The Inventory

A magazine for adventure games only

Keepsake

Is this new game going to
ressurect fantasy adventures?
Find out in our 4-page preview!

2 years!

Contents:

Prologue

Happy birthday Inventory! With the 19th issue of our PDF magazine we celebrate 2 years of life! And what do we plan to do about that? Well how about the biggest online event the adventure genre has ever seen? And you can be a part of it! Learn all about it in our gossip section. But is our birthday party the only surprise we have for you? Far from it.

In this issue we reveal for you a new fantasy adventure. So we introduce to you Keepsake for the first time ever in our exclusive preview of this very promising game. But we have more for the fans of fantasy out there. Learn everything about the new Quest for Glory remake by AGDInteractive in the preview by Joe Thorpe and myself. In our Lounge you can also read an interview with Tale of Tales, developers of the 3D fantasy adventure 8.

If fantasy is not your thing, how about some western action to boil your blood? Read our review of The Westerner, that turned out to be one of the best comedy adventures we have played so far. So you played and loved The Westerner but there is no other western adventure out there? Wrong! Himalaya Studios is working hard on their first commercial title, the western "Al Emmo and the Lost Dutchman's Mine" and they visit our Lounge to tell us all about it.

We have for you the second and last part of The Moment of Silence comics. We would like to thank Philipp Thalmann, editor of adventurecorner.de for creating and translating this beautiful comic and dtp for providing it for us. It is a pity that the comic was not combined with a review of the English version but we never received a copy in time. Justin Peeples wrote ... the first musical review of an adventure game ever, giving his thoughts on Aura in form of songs! Ben Keeney thought that the Last Express was one of the best adventures ever and he tells us why in his review tribute to the only adventure Jordan Mechner ever designed.

Oliver Gruener lets you know how to make your photos look professional with the use of a digital camera in combination with some computer software. Al Lowe is back with his hilarious jokes once more. Those of you who are let down by Vivendi's new Larry-wannabe game might get some consolation reading Al's column.

Enough with the prologue, let's meet Lydia now!

Dimitris Manos

In the 1980s Sierra Online releases a game that was meant to write gaming history. The game's name was King's Quest and it was the first graphic animated adventure to ever appear on a computer screen. Sierra grew to one of the heavyweights in the gaming industry and their first little game spawned a wave of adventures with a fantasy setting along with it. Quest for Glory, Kyrandia and Dragonsphere are some of those examples while the King's Quest series itself had a large number of sequels stopping at the impressive no 8. Fantasy adventures held a special place in the hearts of adventurers worldwide. With the death of Sierra however in the late 90s, we saw a decline in the fantasy adventure genre as well.

The fantasy genre in general, regardless of medium, has been through a lot of troubles during the 90s. A lot of people talked about the death of RPGs and there were not so many fantasy movies coming out. However with the Baldur's Gate games from Bioware and the Lord of the Rings movies fantasy has made a full-fledged come-back. Now Wicked Studios

Lydia is the main character of Keepsake

from Canada, are proud to present for the first time through the pages of The Inventory, their new fantasy adventure, Keepsake. Will Keepsake mark the return of fantasy adventures in the commercial world? This remains to be seen, but the first showings are more than promising. But let's take one thing at a time.

Keepsake takes place in the Dragonvale academy, a school of magic from the world of the old. Located within the heart of the valley of dragons, the Academy is an astonishing structure that defies gravity. Centuries ago, some of the most prestigious mages from around the world built it to become the center of magical research. Now the Academy is a place where the arcane arts are taught to the newer generation of mages. The main character of the game is Lydia, a girl from a poor family that has been through a lot. She had to earn her money herself growing up, by making trinkets and selling them at the town's market. This tough upbringing developed her character and made her an outgoing and resourceful woman . Her dream in life is to join her best friend Celeste in the Dragonvale Academy and learn how to use magic. It's been her dream since the day that Celeste's father saved Lydia from the flames that were burning down her house, through the use of magic.

