Adventure Lantern

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My wife and I were recently at the local Wal-Mart, picking up a few items. A surprisingly large number of customers were at the gardening supplies section of the store, which happens to be outdoors. A number of lawn chairs and a couple of cots were lying around. After walking across to the end of the section, I realized the customers were not about to leave any time soon either.

They were casually chatting and repositioning the lawn chairs. There were bags next to the chairs and blankets on top of the cots. In a few moments, several of the customers were sitting down, getting ready to spend the night at the gardening supplies section of Wal-Mart. As we stepped back into the regular store area, I overheard a couple of customers trying to decide whether or not they should purchase sleeping bags to stay warm throughout the night. It sure sounded like a good idea if they really were going to remain outdoors until the morning. It wasn't raining or snowing, but it was most definitely a cold and windy evening. The temperature would only continue to drop throughout the night.

It wasn't some kind of strange camping experience. They weren't merely loitering or trying to come up with an unusual way to spend their evening. These people were gamers and it was the night before the big launch. In just a few hours, the stores would open, starting to sell the much anticipated PS3. These customers were willing to spend the entire night out in the cold just to make sure they would have a chance to purchase Sony's brand new console on the first day it was released.

We could only assume the customers had not been allowed to spend the night indoors, somewhere in the regular store area. After all, Wal-Mart is open 24 hours a day. Why stay outdoors in the freezing cold when you can stay inside where it was much warmer?

Later that night I spoke to a friend over the phone. He told me about a group of gamers that had been camping outside his local Best Buy for four nights straight. They were waiting for the launch of the Nintendo Wii. However, quite unfortunately, at the end of the fourth day, they had been forced to leave the area. There had to be a good reason as to why they were made to leave after four nights. Nevertheless, I could imagine their frustration. Of course, right before he hung up, my friend did tell me he had plans to spend a night in front of a store waiting for the Nintendo Wii as well…

Unfortunately, there is a much darker aspect of the story. Strong demand for the PS3's has also led to violence in a number of places. Reports include an armed robbery in Hartford, Connecticut. Several thugs demanded money from customers standing in line waiting for the PS3. A man who refused to cooperate

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was shot. In a similar incident, a man who tried to steal the new console was stabbed in Sullivan, Indiana. People were willing to commit crimes to get their hands on the new consoles. It is frightening to realize how far people will go just to make several hundred dollars from selling these stolen consoles.

Disturbing police reports aside, the dedication of these gamers amazes me, even though I am rather proud of my own massive video game collection. Whether it is simply the desire to own the newest and coolest trinket before anyone else or great anticipation for the games that would be released for the new consoles, a surprising number of people were going to great lengths to make sure they would be able to purchase the new products. Of course there were also those who wanted to buy the consoles in hopes of reselling them at a higher price. How many of them would succeed in purchasing the consoles? How many more would be severely disappointed and forced to wait until more consoles are shipped to stores in their areas?

I have little doubt the PS3 and the Nintendo Wii will eventually make their ways into my living room. But I opted not to invest money into a sleeping bag for a camping experience outside the local electronics store. At least for now…

Until next month…

-Ugur Sener

For all your questions and comments about the magazine, you can send an e-mail to the editor at:
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Nearly Departed – Preview

Written by Erdalion

Have you ever woken up some days, feeling so tired you would swear that this is what being a zombie must feel like? This is kind of what happened to the protagonist in this latest, upcoming project from Pinhead Games, only in his case, he actually is a zombie!

It is now up to zombie, and the player controlling his actions, to find out who he was and how and why he ended up this way. Despite this somewhat grim premise, Nearly Departed is a humorous game. As you try to uncover the mystery, much of the humor will be derived from the protagonist's rather unusual predicament.

Pinhead Games, the creators of the Nick Bounty games and Brain Hotel will be involved in this project. However, their contributions will be mostly limited to the sound of the game and its distribution. All other elements of the game, namely the art, story and coding will be provided by one man, John Green.

The game is developed using the LASSIE (Lingo Adventure Scripting System and Interactivity Engine) and as with all games created and/or supported by Pinhead so far, should provide with the option of playing either offline or online through your browser, for free.

There is a demo for Nearly Departed available at John Green's website (http://www.johngreenart.com/nearlydeparted/about/index.htm) and it is quite lengthy for a demo, in fact I would say it is lengthier than some "short" independent adventure games that are currently available. Although there is no sound or music in the demo version of the game, everything else is of high quality.

As indicated by the screenshots currently available, the graphics are exceptional for an independently-developed game. Both the characters and the backgrounds are very well drawn and highly detailed. The animation is smooth.

Some of the puzzles found in the demo are very entertaining and quite original, since

they ask you to utilize the protagonist's... unique condition in order to progress, and that makes for a refreshing change, while also providing with some very funny moments.

While there is no sound or music in the demo, the finished game will feature both music tracks and voice-overs. Given Pinhead's streak in providing quality music and voice-overs, it would hardly be surprising if Nearly Departed ends up being of high quality in these departments.

The interface used in the game is similar to the one found in such LucasArts games as Full Throttle. Often referred to as the "verb-coin" interface, it features a series of commands that can be used to interact with the environment. The version of the interface featured in Nearly Departed is responsive and intuitive enough.

There is no release date set for the complete version of Nearly Departed yet, and that is somewhat expected given the fact that most of the game is developed by a single person. However, it seems like this game will be worth the wait. Between the very promising demo, and the great-looking screenshots released so far, there is good reason to suspect that Nearly Departed will be a game worth playing for all adventure fans, once it is released.

Interview with Roman Navratil on Until I'm Gone
Conducted by Ugur Sener

Imagine a small, quiet, and isolated town. Away from the rest of civilization, time itself seems to flow differently here. Perhaps it is stuck in the past, but it has a certain serene and charming appeal. It is the holiday season and the townsfolk are getting ready for a lengthy winter.

Nathan does not want to travel to the Pitfall Mountain. He is perfectly content spending Christmas with his family in the comfort of his house. But if he does not want his wife to find out about his affair, he is going to have to take the trip to the mountain. Unfortunately, the long drive to get to the town and the unpleasant conversation he has with his mistress are the least of Nathan's problems. Shortly after arriving at the town, a relentless snowstorm forces Nathan to stay. In the chilling cold, the town calls to Nathan to unlock its secrets. A quick trip to Pitfall Mountain is about to turn into something much greater…

Until I'm Gone is an independent third-person point-and-click adventure game currently under development by Faraway Studios. In the final phases of its development, the completed game will be offered as freeware. As the Czech Republic based Faraway Studios team is working on getting the game ready for its release, we interviewed the team leader Roman Navratil to get some more information about the project. Besides leading the development team, Roman has also worked as a game designer and a graphics designer on Until I'm Gone. The young developer, pictured on the left, kindly provided us many details about the upcoming release. Without further ado, here is the interview:

[Adventure Lantern]: What is the storyline behind Until I'm Gone? Can you give us some details about how the adventure will begin?

[Roman Navratil]: The story is set in a picturesque mountain village around Christmas Eve. The main actor, Nathan, is looking forward to spending Christmas with his family in the warmth of domesticity. The idyllic situation, however, is suddenly upset by his lady-friend. She requires that he will come to Pitfall Mountains at any circumstances, or she'll tell the truth about the two of them to Nathan's wife. Thus, Nathan is forced to set out to Pitfall Mountain. Next day he finally arrives there and after a short time he meets his lady-friend in the hotel room, where he spends about an hour. After this conversation, he is upset and wants to get back home. His car won't start, though, and a heavy blizzard is approaching. Then, he rents a hotel room for one night...

This is just the beginning. We haven't revealed much of the story itself, of course, because it's an essential part of the game and we consider it more important than anything else (including the graphics). We want the players to be surprised.

[AL]: What about the game's underlying atmosphere? Can you describe us the overall tone you are trying to create?

[RN]: The atmosphere prevailing in the game is depressive and melancholic. On the other hand there is romantic, magical and sort of beautiful and unrepeatable atmosphere of the winter months. And what's more, it's supported by the bitter cold and blizzard, this all happening in an outlying and remote village in the mountains in the Christmas time.

The majority of the team members as well as I (as the author of the story and designer) love this winter and fall melancholy. You come home, make a fire in the fireplace or just in the stove, sit on an armchair and do your own stuff in the warmth of your home, while it's snowing/raining and it's damp and cold outside. This feeling of ease is, although mixed with elements of horror and some threatening danger.

[AL]: The official Web site tells us players can expect some horror elements in the game. Can you tell us a little about the style of horror the game intends to deliver?

[RN]: The style includes mainly elements of superstition, dark and evil. The horror is based on small "hints", on playing with the player's mind and threatening danger you can't see. I'd call it an "intelligent" horror. No hectoliters of blood, no prolapsed intestines. That sort of horror is not about being scared but about being sick of what you see. I would compare the style of Until I'm Gone to that one of the movie The Shining (made by the brilliant director S. Kubrick). It's that kind of depressive horror.

Otherwise we use various short songs to mark the sentiment of what you currently see (fear, surprise, danger, etc.). You can also look forward to plenty of sounds and music, which will, of course, be in high-quality. It'll be dark, in the themes of winter and snow. The music is composed by Polish composer Rafal Kuczynski.

[AL]: What can you tell us about the locations players will get to explore? What kind of a place is Pitfall Mountains?

[RN]: Pitfall Mountains is quite small remote village or let's say town to get a better picture, situated in the mountains. The local people aren't much sociable and communicative and they aren't happy to see a stranger in their town. They spend much of their free time at home, the "streets" are empty most of the time and not a sole can be seen there. The player will explore a variety of locations (so you don't have to fear stereotype), e.g. the hotel, the town, some building's interiors, a wood and others, which we'll keep in secret ;-)...

[AL]: What can you tell us about the main character of the game? Can you describe Nathan's personality?

[RN]: Firstly, Nathan's not a superhero. He also isn't a fully optimistic character. On the contrary, Nathan's quite ironic, arrogant, and haughty. He works as a manager, earning enough money. He mainly respects himself, why shouldn't he be like that; there's quite a lot of what he has seen in his life. Nevertheless he's a positive character. He doesn't match too many of the grooves, though.

[AL]: How does he get caught up in the adventure in the first place? What drives him into discovering the secrets of the village?

[RN]: As mentioned above, it's his lady-friend who forces him to get there. In some time this reason will, however, become a minor one.

[AL]: How about the other characters featured in the game? Can you describe us some of the people Nathan will encounter?

[RN]: Nathan will meat about 15 characters. You could say that's not a lot for 70+ scenes, but there is a reason behind this. You're not in a busy city, but in an outlying place at the world's end, where it looks like it's from the past century. People don't go outside much to talk to you. The 15 characters, moreover, have strong and deep personalities, which means you're going to take an attitude to each of them, either positive or negative. You'll certainly remember them.

[AL]: Does character interaction play an important role in the game?

[RN]: Yes, it does. There are some long and branched conversations. There are also topics not necessary for progress, but you'll get some more information. Things will gain a deeper meaning and you'll understand some associations. The feeling you'll get out of the story and its general understanding will be deeper if

you go through all the topics.

[AL]: What about the puzzles? What types of challenges can players expect to encounter?

[RN]: As for the puzzles, the most important thing is that they are logically and naturally incorporated into the game story. They fit the context, so you won't say: "Why is this puzzle here when it doesn't fit at all?" Besides typical 1st person puzzles there will also be some mini-games and a few other puzzles requiring logical thinking and imagination.

[AL]: Can you describe the overall interface? How will players interact with the environment? Will the game feature a traditional 3rd person point-and-click structure?

[RN]: Yes, the game features the well-known, time-tested and favorite point-and-click control structure. RMB (right mouse button) is used to examine an object; double RMB will do the same with the character running to the object. LMB function depends on what you're pointing at – it includes walking, running, conversation and various actions like opening the door, taking an object or activating a mechanism. The graphics of the pointer will also change according to the place or object it's pointing at. The inventory is going to be at the upper or lower edge of the screen. We're not sure yet :-).

[AL]: Can you give us any information about the game's soundtrack? Will the game feature voice acting?

[RN]: Yes, it will. Players will be able to enjoy complete dubbing by carefully chosen voice actors. All of them are experienced at either games, movies, serials or theatre and all of them are native speakers! Moreover, the script is really "played", not just reeled off, so the high quality of the dubbing is ensured.

And yes, we are planning to release the soundtrack, probably some time after the game itself. It was sparked off by Rafal, who was the first who understood that it would be good to make the soundtrack when he composes the music so carefully. There will be about 11 songs included in the soundtrack. The overall time will be about 45 minutes of melancholic, freezing, dark, but still fascinating and romantic winter music.

[AL]: What can you tell us about Faraway Studios? Who is the team behind Until I'm Gone?

[RN]: Faraway Studios was formed approximately in 2004. As time passed some members left us and others have signed up, eventually our current team has been formed. The majority of the team members are from the Czech Republic, which is located "in the heart of Europe". However, the team involves some foreign members from the USA, Poland, Australia, etc. as well. The team members' age varies greatly, it ranges from 17 to about 45. Some of us are still studying while others are already working ("unfortunately"), meaning they don't have as much time as necessary for the project, which has caused some delays of the date of release. We focus mainly on the story and the game atmosphere we're creating right now.

[AL]: Can you tell us a little about your experiences developing Until I'm Gone? What were some of the challenges?

[RN]: Well, I think that the biggest challange was (and still is) the "human factor", as it is in many cases. Leadswinging ☺ (the game is freeware, nobody from the team gets any money for their hard work!), the lack of time of many team members, kicking everybody to work ☺, which is extremely boring and frustrating, and mainly it takes much of time; time which could been spent on the "real" development. We have of course also gained much experience during the development of UIG, not only with the "real" development but also with "team management", which we will apply in our future projects.

[AL]: What is the scheduled release date for Until I'm Gone? Will players be able to get to copies of the game from the official Web site?

[RN]: The release date is set to Winter 2006, which includes the date of December 2006 and January, February, March 2007. The players will, of course, be able to get the copy of the game from our site as well as from other different sources.

[AL]: Do you have any other projects in the works? What are your plans after completing Until I'm Gone?

[RN]: Currently, no other projects are developed, but we have a lot of ideas/projects (some of them only in heads, some of them *even* on paper) to work on when the UIG is finished.

[AL]: Are you considering any commercial adventure game projects in the future?

[RN]: We're not sure yet… But probably we will try something more "commercial".

[AL]: Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

[RN]: Keep supporting us and enjoy the beautiful upcoming season.
And don't forget to visit our website www.farawaystudios.com ;-).
That's all I have to share.

Adventure Lantern thanks Roman Navratil for providing us detailed information about Faraway Studios' upcoming release Until I'm Gone. We may not have too much information about the storyline, but the details revealed up to this point certainly sound intriguing. Exploring the town, meeting the different characters, and discovering the mystery behind the small settlement should be entertaining. The initial screenshots released for the game also look very promising.

Despite the fact that the game will be released as freeware, a considerable amount of effort has obviously gone into Until I'm Gone. Here's hoping the final phases of development will go smoothly for Faraway Studios. It should be interesting to experience the final version of the game.

While you are waiting for the release of Until I'm Gone, if you would like obtain additional information about the game, be sure to visit www.farawaystudios.com. You can also find some more details about the development team and get the latest news about their projects at the official Faraway Studios site.

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

Interview with Eric McConnell on Hidden Sanctum
Conducted by Ugur Sener

Independently developed games continually seem to impress us, delivering remarkable quality despite the availability of very limited resources. Whether it is the engaging and original stories, surprisingly high quality graphics, or cleverly constructed puzzles, these titles sometimes have a certain spark about them that cannot be frequently found in the corporate world. Usually the work of a single person or a very small team, offered at very low prices if not for free, independent adventures can often feel as the product of people who truly enjoy the genre.

Hidden Sanctum is among the newest development studios to join the crowd. It is the brainchild of a single passionate gamer. The company has already released its first project, a casual game called Rune Rescue. Shortly after the release of Rune Rescue, Eric McConnell, the man behind Hidden Sanctum has announced an adventure game that is currently in development. Set against the backdrop of 18th century New England, Raven's Hollow is conceived as a 1st person adventure game with horror themes. As Eric works on his upcoming adventure game, we interviewed him to get some information about Hidden Sanctum and Raven's Hollow. Here's the interview:

[Adventure Lantern]: Can you tell us about your early experiences with adventure games? What were some of the games you first played? What were some of the things that made you enjoy the genre?

[Eric McConnell]: I think unlike most long-time adventure gamers, I never really got into Zork. For me it was games like Deadline and Moonmist on my C64. It's ironic that Zork never appealed to me since I was heavily into AD&D (Advanced Dungeons & Dragons) at the time. You would think I would have liked the fantasy elements of Zork, but I really preferred a more realistic settings or horror for my computer games. Back then, to me the only fantasy settings (and rules) were AD&D, so I shunned any fantasy games that didn't adhere to those rules. It's foolish when I think about it now, but back then AD&D was THE fantasy game for me, anything else was a rip off - now I know better.

Before AD&D, I played Avalon Hill wargames. Most notably Tactics, Rise and Decline of the Third Reich and Squad Leader. I enjoyed being able to step back and look at the big picture of what was going on. I resisted the AD&D trend when my friends were getting into it, believing that Squad Leader was the ultimate game where you could do almost anything, yet still wishing I could do more.

Once I gave in to AD&D, I was hooked. THAT game was the ultimate in freedom and exploration where you literally could do and try *anything*.

While I love all the genres, what appealed to me about AGs, well, text adventures at the time, was that it *seemed* pretty open ended. You could try so many different things and get various responses or outcomes. While games like LodeRunner were highly addictive, you had a pretty limited path to take. AGs, gave the *impression* of a much bigger world where your imagination and logic was key.

[AL]: What would you say are the essential things that make a good adventure game? Which elements are most important to you as a player?

[EM]: Getting absorbed into the story, interesting characters and intellectual stimulation. I can get into the whole inventory based puzzles vs. logic based puzzles, but I really don't have a preference. I enjoy them both. If it fits into the story, it doesn't matter. Same with the point of view - 1st person, 360 first person, 3rd, or full blown 3D. I think that's a developers choice of how he wants to present his or her creation. I've enjoyed all of the formats at one point or another. I do find it sad that some players will refuse to play a game based on the format, although for people who easily suffer from motion sickness, I can understand the aversion against 3D or 360 degree rotations.

[AL]: What made you get into game development? Can you describe some of your early experiences?

[EM]: I've always been a gamer and will continue to be one. All genres, all types (PC, board, pencil & paper, etc.). My early experiences all go back to those AH wargames, AD&D, the old Commodore 64 games and all the way up to current titles for the PC. I think it's only natural to want to create something yourself.

[AL]: How would you describe Hidden Sanctum? What are your goals with the company? What kinds of games do you intend to deliver?

[EM]: Right now it's me, two cats, and a one bedroom apartment. I've invested heavily in tools to be able to produce the games I want to do - 3d Studio, Photoshop, Premiere, After Effects, Afterburn, Audition, Dreamscape, powerful PC, Wacom drawing tablet, Midi setup, etc. It was important to me to have most of the tools that the big game companies have so that the only limitation I have is my own capabilities which is something that is constantly evolving.

I've always been a bit of a loner and Hidden Sanctum fits my personality - a sanctum being a place where you can go to be alone to create and think without interruptions. However, there's been a huge downside to it. I think you really need to surround yourself with like-minded people and other creative types. Self-motivation can be very difficult at times, especially when you don't have anyone to bounce your ideas off of who shares the same interests. Likewise, them bouncing their ideas off of you is highly motivating as well. I don't think you can talk with creative people who are very passionate about what they are doing without becoming more passionate about your own projects in the process. Agustin Cordes of Nucleosys has been *HUGE* for stuff like that. Jonathan Boakes as well, although I have been making a conscious effort to avoid emailing him for the last few months because I know he is working on getting The Lost Crown finished. Of course, I couldn't resist when Oblivion came out...

My goals right now are to start small and build a solid foundation to grow on. I'd like to be able to continue doing this full time, and will probably release a few smaller projects along the way. I'd love to do some strategy games, but coding AI is not one of my strengths at the moment, so it might be some time before you see anything like that. Adventure games will always be at the core though.

[AL]: Hidden Sanctum recently released a casual game called Rune Rescue. Can you tell us a little about this project?

