Majesty. The core gameplay mechanics are very similar to the first installment in the series. However, Majesty 2 does depart from its predecessor in several ways. For instance, the requirement for placing temples at special locations is new to Majesty 2. The flag system is also slightly modified. Defense flags that request heroes to protect certain characters and fear flags that ask heroes to avoid certain portions of the map are new features in Majesty 2. But the most significant difference is the updated graphics engine. The 2D isometric view from the first game has been discarded. Instead, Majesty 2 uses a 3D engine that allows greater control of the camera.

The campaign mode of Majesty 2 offers 16 missions. The first mission is a tutorial that familiarizes players with the controls and the process of constructing buildings and hiring heroes. As you complete the earlier missions, more difficult ones become available. Objectives typically revolve around destroying one or more enemy buildings or defeating a strong opponent. The difficulty level increases significantly as you proceed through the campaign. During the first few missions, monster attacks are fairly rare. You are free to develop your kingdom and direct your heroes as they gain levels and get ready to complete the mission objectives. Toward the end of the campaign however, you will need to heavily rely on defensive structures and struggle to survive

enemy attacks. Despite the increase in difficulty, there are viable strategies for every mission. With a bit of perseverance, players should be able to complete all 16 challenges.

As you proceed through the campaign, Majesty 2 maintains a lighthearted atmosphere. Your advisor always offers a couple of jokes during mission briefings. The game also makes several amusing references to well-known fictional characters. For example, in one mission, you will be asked to escort a famous vampire hunter called One Heavensing. While the game is not necessarily hilarious, the attempts at humor does give Majesty 2 a certain charm. When the load screen is flashing messages like 'Your advisor is dressing up', or 'Cleaning the palace', it is clear that the game does not take itself too seriously.

Unfortunately, despite its unique indirect control system and innate charm, Majesty 2 can get a bit repetitive. The developers have clearly tried to keep things interesting by mixing up mission objectives and

gradually allowing players to build the more advanced structures. However, several missions into the campaign, you will have essentially seen all the diversity Majesty 2 has to offer. The core gameplay in each mission never truly steers away from constructing buildings to get the economy rolling, hiring heroes, and building guard towers to defend your palace. In addition to the campaign, the game offers several single missions and a multi-player mode. However, upon completing the 16 missions and watching the ending movie, you may not have a strong incentive to explore the additional content.

The campaign missions also feel somewhat randomly thrown together. There is no overarching plot or gradually revealed storyline that connects the majority of the missions. It seems the young king just needs to attend to an odd selection of problems before he is deemed ready to go up against the demon. A couple more cut scenes or more detailed briefings explaining how some of the missions relate to the greater goal of taking Ardania back from the demon would have been helpful.

Fortunately, the issues with Majesty 2 do not significantly detract from the overall gameplay. With its indirect control system and focus on constructing buildings, the Majesty series continues to distinguish itself from other real-time strategy games. There is a certain appeal to taking a step back from battles and seeing the kingdom function from a higher level. Given some of its repetitive and somewhat formulaic missions, Majesty 2 is not a perfect game. Nevertheless, if you are looking for a challenging and charming strategy game that does things a little differently, Majesty 2 certainly delivers.

Majesty 2: The Fantasy Kingdom Sim   Scorecard
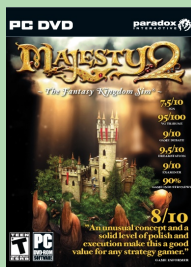
Bright moments:
Unique indirect control system. Charming, lighthearted atmosphere.

Fumbles in the dark:
Repetitive missions. No coherent plot tying individual campaign missions together

Verdict:
It is not a perfect game, but Majesty 2 offers a welcome twist to the real-time strategy formula.

⭐⭐⭐⭐☆

Developer: 1C Company
Publisher: Paradox Interactive
Release Date: September 2009
System Requirements:
- OS: Windows 2000/XP/Vista
- CPU: 2 GHz dual core
- 1GB RAM
- 512 MB video card
- 4GB hard disk space