But now the wait is over. Lydia has finally been accepted in the Dragonvale Academy. This is such a joy for Lydia who won't only be entering the overwhelming building for the first time in her life but will also be reunited with her childhood friend Celeste, whom she hasn't seen for 8 whole years. After a month of hitchhiking through the

land, Lydia finally arrived at the most renowned school of magic of the Old World. Her first gaze at the imposing building was from the top of a hill and Lydia realized that something peculiar was going on… the place seemed completely deserted.

But of course that would not stand in the way of Lydia's lifetime dream, so she marched on all the way up to the gigantic doors of the school that were clearly not meant to be opened in a conventional way. This is where Keepsake begins. You will try to enter the Dragonvale academy and find out why the place is deserted and how come there was no one there to greet you.

Soon Lydia will meet a companion, a wolf named Zak. Zak used to be a mighty dragon, familiar of one of the most prestigious mages ever, but he was turned to his current state by some mischievous students of the academy. He will follow Lydia around and he will try to help her whenever she might need it. Think of him as Crow from The Longest Journey or Oscar from Syberia, though expect Zak to play a bigger role since according to the developers he will follow Lydia throughout the game. Just to avoid any confusion, Zak is a non-playable character. At specific points in the game Lydia will have some visions. Those visions, will explain and develop further the plot of Keepsake.

Right: Zak will always be there to help you with the puzzles you cannot solve
Left: Outside the Academy

Lydia will get to visit a lot of key locations, both inside and outside of the Dragonvale academy, like the mysterious Elvandar forest. The academy itself is divided into two areas, the lower and the higher levels. The lower levels are comprised of common rooms and non-magical locations, but the architecture is impressive and mechanical devices are to be found often. The higher levels are strictly reserved for spellcasters. Some locations to be found there are an intriguing observatory, a magical library, a spectacular solarium and some very unusual classrooms.

The graphics of the game are very Syberia-like but in a fantasy setting of course. The prerendered backgrounds are highly detailed. The 3D character of Lydia was also well modeled. Keepsake makes use of a global engine called Glyph. It utilizes 3D hardware acceleration where available, it can reach up to 1024x768 in resolution and features real time rendering effects such as shadow and dynamic lighting. Glyph is a global engine containing some open

Even Zak doesn't know what is going on

Below: Lydia will have to find a way to enter the Academy

One of the puzzles that requires from you to click those four statues in the right order

Wandering in the castle

Below: Keepsake features some very impressive architecture

If that is a live size statue of a dragon, I really hope I'll never meet one!

source material (i.e. 3D is done in Crystal Space). The engine uses 3D animated characters on 2D backgrounds, a technique that we have seen quite often lately in many 3rd person adventures. Camera angles in Keepsake are static and predefined.

The soundtrack of Keepsake will feature a dozen of tracks created by professional musicians, including Yves Bordeleau (CEO of Wicked Studios) who is cumulating over 8 years of experience in the music industry. The tracks will be a mix of classical, medieval and ambient music and they will be recorded in OGG Vorbis format. Keepsake will make use of 3D sound where available.

The gameplay will feature a lot of unique techniques. Players can solve puzzles in the order they want in order to make the story progress. The puzzles are of variable difficulty and they get harder as you progress in the game. Wicked Studios state that they have tried to avoid the 'Go-fetch' sort of gameplay seen in many classic adventures. Another intuitive feature of Keepsake's gameplay is the active hint system. Wicked Studios have identified that one of the biggest annoyances with adventure games is the feeling players get when they are really stuck. Then players have to stop the game and look for a walk-through that destroys the feeling of immersion achieved thus far by the game.

Therefore Wicked Studios have developed an active in-game hint system. Whenever players get stuck they will be able to press a special button on the interface which will give them the chance to ask your sidekick Zak for some hints. There are also two kinds of dialogues in Keepsake, forced and optional ones. Furthermore the developers have added a 'pause' button in the dialogue interface so if during a dialogue you need to stop for a while and do something else, you can press the pause button and later come back and continue from the point where you left.