[EM]: I wanted to do something small to get back into coding in C/C++. For the last 9-10 years, I had gotten away from it and was working primarily in Visual Basic for my job, so I thought it would be something small enough that hit on all of the major aspects of coding a game. In retrospect, I put a lot more time into it than I thought would be needed. I had prototyped 4-5 other games that looked good on paper, but really fell flat when you actually played them. Rune Rescue on the other hand was one where I lost a lot of time because I couldn't stop playing it. I'd run it to see if a code change worked and end up playing 10-20 levels before stopping myself. I wanted to create a game that fit into the casual category, but wanted to do something different at the same time from what is usually put out.

[AL]: Do you intend to continue producing casual games in the future?

[EM]: I'm not sure yet. There will probably be more downloadable games, maybe another puzzle game in the mix.

[AL]: What can you tell us about your adventure game that is currently under development?

[EM]: I'm a bit of a horror movie buff. The Hammer films, Vincent

Price/Christopher Lee/Peter Cushing movies, and Edgar Allan Poe themed movies. I really want to capture that style of the colorful scenes shrouded in fog, the dampness and decay. I've seen Raven's Hollow posted a few times as a Lovecraftian adventure game, which is news to me. I never got into Lovecraft or read any of his stories. I grew up reading Poe and watching those old movies, so those are my influences. While Lovecraft seems to be more about waking some ancient horror, Poe is more about some great wrong occurring to someone and justice or revenge being served...

[AL]: Can you give us some details about the story featured in Raven's Hollow?

[EM]: I really don't think I can go into much detail here without giving some key elements of the story away. Hopefully there are enough tidbits in this interview to give people an idea of the direction it is heading in.

[AL]: What about the game's locations? Can we expect a degree of authenticity?

[EM]: Raven's Hollow takes place in a small village in New England during the late 1700's early 1800's. It's in Massachusetts near the Connecticut border. The time frame made for an interesting background history that's been incorporated into the story.

There has to be a certain degree of authenticity to pull this off. From the blacksmith shop, New England Church, covered bridges, the old coach that brings you to the village at the beginning of the game, the foliage, landscape, costumes, etc. People seeing screenshots will hopefully be able to immediately think of New England without having to read the text. However, at the same time I want it to be interesting visually so a bit of freedom has been taken to get away from it being 100% authentic. For example, the cemeteries back then consisted of primarily rectangular or rectangular with round top headstones made of slate. For entertainment purposes, this makes for a pretty mundane graveyard - creepy, but mundane. So in places like that I bent the rules a bit to make it more interesting. I want people to get immersed in the game and have fun, not run them through a history lesson.

[AL]: What kind of an atmosphere can we expect to encounter? What style of horror will Raven's Hollow feature?

[EM]: Expect it to be populated. There are plenty of locations in the game where the player will be isolated and alone in their explorations, but the entire game is not like that. I want to try and keep away from the somber and depressing feel of some horror games. Sure there will be some locations and parts of the storyline

like that, but it won't be that way from start to finish.

[AL]: What kinds of players would you expect to enjoy Raven's Hollow?

Anyone who likes exploration and having a hand in a story that unfolds. While it is a horror game, it's intended to be a more well-rounded experience. The horror is not a constant throughout. There are periods of interaction with some unique characters, periods of calm, and periods of terror.

[AL]: Who will be the game's main character? Will players have a chance to interact with any other characters?

[EM]: The main character is in the employ of a businessman from Boston. Another employee was sent out previously to check on some properties and deeds in the area, but never returned. Whether or not they met with foul play is up to the player to find out. The main characters occupation gives a good excuse for digging into the backgrounds and history of the village.

Interacting with other characters is key to the story. I'm not big on long-winded dialogs. I think you can tell a lot about a person just by their appearance, mannerisms and setting. You don't have to have them tell the player their life story in a seemingly endless dialog tree. While there are a number of people in the game, there are many isolated areas where the player is on their own. I think there is a nice balance there. I'm really hoping that the individuals the player meets will be memorable characters. I am horrible with remembering peoples name in games (and real life), so unless the characters are unique enough with their own little quirks, I have a heck of a time remembering who did or said what.

[AL]: Can you describe the game's interface? How will players control their character and interact with the environment? Will Raven's Hollow feature a node-based navigation system?

[EM]: I definitely am planning on 1st person point-n-click slideshow. For me at this stage, it does what I need. I really want the screens to be alive though, not static. The fog drifts, candles flicker, the trees swaying and leaves blowing in the wind. My goal is to have some movement going on with each screen. Granted, some screens based on where they are will not have any activity for obvious reasons, but the majority of them will be alive with some type of movement.

[AL]: What can you tell us about the puzzles featured in the game? Will the emphasis be on inventory-based challenges?

[EM]: This is a tricky one. I'm really focusing on the story, characters and locations. As I develop them, the player challenges literally grow out of the landscape and situations that occur. I don't have a list of puzzles that I am trying to squeeze in somewhere for the sake of having a puzzle. Some are inventory based, others logic. This could potentially backfire. You have some players that refuse to try a game with logic-based puzzles and vise-versa. I'm really hoping that the game will not fit into any particular slot and will be judged on its own merits as an entire package. It's that freedom to create that has me pursuing this - getting locked into something to appeal to a certain group of players runs counter to that.

[AL]: Do you have any other team members working on the game or is this a solo effort?

[EM]: Right now it's just me. I was quite happy to find that there is a rather large underground scene here in Cleveland of indie movie makers. This led me to an indie horror movie convention that was going on here in early October. While developing Rune Rescue, I literally looked around the world for artists and musicians and cringing at costs. Game development is a VERY expensive undertaking - especially when you are just starting out and your only resource is yourself. Discovering that there is a huge amount of local talent right under my nose that I wasn't able to find previously has been a major eye-opener for me. Musicians, actors, writers, directors, artists, etc. There was this camaraderie they all shared and there seemed to be an underlying theme of "We all need to stick together and help each other out here. We don't have big budgets, just big ideas. You help me out here, I'll help you out there." Whether I will eventually be able to work with them down the road is up in the air, but just being able to discuss their projects and mine and feeling that creative energy was highly motivating. It was really an inspiring event and hey, I got to meet Jason's mother, Betsy Palmer, from the original Friday the 13th movie so how cool was that?

[AL]: How has the development experience been so far?

[EM]: A MAJOR learning experience with lots of hard lessons along the way.

[AL]: What is the scheduled release date for the game?

[EM]: Late 2007. It's pretty dependent on how well Rune Rescue does and a few other projects. If I have to go out and get another job because I can't sustain myself with the game development, then obviously Raven's Hollow will have to be pushed back.

[AL]: Do you have any other projects you are currently working on?

[EM]: Right now the main one is working on getting Rune Rescue out on to the game portals and working on another AG that is less involved than Raven's Hollow, so that one should be ready to go in late spring, early summer - it's actually surprising me how fast its coming together. There are a few smaller games I'm toying with, while putting the majority of time into Raven's Hollow. Raven's Hollow is quite a large game that will take about a year to finish. I've got enough money in the coffers to cover me for a few months, but not enough to be able to spend an entire year on getting Raven's Hollow finished so I have to get some other things out in the meantime.

[AL]: Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

[EM]: Adventure games are the only genre where anything goes. Different themes, styles, formats, etc. You would think that adventure gamers would be open to new ideas and accepting of developers decisions to pursue one format over another. While they are quite diverse, it's disheartening to see various camps that have formed. When players flat out refuse to play an adventure game because its in real time 3D, I find myself scratching my head. On one hand we all want to see the genre advance and explore new territory, on the other we want the same games that came out 10 years ago. On the other side of the coin, downing a game because it's like the ones that came out 10 years ago is just as bad. Everything goes, everything is valid, and each game should be judged on its own merits. Breakout and shoot em up games are still being made and no one is ripping on them for following the same format that has been in use for almost 30 years, yet they jump all over AGs for still using a 12 year old format - ridiculous. While I respect everyone opinions, I feel pretty fortunate that I can enjoy all the different genres and formats without being locked into one type. I think it was my tunnel vision during my AD&D period that taught me a lesson and I missed out on a lot of fun gaming experiences - I don't want to make that mistake again.

Adventure Lantern thanks Eric McConnell for providing us information about Hidden Sanctum and his upcoming adventure game called Raven's Hollow. If the details Eric was able to disclose at this time and the preliminary screenshots are any indication, adventure gamers might be in for quite an interesting experience. Once again, an independent developer might impress us with a high quality product. While you are waiting for the release of Raven's Hollow in 2007, you can visit the official Hidden Sanctum Web site at www.HiddenSanctum.com for more information about the company and its projects. You can also try out the demo version of Rune Rescue or purchase the full game.

## The Best Way to Play Old Classics – Part A: Grim Fandango
Playing Old Adventure Games – Part 3   **Written by Sir Dave**

To some extent this series is directed at adventure purists- those like myself who look back wistfully at the period of 1993 to 2000 as a golden age of adventure gaming and wish to play the classics of that period in the way they were meant to be played. This period gave rise to what are now considered by many to be the all-time classics of the adventure game genre and include, among others, Myst, Riven, the Gabriel Knight games 1&2, the Monkey Island games 1 to 3, the Tex Murphy games: Under a Killing Moon and The Pandora Directive, the Journeyman Project games, Grim Fandango and so on. In addition to the classic adventure games of this period were games that, although not perhaps classics, have brought with them their own mystique- games such as Amber, Lighthouse and Secrets Of The Luxor. Of course, there are many others than those mentioned above and, inevitably, we purists are determined to play them all…perfectly…one day!

There is one problem however- to use a variation of an old phrase, these classics have only one chance to make a good first impression. The way you play them the first time will determine how you think of them forever. *Replaying* an adventure game usually has very limited rewards, so how we purists play it the first time had better do it the best way possible. Most of these games were developed during the Windows 95 and 98 era, although a few (eg. Myst, Under A Killing Moon, Monkey Island, Gabriel Knight 1 & 2) were produced during the period of MSDOS/Windows 3.1, just before Windows 95 arrived. Since many of these games won't play optimally or won't play at all under Windows XP, the challenge is to find the best way to play them the way they were meant to be played.
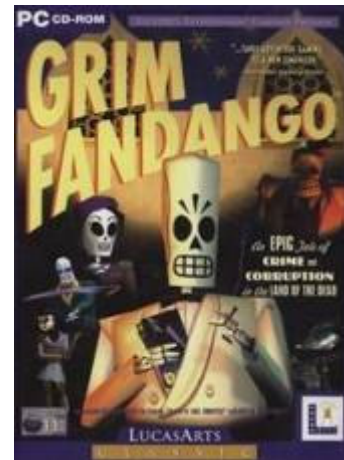
There are a number of software solutions that will allow one to play games of the DOS/Win95/Win98 era in a Windows XP environment:

DOSBox: The freeware DOSBox is both a full CPU and MSDOS emulator and will play most DOS games. Although it can play DOS games in real mode (used in pre-Windows 95 games) and protected mode (many post-1995) games, it may have problems with some protected mode games.

Virtual PC emulators: This is software that can emulate a hardware PC running other operating systems in a Windows XP environment. These include **VMware** which can emulate more than one operating system eg. Windows and Linux (as well as various hardware/software configurations) and Microsoft's now-free **Virtual PC** which can emulate both Windows 95 and 98 and a fixed hardware configuration (an Intel Pentium II processor, Intel 440BX chipset, a standard SVGA/Vesa graphics card and Creative Labs Soundblaster) under Windows XP. Emulators run within the Windows XP environment which means that the computer hardware must support Windows XP and the emulator at the same time.

Dual Boot: In this case, operating systems such as Windows 95 or 98 can be set up on a separate partition of the hard disk from Windows XP and the user has the option of separately booting up into either system. This is quite different from an emulator in that the hardware of the computer is totally dedicated to the Windows system in use. You are running Windows 95 or 98 as a totally separate operating system, *not under or within* Windows XP.

ScummVM: A free software interpreter that allows you to play most of the old LucasArts games or SCUMM games (eg. Monkey Island series, Sam and Max, Indiano Jones etc.) in addition to a few non-SCUMM games (eg. Beneath a Steel Sky, Flight of the Amazon Queen) under Windows XP.

All of these methods can be used to run old adventure games, but there can be serious limitations:

1. All of them require some degree of computer savvy and a certain amount of hassle- if you're excited to play a particular game, you won't be able to just load it up and play right away. They have to be set up correctly in order for the game to run. To some extent, this limitation can be overcome by the experience of others- there is helpful information on the internet on what settings to use for particular games.

2. The emulators require hardware/CPU power several times greater than the original games. Ordinarily, this is not a problem for the typical computer of today, but it might be if your computer is several years old.

3. For the most part, no *one* of these solutions will play all the old adventure games optimally. For instance, DOSBox will work better for the pre-1995 DOS

games while Virtual PC will be a better solution for post-1995 Windows 95/98 games.

4. Some games, no matter what method you use and no matter how hard you try, will simply not play with totally smooth sound and clear steady graphics. Some games will play almost perfectly on some computers with certain settings while those same games will not on other computers with the same settings. A few games (notoriously Under A Killing Moon) will likely not play perfectly using any of these methods.

There is, however, one method that will play all these games flawlessly: Using a laptop running Windows 98SE! Hold on now! Before you run out of the room screaming 'He wants me to buy another computer?!!', hear me out. During the period of approximately 1997 to 2000, companies such as Toshiba and IBM produced exceptionally well-made, heavy-duty, laptops that were some of the first laptops designed as 'desktop-replacements'. They were very expensive at the time, costing anywhere from $2500 to $4000 USD. However, because of both the existence of eBay and the (lucky for us) perceived obsoleteness of these laptops, they can be had for under $200 and often, under $100 today! Think of it: For less than a price of couple of tickets to a U2 concert, in a matter of days, you can be playing all the old adventure favorites with a minimum of hassle and effort.

The laptops I have in mind have the following general characteristics: Pentium II CPUs running at between 233 and 366 MHz, a CDROM drive (either built in or available in a docking station) running Windows 98SE. I have personal experience with and highly recommend 2 models: the Toshiba Portege 320ct and IBM Thinkpad 380z. Other possible models to consider are the Toshiba Portege 3480ct and 3490ct and the Toshiba Portege 7010ct and 7020ct. Some people are wary of purchasing anything over eBay, let alone a laptop computer. I have done it at least 10 times and have never had a problem (well, one seller tried to pass of some light scratches on the screen as dirt, but since they were pretty minor, I didn't make too much of it). Here are a few hints:

1. Don't jump right in. Check out some of the models I've mentioned above on eBay and get a feel for what they include and the price being asked and what they sell for compared to the shape they are in.

2. I prefer buying from individuals who owned the original computer rather than a company. Often, individuals are selling laptops that they have used and cared for and they are more likely to be in-good-working-order units that have both a lot of the original hardware and software as well as extra accessories thrown in. Laptop owners who have taken care of their machines are only too happy to describe what good condition they are in. Too often, companies are selling barebones laptops in various states of disrepair so although you don't necessarily need to avoid them altogether, be a little more cautious.

3. Buy only from sellers with good feedback. I prefer over 98-99%, but I may accept a little less if they have over 500 transactions. If they have under 50 transactions, I will rarely accept under 99%!

4. Once you have settled on a possible unit, always email the seller with a few questions before bidding. How and whether they answer will give you a clue as to the seller's reliability in addition to giving you extra information on the condition of the laptop. In the email, ask for confirmation that the screen is in excellent condition (2 or 3 burned out pixels are okay; much more than that or any scratches are not), that the keyboard, CDROM and any hardware accessories are in excellent condition, and that the unit works flawlessly (periodic crashes are unacceptable). Look for the seller who is proud of how well they have looked after their laptop; often, you will see that described in the description of the laptop.

5. Preferably, the laptop should come set up for Windows 98SE. Optimally, it would be nice to have the original Windows restore CDs that were provided with the computer, but it is hard to find laptops with the original restore CDs on eBay these days. Consider it a real plus if they are provided. Only consider laptops running Windows ME, Windows 2000 or even Windows XP if you have your own Windows 98SE disks and are experienced enough to set up the laptop under Windows 98SE. The drivers for Windows 98SE are available on the internet for most laptops sold between 1998 and 2000.

All that said, it's time for me to put 'my money where my mouth is' by describing my personal experience with the Toshiba 320ct and IBM 380z using the classic Grim Fandango as an example.

First the hardware:

Toshiba 320ct: This was part of a laptop series that Toshiba produced circa 1997-1998 and came

standard with a 266mhz CPU, 32-64mb memory, a gorgeous (even by today's standards) 10.5 inch TFT color screen and standard-size keyboard even though the laptop is only 10.25 x 7.5 inches. It was sold running Win95 OSR2 or Win98 (but is often sold on eBay running Win98SE) and has a built in Accupoint pointer (the small knob like a pencil eraserhead in the middle of the keyboard) or you can attach a plug & play mouse on the USB 1.0 port available on the optional docking station). Speaking of the docking station, try to purchase a 320ct that includes it since it provides a CDROM drive, USB port, the older legacy printer and serial ports, as well as stereo speakers which produce really beautiful sound. The built-in soundboard is a standard Soundblaster Pro-compatible, always important for running old adventure games! Expect to pay anywhere from $90 to $200 depending on whether the dock and what other accessories are included. In 1998, I paid $3800 for a new unit, dock and all! In the last year, I bought 2 of these on eBay, both including the dock, paying $95 for one and $140 for the other. The Toshiba 320ct does not show up as often on eBay as it used to, but if you keep an eye out for, it appears not infrequently.

Here are some links for instructions on setting up the 380z for Windows 98 and a general driver depository:

http://support.toshiba-tro.de/Win98SE/portege/port320/port320952se.htm

http://www.csd.toshiba.com/cgi-bin/tais/su/su_sc_modItemList.jsp#PublicList

IBM Thinkpad 380z: This unit is a little different in that it is even more of a potential desktop replacement than the Toshiba 320ct. It comes with both a built-in CDROM, USB port and the older legacy printer and serial ports as well as a Floppy drive; you don't really need a docking station. The 380z is somewhat larger than the 320ct- 12.5 inch screen and 12 x 9 inches (also thicker at 1 5/8 inches). Whereas the 320ct was marketed over about a year in one standard configuration, the 380z was marketed for at least 2 years and came in several, increasingly powerful, flavors so that you will find some units with 64mb memory and a 233 mHZ CPU while towards the end of its run, there were units with 96mb memory and a 333 mHZ CPU. This laptop is a real workhorse, has a beautiful screen, is built like a tank and has a great standard, Selectric-type keyboard that IBM was known for, as well as an Accupoint pointer much like the 320ct. I bought mine just a month ago on eBay for $75 (plus $20 shipping). It is in perfect working order and almost looks

new! In 1999, this same laptop cost at least $2500!

Note that both of these laptops, in addition to acting as a computer to run old adventure games, can also be used for things such as word processing and wireless internet. Although you would do well with either, the Toshiba Portege 320ct offers more portability when removed from its dock and it can easily sit on your lap while lying in bed. On the other hand, the IBM Thinkpad 380z is more of an all-in-one machine and in exchange for some portability, provides more of a desktop adventure gaming experience.

Here are some links for instructions on setting up the 380z for Windows 98 and a general driver depository:

http://www-307.ibm.com/pc/support/site.wss/document.do?sitestyle=lenovo&lndocid=LWIK-3XM465

http://www-1.ibm.com/support/search.wss?q=thinkpad+380z&rs=0&lang=en+en&loc=en-US&from=tss&ics=iso-8859-1&cs=utf-8&cc=us&search.x=60&search.y=7

Running Grim Fandango on the Toshiba 320ct and the IBM Thinkpad 380z:

Okay, let's get back to the subject at hand: Running the old classics as optimally as possible. We only have one shot at this- for the most part, once we've played a classic, we won't be able to 'go back' the same way ever again!