So Keepsake will feature gorgeous graphics, an epic music score, an intriguing storyline and intuitive gameplay. Is this the second coming of fantasy adventure games? I personally have only one small reservation regarding Keepsake and it concerns the number of characters you get to meet. Apart from Lydia, Celeste and Zak there is only 1 more character you will meet in the whole game, so four overall. Unique and memorable characters have traditionally been one of the strongest points of fantasy stories, whatever the medium. Who could ever forget Erana, Rakeesh, Uhura, Katrina and Ad Avis from the Quest for Glory series or who could forget Abnaxus, Crow, the Draic Kin, the Aerum and the Stickmen from The Longest

Journey? Whenever you would exit a screen in those games to go to a new one, you were wondering what kind of strange creature you would meet next!

Developers have stated that Keepsake will not feature many characters because they want to focus instead on gameplay and on the depth of those 4 characters' personalities. Although this is a viable target, the developers enter a dangerous path that may turn the game into a series of interconnected puzzles, something that may become repetitive after 2,3 hours in the game. Especially when such an intuitive dialogue system is created it would be interesting to see it in action more often.

Having said that however, Keepsake is definitely not a Myst-clone and the main heroine, Lydia, is far far more vocal than for example Kate Walker of Syberia. In the footage we got to see, Lydia would make comments to almost any hotspot you would click on. On top of that, there is a lot of emphasis on the role of Zak and the interaction between him and Lydia. Therefore I truly believe that Wicked Studios are making a sincere effort to develop the personalities of the characters to a great extent. And if the fact that there are only four characters fits well with the rest of the plot and if a rational explanation is given for that then it might be even more realistic and logical this way. But the final outcome remains of course to be seen. When I mentioned my reservation to the CEO of Wicked Studios he replied: *"I understand how someone who doesn't know the whole script would possibly feel about that so, let me just tell you that we'll be pretty much on par or better than most actual adventure*

games in the area of character interactions and surprises!"

All in all, this is one of the most exciting upcoming titles and it is great that a company undertakes the challenge of making a high-quality fantasy adventure after so long time. Yes we had Thorgal and Salammbo from TAC, but the first one lasted for 4 hours and the second one used a confusing and outdated navigation system so it is refreshing to see that someone is trying to get all the characteristics of a fantasy adventure done right for once. The developers of Keepsake will be some the honored guests in our forums during our birthday party to discuss with all of you their upcoming game. But until that feel free to join our forums at www.theinventory.org already and express your opinion on Keepsake based on what you know about it so far. We would like to thank Wicked Studios for giving us the chance to break the news of their exciting new adventure and wish them the best of luck on the development of Keepsake.

- Dimitris Manos

Where is everybody?
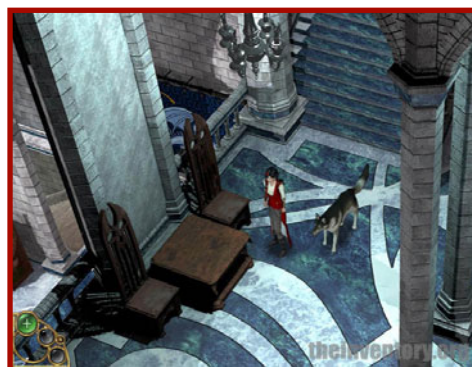
The chairs are there but no one is sitting on them. Makes you wonder

Below: A magnificent view from a balcony

QUEST FOR GLORY II

- Remake

Editor's Note: The preview is written by Joe Thorpe and myself. Joe writes the preview based on the information that the developers sent us. The developers also sent us a playable demo of the game that I was not allowed to forward to anyone so after Joe's text you can read my impressions of the demo.

Ordinarily I start to get worried when I hear that a team of amateurs is going to remake a classic but with the pedigree held by Anonymous Game Developers Interactive I think I'll be able to sleep at night. With two high quality remakes of Sierra classics already under their belt, AGDI (formerly Tierra Entertainment) has firmly established itself at the forefront of the freeware adventure scene and is ready to defend that title with their upcoming remake of Quest for Glory 2: Trial by Fire.