Grim Fandango was released in 1998. In some ways, GF was one of the last gasps of LucasArts adventure games and what a last gasp it was since it is often at the top of adventure gamers' best-of lists! Tim Schafer, the man behind GF, also worked on LucasArt's Monkey Island series, Full Throttle and Day of the Tentacle. Unfortunately, GF can be difficult to run under Windows XP. Some people will have no trouble while others will not be able to get rid of jerky, stuttering sound and flakey video, especially on the cutscenes. Although, beyond this particular discussion, suggestions to surmount problems running GF under Windows XP have included: Installing the v1.01 patch (more about that below), using a program such as *imagecfg.exe* to patch GF so that it won't allow hyperthreading thus

preventing looping audio or echoing sound (imagecfg.exe for those who are interested is available at: http://www.death-web.com/files/imagecfg.zip), *not* using compatibility mode and avoiding running under Directx 8.1a. Some or all of these methods have fixed some or all problems for some people and none for others. Some people have run into problems with their fast Windows XP computers particularly when it came to the wine lift in year 2 and the conveyor belt in year 3. These can be helped by the use of a program such as CPU Killer at: http://www.cpukiller.com

GF was originally released just before Windows 98 so that it was tested under Windows 95, not Windows 98. It seems to work just as well under Windows 98SE although some users may need to adjust Hardware Acceleration for the best results. Grim Fandango is not a traditional point and click game- it was the first game to use the GrimE engine which uses keyboard keys including the arrow keys to move around the main character, Manny Calavera. This has been probably the biggest complaint about GF by adventure gamers. The keyboard just doesn't work as well as a mouse! However, there is one, in my opinion, big alternative: GF can be set up for use with a joystick or gamepad which is a big improvement over the keyboard.

The optimal setup for Grim Fandango is one where you can play the game fullscreen entirely from the hard disk using a gamepad such as the Gravis Stinger Laptop Gamepad to control Manny. The earliest release of GF offered only a standard 39mb install that required swapping the 2 CDs, but later releases allow a 'Complete' or full install occupying 1215mb on your hard disk. Ordinarily you would still need to have CD 1 in the drive to start the game (unless you were to use a virtual cd utility such as Virtual-CD or VirtualDrive in which case having an image of CD 1 in a virtual drive would work just fine), but there is a great free 3rd party Grim Fandango Launcher that will not only guide you through a full install, but will also allow you to play the game without CD 1 in the drive (see below for a link).

By the way, if you have an earlier release of GF that doesn't offer a full install, you can accomplish the same thing by copying the 'Year 1' files (Data001.lab, Movie01.lab, Vox0001.lab, and Year1mus.lab) from the Grimdata folder on CD 1 to the Grimdata folder in your Grim Fandango folder/directory on the hard disk.

The installation on both the Toshiba Portege 320ct and the IBM Thinkpad 380z as above is straightforward and effortless. The game runs perfectly on both machines except for maybe the rare sound hiccup on the Portege. The IBM Thinkpad 380z has the benefit of allowing the native 640x480 resolution of GF to

be scaled up to fullscreen by toggling FN-F8. The Portege cannot do so on its screen, but can on an external monitor by toggling FN-F5. I strongly recommend a gamepad such as the Gravis Stinger Laptop Gamepad. The controls for that exact model are pictured in the GF manual. It is not manufactured by Gravis anymore, but it is available new and used from $10-20 USD on Amazon.

Be sure to install the v1.01 patch which fixes some bugs and allows text subtitles for the cutscenes toggled using Ctrl-T. Find the patch at:

http://www.grimfandango.net/?page=patch

The 3rd party Grim Fandango Launcher mentioned above is available at:

http://www.grimfandango.net/?page=launcher

Some other useful links are first, a nice copy of the manual that isn't available on some jewel case releases of Grim Fandango and second, a selection of savegames:

http://www.ninth-world.com/manual.php

http://www.grimfandango.net/?page=saves

Part B of this mini-series on the use of laptops running Windows 98SE for adventure games will look at running games such as Amber, Secrets Of The Luxor, Under a Killing Moon, and The Pandora Directive and introduce the use of one more laptop for the more adventurous!
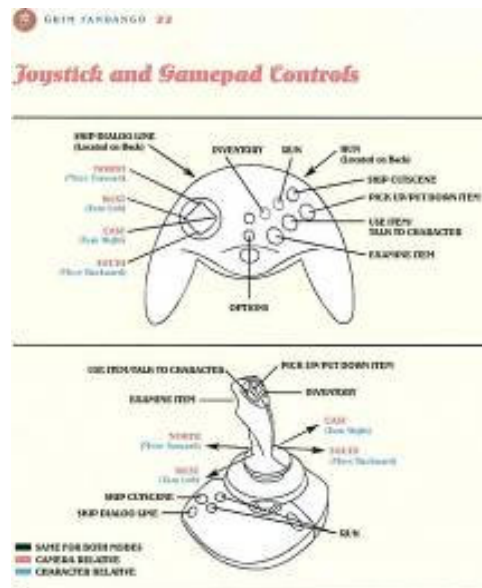
Secret Files: Tunguska (North American release)

PC Review by Wendy Nellius

Step Back into the Past…

June 30, 1908: A large ball of fire streaks through the Siberian sky destined for impact near the Stony Tunguska River. The ensuing explosion has the force of roughly 10 million tons of dynamite and could be felt for hundreds of miles. The cause of the explosion is unknown. Was it a meteor or comet? Or perhaps even a UFO? Years later, a Russian mineralogist discovers a fragment of unknown material. Supernatural plant growth is noted as well.
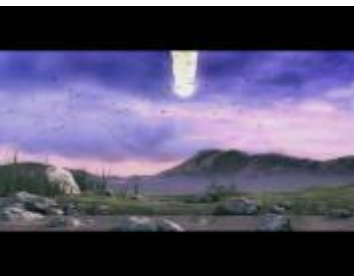

1958: Vladimir Kalenkov conducts a secret expedition to the Tunguska explosion site. One of the fragments is analyzed and seems to have no earthly origin. The site is still exuding radiation left over from the blast. He details his findings in what is called the "Kalenkov Report". But, his research is ultimately shut down by the government.

1977: Vladimir Kalenkov returns to the region with Manuel Perez to delve deeper into the discoveries he made 20 years earlier.

Present Day…

March 27, 2006: Vladimir is putting in quite the late night at the Museum. The door to his office mysteriously opens. Vladimir doesn't see anyone right away so he decides to investigate. Footprints in the hallway denote the trail of a secret visitor. A shadowy figure cloaked in black appears behind Vladimir. Vladimir is brought down to the ground as though his mind is being controlled. End cut scene.

Later that evening: Nina Kalenkov arrives at the museum to visit with her father. What a shock to find the office has been ransacked and her father is missing. An urgent call to the local police proves fruitless. Someone must have seen something. A search of the museum turns up the janitor Eddie who is paralyzed with fear. He apparently saw two of the mysterious entities. But seeing how scared he is, he won't be a lot of help at this point. Nina does manage to find another person at the museum: Max Gruber.
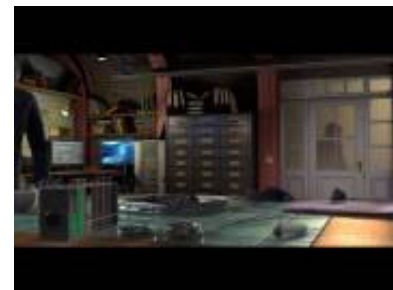
Max is one of Vladimir's co-workers. Unfortunately, Max is unaware that Vladimir has gone missing and didn't hear anything because his music was cranked up.

He is, however, willing to help Nina find her father. In game terms, that means you will get to alternate between playing as Nina and Nick.

Secret Files: Tunguska is a 3rd person point and click adventure. The game comes with a whopping 4 CDs and a game manual. Although it takes a while to load up 4 CDs, there were no technical difficulties encountered during installation or game play. There have been reports of a bug in which a specific item cannot be picked up and has resulted in being a game stopper. For those who have encountered this problem, a patch has been released to correct it. Music is used sparingly in the game, but they've got a great opening number that blends a touch of whimsy into a dramatic score.

Right off the bat, you'll notice that Secret Files Tunguska is a really great looking game. The backgrounds are truly impressive and there are quite a lot of them. Each is significantly different and highly detailed. The colors are vibrant and alive. And, the use of shadow and light brings depth to each location. One of the best parts of the game is getting to visit all the different locations. It adds excitement to the game as you anticipate where the heck you'll get to go next. You'll start out at the museum in Berlin. From there, you'll check out Vladimir's house and one of his former colleagues. The trail will then lead Nina through Russia, Cuba, Ireland, and China with a final destination in Antarctica. Each country has ample environments to explore.

Secret Files Tunguska also features interesting tension-building action cut scenes which work wonders to connect the storyline as you jump to a new location. A few of them were a little blurry, but I'm going to chalk that up to my graphics card since I haven't seen any complaints anywhere else. Always welcome is the chance to replay the cut scenes. This option is offered on the main menu. If you have no desire to watch the cut scenes, you can just right click them away.

One of my favorite scenes is actually part of the game and not a cut scene. Nina has to escape from a locked room on the train. She manages to get out a hatch and is on top of the train. The landscape whips by and train shakes causing Nina to constantly grapple for balance. Your task is to figure out what to do next. To be honest, I left her up there for quite a while. It was just too cool to watch. Alright, let's be honest…I also was a little stumped on what to do.

The interface has never been simpler. The folks over at Deep Silver seem to have this down to a science. The cursor begins as a small blue arrow. When hovered over an item of interest, the cursor will turn into a replica of a mouse. If you can just examine an item, the right mouse button will be green and a small eye will appear near that button. If you can interact further with the item, the left mouse button will be green as well and a small hand will appear near that button.

They also took the nightmare out of pixel hunting. At the bottom of the screen is a small magnifying glass which provides help (when chosen in the options menu). Clicking on the magnifying glass will highlight all the hotspots available with magnifying glasses. The exits will also be visible with large red arrows. The highlighted hotspots will remain active for about 10 seconds and then they disappear. However, you can use this feature over and over again. Nina doesn't run in this game, but you can double click on an exit to immediately access another location without having to walk the whole way. This is a bonus when you have to move back and forth multiple times to complete tasks.

Along with the help feature at the bottom of the screen, a diary is available as well. The diary keeps track of the information you have learned so far. Small hints are available as well for the mechanical and logic puzzles. Inventory is maintained across the bottom of the screen. You will soon learn that Nina is a packrat and will take anything that isn't nailed down. Size doesn't seem to matter. If it's there, she'll take it. The main menu is located here as well. Access is granted by clicking on the picture of a computer. You will be able to load, save or quit the game. Each time you quit, the game will automatically prompt you to allow an autosave game. The Options menu allows you to adjust the volume of the music and sound effect. Character shadows, subtitles and game help may be turned on or off. Video quality may also be adjusted to improve performance.

Inventory scrolls across the bottom of the screen. And, you will be using it a lot as the majority of the puzzles are inventory-based. You will be required to combine items with each other. This is done by simply clicking on one item and dragging it over another. What can be said is that Secret Files Tunguska has some of the strangest inventory solutions this reviewer has seen in a long time. For example, there are small burned fragments of paper

in a fire pit. Nina needs to remove them. Instead of just picking them out, she will have to instead skin a tree of bark, then scrape some resin off it, take that resin and melt it down after finding a source of heat other than fire. Finally, she'll be able to take that melted resin and brush it on the pieces of paper with a

handmade brush which of course she'll need to make from scratch. Geez…Why can't we just pick out the pieces of paper? Thinking outside the box is a prerequisite for this game. You may find yourself using every single item on every hotspot in an attempt to figure out what the hell works. Part of me hated this and the other part of me loved the challenge and sense of satisfaction when I figured it out. And, I think I've gotten so used to games filled with logical inventory puzzles that I've forgotten how much I really used to enjoy figuring out these kinds of problems. It takes a while to get your brain back into the groove. There were some logical and riddle type puzzles. These ranged from very easy to a medium level of difficulty. There will be help in the diary for certain riddle puzzles.

So, what about the characters? Deep Silver did a great job in ensuring the characters were drawn with care and this shows in their outward appearance. With the exception of Nina's slightly odd walking gait, character movements were wonderfully life like. Head turn and hand gestures are portrayed naturally which is rarely accomplished. Along with Max, Nina will meet up with plenty of characters to interact with in each location. One of the most unusual is a train engineer who is experiencing "stomach" problems and has quarantined himself in the bathroom. Nina's whole conversion is to a pair of feet through a gap under the door. It's amusingly surprising. Lip synching is decent. No real complaints here.

So far, everything seems great, right? Not so fast. A story is only as good as its telling. Secret Files has a good and interesting story. It is in the telling where the game goes wrong. I'm talking about the voice acting. To me, this aspect was a real downer. The dialog itself was awkward and stiff at times. I believe this is due to the "way too formal" translation from German to English. Not enough attention was paid to natural phrasing. It's hit or miss throughout the game. This would not have been so bad if the voice acting was better. Nina has a high semi-little girl voice. This voice could have been quite tolerable had there been any emotion or natural flow in what came out of her mouth. It was very difficult to make a mental or emotional connection with the protagonist or any other character for that matter. Max's voice was the best of the bunch. Not outstanding… Not really great… Simply the best of the bunch.
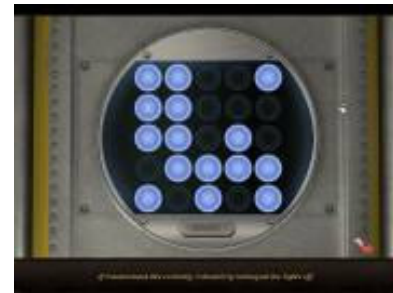
So, we are looking at pretty much a whole game full of not so great voices. This definitely detracted from the enjoyment of the game. There also seemed to be a problem in the microphone levels. During one conversation, Nina's voice would sound normal on one sentence and then sound as if she were in an empty bathroom the next. This would flip back and forth multiple times. It seems as

though two recordings were done of each scene and they used pieces of both without accounting for the different sound.
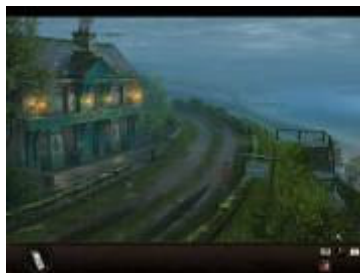

The original game ending is abrupt and does not provide a feeling of finality. It almost feels as if it wasn't quite finished. However, Deep Silver released a patch to fix a bug. This patch also incorporates an improved ending to the game. This new ending was much more appropriate, more exciting, and had a more completed feeling. Included in both endings were mock blooper scenes. While they are a cute addition, again the voice acting ruins the effect. In the new ending, however, they have added the "Where are they now?" explanations for each of the characters. Cracked me up, they did!

So, the bottom line is that Secret Files Tunguska should have been a great game. The concept, story, and graphics all worked towards the end. And, in this way, the game has a lot to offer. But, I had trouble getting past the stilted dialog and the poor acting. Hence, it becomes just an alright game. Since there are plans for a Secret Files 2, it is recommended that translation and casting play a higher role of importance. If they do, the sequel could turn out to be outstanding.

But, keep in mind that this is a matter of taste and everyone's tolerance level is different. I would suggest giving the demo a try. If you don't care about voice acting and just want to play a really pretty game that will have you scratching your head, then get yourself a copy.

Final Grade: 78/100

Developer: Deep Silver	**Minimum System Requirements:**
Publisher: The Adventure Company	Windows® 2000/XP
Platform: PC	500 MHz Pentium III Processor
Genre: Adventure	128 MB RAM
Release Date: November 2006	16 MB DirectX® Compatible Video Card
Grade: 78/100	16 bit DirectX® Compatible Sound Card
	16x CD-ROM Drive
	Hard Drive space of 2 GB

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

Evidence: The Last Ritual

PC Review by Ugur Sener

[Editorial Note: Evidence: The Last Ritual is the sequel to Missing: Since January, which was released in 2004. If you have not had a chance to play the original game and want to learn more about it before reading about the sequel, scroll down a few pages for a review of Missing.**]**

It was 1999 when her brother disappeared without a trace. Adrian Moses did not leave a note or a letter to explain where he was going. His family did not know whether he was kidnapped, murdered, or just seeking independence. Searches conducted by the authorities did not yield any results. As the years went by, Jessica almost completely gave up hope of finding her brother. But a simple phone call changed everything.

A policeman in Vermont had found some clues that might lead to Adrian's whereabouts. Jessica knew this might be only chance left for finding her lost brother. She arranged with her boss to take off several days and look for her brother. Her friend Sharon agreed to help with the search. They did not know where Adrian had been for the past several years. They had no idea where he might be. Clues were sparse and cryptic at best. But Jessica knew she at least had to try.

Across the Atlantic, journalist Jack Lorski was working on a documentary about European police forces. He had joined Officer Manuela Ortiz during one of her investigations. Manuela was looking into a series of particularly gruesome murders. Two men had been found stabbed to death after being tortured. Each of them was missing a limb, and both had strange scrolls stuffed in their mouths. On Jack's very first day with Manuela, another body would be found. The journalist did not yet realize it, but the investigation was about to take an even darker turn. Old demons had a way of returning.

The search for a missing brother and an investigation into a series of murders… Are these seemingly unrelated events somehow connected? A number of months have passed since Jessica and Jack began their journeys. Many of the details are obscure, but one thing is certain. The journalist is no longer alive.

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There is reason to believe the criminal known as the Phoenix might be responsible for Jack's death. Lorski had first crossed Phoenix's path while he was researching a different murder with his friend Karen Gijman. Individuals dedicated to finding and capturing Jack's killer have joined together, forming the International Committee for the Phoenix's Arrest (ICPA).

The Phoenix is responsible for a number of deaths, and he must be stopped. Unfortunately, locating the murderer is not a simple task. The criminal is highly skilled at avoiding the authorities and covering his tracks. The only clue to his whereabouts is a set of CDs the Phoenix himself has sent to the authorities.

This is not the first time the Phoenix has tried to get his name out by sending in a cryptic collection of puzzles and video clips. When he kidnapped Jack and Karen some time ago, the Phoenix sent a black disc to SKL Network, the company that employed Jack. What is the madman trying to accomplish this time? Is this just a vain attempt at to prove he is more intelligent than everybody else? Can we even be certain that the same person actually created the new discs?

Regardless of the Phoenix's motives, once again, the individuals who received the discs are unable to unlock all of its puzzles. After much deliberation, the CDs are made available to the public. Perhaps a larger group of people will be able to collaborate and find all of the answers.

As they were allegedly sent by the Phoenix himself, the discs are not about to openly disclose the criminal's exact location. But maybe somewhere within its contents there are important clues that might help the authorities. An analysis of the discs' contents might reveal details about Jack's death and provide leads that might ultimately lead to the murderer's capture. Joining the group of individuals working on cracking the discs, it will be up to you to solve all the puzzles and uncover the hidden secrets.

With Evidence: The Last Ritual, the development studio Lexis Numérique brings us a sequel to their successful alternate reality adventure game Missing: Since January. Just like its predecessor, Evidence has been designed to make players feel as though they are part of a real investigation. While Evidence features a new storyline, different puzzles, and an updated interface, it still stays true to the original

game's core formula. The game does have some issues that hurt the overall experience, but it still brings plenty of original content presented in a distinct style that can easily appeal to adventure gamers looking for something different.

This time around, the story starts out with two separate branches. By solving the various puzzles featured in the game, you will unlock a series of video clips. It is through these videos that Evidence tells much of its underlying story. The first branch deals with Jessica's search for her missing brother Adrian. Accompanied by her friend Sharon, Jessica travels to a number of different locations across North America in hopes of locating her brother. The second branch features the journalist Jack Lorski, one of the first game's main characters. Jack is working on a documentary when he gets caught up in investigating a series of murders.

As you go through the game and solve a number of puzzles, the story starts to get more interesting. A number of plot twists will have you questioning various facts and wondering where the two investigations will eventually lead. It may not feature the best-crafted storyline you will ever find in an adventure game, but Evidence should still have what it takes to maintain your interest.

It is not absolutely necessary to play the original game in order to enjoy and understand Evidence. The sequel does have a consistent storyline of its own. However, going through Missing before you play Evidence can still help you. Knowing about Jack Lorski's previous investigation and having an idea about the kinds of things the Phoenix is capable of might help you better appreciate the storyline of the new game. Moreover, some of the plot twists will probably be more interesting to players who have played Missing.

When you start Evidence for the first time, you will have to create an account with a valid e-mail address. As you play the game, you will receive e-mails from a number of fictional characters. During the registration process, you are asked whether or not you participated in the previous investigation. How you answer the question has an influence in the e-mails you receive. If you have played Missing, you will undoubtedly recognize some of the fictional characters. If you indicate that you were a part of the first investigation, the characters will 'recognize' you as well.