If you're not familiar with the original game, it was released by Sierra near the height of its glory in 1990 and the entire series is well-beloved in the adventure community and is known as the only series to have successfully blended adventure and RPG elements. The remake will be no exception to the QFG standard of quality as the developers are trying to take every precaution to make this game appeal to as many people as possible.

The adventure portions of the game will be streamlined by the addition of a point and click interface while a greatly improved combat system might excite RPG fans.

AGD2 from AGDI said that: "*The biggest difference in our remake over the original is obviously the simplified Point & Click interface which makes gameplay more straightforward for most people. On the other hand, there are those adventure game afficionados who argue that the text parser is the most thorough and enjoyable way to really play complex adventure games such as Quest for Glory 2. Taking this into account, we have taken some measures to satisfy both ends. The game is a remake so it is, of course, entirely mouse and icon driven as far as puzzle solving is concerned, but we've tried to appease the classic enthusiasts too*". In the new combat system, monsters will gang up on you, forcing you to use your skills to their full extent and even giving you the chance to raise your skills as a result of the battle.

AGD2 said: *Probably the biggest overhaul is the combat system. It's quite impressive and very fun to play, even if I do say so myself! We took the original game's basic combat, keep the perspective and the concept exactly the same, and just added a lot of cool things to it. Monsters will no longer wait*

**Below: Your loyal companion, the ridable saurus!**

on the sidelines for their turn to fight. They'll actually gang up on you! The Terrorsaurus is more aggressive and smarter in its attack patterns; Ghouls are truly a lethal force to be reckoned with and have many more magical abilities, plus a new array of savage melee manouvres; The Griffin can launch a wider variety of fierce ariel and land attacks. Every monster in the game has been given this treatment, and now combat will actually provide a nice challenge to the player. Fighting monsters will make you USE your skills to their full potential in order to raise your stats. Using magic spells in combat is also a blast, so to speak! Magic spells that the player can learn are exactly the same ones as in the original version. However, expect to see a few other familiar spells from the QFG series (obtainable in future games) being cast throughout the course of the game, by other characters!

One of the issues with the original Quest for Glory 2 were the confusing alley corridors. AGDInteractive have addressed those issues too in the remake. According to AGD2: *The alley map systems are very reminiscent of those in the original game, but we have made a few big changes. No longer does every street look identical -- they are all unique! A lot of work and detail has gone into the construction of the alleyway system and we hope that it goes some way to helping people gaining their bearings easier -- or if they do get lost, then at least having some nice scenery to look at along the way! There's no map for the desert region, but just like in the original, the player can purchase a compass early in the game. Your ridable saurus also has the ability to automatically return home at any point.*

In terms of graphics, you can see for yourself with the screenshots that this game will not skimp on the eye candy and the good people at AGDI say that they have learned from their experience on the King's Quest remakes to make this game's graphics even better then it's predecessors. We are told that the biggest differences will be more pixel editing and detail work then they were able to do for their earlier games. AGD2 said: *Originally, we intended to hand paint all of the backgrounds from scratch. However, after creating just a few, we discovered that this process was more time consuming and not really feasible for a remake in which the backgrounds already existed.*

So we returned to using the familiar tactic of using the original EGA screens as a base to draw our new backgrounds on top of. The results look very good, and there is a marked improvement over any of the previous games that AGDI has released. A lot more pixel editing and detail work has gone into these screens. As we continue to create games, we're learning more about art and design, and this is allowing us to do things that we weren't capable of achieving in earlier titles. Quest for Glory 2 VGA should be our first game that looks pretty much identical to a classic Sierra game in regards to graphics, and people will certainly notice the difference in comparrison to KQ2VGA!