The e-mails are a big part of creating the alternate reality of Evidence. The fictional characters will e-mail you their observations, theories about the case, and clues on various puzzles. They will also give you access to various tools and help with the development of the storyline. At times the clues you get in the mail can point you in the right direction. The additional information provided by some of the characters might also help you get a clearer understanding of the game's underlying themes.

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The progression of the game is very similar to Missing: Since January. At any given point, players are presented with a set of puzzles. You are free to examine and solve them in any order. If you cannot find the answer to one of the puzzles immediately, you can go back to the selection window and try a different one. When you correctly enter a solution, you will be rewarded with a video clip. Besides advancing the storyline, the videos can also contain important clues that can help you solve other puzzles. When you complete all the challenges in a given set, the game will let you proceed to the next one.

While Evidence features a good variety of puzzles, their basic presentation remains fairly consistent throughout the game. You will be presented with a dark screen that may contain one or more images in the background. You will hear ambient sounds and sometimes haunting tunes. The overall tone is very deliberately dark if not downright depressing. There is usually something disturbing about each screen. You do not want to linger on them for too long. The developers seem to have put a good degree of effort into making the puzzles feel as if they are the work of a madman.

You will employ a variety of techniques to find the solution to the puzzles. Some of them can be solved by simply examining the clues presented to you on the screen. You might need to examine certain images closely or pay attention to the sounds. Clues provided in the videos will help you in some of the other puzzles. An important image might be part of a video helping you find the correct answer.

Solving the majority of the puzzles however will require the use of the Internet. In many cases small clues will be presented to you on the screen. Sometimes you may need to do a little bit of work before you can see all of the clues. Once you have some information, you will have to conduct a search to see if you can find the details the Phoenix wants you to find. In many cases, looking up the keywords using your favorite search engine will not be enough. You may need to analyze various Web pages or find closely related topics that will ultimately get you the answer you seek.

Another part of the challenge comes in the form of entering the answers. On a number of the puzzles, finding the solution is actually a lot easier than entering it. The screen might feature various elements you will have to manipulate correctly in order to enter the solution. For instance, in one of the puzzles, you have to use the mouse pointer to guide the letters to make sure they fall into the correct positions and they do not get erased by going over one of two skull symbols. In another challenge, some letters are cluttered at the center. On the left side of the

screen, you will see three small circles. Two of these produce wind when you bring them close to the letters. You have to use these circles to isolate individual letters you want to manipulate. The last circle acts as a magnet, allowing you to guide letters into their correct positions.

In general, the puzzles do a decent job of putting your reasoning and research skills to test. It is worth mentioning that Evidence features far less in the way of mini-games than Missing. It should also be noted that a good number of the challenges do depend on sound in one way or another. You might have to distinguish between different tones or combine small sound clips to construct a phrase. You will also have to listen to the dialog in the videos as subtitles are not available.

Just like Missing, Evidence is highly effective in certain areas. Some of the puzzles are quite challenging and rather engaging. They might have you thinking for a couple of days before you piece together the clues and find the answer. Despite the fact that you do not actually explore different places and interact with various characters, the atmosphere is at times pretty strong. There is a clear dark tone and a sense of hopelessness that seems fitting for the game. The storyline has some interesting points and some of the e-mails you receive do actually add some value to the overall experience. However, the game is most certainly not without its problems.

First of all, Evidence suffers from the same feeling of tediousness that plagued Missing. The core of the game ultimately consists of solving various puzzles to watch video clips. While this works fine when you start the game, the exercise can become quite repetitive by the time you overcome a number of the challenges. There is a mild attempt at breaking the cycle by using a couple of the tools you get later in the game. But it is still not quite enough as all you truly end up doing is working on a couple of extra puzzles.

Many of the films in Evidence do seem to be cleverly crafted and they are effective in advancing the plot. However, a number of videos leave something to be desired. While the acting and the storyline itself are fairly decent, some of the footage seems unnecessary. Watching the traffic while Jessica and Sharon are driving down the road or hearing Jack having conversations in a language you may not necessarily know is really not interesting. Despite obvious attempts at creating a certain mood with the use of imagery and music, a number of the scenes feel drawn out and dull. Just like Missing, some of them seem to be created just so there is a reward for solving a puzzle.

A similar problem exists with some of the e-mails. At times it seems like the fictional characters are trying a little too hard to explain everything and the updates do not really provide any kind of true insight. While the game does not exactly send an e-mail every five minutes, the sheer number of messages you receive can also get a little annoying.

The puzzles featured in the game can also be a bit problematic from time to time. Having to apply a variety of techniques and being challenged to combine various elements together is certainly a good thing. However, some of the puzzles do get tedious. For instance, staring at your computer screen until it will grudgingly reveal a series of numbers you need to type into a textbox is not exactly entertaining. Even when you have found the correct source of information and know the answer, entering it can be a little too much work. This gets especially annoying when you do not have the right solution. Some of the online searching can also be tedious. Sometimes you may not even be sure whether you are on the right track or just going after some trivial information that is really not part of the answer.

Viewed as a whole, Evidence most certainly delivers a distinct experience that is not typically found in a video game. Between the game's efforts at creating an alternate reality experience, a number of cleverly constructed puzzles, and a fairly interesting storyline, Evidence can easily be entertaining. Amidst its dark tones and attempts at symbolism, there is something refreshingly

appealing about the game. However, Evidence is not a game that can be recommended to everyone. The progression of the game can become tedious, some of the imagery might be too gruesome, and working on a number of the puzzles can get rather frustrating. If you are willing to deal with the game's less than glamorous aspects and if the idea of conducting Web searches to track down clues seems interesting, consider giving Evidence a try. It might be very similar to its predecessor, but it is still vastly different from many of the other games on the market. That alone might make the game worth your attention.

Developer: Lexis Numérique **Publisher:** The Adventure Company **Platform:** PC **Genre:** Adventure **Release Date:** October 2006 **Grade:** 78/100	**Minimum System Requirements:** Windows® 2000/XP Pentium® III 800MHz Processor 256 MB RAM 8x CD-ROM Drive 32 Bit Video Card SoundBlaster-compatible Sound Card 2.5 GB Hard disk space 56.6 Kbps or better Internet connection

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

Nancy Drew: The Creature of Kapu Cave
PC Review by Wendy Nellius

HerInteractive promised us two games this year and they certainly kept their promise. The 15th installment in the Nancy Drew Series rolled off the production line and into stores at the tail end of October. This time around, Nancy is off to Hawaii. Always willing to sign herself up for anything and everything, Nancy will be performing the job of Research Assistant to Dr. Quigley Kim. Dr. Kim is an Entomologist; entomology being the scientific study of insects.   Oh joy……we'll be working with bugs. I just looovvvveee bugs!

As with Danger by Design, The Creature of Kapu Cave starts out with a full tutorial in Nancy's bedroom. On her desk, you can click on a scrapbook and see a synopsis complete with pictures of all the previous 14 games. The case file provides Nancy will all the details she needs about this newest case. There is also a book entitled 'How to be a detective'. This is where the tutorial is located. Clicking on topics such as What's New, Inventory and Tools, Camera etc… will provide you with instructions on how to use each feature in the game. You will even get to try out various features so you can get used to the controls. If this is your first Nancy Drew game, be sure to go through the tutorial. For those of you who have played the previous installments, you have the option to skip the tutorial and click on a plane ticket to start the game.

OK… So we've clicked on the plane ticket and we're off to Hawaii. A jeep has been left for Nancy at Immersion Excursion. All she has to do is get the keys from Big Island Mike (Mike Mapu). But, as this is a Nancy Drew game, things are never quite so simple. Big Island Mike's business is designed for tourists. The goal is to have the tourist experience things that true Hawaiians get to do every day as part of their daily lives. Mike has a very interesting sales technique that he uses on Nancy. Basically, she doesn't get the keys to the jeep unless she partakes in his immersion excursion. She protests but, it doesn't help. Her task will be to collect shells on the beach and make them into a necklace.

So, off to the beach Nancy goes.   It is here that she gets a huge surprise. Joe and Frank Hardy are actually standing on the beach. What a coincidence! It seems they're in Hawaii investigating Big Island Mike and his daughter Pua. Pua is on the road to becoming a professional surfer and may be eligible for sponsorship from Joe and Frank's client. Of course, that all depends on the investigation coming out clean. Sponsorships involve a lot of money and could easily bring bad publicity and financial loss if a scandal were to break out. So,

even though they're busy with their investigation, it's nice to have some friends around.

Finally, Nancy is on her way to Dr. Kim's campsite. The detective is horrified to discover that the site has been completely trashed. There is no sign of Dr. Kim. Who could have been behind such devastation and where in the world is Dr. Kim? As Nancy spends more time on the big island of Hawaii, she'll uncover more mysterious happenings. She'll have to deal with a secret research facility doing who knows what, failed crops, unnatural bug population growth, and an old Hawaiian legend about an angry spirit named Kane Okala. Could Kane Okala be causing all the problems or is it an earth-bound troublemaker? It is up to Nancy to find out.

Creature of Kapu Cave comes in a DVD case with 2 CD's. They load up with absolutely no problems. No technical problems were encountered either. I purchased my copy of the game from Best Buy. This version came with the Official Strategy Guide which will give you all the help you need if you get stuck. Creature of Kapu Cave is a first-person point and click adventure. Upon starting the game, you will get to choose your detective level. You will have the choice of either Junior or Senior level. The game offers ample save game slots. The main menu allows you to adjust the volume of the voices, music or special effects. You also may turn off the text.

Getting around is quite simple. There are large yellow directional arrows to indicate where to go. For this installment, a map has been incorporated into the game. It will pop up every time Nancy uses the jeep. Accessible locations are clearly shown and clicking on one of them will transport you to the corresponding place. At the bottom of the game screen you can access the main menu, inventory, Nancy's notebook, cell phone, and a change purse that contains Nancy's money. This time, Nancy will not have real money. She will be collecting Big Island Bucks from Mike Mapu's Immersion Excursion. The cell phone options are a bit different this time around. Nancy will be able to contact her boyfriend for assistance and moral support. She can also contact Frank or Joe Hardy. Conversations with Bess and George are not included in this installment. This definitely makes for shorter conversations. The standard cursors have not changed. Nancy has a magnifying glass that will turn red when she can examine something. A hand icon will glow red when you can interact with or pick up an item. A speech bubble is used to indicate that you can talk to a given character.

HerInteractive has stepped up the graphics for The Creature of Kapu Cave. The character renderings are greatly improved and look more natural. While you

won't have tons of characters to interact with, the ones you do encounter are quite quirky. Dr. Kim prefers spending time with the bugs in the trees rather than people themselves. She tends to ramble on about her research so you'll need to shut her up at times. Big Island Mike seems helpful. But keep in mind that he's all about making money, and he has a round about way of doing it so it doesn't seem obvious. Pua seems quite normal and is focused on her surfing. Your initial impression will be that she couldn't possibly be involved in anything shady. Dr. Malachi Craven is perhaps one of the most interesting characters. He's quite the grouchy man and extremely guarded and secretive, but he is a sucker for an anything that appeals to his ego. All the voice acting is done well and keeps with the standards HerInteractive has set for themselves.

You'll even get the chance to switch places with the Hardy Boys. This is accomplished by using your cell phone. Each time Nancy calls, she will switch the investigation to Joe or Frank. The reverse is true when the Hardy Boys call Nancy. You can switch characters as often as you like. This is a plus for all the males out there who play the game. While I'm sure they don't mind playing a female detective, it sure must be nice to flex their muscles with the Hardy Boys. I would hope that one day the Hardy Boys get their own game series.

The backgrounds, while still maintaining the vibrancy we've come to expect, also incorporate a measure of fluidity. For example, on the beach the water is actually moving. This adds a new dynamic to the customary static environments.   You'll spend a decent amount of time at Mike's Immersion Excursion. There are a lot of tasks to complete there. You'll traipse through the brush to get to Dr. Kim's research location, wander cautiously around her destroyed camp, sneak around the secret research facility and get a chance to go underwater with some scuba diving.

An unfortunate trend in the last 2 games is a strong deviation from the original Nancy Drew model which involved heavy emphasis on the investigation within each game. It was the investigative process that helped bring the books and the PC games together as complementing entities. It is also what ended up luring adults to the games. You could actually play this game with your child/teen (or by yourself) and all involved would get a satisfying game experience complete with full-on snooping, and interesting puzzles that could be quite the stumpers. The fact that one or two mundane tasks were thrown in did not detract at all from the games. The dynamic has now been changed and includes more repetitive tasks which is disappointing. The Creature of Kapu Cave is quite short and it seems as though the tedious tasks were included just to add length to the game.

The repetitive tasks start right from the beginning. You have to make the necklace for Mike in order to get the keys. You go to the beach and pick up some shells. Walk away. Come back and get more shells. Walk away. Come back and get more shells until you have enough of the right type of shells to complete the required necklace.   Should you need more Big Island Bucks, you can make more necklaces or you can try fishing. The fishing is a bit boring. Unless you have the best bait money can buy, there is a long pause in between when you cast your line and the fish actually bites. You'll do this over and over.   Even solving some of the puzzles will have the same effect. You'll make snow cone after snow cone and separate bug parts from seeds. These chores are just downright tedious.
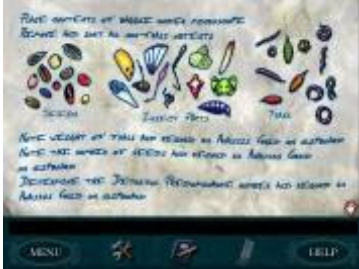
However, there are other types of puzzles where you have to figure out combinations to lockers and boxes. You'll get to ride some tides underwater as you snorkel your way through a maze. These puzzles are fun but easy even at the Senior level. And, as always, there is the 2nd Chance puzzle.

The Hilihili Research facility is the only location that feels more like the old Nancy Drew games. Nancy at least asks some questions and expresses her nosiness here. But, this is short lived. The ending of the game also seems a bit abrupt and the clues you find during the game don't really lead up to this ending at all. The mystery just doesn't seem all that mysterious, if you know what I mean.

Graphically, this is the best Nancy Drew game ever. Thumbs up to HerInteractive for making these improvements. But, overall the game feels like it is aimed at a much younger audience than previous games. Perhaps that is the intention… If you're a die hard Nancy Drew fan like I am, then you'll play the game, get some enjoyment out of it and hope for a return to the Nancy of old in the next installment. Kids will still love it and that seems to be the target audience of the game. Therefore, The Creature of Kapu Cave gets two grades:

For kids: 85/100
For the rest of us: 75/100

Developer: HerInteractive	Minimum System Requirements:
Publisher: HerInteractive	Windows® XP/Vista
Platform: PC	Pentium or equivalent 1 GHz
Genre: Adventure	128 MB RAM (512 recommended)
Release Date: October 2006	32 MB DirectX® Compatible Video Card
Grade: 75/100	16 bit DirectX® Compatible Sound Card
	24x CD-ROM Drive
	Hard Drive space of 1 GB

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

Missing: Since January

PC Review by Ugur Sener

How far would you go to uncover the truth? How many cities would you travel through? How many people would you seek just to ask a single question in hopes of uncovering the smallest bit of information? At what point does the search turn into an obsession?

It began with the discovery of a recording. The film started innocently enough. Perhaps it was intended to be nothing more than a series of images from a family vacation. Journalist Jack Lorski did not expect to see the murder at the end of the video. Who was the man that was killed? Who were the ones responsible? Jack had to know the truth.

It wasn't long before Karen Gijman became involved with the investigation. Jack and Karen would spend hours going over the facts, trying to uncover clues that might help them unlock the mystery. Soon the couple would be completely caught up in the investigation, eventually putting them on the trail of a serial killer.

Unfortunately, the results of Jack and Karen's investigation are unknown. The couple has been kidnapped by a mysterious person only known as "The Phoenix." There is only one clue that might help in the search for Jack and Karen. It is a black disc that has been sent by the Phoenix to SKL Network, which is the company that employs Jack.

The disc contains a series of interlinked riddles. Perhaps somewhere within its contents there is a clue that might lead the police to Jack and Karen's whereabouts. Unfortunately, nobody has been able to get past all of the puzzles until now. The Phoenix has dared SKL Network to go public with the black disc. After much deliberation, the company has decided to take drastic measures to locate their missing journalist Jack and his friend Karen.

Copies of Phoenix's CD have been distributed to a number of people across the globe. Perhaps through a great deal of dedication and collaboration, all the contents of the disc can be accessed. With the authorities at a loss as to how they can locate the missing couple, this is the only hope left for Jack and Karen. You must hurry, with each passing day the hope of finding the couple alive diminishes.

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

If there is a single positive aspect of Missing, it is the game's originality. Developed by Lexis Numérique and published by The Adventure Company, Missing is presented as an alternate reality experience. Rather than taking control of a character and following a storyline by exploring various locations and talking to other characters, players get to pretend they are participating in a real investigation. While the game does have a number of rather frustrating elements, it still deserves attention for its distinct presentation style that attempts to create an uniquely immersive experience.

The basic premise of the game is fairly simple. While investigating a series of murders, journalist Jack Lorski and his friend Karen Gijman disappear. Some time later, the Phoenix contacts SKL Network. The executives suspect this mysterious figure is behind the kidnapping. Phoenix eventually sends in a CD that may contain critical information about Jack and Karen. Unable to crack the disc, SKL Network and the authorities decide to distribute the CD. You, as the player, are one of many people that have decided to try and unlock the contents of the strange black disc.

There is a registration process you have to complete before you can start the game. You have to provide a valid e-mail address since you will receive important clues from other investigators through e-mail. A number of fictional people will contact you on a regular basis with observations about the case, theories on Phoenix's personality, or various facts that might help you in solving some of the puzzles.

The CD itself has a straightforward but nevertheless effective presentation. At any given time, you will be presented with a set of three or six different challenges. You will have to get past these challenges before you can proceed to the next section. You can attempt the puzzles that are part of the current set in any order. However, since there are thematic connections between various challenges, solving one might help towards unlocking another.

Selecting one of the challenges from the current collection will transfer you to a new screen where you will be presented with some clues to help you reach the answer. Sometimes, before you get to the real puzzle, you will have to click on a series of images. Combined with ambient sounds and occasional haunting tunes, these sequences help create a disturbing atmosphere.


The puzzles themselves have a somewhat dark tone. They are always presented against a black background. The choice of color on each screen seems very deliberate. Through the use of small sound effects and a variety of different

imagery, the game attempts to create a feeling of uneasiness. Morbid themes and symbolism are common throughout the puzzles. On some of the best-designed screens, you can almost believe this is truly the work of a psychopath trying to prove the entire world he is smarter than the rest of us.

The storyline unfolds through cinematic sequences presented in between various puzzles. In general, each time you solve a puzzles in a collection, the Phoenix will reward you with a video that may reveal some additional details. The videos themselves can contain clues that can help you with other puzzles.

There is a good degree of variety in the challenges featured as part of Missing. Some of the challenges can be overcome by only using the clues presented to you on the current screen. These are either structured as logic puzzles you might find in other games or play out as mini-games and do not require the use of your detective skills. One of the logic puzzles initially looks like a simple jigsaw. Trying to put together the pieces however, you will quickly realize they do not quite fir nicely. You'll need to do a little more work to reach the answer. On the other hand, one of the mini-games is essentially a simple miniature golf simulation. You have to guide your ball to the hole by hitting it at the correct angles and with the right amount of force. You have to complete each of the featured holes using equal to or less than a predetermined number of strikes.
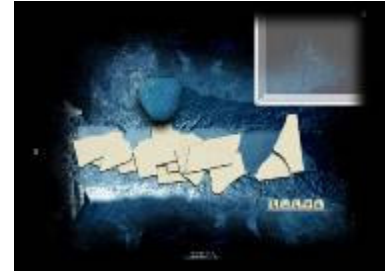
A tremendously more annoying mini-game involves guiding a series of letters to the four corners of the screen. When the mini-game loads, the letters are floating around the center. You have to press various letters on the keyboard to 'push' the other letters closer to the edges. Unfortunately, getting the correct letters to various corners depends as much on dumb luck just as it does on skill. While the sheer number of mini-games featured may irritate many adventure gamers, it should be noted that some of these challenges are nicely designed and can even be entertaining while they last. Nevertheless, the game could have benefited from fewer mini-games and more genuine puzzles.