The audio of KQ2VGA was also a part of the game where AGDInteractive excelled. Furthermore the adventure community was impressed with the work behind the speech packs for the 2 remakes they have already released. So will they manage to
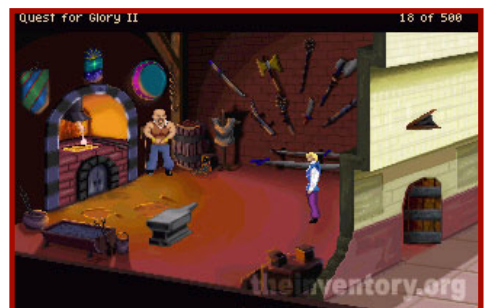
From top to bottom:
1. One of the plazas of Shapeir
2. The Katta Inn is always a great place to eat and spend the night
3. Emm...you forgot your saurus
4. The blacksmith...he's got issues

AGDInteractive has done a great job in the remake's graphics

Below: **Your paladin friend Rakeesh sitting outside the Guild Hall.**

surprise us once more with QFG2VGA? They claim that there won't be any speech pack this time around - not even as an april's fool joke (those who were members of the Tierra forums when the KQ2VGA speech pack was released know very well what we mean). But as far as music is concerned AGD2 stated that: "*Just like the plot and the graphics, the music will also use the identical themes by Mark Seibert and Chris Brayman. Tom has been working diligently on preparing these pieces and encoding them digitally, so that they sound their absolute best. In addition, there are several new music pieces used throughout the game, that are based on the original themes. The digital music pack will be included with the game itself this time around, and there will be no MIDI option at all. This ensures that everybody who plays the game will hear exactly the same thing; that the sound quality is optimal; and it will also save us a lot of time in the process. It's advantageous to everyone!*"

Now enough with the technical specs, lets get to the breaking point of an adventure experience: the plot. The developers have left the original plot intact. They have only tried to add some little extra bits here and there such as a few more easter eggs and some more depth to certain characters and scenes. The story begins after you have defeated the brigands in Speilburg Valley and been proclaimed a true hero across the land. The life of a hero is never dull and you are soon whisked away to the desert land of Shapeir by way of magic carpet. Dark Omens foretell of dire circumstances and the city is soon found under attack by Elemental Beings

and only you can save it from annihilation. You must travel to a vast array of locales all the time reinforcing your name as a valiant hero by performing honorable deeds (unless of course you're a thief).

New players might be wondering about that last statement which brings me to one of the strongest points of the series. At the beginning of the game you will be presented with the option of three character types: Fighter, Magic User or Thief. This makes it essentially three games in one as certain actions can only occur when you're one player type and you have to play to your abilities to accomplish your goals. A popular feature in the Sierra originals was the ability to take your character from the first game through the entire series by importing him from each game and this choice will still apply in the remake.

The husband and wife wonder duo who originally designed the series, Corey and Lori Cole, are not involved in any way with the remake, but AGDInteractive have occasionally kept them informed of their progress out of respect to their work on the original.

While the release date is still a tentative Mid 2005, I am assured that the game is still progressing as scheduled and this is only to insure the highest quality for the game. This game has a lot to live up to, not only with its Sierra original but also with the King's Quest remakes being so popular but I'm hopeful that the Quest For Glory 2 remake will stand firmly on its own two feet as a game to be enjoyed by all.

- Joe Thorpe

I had the privilege to play an early build of the Quest for Glory II remake. For the record, I tried out the game playing a fighter. Needless to say, AGDInteractive have done a great work once again. The interface and the graphics are very much reminiscent of Quest for Glory 3 (which happens to by my favourite one in the series, so I was happy to notice that).

The work that has been done on the graphics is as the developers claimed the closest you will see to a Sierra adventure. Backgrounds and character portraits are improved in comparison with the ones in King's Quest 2 VGA. The interface design is the same with the one you saw in QFG3. You have the classic Sierra icons (walking man, eye, hand, mouth) and then the two extra icons, one for magic and one for extra actions such as running, sneaking, resting, checking the time and checking your character stats. After those there is a window showing which item you have selected, your inventory, the options and in the end the help button. The dialogue interface is exactly the same with the one we saw in QFG3. You have a number of questions to ask when you talk to someone and some of them open up sub-questions. You can also bargain with the merchants in the town, and it usually pays off to offer a smaller price than the one they are giving you in the beginning.

The alleyway system has been improved and it is easier to walk through than it was in the original Quest for Glory 2. The combat system is one of the best you have seen in any game of the series, although it would have been nice to see a point and click impementation of it like in QFG3. The way

combat works is that there are five rows in each area where you fight. You can move front and back within those rows as long as there is no enemy in the row in front or as long as you are not in the last row. You have two attacking moves, two defensive moves and you can dodge in 2 directions. You can even jump over an enemy's blow if you find the right timing!

Life in the city of Shapeir is flourishing. Kattas and guards walk around minding their own business as you play. Merchants start talking to you as you pass by them, trying to sell you their wares. Easter egg fans are going to be delighted with QFG2. I wouldn't like to spoil the fun so I'm not going to mention anything concrete but let's just say that the heat of the desert can have funny effects on people who pass through it. The retro music is also great to listen to and those of you who played the original will find a lot of familiar tunes.

I did not play the demo all the way to the end because I would rather play and enjoy every aspect of the game when it is ready, but the portion of the game I played showed me beyond any doubt that AGDInteractive have mastered the art of remaking. It is also great to hear that they have started another company, Himalaya Studios, that is working on their first commercial title. Read more about it in our Lounge. AGDInteractive / Himalaya Studios are also going to be guests in our birthday party (you can read all about the party in the next page) and you will have the chance to talk with them about their past and future titles.

- Dimitris Manos

From top to bottom:
1,2. Some examples of the combat sequences in QFG2
3. You have to choose your character in the beginning of the game

The Inventory

invites you to its

Birthday Party

Also known as *"The biggest online event the adventure genre has ever seen"*

We released the first issue of **The Inventory** in November 2002. To celebrate 2 years of The Inventory we have prepared something very special for all of our dedicated fans who have helped us to come thus far. We are throwing an online birthday party where you will have the chance to discuss with some of the most renowned developers and publishers in the adventure community. Where? At our brand new **forums** that you can find in our new website www.theinventory.org . When? On the **29th** (Monday) and on the **30th** (Tuesday) of **November**. The party will officially start at **18:00 GMT** and it will finish at **24:00 GMT** on both days. Who is coming? Here is the list of the developers that will attend the party to discuss with our fans:

Our honored guests:

- *Al Lowe* (Developer of legendary titles such as the Larry games and Freddy Pharkas)
- *AGDInteractive* (Developers of the King's Quest and Quest for Glory remakes)
- *Autumn Moon Entertainment* (A team of talented developers that used to work in Lucasarts for great titles such as Curse of Monkey Island and The Dig and are now working on the point and click adventure A Vampyre Story, that won our most awaited adventure award)
- *DTP* (The biggest European publisher of adventure games)
- *Frogwares* (Developers of Journey to the Center of the Earth and the two Sherlock Holmes games)
- *GMX Media / Artematica (*Thepublishers and developers of the upcoming adventureMartin Mystere which is based on a popular European TV and comic series)
- *Himalaya Studios* (Developers of the upcoming western adventure Al Emmo)
- *House of Tales* (Developers of The Moment of Silence and Mystery of the Druids)
- *Josh Mandel* (Developer of legendary Sierra titles such as Freddy Pharkas and Space Quest 6)
- *L'Art* (Developers of the upcoming comedy adventure Boyz Dont Cry)
- *Pendulo Studios* (Developers of the award winning point and click adventure Runaway, currently working on its sequel, Runaway 2)
- *Razbor Studios* (Developers of the sci-fi point and click adventure Legacy)
- *Tale of Tales* (Developers of the 3D fantasy adventure 8)
- *TellTale Games* (The team that consists of ex-Lucasarts employees who were behind the now cancelled Sam and Max 2 and who are currently working on a new secret title)
- *White Birds Productions* (Benoit Sokal and his team has worked on the award winning Syberia series and are currently developing the upcoming Lost Paradise)
- *Wicked Studios* (Developers of the exciting upcoming fantasy adventure Keepsake that we preview in this very issue)

These are only the developers/publishers that have replied so far to our invitations. We have invited many more and we plan to invite even more. To learn more about all the developers and publishers that are going to

finally attend the party and all the technical details check out this thread in our forums:
http://www.theinventory.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=42 .