Fortunately, Missing does have a number of creatively designed puzzles to make up for some of its weaker mini-games. For the most part, solving these puzzles requires the use of the Internet. The game will typically present you with a screen you can examine to come up with one or more clues. Sometimes you may need to manipulate some of the items on the screen in order to reveal the clues. The next step is to go online and search the Internet for the keywords you have uncovered. Sometimes the clues are very straightforward and they will easily direct you to a Web page that has the answer to the puzzle. On other puzzles you will have to sift through a certain amount of information before you get to the key details you are seeking. Even then, you may need to figure out exactly how the answer needs to be entered.

If you are having trouble with some of the puzzles, the fictional characters may e-mail you clues to help you reach the answer. Sometimes their observations may prove to be extremely useful. They might even provide you tools you can utilize to better examine various clues.

The overall concept behind Missing is most definitely refreshingly original. Pretending to take part in an actual investigation, trying to crack a strange disc created by a very dangerous man, and sifting through Web pages to find clues can all be entertaining. However, all of this does not add up to make Missing a monumental achievement. The game has significant flaws that can take away from the experience.

When you load up the game for the first time and solve a few of the puzzles, you will most likely be taken by the original ideas that have gone into the game. Once you complete a few sets of puzzles however, the game starts to become increasingly repetitive if not downright tedious. The cycle of solving a puzzle or winning a mini-game to watch a video clip starts to look stale. The situation is not helped by structure of some of the clips either. There is a lot of footage that does not truly add anything to the game. It feels as though some clips were only included since the developers needed something to be the 'reward' for completing a puzzle. It can be argued that a lot of the films intend to convey different aspects of Jack and Karen's investigation and relationship to each other. Nevertheless, some of them feel drawn out and lacking in substance.

The idea of solving a puzzle and then watching a film to reveal part of the story can also hurt your feeling of immersion. From the beginning, players are told the goal is to crack the disc in hopes of finding clues that might help the authorities locate Jack and Karen. However, as you interact with Phoenix's CD, the story you view for the majority of the game deals with the investigation Jack and

Karen conducted. Even though the puzzles deal with specific facts the journalist and his friend discovered along the way, you can still feel distanced from the events. Rather than being immersed in the alternate reality of the game, you can feel as though you are watching a movie as part of the audience. In particular, you might feel completely out of the loop during the conclusion of the game.

Another problem is with the atmosphere created while you are working on the puzzles. Early in the game, players will likely appreciate the effort that has obviously gone into giving the black disc a disturbing and haunting feel. But once you overcome a number of challenges, ambient sounds, flashing images, and the

dark tone of the puzzles can start to lose their effect. You may even find yourself growing tired of having to click on images before you can reach the puzzle.

Even though they are intended to provide you with additional details about the investigation, some of the e-mails you receive might also have an adverse effect on the game's atmosphere. At times the fictional characters try too hard to find deeper meaning within the puzzles and making absolutely sure you get some of the references. A few of the e-mails may even feel as spam rather than useful information. It can seem as though the game is taking itself a little too seriously, which actually diminishes its believability.

Finally, the reliance on the Internet to solve the puzzles might be a cause for concern. Given that playing Missing requires a registration process and you are sent a number of e-mails throughout the investigation, it is highly conceivable that at some point the server will be taken down and players will not be able to access the game. Of course, that much is true for any massive multi-player game. But in the case of Missing, there is also the added concern of being able to find the Web sites you need to solve the puzzles. There are already a number of Web sites trying to take advantage of the keywords featured in Missing. As such, conducting a search may not always take you to legitimate sites, making it more difficult to find the correct answers to than what the developers intended.

Despite certain problems, viewed as a whole, Missing is still a commendable achievement. It is clear that a great deal of work has gone into creating a unique experience with various distinct elements to make players feel as though they are part of the investigation. The game does feature a good number of creative puzzles. Some of the presentation is quite effective. Some of the video clips, a number of the challenges, and the sound effects all combine to deliver a suspenseful atmosphere. The game is most certainly not without its flaws. The sheer number of mini-games featured can be frustrating, the video clips do not always add much to the story, and players may feel a bit left out of the story. However, unless you find the very idea of using a search engine to solve puzzles repulsive, consider giving Missing a try. It may not be perfect, but it is still an entertaining and unusual experience that can maintain your interest.

Developer: Lexis Numérique **Publisher:** The Adventure Company **Platform:** PC **Genre:** Adventure **Release Date:** 2004 **Grade:** 75/100	**Minimum System Requirements:** Windows® 98/ME/2000/XP Pentium® II 333MHz Processor 128 MB RAM 8x CD-ROM Drive SVGA Graphics Card with 32 bit color 16 Bit SoundBlaster-compatible Sound Card 700 MB Hard disk space 56.6 Kbps or better Internet connection

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

Sentinel: Descendants in Time

PC Review by La Primavera

Name of the game: Tedium

I had a slight misgiving when I bought the game. This was the same Polish developer Detalion, who had created *Schizm* and *Mysterious Journey II*. These games had absolutely stunning graphics, a lot of cerebral puzzles, not-so-attractive characters and mediocre stories (Mysterious Journey II was downright silly). A kind of mixed bag.

But I was a sucker for those strange and beautiful worlds and I wanted to see more. Instead, what I found in *Sentinel: Descendants in Time* was one big yawn.

You call that a story?

The story is supposedly based on the work by an Australian sci-fi / horror / fantasy writer (same as in the first two games). Well, I am sorry to say but either he is a lousy writer or the developer totally mangled it.

Since I don't usually bother to read the manual beforehand, all I know at the start of the game is that I am going to be Bennie, a tomb robber whose sister Carrie has been abducted by Doba and the gang. They demand some kind of ransom, a treasure from the tomb. A guy named Ramirez is the only one who came back alive to talk about the tomb. There's a brief mention of "Tastan", but this Bennie guy speaks so fast and I can't catch everything he says.

The elevator goes down to the ground level. As I (Bennie) walk across the causeway, a cutscene comes in abruptly. I hear Bennie shouting into dusk excitedly, "Dormoose!" WAIT A MINUTE, am I supposed to know whoever that is? What did I miss?

So I stop the game and read the manual grudgingly. In the game I am Beni, and I'm in the caverns of one of the legendary Tastan tombs. The Tastan civilization, one of the most advanced in the history of the world, vanished more than 500 years ago and all that's left are these tombs guarded by the defense A.I. program called the Dormeuse (now I know the correct spelling). Tomb 35, which is where I am as Beni, has a series of chambers with teleporters that allow the sampling of the domains – different worlds that the tomb's owner once cherished.

Well that's a lot to know from the beginning, and if I am supposed to know that from Beni's blurting in the opening scene that's asking a bit too much.

And what am I supposed to do? What is this game about? Is it about finding some great treasure? Or is it about learning about the Tastan civilization and its demise? Or… what? Halfway through the game, I am still scratching my head: this is a story of what?

As I move from one world to another, I do gain some knowledge: there were a million Tastans, who left only 85 tombs, etc. But that knowledge comes only from the cutscene dialogues. I am simply told. By visiting the different domains, I don't get any new insights into "the most advanced civilization". Stations floating over snow-capped mountains, then a fishing village, then a rustic western town on a prairie - they remind me of Disneyland theme parks, but not an advanced civilization.

You could say the game has a nice twist at the end, but the astute adventure game fans would have figured it out long before the end. Besides it was so minor and anti-climactic it actually made me mad.

Not helped by lousy voice acting and script

A good game tells its story through a variety of means: cutscenes, interactive dialogs, design of characters and environment, visual and sound effects, puzzles that reveal new information or new location, and even battling with monsters. However, this game relies solely on cutscene dialogs for storytelling, and it does a dismal job at it with poor voice acting and crappy script.

Over the years adventure gamers have learned to expect little from voice acting, but this one hits near the bottom. On starting the game, I was immediately put off by the obnoxious speech manner of Beni, who was supposed to be my character in the game. I thought, "I don't want to be this bumbling idiot…"

Both Beni and Dormeuse, whose real name was Tamara (what an exotic name), speak in a loud, almost antagonistic voice which sounds out of place. So loud, in fact, you don't need to turn on the subtitles. They speak the same way no matter what the topic is.

Beni comes across as a stupid, ignorant teenager for whom tomb-robbery is some kind of rite of passage. Oh why, oh why am I playing this game? You later learn that he is over 70 years old, as the average life-span in this disappointing

future is over 500 years. If living longer means being stupid longer, I don't want to live that long.

Abrupt and irrelevant bursts from Beni, exclaiming he will win or he will save his sister, or he can't think, or whatever, were actually the only surprise element in this game. They literally startled me.

Dormeuse is portrayed as strong, intelligent, and sexy young woman, but she is not served well by the lousy script either. When she told Beni that she may be asking more from him (or something to that extent), as she lay on her stomach on a papasan bed looking up and showing her cleavage, I had to laugh.

The result of relying on this poor acting and script for storytelling is alienation. The game totally fails to engage. I simply didn't care whatever happened to the civilization or their worlds. I didn't care about Beni or Dormeuse. Soon, I didn't care to look around to see the scenery. I couldn't care less.

Puzzles may be logical but so what?

Puzzles are similar to what you experience in the developer's first 2 games, without much cerebral challenge. They fall into three categories: manipulating mechanical device to get a desired height (rotation, orientation, etc.); color-matching, and sound-matching. Dormeuse ever so often remarks that these domains are just rough sketches of the real things. Well that sounds like one big excuse to me for having created repetitive and unrewarding puzzles.

Take the volcanic islands for example. You are supposed to rotate the bridges to get to a volcano pump. You have about 9 bridges to figure out, and each one has a symbol attached to it. You go up the tower and rotate the bridges by selecting the corresponding symbol from the pyramid-shape device that has 40 or so buttons with different symbols. And you have to repeat this 4 times for 4 sets of bridges. All that effort to get just one crystal.

The sound puzzles may be very irritating to many people, and there are a lot of them. Not only it's often difficult to differentiate the sound, in one domain you can't even hear it unless you turn off the nonsensical background music. So I turned off the music, and I still couldn't hear well because of the incessant bird chirping noise in the background.

I didn't find any puzzles intellectually stimulating. I found them to be too predictable. You will never say "Why didn't I think of that?" in this game. They are no fun either. What joy is there, for example, in opening a door after boring door to hear how it creaks?

What's worse, the puzzles in this game have nothing to do with the story (however flimsy), nothing to do with the lost civilization or the domain in which they exist. They are there, just so you collect a crystal after you finish the puzzles.

Solving one puzzle doesn't even lead to an unexpected event or place. Suppose you have solved the flower-bud puzzle in Tregett and go up the elevator. What now? The next scene looks pretty much the same as the previous one - some kind of mechanical devices against the same background of strange flowers and plants.

Very quickly, solving the puzzles became a tedious chore. All I could think of was just solve them, collect crystals and reach the end. Ahhh the end puzzle. After collecting all these crystals, you would think some momentous secret is about to be revealed. Wrong again.

As you proceed with the game, you get this creeping suspicion that the developer created the game just to show off the graphics, and the story and the puzzles are totally incidental.

The only redeeming feature: beautiful worlds (but not characters)

The domains are indeed beautiful, but I didn't feel much jaw-dropping sense of wonder (like I did in their first game). Instead, I had a strange sense of déjà vu. Tregett looks like it's been recycled from their previous game. The snow-covered Sanselard reminded me strongly of one of the worlds in Myst V without the charm (OK, Myst V did come after this game). Eska looks as if it was heavily inspired by the Channelwood Age in the original Myst. The last domain, Argannas, looks like a mock-up for a Hollywood western. The volcanic world of Corabanti has an unusual beauty, but that's about it.

(Speaking of déjà vu, the opening cutscene is almost identical to a rooftop scene in the 2004 cult Russian gothic sci-fi horror movie titled "Night Watch", based on the novel by Sergei Lukyanenko. Check it out, although the game based on the movie falls flat.)

Perhaps the developer should have invested a bit more in creating better looking characters. Mercifully you don't get to see Beni, but you see Doba, Carrie, and Dormeuse. They all look

very cartoonish, and they cut a sharp contrast to a realistically created environment.

Dormeuse moves awkwardly, and simply looks awful in her tight-fitting red see-through dress, long, purple gloves and black high-heels. (The styles are all wrong, the color combinations are all wrong!) When she blew a kiss at me (Beni) toward the end of the game, I cringed.

Where did my mouse pointer go?

The game uses a first-person perspective with a 360-degree view and freedom of movement. Game control is done either by the mouse or the keyboard. I used the mouse. However, the mouse was very sensitive and moved fast, even after I lowered both speed and sensitivity. I often ended up looking at a close-up of some stone wall.

The default mouse pointer is a miniscule white dot fixed at the center of the screen, which can easily get lost in the scenery (in white snow in Sanselard for example). Hint arrows in golden yellow are often annoying, as they still point to the puzzles already solved.

The game comes with the built-in hint system, but I didn't use it and so I cannot comment.

Hardware caution

Realistic scenes come with a price. If you don't have a TnL (Transform and Lighting) capable video card on your computer, the game still runs but may become very unstable. The error message when the game loads gives the impression that either this video card or DirectX 8.1 is what you need, but you actually need both.

I initially installed this game on my 2-year-old notebook which didn't have this card. I managed to finish the second to last domain, but the last one simply refused to load. I ended up installing the game on the brand-new high-end desktop just to finish the game.

One good thing about setup: the game installs completely on the hard disk, and you don't need to have a CD-ROM disc on your machine to play the game.

Verdict: good graphics alone cannot make a good game

To me, this is the worst of the three games from this developer. The puzzles are too predictable and repetitive, the worlds may be beautiful but boring (as I was there just to solve boring puzzles), and the story is, what story? Not once I felt the tingling in my brain. Not once I felt like I was exploring an alien world. And not once I was made to care for Beni, Dormeuse, or the lost civilization.

You are there, just to see these worlds. Nothing you do affects these worlds or affects the outcome of the game. You can't pick up anything (other than crystals), you can't destroy anything and you can't fall off a cliff and die (I really wanted to do that and tried, about halfway through the game). That's hardly an adventure.

Avoid, unless you want to suffer logical but boring puzzles, unless you just want to see what other beautiful worlds this developer created this time (although you can simply check out screenshots on the net instead). Even then, only if you can get the game for free or borrow from your friend. If you are tone-deaf or colorblind, don't bother at all.

Perhaps the developer should think hard and long before they create the next game. Why do they want to create a game? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What do they want the customers (gamers) to experience? What is it that they want to create, to begin with? In other words, I think they should start asking the fundamental questions. Maybe they should ditch the writer and come up with their own story.

My score is 35 out of 100, with the sole point-getter being the graphical description of the worlds which are still beautiful despite the serious flaws in the game.

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Developer: Detalion **Publisher:** The Adventure Company **Platform:** PC **Genre:** Adventure **Release Date:** December 2004 **Grade:** 35/100	**Minimum System Requirements:** Windows® 98/ME/2000/XP Pentium® III 1.0 GHz or Equivalent (2.0 GHz or Higher Recommended) 128 MB RAM (256 MB Required for XP) 64 MB DirectX Compatible 3D Video Card (128 MB Recommended) DirectX® Compatible Soundcard 24x CD-ROM Drive or Higher 1.6 GB Hard disk space DirectX 8.1 or Higher Keyboard, mouse, speakers

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

The Vortex: Quantum Gate II

PC Review by Thaumaturge

The year is 2057, and earth is dying. Finally brought to its knees by pollution and misuse, the ecosphere is on the verge of collapse. The prediction is that by 2084 all human life will end.
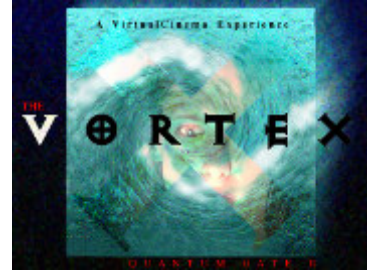
The UN and world governments announce a last desperate plan: troops will be sent through a newly-built "quantum gate" - the creation of a Dr. Elizabeth Marks – to the planet AJ3905. There, the mineral iridium oxide – rare on Earth, but abundant on AJ3905 – will be mined, and then processed to repair the damage done to Earth. The planet is not friendly, however. The atmosphere is a truly deadly combination of chlorine and lithium dioxide, of which one character warns "it'll eat your brain while it eats your face." The inhabitants are a variety of giant and very much hostile insect-like creatures. These strange creatures are the reason why UN troops are sent as part of the mission. They are dressed in environment suits and equipped with virtual reality augmentation headsets. The suits include a euthanizing device to spare the soldiers a horrible death should they be exposed to the atmosphere of AJ3905. One of these soldiers is Drew Griffin, a young man who has recently joined the UN forces.
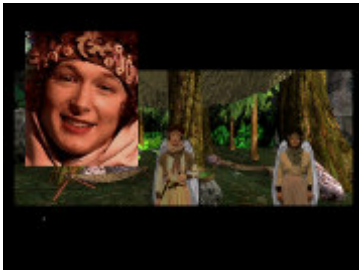
Seems straightforward, doesn't it? But it isn't. Not at all… Sent out to recover Dr. Marks after her transport crashed, Drew's environment suit is breached. He understandably begins to panic, and images start to flash before his eyes. The bugs that inhabit the planet. The journey through the gate. People looking down on him, talking about him as if he were disabled. A car accident from his past…

He wakes to find himself amidst trees and under a blue sky, and before him are two women. They share two most unusual traits: their dresses have a natural look about them, as though they are made of wood, leather, and natural thread. But more amazingly, their shoulders support a pair of large, white wings. One would seem to be the healer, but leaves shortly after being introduced. The other introduces herself as Illyra. Judging from her appearance, she must be a warrior. She explains that they removed Drew from his "battle skin" and brought him to this place, which is a house of healing.

But... AJ3905 is a deadly planet populated by aggressive insects... isn't it? Yet the beautiful surroundings and Drew's ability to breathe the air seem contradicts the alleged hostile conditions of the planet. And Illyra certainly does not appear to be aggressive towards the soldier.

But why would the UN lie? And if the soldiers haven't been killing bugs...

Despite the predations of the UN troops, Illyra acts kindly and warmly to Drew, becoming his guide and ally in this strange new world. She takes him first to see the Sayet, a matriarchal figure whose outlook on Drew is both welcoming and cautious, and from there to the council – not all of whom are as open-minded towards their human guest. Eventually the true nature of the UN's activities come to light. It becomes apparent that while the winged people have little chance of defeating the UN soldiers, Drew might just be able to make a difference. At the end, he finds himself at a crossroads, with much more than just his own fate in his hands.

During his journey Drew may at times find himself suddenly somewhere – or when – else. He may relive memories, not only experiencing what happened but faced again with the choices of that moment. More disturbingly for Drew, he may experience what seem to be other realities, most rather less pleasant for him at a personal level; in some cases terribly so. None have the quality of visions or dreams for Drew – they seem as real as a waking experience. They perhaps understandably cause Drew to doubt his own sanity.

The story is easily The Vortex's greatest strength and it is also the game's focus. The backstory could easily have been made into a standard save-the-Earth-in-an-alien-environment story. But the writers here have created something different, something that I found much more interesting. This is a story which touches on some interesting questions: Can we trust those that lead us? Can we trust what we see and experience? Are we using the Earth as we should? What sort of creature are we really, we who call ourselves humans?

As Drew travels through the alien world he records his experiences in a diary, which already contains a brief history of Drew's signing with the UN and the path to his current situation. This diary is for the most part well-written, but there are some minor inconsistencies. Better yet, the diary seldom becomes boring. For instance, in the aforementioned brief history, a part of the story that could perhaps

have become turgid and uninteresting is instead told in bullet points, which helps the section remain enjoyable. More importantly, the diary records Drew's perspective of events, beyond the thoughts and words that we hear in the game itself. It is here that Drew records his worries over his sanity, and his questions about the UN's mission. Thus, the diary adds rather well to the story.
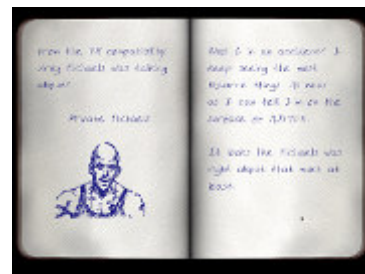
There are no real puzzles to be found in The Vortex. There are no alien machines to be comprehended, riddles to be unraveled or strange codes to be deciphered. There isn't even an inventory. Rather the gameplay consists of Drew's choices and the story in which they are set. Players choose how Drew will respond to others – what he will say, even at times how he will react emotionally – and more. Players may at times choose the glimpses (hallucinations?) of other times or realities that come to Drew. This should not, I feel, be looked upon as a weakness, however. It is true that this is probably not a game for those who desire the puzzles mentioned above, let alone those who crave action, but I found that the choices placed before the player nevertheless succeed very well in creating a sense of interaction, of involvement in the game world and of having an effect on Drew's situation.

Part of this element of choice is the fact that there are a number of areas and experiences which are entirely optional. Some are places in the alien world – at one point Drew has some time in which he might explore a little, and which can be used to visit one of a handful of areas, for instance. Others take the form of Drew's visions. In fact there are paths – even entire areas – which may only be discovered on subsequent play-throughs, and more than one ending – although not all the endings are good ones. This degree of freedom can be frustrating, as it can be easy to feel that something of interest has been missed. At the same time, the freedom also creates an unusually high replay value. Players can experience different options on subsequent journeys into The Vortex, some of which may reveal additional details.

It should be noted that players are given a limited amount of time to make some of these choices. Some of the potential visions which Drew can experience are only available briefly, for instance, and in at least one case waiting too long can result in Drew's death – albeit in that case there is very little pressure as the time available should be more than enough.
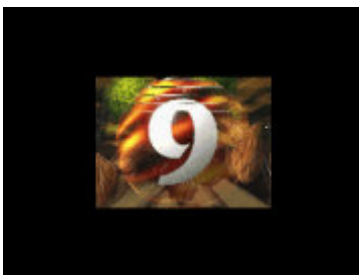
It is possible to die – in some cases in some very odd ways, and on a few occasions through choices that the writers apparently felt so unwise as to invoke clips showing the writer or director ranting at or about the ending that the player has created!

The interface of Quantum Gate II is entirely point-and-click, and very easy to use. The mouse cursor, which normally takes the form of a small crosshair, changes when passed over an area of the screen in which an action is possible (a "hot-spot"), the resultant cursor depending on the nature of the possible action, and a single click under

this condition enacts that action. There is a wide variety of such mouse cursors, indicating such actions as movement, examination, interaction, thought or speech.

Hot-spots on which to use these cursors are in good supply, especially the examination cursor. Most areas have a decent number of hot-spots, creating the impression that you are really exploring the environment rather than simply looking at a computer screen. In addition, such exploration sometimes prompts thoughts or visions on Drew's part.

The movie clips used to portray events in the game and movement between places or views can be paused by a single left click on the movie, or skipped by a single click of the right mouse button. Skipping movies has its risks, however – in some cases options present themselves during the movies, meaning that it is possible to miss choices by skipping through the movies that prompt them, and in at least one case skipping the movie is lethal to poor Drew, as the options that might save him are presented during the movie.

Conversation is carried out by the selection of topics from a short list. Selecting one results in a short video clip in which we hear Drew's words, followed by the response of the person with whom he is talking, and in some cases followed by the appearance of new topics of conversation. In addition to this, some topics or events can result in Drew thinking of important questions that he wants to ask, or a direction that he might want to take. When that topic is specific to that character (or at least to only a few), it is represented by an icon at the bottom right. A simple click on one of these asks its question or takes the conversation

in its direction. On the other hand, some topics can seemingly be asked of any character; the icons for these appear at the top left. These are used by clicking on them (the mouse cursor becomes a thought bubble when over such an icon), and then clicking on a character (the mouse changes to a speech bubble when over a character that can be addressed by that question).

Both movie clips and certain choices are overlaid on the main view, and, combined with the interface described above, creates an interesting and unusual feel, which is at the same time very easy and intuitive to use.

The game's music and sound are very good. Each musical piece has an appropriate feel that produces an effective and fitting atmosphere. For instance, the music of Aylinde (seemingly the name of both the alien world and its winged people) focuses on drums and wordless vocals, evoking an impression of Earth's tribal societies. Of particular note is the music used for the "sounding" scene.

This has an emotive, almost enchanting quality that matches and enhances the mood of the scene very well indeed, contributing to making it a scene that for me, at least, is a favorite.

Graphically, The Vortex is a mixed bag. The full-motion video is very nicely done, and I found the graphical style to be very good indeed, with a slightly surreal (and in a few places rather hallucinogenic) feel. The environments are nicely designed, giving an impression both familiar, via our tribal societies, and at the same time slightly alien. On the other hand, the CGI used is less impressive, in some cases standing out as artificial when compared to the actors set against it. Overall, however, the graphics are acceptable and enjoyable.

Unfortunately there does not seem to be a save function available. Instead it is possible to jump to a scene chosen from a list available via the main menu and play from that point. However, whether or not the choices made prior to that point persist when you choose to continue from a given scene is unclear to me. It appears, at least, as if choices are retained while the game is running, and lost when it is quit.
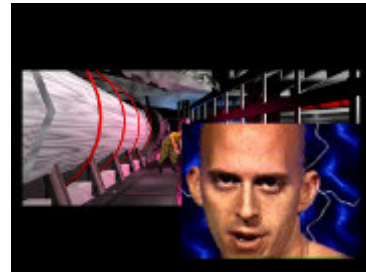
I found the characters interesting and nicely realized. Even if the acting is not perfect, it is not terrible either (especially on the part of the actress portraying Illyra, and in the more emotional encounters). Drew's visions both suggest that his experience might be hallucination and allow the player to fill out some of Drew's past by having the player make choices in Drew's memory, a nice change from simply reading about or watching all of the background.

In conclusion, The Vortex is two things: a very strange game, and an intelligent one. Moreover, it is a fun game, with a very good sense of freedom and choice. The story is well-told and interesting. I would say it is more likely to prompt thought through its themes and questions than the average game narrative.

Some might dislike the lack of puzzles – and indeed, this is not a game that is likely to be very challenging to finish, and nor is it a very long game. Rather I would say that it is a game that should be enjoyed for its story, characters, and impression of choice. All in all, The Vortex is a game that I would very much recommend to anyone interested in a strong story, a degree of freedom of choice, a strange experience and interesting ideas.

Developer: Hyperbole Studios	**Minimum System Requirements:**
Publisher: Hyperbole Studios	Windows® 98/ME/2000/XP
Platform: PC	486 SX 25 MHz
Genre: Adventure	8 MB RAM
Release Date: 1994	640 x 480 256 Colour Display
Grade: 82/100	16-Bit Soundcard
	Double Speed CD-ROM Drive

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

Nick Bounty: A Case of the Crabs

PC Review by Erdalion

Technology often changes the way our favorite media work. It also helps in making media available to more people. The most recent examples would be the drastic changes that the .mp3 has brought in the way we listen to our favorite music, and sites like YouTube which made video publishing a lot easier, for better or worse. What does that have to do with this review and the game in question? Simple; through the advancement of technology and Macromedia's Flash it is now possible to play entire adventure games in your browser, with no download or installation necessary, and A Case of the Crabs, created by Pinhead Games, is one of those games.

More on the game itself, A Case of the Crabs is an independently developed adventure game, starring a young and enthusiastic, though not terribly experienced, private investigator called Nick Bounty. We join Nick as he is about to find himself trapped in a multi-threaded conspiracy involving, well, crabs, those pesky crustaceans. The game borrows heavily from the Noir genre of film, and this is obvious in its presentation and its setting. A Case of the Crabs is fully in black and white and starts with an off-camera narration from the protagonist himself, in typical Noir fashion. Before long, a murder has already taken place and it is up to Nick to solve the mystery.

It should be pointed out however, that A Case of the Crabs is a comedy adventure which does not take itself too seriously, so you should not be expecting a serious Noir story from it. The developers have no intentions to hide the fact that their inspiration came from the classic LucasArts games of the late 80's and early 90's. In fact, this inspiration can be seen in both the interface and the wacky humor of the game, both of which will remind you of the aforementioned games.

The thing about the game that will probably catch your attention, besides the obvious Noir influences, is its humor. Nick comments on the unfolding events in a hilarious manner, the supporting cast with their, shall we say, distinct personalities also add a lot of humor, while the events themselves are often funny in their own right. The writing is for the most part very good, but sadly there are several spelling errors found in the game, which does make it seem slightly amateurish. Another somewhat disappointing aspect of the game's writing is the fact that sometimes there is a discrepancy between the written and the spoken

text, which makes one think that the script could have done with a little more proofreading.

Speaking of the voice-overs, they are easily one of the most accomplished aspects of the game. While not necessarily of professional quality, they certainly get their job done, and help with the delivery of the numerous jokes in the game. The music themes are also very good, and fit in perfectly with the game's Noir atmosphere.

Graphically, A Case of the Crabs is among the better looking independent games. While it uses the two-dimensional graphics commonly associated with the genre, they are well drawn and animated, and the occasional cut-scenes are also very well done. As it has been mentioned before, the entire game is in black and white, which gives it a unique look.

The gameplay found in A Case of the Crabs is exactly what you would expect from a 2D point and click adventure, influenced by such games as Monkey Island. In other words, there are familiar dialog and inventory puzzles. Even lthough they are not the most original puzzles you will ever find, they are logical and fair, so they get their job done. The interface borrows heavily from the early SCUMM system developed by LucasArts, complete with several verbs you can use to perform various actions. However, oftentimes using a verb on a hotspot will only give you a token answer, which does become slightly annoying after a while.

All in all, given the fact that A Case of the Crabs is a game offered completely for free, and also given that you can play it without installing a single file, make it worth checking out for fans of the genre. Of course, the game itself is very enjoyable and entertaining, which is all the more reason for you play it.

The game can be found at www.otterarchives.com/bountygame.html where you have the option to either play it online on your browser, or download it to your computer. At 8MB, even modem users should be able to download it without too many problems. It is also worth mentioning that Pinhead Games is offering all their finished games in a CD for those who are unable to download them, only charging you for the packaging and shipping costs.

Developer: Pinhead Games **Publisher:** Pinhead Games **Platform:** PC, Mac **Genre:** Adventure **Release Date:** 2004 **Grade:** 80/100	**Minimum System Requirements:** Windows® 98/ME/2000/XP Pentium® 600 MHz 128 MB RAM Video Card capable of 320x200 in 16-bit color Windows compatible soundcard *Note: This game may well run on slower* *machines than listed above*

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

Nick Bounty: The Goat in the Grey Fedora

PC Review by Erdalion

Nick Bounty is back in this sequel to the successful independent adventure game of 2004 called A Case of the Crabs. Staying true to the style of its prequel, the Goat in the Grey Fedora is entirely in black and white, with an atmosphere that will remind you of the Noir films of the 1940's and 1950's, while using the same Flash-based engine as its predecessor. However, the game also sports a significant number of improvements over the previous installment.

The first enhancement that you will notice is the graphics. While the original game was completely in 2D, The Goat in the Grey Fedora offers 3D character models over pre-rendered 2D backgrounds. Commonly referred to as '2.5D' graphics, this style has pretty much become the mainstay in modern adventure games, found in commercial releases such as the Syberia games and Still Life. As such, it is not really a big surprise that Pinhead games opted for this approach. Overall, the Goat in the Grey Fedora, while still not as good-looking as professional games, is easily one of the best looking independent games around.

The second improvement you will notice as soon as you start playing the game is its interface. It is very similar to some of the latter LucasArts games such as Full Throttle and the Curse of Monkey Island and is commonly called the "verb-coin" interface. By clicking a hotspot you are presented with three options. You can look at the hotspot, use your mouth with it (not as dirty as it may sound, if the hotspot is another character you talk to them, for example), or use your hands with it for actions like picking up items. This new interface allows for a less-complicated gameplay experience that is intuitive while leaving room for plenty of random interactions with the environment to ensure that we get several funny comments from Nick.

Speaking of which, the humor found in the Goat in the Grey Fedora is as good as the one found in the first game, if not better. That is definitely not a bad thing, given that A Case of the Crabs was a pretty hilarious game. The adventure again feels like some sort of film Noir from Bizarro world, since there are still several of the "rules" that define a Noir, such as the dangerous blonde woman who gets the hero in trouble. Yet the situations in which the characters find themselves often feel almost surreal.

Overall, the quality of the writing is also as good as the prequel, yet sadly there are still some spelling and grammar errors to be found, which is somewhat

baffling given the obvious work that has otherwise gone into the game. It is also worth noting that the game has certain scenes that pay tribute to famous Noir films of the past such as Casablanca, and famous adventure games of the past such as the Secret of Monkey Island, usually in a very humoristic manner. The Monkey Island homage in particular is really endearing, as it is based in one of the funniest parts of that game, the "behind the bookcase" off-screen sequence.

Voice-overs are again one of the game's finest qualities, and they are again improved over the ones in A Case of the Crabs. Jason Ellis, one of the writers and the person that provided Nick's voice in the first game reprises his role in The Goat in the Grey Fedora, and seems more comfortable with it this time around. The rest of the voices are provided by professional actors which do a solid job and make the characters seem more believable and charming. The music is also very good and will definitely remind you of any Noir films you may have watched in the past, so it definitely gets the job done.

Despite all these changes, The Goat in the Grey Fedora plays very much like its predecessor. There are no unfair or blatantly irrational puzzles, and even if you get stuck momentarily, you should always have a clear indication of what you should be doing in order to solve the puzzle. The game is of average length for an independent adventure, and should take you roughly about two hours if you take your time with exploring your environments and following every single dialog option.

Overall, The Goat in the Grey Fedora is a worthy follow-up to A Case of the Crabs, and an entertaining game in its own right. Given the numerous improvements over the first Nick Bounty case, it is recommended not only for those who enjoyed the first game (as they would play it anyway) but also to those who were somewhat disappointed with it, but still saw potential in it. After all, do not forget that it is still free!

The Goat in the Grey Fedora can be found at www.otterarchives.com/bounty2 and as with all other Pinhead games, you may choose to either play it online or download it. At roughly 40MB it could be a while before the download is over for modem users, but it makes for a better gaming experience, especially given the fact that fullscreen play is only available in the download version.

Developer: Pinhead Games **Publisher:** Pinhead Games **Platform:** PC, Mac **Genre:** Adventure **Release Date:** 2005 **Grade:** 84/100	**Minimum System Requirements:** Windows® 98/ME/2000/XP Pentium® 600 MHz 128 MB RAM Video Card capable of 320x200 in 16-bit color Windows compatible soundcard *Note: This game may well run on slower machines than listed above*

ADVENTURER'S RAVINE

Brain Hotel

PC Review by Erdalion

Many of us often think that the future will be radically different from our time. Not necessarily better, just different. However, as Ed Arnold, the star of Brain Hotel is about to find out, certain things never change. Making deliveries is still not a terribly exciting job, people still get their hearts broken by their significant others, and things are never as simple as they seem. Especially when there are super villains involved. As our hero is about to find out, things get even worse when you are supposed to make a delivery to the hotel where a super villain *convention* is taking place.

Brain Hotel is the second game created by Pinhead Games. Just like the first game, A Case of the Crabs, the game can be played online or downloaded. Since it was created with Macromedia's Flash technology, Brain Hotel is easily playable on most PC's without any fear of compatibility issues.

Unlike A Case of the Crabs, which was based on Pinhead Games' original material, Brain Hotel is based on the online comic "Tales of the Odd", by Ron "Aalgar" Watts. You can read the comic at www.talesoftheodd.com. Loosely based would be a more correct term however, since Brain Hotel is not a retelling of an existing storyline. The game merely takes place in the same world as the comic. This world is not unlike many others seen in futuristic novels, movies, or comics. It is dreary and gloomy, and our protagonist is a disenchanted loner.

However, the world in Brain Hotel is a lot wackier and funnier than the average bleak vision of the future, which makes perfect sense given that this is a comedy adventure, influenced by games such as Maniac Mansion. This is reflected in the game's dialogs, which are full of jokes, puns, and more references to real-life comic books and movies than the average gamer could ever possibly recognize. I mean, I struggled with more than a few of them and I take pride in being a huge comic book nerd. Not all the jokes are equally funny however, in fact some of the jokes and characters are more annoying than comical, and you are probably going to be lost in the sheer number of references before too long. Despite this, there are still a lot of amusing jokes in the game and they outweigh the not-so-funny ones, ensuring that Brain Hotel remains entertaining from start to finish.

As far as independently developed adventure games go, Brain Hotel is solid in the graphics and sound departments. Character models are well-designed and

animated quite nicely. The backgrounds are decent, even if they are not terribly detailed. The voice-overs, provided by professional actors, are what stand out the most, since lines are very well delivered in a believable manner. A couple of the voices may not be to everyone's taste, but they do reflect the characters' personalities quite well, so it is not a delivery issue. There are also a couple of music tracks available in the game, but sadly we do not get to hear them often enough, and for that reason the game's sound may seem a bit barren at times.

Brain Hotel is a fairly short game, roughly about sixty to ninety minutes long on your first playthrough, which is the usual length of a quality independent adventure. Sadly, the gameplay is not consistent during the game as some of its puzzles are somewhat lacking. They are not terribly difficult, or original for that matter, as they do not stray far from the 'find item A and bring it to place B' mentality. The problem lies with the fact that it is not always clear what you have to do. Thankfully, the game's site has a hints section which should help you if you get stuck in a specific part of the game, but it would have been nice if the game itself were clearer. Still, the puzzles themselves combined with the humor found in the game make up for this problem, so all in all, Brain Hotel's gameplay remains enjoyable.

The user-interface will be familiar to most fans of adventure games, since it is based entirely on the early LucasArts SCUMM system, which is hardly surprising given the fact that Brain Hotel is heavily influenced by those games. At any rate, the interface works fine, and using every single available verb on any given hotspot provides some funny reactions from Ed himself.

Brain Hotel is an entertaining, if not terribly spectacular entry in the independent adventure scene that should keep you amused while it lasts. It has its flaws, but they are not game-breaking. If you keep in mind that it is a freeware game, and perhaps also keep your expectations a bit low, you are bound to have fun while playing. Brain Hotel can be found at http://www.otterarchives.com/brainhotel where you can either play it on your browser or download it. Narrowband users should be wary of the fact that it is slightly over 30MB so it may take a while to download.

Developer: Pinhead Games	**Minimum System Requirements:**
Publisher: Pinhead Games	Windows® 98/ME/2000/XP
Platform: PC, Mac	Pentium® 600 MHz
Genre: Adventure	128 MB RAM
Release Date: 2004	Video Card capable of 320x200 in 16-bit color
Grade: 70/100	Windows compatible soundcard
	Note: This game may well run on slower
	machines than listed above

The Bard's Tale

PC Review by Ugur Sener

It had been a long and arduous journey. The Bard was sick of fighting seemingly endless hordes of monsters and completing errands for mysterious strangers. He felt weary as he gazed upon the intimidating tower. He really had not seen enough coins to justify the tremendous risks he was taking. His final reward had better be something utterly amazing.

A group of robed figures charged out of the tower. The man leading the charge let the Bard know that it was a mistake to come here. How many times had the exact same threat been made in the last several days? "At least he did not go into a long speech about how he is going to make sure I won't reach the top level of the tower," the Bard thought to himself. His summoned creatures at his side, the Bard braced himself for battle.

Of course, it would be a shame to tell you how that battle ends before you get to experience the aforementioned long and arduous journey. How did the Bard end up at this dark and foreboding tower? What possessed him to confront what appears to be a group of maniacal zealots? After a glimpse of what is to come, The Bard's Tale catapults us into the past, to show us how it all began.

The Bard was not your average hero. He did not possess visions of grandeur; he did not seek greater glory like a valiant knight. All he ever desired was some gold, a good meal, and a warm place to sleep. The company of a beautiful young lady would not hurt either.

He was walking through the small town of Houton when he found himself in front of the Drunken Rat. The local inn always seemed to be a good place to satisfy all of the Bard's needs. It was time to get to work. Pulling out his lute, the Bard played a small magical tune. Called forth by sorcery, a rat curiously appeared in front of the bard. The obedient creature seemed to know the drill. It dashed through the small opening underneath the tavern's door. Just as expected, the Bard heard somebody scream in just a moment.

The ever-heroic Bard rushed in to see who was in trouble. His little summoned rat had done very well indeed. An attractive barmaid was standing on top of a stool, terrified of the vermin. Proclaiming himself a savior, the Bard quickly produced his lute and played a tune to make the summoned creature disappear.

The barmaid was grateful for being saved from the rat. But since the Bard was obviously so efficient at taking care of rat problems, perhaps he would be

interested in putting an end to the infestation down in the cellars? Seeing a clear opportunity for a free meal, the Bard agreed to this admittedly cliché task.

Of course, this would turn out to be different than the average rat hunt deftly placed at the beginning of many a role-playing game. A highly unpleasant surprise was waiting for the Bard downstairs. Between scorching flames, a healthy dose of embarrassment, and the first of many mysterious men to offer him advice, the Bard would start on his epic quest.

Developed by InXile Entertainment and published by Vivendi Universal Games, The Bard's Tale offers a somewhat unique and charming action RPG experience to gamers who might feel as though they have seen just about everything the genre has to offer. The game might not be dripping with originality and breaking new ground in every step, but it does possess a witty style that can prove to be endearing. That is, if you are willing to overlook or put up with its less than glamorous aspects.

Before we get any farther however, it should be noted that The Bard's Tale is not a direct sequel to the role-playing game released during the 1980's that bore the same name. While InXile's president Brian Fargo may have been involved with the original game, the similarities are just about limited to the title. The 2004 release of The Bard's Tale is a departure from the original series both in terms of setting and game play. Using the familiar Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance engine, The Bard's Tale puts the emphasis on action elements as role-playing aspects take the backseat.

From the very beginning, it is very clear that you are not dealing with an ordinary tale of heroism and bravery. The Bard is not some fearless defender against evil, but more of a selfish trickster. He only offers his aid grudgingly if there is promise of a good reward. His cynical attitude and frequent jibes at other characters makes him a rather interesting and entertaining character to control.

The underlying humorous tone is what sets The Bards Tale apart from many other games in its genre. The situations the Bard encounters are often rather comical. A seemingly innocent quest can have catastrophic consequences. A simple task can lead to considerably more trouble than you first expected. Amidst a broken-hearted villager, a Trow in charge of a 'brilliant' time-travel scam, and a horde of zombie cows and sheep, you never know what absurdity might hit you next.

Much of the humor comes from the Bard's witty remarks. On many occasions, you encounter people, places, or situations that will be similar to what you might find in any game with a fantasy setting or role-playing elements. Being very well-traveled himself, the Bard will often recognize these elements and crack a couple of jokes that should be appreciated by seasoned gamers.

The interaction between the Bard and the game's narrator can also be rather amusing. The narrator will make occasional sarcastic remarks generally pointing out what a worthless man the Bard is. Since he can somehow hear the narrator, the sharp-tongued Bard does not let very many of these comments slide, coming back with witty responses of his own.

The core storyline in The Bard's Tale is relatively simple. The first few quests have the Bard traveling to areas around the town of Houton as he completes a few tasks and learns how to play new magical songs. Before long however, you will leave Houton and set out for the next town. It is here that you will learn the nature of your main quest.

At first, it sounds like a simple rescue mission. Take a quick trip to some mysterious magical tower, slay a horde of monsters, and the job is done. Of course, in a video game, things are never quite that easy. Before long, the quest turns into a lengthy journey, with many obstacles you have to overcome before you can reach the final confrontation. While the storyline may not be exceptional, there are several twists and turns to maintain your interest throughout the game.

Players also have a chance to decide how some of the scenes unfold. At certain points, you have a chance to dictate the attitude with which the Bard will respond to a question or comment. Speaking to other characters rude or polite tone can have fairly amusing consequences throughout the game. For the most part, your responses will not have an impact on the ultimate outcome of the scene, but you might end up with a few extra items or hear a couple of additional jokes. You might even manage to get yourself a little bit of help in an upcoming fight.

While the humorous dialogues and the often absurd storyline might be a big part of what keeps The Bard's Tale interesting, the majority of your time playing the game will be spent fighting various monsters. The combat featured in the game has two distinct aspects. Players will have to utilize the Bard's melee fighting abilities to fend off many of their opponents. However, since the enemies typically attack you in fairly large groups, you will also have to rely on a series of summoning spells.

The melee fighting is fairly straightforward. You move the Bard around the game world using the analog stick on the controller. There is an attack button that can be used to swing your button and a block button to defend yourself from the strikes of your opponent. You have to time your blocking to the enemy's attack; you cannot simply press and hold the button to avoid multiple strikes. The speed of your attacks will depend on the type of weapon you are using.

While you will start the game with a simple sword, the Bard will obtain better weapons throughout the game. You can also learn how to use different types of weapons by acquiring various talents when you gain levels. You can learn to wield two-handed weapons that can knock back your enemies or pick up the dual-wielding skill to fight with two weapons. There are also a couple of special weapons that the Bard will come across during his journey. You will not have to learn a special talent to use these weapons. The Bard will be able to use them as soon as he finds them.

What sets the fighting and exploration elements of The Bards Tale apart from many other games are the summoning spells that will be at your disposal. By playing whatever instrument he is carrying, the Bard can call forth a number of magical creatures. At the outset of the game, the only creature you will be able to summon is a common rat. However, after making a very small amount of progress, you will learn the first spell that will let you summon a creature that can actually fight for you.

You will not be able to directly control summoned creatures. However, it is possible to give them various commands. Depending on their current situation, the creatures will usually obey your commands immediately. The instrument you have at your disposal determines the number of creatures you can summon at any given point in time. While you can only have one magical creature that aids you at the beginning, before long you will pick up more powerful instruments that will allow you to bring forth multiple allies at the same time.

A number of the summoned creatures will directly help you in combat by engaging your enemies. For instance, you can summon a heroine that fights with a crossbow. Especially early in the game, she is great at taking out a number of enemies from a distance. On the other hand, you can summon a knight that will face your opponents in melee combat. While your summoned warriors will not win every single fight for you, their presence will often keep some of the enemies at bay, allowing you to personally deal with a smaller number of monsters.

UNCHARTED WATERS

There are also summoned creatures that can help
you indirectly during combat. For instance, the
crone is exceptionally useful as she can cast
healing spells on you and your other magical allies.
Her powerful healing magic can make the difference
in many fights when you think you are just about to
lose. On the other hand, the bodyguard can be used
to fend off against incoming ranged attacks while
the knocker can inflict serious damage on your foes with his deadly traps.

In certain areas, you may also need a couple of creatures that do not aid you
during fights. You can call upon a fairy to bring light to particularly dark areas
where you may not otherwise be able to find your way. In addition, the trap finder
can be extremely useful in some of the game's dungeons. If there are too many
traps draining your health points, you can summon the trap finder and let him
clear the way for you. He will protect you and your other allies by preventing the
traps from going off until you walk past them.

The inclusion of the summoning spells does make the fighting more interesting
than mowing down one horde of enemies after another with a sword. Especially
once you are learn a number of spells and become able to call more than one
creature to aid you on the battlefield, a small amount of strategy factors into the
combat. You will have to choose effective creature combinations and vary your
tactics based on the types of monsters you are facing.

The summoned creatures also add to the game with their personalities. A couple
of them will frequently taunt their opponents. The trap finder can be particularly
amusing with all his complaining and his unabashed satisfaction when happen to
trigger a trap despite his protection. Even though they will not feel like fully
developed characters, it is still nice to see that your summoned allies are a little
more than mindless drones.

Without a doubt, the action elements take the center
stage in The Bards Tale. However, the game does
have role-playing aspects that will influence your
effectiveness in combat. For instance, the Bard has
six key attributes that can be further developed
throughout the course of the game. While the
strength attribute determines the amount of damage
you can deal with melee weapons, the dexterity
attribute will dictate your effectiveness with bows and arrows. A high vitality score
will make the Bard able to withstand greater amounts of damage whereas a high
charisma will give you a discount at the stores. Indicating how well the Bard can
use various musical instruments, the rhythm attribute will give bonuses to your

summoned creatures. Finally, a high luck score will have a positive impact on many aspects of the game.

Your initial score in each of the attributes is determined by the difficulty level you choose at the beginning of the game. You also get to distribute a set number of points across the six attributes. As you complete various quests and defeat monsters, you will earn experience points and gradually gain levels. Each time you gain a level, you gain two bonus attribute points. You can continue to increase each category until you reach the maximum score of twenty.

The way you allocate your attribute points will for the most part depend on how you want to deal with your enemies. If you prefer to face them head on in melee combat, a high strength score will be important. On the other hand, if you want to rely on your summoning spells as much as possible, you may want to max out your rhythm score. However, regardless of your preferences, there will be times where you might simply have to utilize a ranged weapon or directly engage an enemy in melee. As such, you will have to maintain at least a certain degree of balance between the various attributes.

In addition to increasing your attribute scores, gaining levels will also give you access to new talents. A number of the talents featured in the game deal with learning how to use various types of weapons. There are also a number of talents that will give you special abilities during fights. For instance, you can learn 'critical strike,' which will give the Bard a chance to inflict heavy damage on his enemies. There are also talents that only become available once you meet their prerequisites. For example, if you acquire the 'dual wield' talent, the Bard will become able to learn 'riposte,' which allows him to respond with a counterattack when he successfully blocks an opponent's strike.

Given its humorous tone, fairly entertaining action elements, and interesting summoning dynamics, The Bard's Tale certainly sounds like a pretty decent game. It does not disappoint from a presentation point of view either. They may not exactly be exemplary, but the graphics get the job done. The character models and a few of the areas can be a bit lacking at times, but some of the

environments a well-crafted with a lot of attention to detail. The voice acting is great for the most part. The voices seem fitting for the characters and the lines are usually delivered effectively. Even though it may not be exceptionally memorable for most players, the soundtrack suits the game's lighthearted fantasy setting.

There are also a number of segments where you will encounter a group of characters singing a song with fairly amusing lyrics. Whether the other characters are praising the Bard for the horrible things he has inadvertently caused or proclaiming "it's bad luck to be [the Bard]," these sections certainly enhance the game's atmosphere. They also seem very appropriate for a game whose protagonist is a bard.

Unfortunately, The Bard's Tale does have a number of problems. First of all, going through some of the areas featured in the game feels like a tedious chore. There are times where you fight one or two types of monsters over and over again as you cover a fairly large area. Some of the dungeons seem to drag on for too long before you are rewarded with a cut-scene that unravels more of the story. Some more variations in level design or the inclusion of several more types of enemies would have been much welcome. A few more side quests players could perform while exploring various areas or some more characters the Bard could talk to would have been helpful as well.

The game could have also used a little more room for character customization. While players do have the ability to dictate attribute scores, select talents, or pick the weapon they would like to use, it never feels as though you truly have freedom to develop your character in various different ways. It would have been nice to have additional choices for equipment and a more diversified list of talents with some more specialty skills. The benefits from increasing various attribute scores should have also been a little more noticeable.

In the end, The Bard's Tale is a charming game that is hurt by a series of problems. The storyline does not include a great deal of depth. Some of the dungeons become a little tiresome to explore. Players do not have as much freedom as they could in terms of customizing their characters. On the other hand, the game has a number of strong elements as well. Even though it might grow a little stale after a while, the humor is for the most part entertaining. Using musical instruments to summon creatures makes for some interesting game play mechanics. There is plenty of game play time with a lengthy main quest and a number of bonus areas to explore. Overall, The Bard's Tale does not have the makings of an unforgettable action RPG experience. However, it is still an interesting game with a pleasant lighthearted atmosphere that can keep you entertained for quite a number of hours.

Developer: InXile Entertainment **Publisher:** Vivendi Universal Games **Platform:** PS2 (version reviewed), Xbox, PC **Genre:** Action RPG **Release Date:** October 2004 **Grade:** 77/100	**System Requirements:** Windows® 2000/XP Pentium® III 933 MHz processor 256 MB RAM 5.5 GB hard disk space Direct X 9.0c

UNCHARTED WATERS

Intrigue at Oakhaven Plantation - Walkthrough

Written by Southern Belle

Welcome to Louisiana! This game is played using two characters, Daphne and Dominic. Each character has ten puzzles to solve. You begin the game as Daphne. If you find yourself stumped at some point, try changing to Dominic and vice versa. There are times when you must change characters to move forward in the game. If a certain puzzle has you befuddled, you can right click to exit that puzzle and continue searching the mansion. Notice the doorknob in the bottom left corner of the screen. Clicking on the doorknob will allow you to exit the room you are currently in.

And now, enjoy the bayous, Spanish moss and Old World charm of Intrigue at Oakhaven Plantation.

As Daphne

- Click on the screen and read the letter from Simone Allain.
- Click on the letter and see the number of puzzles completed.
- Move forward to the mansion and enter the front door.
- Click on the mirror.
- Go into the Living Room on the left and talk with Simone. Exhaust all conversation.
- Exit the Living Room and go upstairs.
- Go down the Right Hallway and enter your Bedroom on the right.

As Dominic

- Read the letter from Simone Allain.
- Click on the screen and see the number of puzzles completed.
- Move into the house and then into the Living Room. Exhaust all conversation with Simone.
- Exit the Living Room and go upstairs.
- Go down the Left Hallway and enter your Bedroom on the left.

As Daphne

- When you wake up, pick up the pitcher of water in the upper right hand corner.
- Enter the Bathroom. Take the shell shaped soap cake on the right by the sink.
- Place the shell shaped soap cake on the Bath Essentials to the right of the bathtub.

- Click on a soap cake to move it. Then click on the location you wish to move it to. Arrange the soap cakes to read "The animals will guide you."

- Exit the Bathroom and the Bedroom.
- Exit the Right Hallway to the Entry Hallway and pick up the stone on the little table to your right.
- Go down the Left Hallway and enter the Library on your right. Read the book about "Herbal Tea" on the left side, the second shelf from the top, the book about "American Religious Practices" on the left side, the second shelf from the bottom and the book about "Voodoo and Swamp Witch" on the center shelf left of the green chair.
- Read the book about "Symbols and Talismans" on the coffee table by the cup.
- Click on the book "Compound Words" in the bookcase behind the railing on the left. Click under each picture to change the picture. Select the star + the fish = starfish. Lips + stick = lipstick. Pine + cone = pinecone. Paint + brush = paintbrush. Foot + ball = football. Shoe + lace = shoelace. There are other combinations that can be selected; these are the first six.
- Pick up the music book on the table on the far right.
- Exit the Library and the Left Hallway. Go to the Right Hallway and enter the Music Room.
- Pick up the stopper on the music stand.
- Use the music book from your inventory on the harp. Click on the harps in the following order – 7, 1, 5, 4, 2, 8, 6, 3.


- Exit the Music Room and go downstairs.

- Enter the Parlor and pick up the stopper on the mantel above the fire.
- Enter the Bar and Billiards Room and talk with Joe.
- Exit the Bar and Billiards Room and the Parlor and go across the hallway to the Living Room.
- Go into the Dining Room and take the doll furniture on the floor on the left and the Julep glass on the table.
- Go into the Kitchen and talk with Paulina. Take the teacup and the sugar lumps. Look at the stones by the fire.
- Combine the stone you picked up upstairs with the bag Paulina gave you. Use the bag on the stones next to the fireplace. Place the stones in the following order:

- Go out the back door into the Herb Garden. Take some peppermint from the potted plant under the tree on the left.
- Exit the Herb Garden and go back through the Kitchen and into the Dining Room.
- Use the Voodoo Doll in your inventory and place it next to the doll on the floor by the fireplace. You have approximately 25 – 30 seconds to click on 30 dolls. Click on the dolls in no particular order. If you keep making a circle of the three dolls in the lower right quadrant, it can be done. Or, continually click on the middle Voodoo doll while it is showing.
- Exit the Dining Room and go upstairs. Continue up the next flight of stairs and enter the Nursery on the right. Use the doll furniture from your inventory and place it in the dollhouse on the floor. Match the pairs of toys. The pairs are A+P, B+N, C+L, D+Q, E+M, F+J, G+K, H+O and I+R.
- Pick up the bottle stopper on the floor by the blocks.
- Exit the Nursery and enter the Attic on the left. Look at the picture on the floor.
- Go downstairs to the Parlor and take the easel.
- Combine the peppermint with the teacup in inventory. Use the teacup with peppermint on the teacups on the shelves against the wall on the left. Arrange the herbs in the following order. Senna, laxative; Uva Ursi, diuretic; Golden seal, antibiotic; Dandelion, bloating; Gensing, immune; Feverfew, migraines; Spearmint, indigestion; Rosehips, Vitamin C; Garlic, cholesterol; Camomile, calming; Ginger, motion sickness; Raspberry, morning sickness; Slippery Elm Bark, sore throats and Comfrey, cell growth.
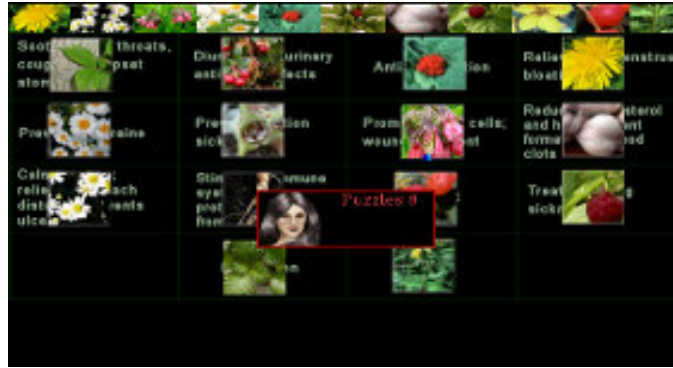
- Go back to the Attic. Use the easel in your inventory on the picture on the floor. The portraits should be hung in the following order.


- Go back downstairs and out into the backyard. Take the mint leaves from the plant on the right. Take the oars from the railing on the left.
- Use the oars in your inventory on the boat. Go forward, turn left, forward, forward, right, right, forward, left, left, left, left, forward, left, forward, right, left, left, right, right, right, forward, left, right, right, forward, left and forward.
- Enter the door of the house. Talk with Brigitte.
- Click on the Witch Board in the bottom right hand corner.
- Click on the center pointer. The Witch Board tells you that "Only as a pair will the truth be told and the lock of silence be broken". The Witch Board will continue to answer your questions with "yes" or "no" for as long as you wish to play. When you are finished, click on the no, click on the center pointer, then click on Goodbye.
- Talk with Brigitte. Give her the pair of Voodoo dolls.
- Click on the deck of cards until you have dealt out 10 cards.

- Click on the green shaded cards on the left. Click on the cards on the right the same way. You may have as many readings of the Tarot cards as you would like.
- Exit the cabin.
- When you return to the house, go into the Gazebo. Take the photo and the key.
- You will automatically go upstairs to your room for the night. When you wake up, change characters to Dominic.

As Dominic

- Look at the rifles hanging on the wall.
- Enter the bathroom and look at the torn post card.
- Exit the bathroom and bedroom and enter the Library. Take the book of music on the left.
- Exit the Library and go to the Music Room and pick up the tape dispenser on the table next to the Crystal Ball.
- Use the music book in your inventory on the bongo drums. Click on the drums in the following order - 4, 6, 1, 8, 2, 7, 5 and 3.
- Go back to your bathroom and use the tape dispenser in your inventory on the torn post card.
- Put the picture together.
- Exit your room and go upstairs.
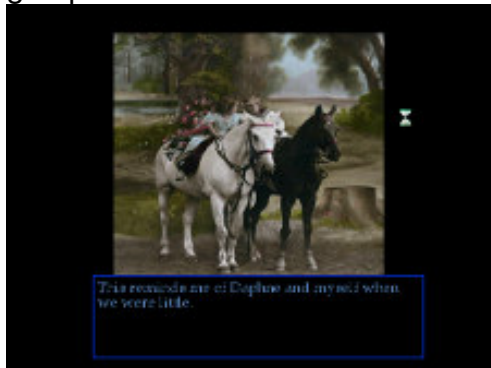
- Go in the Attic on the left and look at the mouse in the lower right hand corner.
- Exit the Attic and go downstairs.
- Go through the Parlor and into the Bar and Billiards Room. Talk with Joe. Take the cigar box on the pool table.
- Enter the Storeroom and take the rifle and the matches.
- Exit the Storeroom and the Bar and Billiards Room and go to the Living Room.
- Enter the Living Room and pick up the hat on the table on the right.
- Click on the portrait on the left.

- Enter the Dining Room and use the matches to light the candles on the cake on the left. Light the candles in the following order – 3, 1, 9, Center and 7.
- Enter the Kitchen and talk with Paulina. Get the Gris-Gris bag. Take the cheese on the table.
- Go back to the Bar and Billiards Room and talk with Joe. Get the knife.
- Exit the Bar and Billiards Room, go through the Parlor and go out the back door. Take the mousetrap on the floor on the right hand side.
- Go upstairs to the Nursery. Use the hat in your inventory on the horse. Solve the slider puzzle.

- Pick up the jar of pickles next to the lamp then exit the Nursery and go into the Attic.
- Use the cheese on the mouse. Use the trap on the mouse.
- Move the mouse left, up, up left, left, down, left, left, left and down.
- Exit the Attic and go back to your Bedroom. Use the rifle in your inventory and put it on the wall with the other rifle. Click on 1841 Mississippi, then on the fourth rifle from the top. Click on 1763 Charlesville Musket, then on the first rifle. Click on 1852 Enfield Cavalry, then on the second rifle. Click on 1858 Enfield Cavalry, then on the sixth rifle. Click on 1859 Sharps Infantry, then on the third rifle.
- Exit your Bedroom and enter the Library. Read the book on the coffee table and see that you need garlic, cinnamon and cloves for a protection Gris-Gris. Look at the bookshelves on the right and find Classic Books. Click on a book title at the bottom of the screen and then on the picture that represents that title. Place the book titles in the following order.

- Go downstairs to the Kitchen. Use the jar of pickles in your inventory on the Spiced Pickles on the shelf behind Paulina. Unscramble the words to read cinnamon, garlic and cloves. Click on a letter and then click on the jars above the letters to place that letter in the correct position.
- Exit the Kitchen and go out the back door. Take the oars. Use the oars in your inventory and click on the boat. Follow the animals to Hattie's cabin.
- Talk with Hattie. Give her the cigars.
- Combine the cinnamon, garlic and cloves one at a time in the Gris-Gris bag and give it to her.
- When you return to the house, go to the Gazebo. Take the photograph, the key and the locket.
- Go inside and automatically go to your room. When you wake up, go into the bathroom and take the pool cue in the corner.
- Go downstairs to the Bar and Billiards room. Use the cue stick on the pool table. Click on the balls in the following order – red, yellow, green, brown, blue, pink and black.

As Daphne

- Exit your Bedroom and enter Dominic's room. Take the liquor bottle on the mantel. Enter the bathroom and take the stopper from the table on the right.
- Return to your room and click on the dressing table. Place the stoppers in the perfume bottles.

- Exit your room and go downstairs to the Bar and Billiards Room. Talk with Joe. Mix the Mint Julep. Combine in your inventory the water from the pitcher, the mint leaves, the sugar and the bourbon one at a time with the Julep glass. Give the Mint Julep to Joe.
- Exit the Bar and Billiards room and go out the back door.
- Use the oars in your inventory and click on the boat on the left. Row straight out to the island. Go in the cave and click on the trunk. Use the key in your inventory on the trunk.

As Dominic

- Go into Daphne's bathroom and take the Beryl Stone.
- Go into the Parlor and use the Beryl Stone on the Crystal Ball. There are 18 questions to be answered. You must answer 9 correctly.
  Mardi Gras is the celebration before Lent.

Louisiana was named in honor of King Louis XIV.
The Lake Pontchatrain Causeway is 24 miles long.
Jean Lafitte helped win the War of 1812.
Breaux Bridge is known as the "Crawfish Capital of the World".
Marie Laveau practiced her Voodoo in Congo Square.
The US paid France 15 million dollars for the Louisiana Purchase.
Beauregard is General Pierre Gustave Toutant's last name.
St. Joseph's Cemetery faces North and South.
Spanish moss is used to make clothing, stuff mattresses and is brewed with tea.
Louisiana has the largest population of Cajuns.
The dueling oaks are at New Orleans City Park.
The New Orleans and Carrollton Line has been in operation since 1835.
Baton Rouge's flag is a field of Crimson.
Bayou is a French name for slow-moving river.
Opelousas is the third oldest city in Louisiana.
The city of Ponchatoula derives its name from the abundance of Spanish moss.
Myrtles Plantation is known for its 10 murders committed there.

- Exit the Parlor and go out the back door. Use the oars on the boat on the left and row out to the island.
- Enter the cave and talk with Daphne. Use the key in inventory on the trunk. Use the knife to pry up the lid.
- Daphne will take the diary. Open the diary and take the pictures from the right hand page. Read the diary. When the conversation is over, you will automatically go back to the house.
- When Daphne and Dominic finish talking on the back porch, they will go see Joe. Click on Joe to start the conversation.
- When the conversation with Joe is over, you will go see Paulina.
- Click on Paulina to start the conversation.
- When the conversation with Paulina is over, click on Simone's bedroom door.
- Click on Simone to begin the conversation. When the conversation is over, enjoy the end game.

Many thanks to Cindy Pondillo, this game's developer, for the input she provided during the writing of this walkthrough.

Developer: Cindy Pondillo	**Minimum System Requirements:**
Publisher: Cindy Pondillo	Windows 95/98/ME/2000/XP
Platform: PC	500 MHz or faster processor
Genre: Adventure	32 MB RAM
Release Date: October 2006	DirectX 5 or above
	DirectX-compatible video card
	DirectX-compatible sound cards

Safecracker: The Ultimate Puzzle Adventure - Walkthrough

Written by Southern Belle

Right clicking will bring up your inventory and allow you access to the Main Menu. Click on the little door on the right end of the tool bar for the Main Menu. You can access the map by clicking on the left end of the tool bar. Read every paper you find scattered throughout the house, if you would like. I am not indicating where they are because you can walk through the game without reading them. Enjoy!

- Turn right and go through the Small Sitting Room to the Small Corridor.
- Look closely at the puzzle with the blue, red and green balls. The balls must line up under the matching color arrows. Red left twice, blue right twice, green left once, blue left once, green left once, red left once, blue right once, red left once, blue left twice, red left once, blue left once and red right once.

- Take the resistor and the paper.
- Turn around and go back through the small sitting room.
- Turn right and go forward to the double doors. Click on the keypad on the right of the doors.
- Enter the combination you took from the drawer in the Small Corridor. Enter 4298.
- Turn right and enter the Museum.
- Go diagonally right to the safe in the corner.
- Click on the safe. Number the gold colored buttons left to right and top to bottom 1-16. Press in order 15, 14, 13 twice, 9, 5, 1, 7 twice, 6, 5 twice, 4 twice, 3, 2 twice, 6 twice, 12 three times, 7 twice, 3, 16, 15 twice, 11, 7, 4

twice, 8 three times, 4, 11, 8, 4 twice, 15 twice, 11 three times, 13 twice, 9 three times, 13 three times, 14 twice, 15, 14, 16, 12 twice, 16 three times, 12, 13, 14 three times, 15, 16, 14 twice, 16, 15, 14, 15, 14 three times, 13 twice, 14, 13, 14, 13.

- Take the L=E paper and pull the handle.

- Go toward the right hand window, turn around and look at the currency puzzle.
- Click on a square and cycle through the available currencies. You must have only one of each kind of currency in each column or row.

- Move right toward the double doors and turn around to look at the white square puzzle. You must move the white square through the blue squares, turn them white and make them disappear. Move the white square down, right, up, right, right, down, left, down, right, down, left, up, left, up, down, down, left, down, right, right, right, up, right, left and left.
- Exit the Museum and go across the Winter Garden to the Main Sitting Room.
- Look at the safe in the left bookcase behind the sofa.
- This is a substitution code. L = E. Turn the inner wheel so that the L is under the E. Decode the letters on the bottom. It says - six, four, one, two. Set the dials at the top to 6412. Take the photograph and the eight pin circuit. Look at the yellow sticky note.
- Turn around and go forward. Turn left and enter the Study. Click on the box with the red light on the side of it.

- This puzzle is magnetic. You have to move the little ball from the opening location to the hole at the bottom right. Click on the horseshoes in the following order – top, right, bottom, left, bottom, right, bottom, left, top, right, top, right, top, right, bottom, right, bottom, left, top, right, bottom. Take the four pin circuit.
- Exit the Study and go back through the Winter Garden, into the Museum and into the Office door on the left.

- Look at the keypad with the red light on the left. You are trying to find a path that will use all the keys following the direction of the arrows and end with a key pointing at the red button. Press the buttons in the following order 7, 6, 14, 16, 4, 8, 5, 1, 3, 2, 10, 11, 15,13 and 9. Press the red button.
- Look up and click on the mirror. Go to the opposite side of the room and click on the mirror there. Take the transistor from the globe.
- Turn around and move to the Workshop door. Look at the keypad on the right. Place the 8 pin circuit, the 4 pin circuit, the transistor and the resistor on the broken keypad.
- Enter the Workshop and go to the safe in the far left corner. The combination is random. The lock is broken so the numbers don't give the same response every time. Take out a sheet of paper and pencil, or however you like, and start writing. Look closely at the safe keypad. Start with the number 1 and click on it 4 times. Write these numbers down in a column. Do this 4 more times for the number 1 and write down, in columns, what each rotation is. After the fifth set of numbers, it will start to repeat. Do this for all the numbers. Look and see which numbers will have a number at the top of one of the rotations that you need to enter 5841. Circle them. Back away from the safe to reset the puzzle. You must set up the numbers that will come up first on the next rotation of a number. In this game, the number 7 will have a 5 at the top of the fourth rotation. I must press the number 7 twelve times. This goes through the first three rotations for the 7 and leaves the number 5 as the first number to come up at the next rotation. Eight will be at the top of the fifth rotation for the number 9, so I must press 9 sixteen times to set up

the number 8 at the top of the fifth rotation. The number 4 will be at the top of the fourth rotation for the number 2. I will press the number 2 twelve times to set up the 4 as the first number in the next rotation. The number 1 will come up as the first number on the 6 key at the fourth rotation. Again, I will press the number 6 twelve times to set up the number 1 on the fourth rotation. Now I will press the number 7926 to dial in 5841.

- Take the magnetic card.
- Exit the Workshop and go back to the Study.
- Look at the keypad next to the door. Notice that three of the keys are lighter in color than the others from use. Put the magnetic card in the slot and press the lighter color numbers until you get the correct sequence. Enter 834.
- Go past the Service Stairs to the dining room. Look at the picture you took from the safe in the Main Sitting Room. Arrange the pictures to match the photograph.


- Take the letter from the safe.
- Go back to the workshop and look at the safe with the laser lock. Press the button above the first space until the blue laser light appears. Press the button above the second space until the laser light turns yellow. Press the button above the third space until the light on top comes on. Do this very slowly, as there is a pause before the light comes on. Enter 584.
- Take the small gold key and the T shaped key.
- Exit the Workshop, turn left and go to the Small Sitting Room using the door to the Small Corridor. Approach the door and unlock it.
- Go through the Small Corridor, turn right and go into the Small Sitting Room.
- Turn right and use the T shaped key on the cabinet.

- Take the piston from the cabinet.

- Go back to the Service Stairs by the Study and go into the Basement.
- Look on the right for the puzzle that will turn the lights on. All the red knobs should point up. Do this in no particular order.
- Go forward and turn left and enter the Store Room.
- Go forward and place the piston in your inventory in between the two that are already there.
- Look at the panel on the water tank. You must fill the center tank to the level the arrow is pointing at. Number the buttons starting on the left top 1, the right top 2 and the bottom buttons 3. Press them in the following order – 3 left, 2 left, 3 right, 1 left, 3 right, 1 left, 2 left and 1 left.
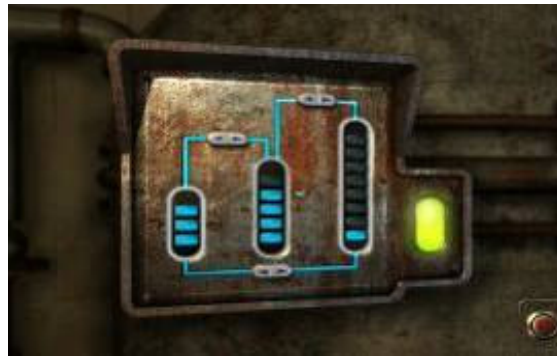
- Exit the Store Room and go straight. Look at the puzzle on the wall. The goal is to light every other light and create a path to the light in the upper right hand corner. You can only turn at corners. Beginning from the top left light every other light 4 times. Turn right and skip the first light and light the second one. Turn diagonally up and light every other light twice. Go down and light every other light twice. Turn right and light every other light once. Turn right and light the corner light. Go straight up and light every other light 3 times. Go up diagonally left and light every other light 3 times. Turn right and light every other light once. Go diagonally down right and light every other light once. Go right and light every other light. Take the GPS keycard and the brass key.

- Turn around, go forward and turn left. Go back upstairs.
- Go through the dining room and unlock the door with the brass key.
- Unlock the door to the Hall.
- Turn around, go forward, turn right and go up the stairs.

- Turn right and go forward to the Kitchen door. Unlock the Kitchen door and enter the kitchen. Turn right and go to the dumbwaiter.
- Pressing the up arrow moves the dumbwaiter up 5. Pressing the down arrow moves the dumbwaiter down 7. Press the up and down buttons in the following order. Up, up, down, up, down, up, down, up, down, up and up. Take the special pipe key.
- Exit the Kitchen into the West Corridor and turn left.
- Go to the end of the corridor and turn right.
- Look at the keypad. Use the Special Pipe Key to open the door on the keypad.
- The different colored wires form number shapes and they are in layers. Green is the top layer, then yellow, blue and red. Enter 2493.
- Enter the Yellow Room.
- Turn left and go to the keypad by the window. Click on the switch in the upper left corner. Take the Magnetic Pass and the Snooker Rules.
- Turn around and look at the plate at the top of the door to the toilets.

- Exit the Yellow Room and turn left.
- Go to the Hall and turn left.
- Go forward three times and open the door to the toilets.
- Look at the plate attached to the top of the door.
- Go forward twice and turn left.
- Enter the Games Room.
- Look at the Snooker Rules. Note the number of balls of each color that are used to play the game and their point value. Count the number of balls that are present at the Snooker table, including those that are in the baskets under the table. There are four balls missing. 1 black, 1 green and 2 reds. Using their point values, that would be 7, 3, 1 and 1. The combination to the safe on the wall is 1137. Put the green magnetic pass in the slot and enter 1137.
- Take the Fountain Plug and the Lever.
- Go to the driving machine. Insert the GPS card in the slot and turn on the ignition. Make the turns just as the green line indicates.
- Turn the wheel right, left, right, right, left, right, left, left, right and left.

- Take the Paper from the slot.
- Go downstairs to the Winter Garden.
- Put the Fountain Plug in the hole in the floor. These instructions assume that you have your back to the hallway. Move left, right, right, right, left, left, left, left, right and left. Take the Double Key.
- Exit the Winter Garden and go into the Museum.
- Go to the keypad by the open safe.
- Enter 6821 from the paper you took at the driving machine.
- Click the arrows in the following order – The arrow to the right of the number in the top right hand box, to the left of the number in the box at the lower left, below that same box and above the box in the top right hand corner.

- Go upstairs and to the Violet Room just past the Games Room. Use the Double Key to unlock the door. Go to the music box on the dresser on the right hand side of the door to the toilets. Use the Small Gold Key to open the music box. Take the Small Iron Key and the Screen and Keycard Reader.
- Note the marks on the top of the door.
- Exit the Violet Room and go to the Games Room. Enter the Library.
- Go to the safe on the left wall. Note the sticky note to call Sarah. Use the telephone in the Blue Room to translate the name into numbers. Enter 86265. Take the Steering Wheel.
- Turn around and look at the code machine. Use the Screen and Keycard Reader on the space under the keypad. You can see partial numbers on the reader. Enter 8796. Take the triple key.
- Go to the Blue Room. Click on the telephone puzzle. Use the iron key on the keyhole. Turn the key. Press the speakerphone button. Enter numbers using the keypad on the phone. A steady green light means the number is correct and in the right place. A blinking green light means the number is in the solution, but in the wrong place. A red light means the number is incorrect. You have four tries and then the puzzle resets to another code. The solution is random. In this game, the code was 5139. Take the Chip Card and the Letter from Margaret.
- Go downstairs to the Workshop and directly ahead to the safe. Use the Chip Card on the slot and enter Duncan's middle name on the dials. Enter Walter.

- Enter the Boudoir.

- Look at the box on the table to the left.

- Pick up the magnet on the left. Move the blocks in the following order – 1 up, 2, down, 3 and 4 up, 5 right, key and 6 left, 7 down, key right, 8 down, 9 left, 10 up 6 right, 8 down, key and 6 left, 7 up, 5 left, 4 down, 6 right, 2, 8 and 11 up, 5 left, 11 down, key right, 1 down, 9 left, 7 up, key right, 8 up, 6 left, 10 down, 3 up and key out to the right. Right click on the left where you picked up the magnet to drop it. Take the key.
- Go back upstairs to the metal door by the Games Room.
- Look at the door and use the Steering Wheel to replace the missing one.
- Ignore the two wheels on the right. Turn the top wheel 4 times, the middle wheel 3 times and the bottom wheel 7 times.
- Enter the Laundry Room and go up the ladder on the left.
- Approach the chessboard behind the bars. Use the handle on the mechanism on the right to raise the bars. The object of the puzzle is to place 6 queens on the board so they cannot move into each other. Queens may move in a straight line vertically, horizontally or diagonally. Place a queen in row 1 column 4, row 2 column1, row 3 column 5, row 4, column 2, row 5 column 6 and row 6 column 3.

- Take the Triple Key.
- Turn around and go to the safe in the opposite corner.
- You must connect the pipes to make a complete circuit.

- Take the Carved Stone Block.
- Exit the Loft and go to the West Corridor. Turn right. Move forward twice and turn left. Notice the marks on the top of the Dressing Room door.
- Enter the Dressing Room and look at the puzzle on the wall on your right.
  Use the Carved Stone Block on the space at the bottom.
- The numbers above the dials should be viewed in pairs. The first pair is 34. Look at the block and use row 3, column 4. The first letter decoded is O. Continue this for all the pairs. Enter 1265.
- Take the Triple Key.
- Exit the Dressing Room and go to the Violet Room.
- Look at the door to the left of the door to the toilets.
- Use the Triple Keys to open these doors.
- Combine the marks you noted above the Dressing Room, Yellow Room, East Corridor toilets and The Violet Room doors. It forms an LCD readout of numbers. Enter 3528. Take the paper in the box.
- Name any heir you like.

Developer: Kheops Studio **Publisher:** The Adventure Company **Platform:** PC **Genre:** Adventure **Release Date:** August 2006	**Minimum System Requirements:** Windows® 98 / 2000 / ME / XP Pentium® III 800 MHz 64 MB RAM DirectX® 9.0c compatible 64 MB video card DirectX® 9.0c compatible sound card 16X CD/DVD-ROM drive 700 MB Hard disk space

A Final Note…

You probably knew it was coming at some point. Our first couple of issues were actually released one day before the beginning of the month they covered. Then we had a slight delay, with the issue getting released sometime during the first week of the month. Practically our entire team started having scheduling conflicts. Other responsibilities took time away from Adventure Lantern. Each consecutive issue kept getting released a few days later. The special Halloween edition in October was available through our Web site during the very last week of the month.

It is hardly surprising that the pattern continued in November. I had about two full weeks during which I could not complete any of the work for our would-be November issue. As the end of November drew closer, a couple of our teammates suggested releasing a combined November and December issue. I had been thinking about the same thing as well. Finally, just two days before the end of the month, I accepted that we were out of time and we had to somehow hit the reset button.

Thus, we formally made the decision to release this issue our November/December 2006 release. Our next edition will be released during January 2007. We are hoping to have it completed and available around January 10th or a little later. This will hopefully offer our regular contributors some much needed time-off. It will also give us a chance to start releasing our issues closer to the beginning of the month. In the meantime, we are also going to undertake some restructuring efforts to make sure new Adventure Lantern content will become available in a more structured manner.

We hope you enjoyed our selection of articles for Adventure Lantern's November/December edition. We hope you have a wonderful time over Christmas and New Year's. Be sure to come back in January for a brand new issue.

Until next month…

- Ugur Sener