We are going to edit and update the thread as new information will be available to the public. All these honored guests will be present in the forums for minimum 2 hours each to answer all your questions and comments. Each developer/publisher will have their own forum subsection so that the discussions won't get too messy. Some of them will also have some surprises for you!

If you are a developer or publisher and you would like to attend the biggest online event in the history of the adventure genre let us know by emailing us at: theinventory@yahoo.com . If you would like to take advantage of the wide audience this event will reach you could also sponsor the event by advertising in our forum.

We hope that you will all attend our birthday party and that you find it as exciting as it is for us to prepare! Looking forward to seeing you there!

The Inventory team

Adventure Developers site returns

The site www.adventuredevelopers.com has finally made its comeback. Adventure Developers is a site that hosts adventures made by independent developers and provides its visitors with coverage of such titles. Make sure to visit it and check out some of the titles that are already there available for download (most of them are free).

Two more adventures to be revealed in The Inventory

Having already been the first publication to reveal great titles such as A Vampyre Story and Keepsake, we plan to continue this tradition by revealing two new adventure games to you. One of them you will get to see in the pages of The Inventory in our next issue and the other one will be revealed in our January issue. We are also trying hard to combine these articles with comics based on the respective games. We can't let you know more information about these games right now, but you know...patience is a virtue! If you are a developer working on a new game and you would like your game to also receive the high quality coverage of The Inventory contact us at theinventory@yahoo.com

Larry 8 or Loveage 1?

If there is one person that has the expertise to write an opinion article about what some people call the new Larry game, that would have to be Al Lowe. If you have not read it yet, make sure to read his article where he shares his impressions of the Larry-wannabe game here: http://www.allowe.com/Larry/MCL.htm

When we were criticising the Larry-wannabe game during the time it was announced, some people called us stuck-up purists. Well to those people, we now wish that they enjoy their mini-games with the sperm navigation systems and all that adventure gallore!

Broken Saints DVD available

Not necesserily adventure news, but the Broken Saints online comic will become an adventure game so it is adventure-related. The Broken Saints series is coming out on DVD on Monday 15th of November. The DVD version will come in 4 DVD discs and it will feature lots of exclusive material including voice-overs in Dolby Surround 5.1 by famous actors like William B Davis (X-files) and completely upgraded art. The DVD set will cost 40.00$ (without shipping costs) and you can order it from www.brokensaints.com

So what's up with Sealed Lips?

A lot of people have been asking us what is going on with Sealed Lips so maybe we should let you in on what is going on with the game. I had the impression that creating a high-quality adventure game with people working over the net was possible. I was painfully wrong. So the project came to a halt. But this does not mean that it is entirely dead.

I have been working on the script and the storyline and after the holidays when I will have more material to show I will approach investors and/or developing companies that would be interested in producing a game like Sealed Lips. There is already a company that has expressed a vague interest but nothing concrete yet. We will keep you informed if something new comes up.

- Dimitris Manos

Interview with Himalaya Studios

In the first issues of The Inventory we were fortunate enough to review the remake of King's Quest 2 by Tierra and to interview the extremely talented and dedicated developers that used to call themselves Anonymous Game Developers back then. Now, 2 years later, a lot has changed. Tierra has been renamed to AGDInteractive and is about to release its third (and maybe last) remake, Quest for Glory 2 VGA. But the developers that formed this magnificent company have also expanded their horizons and are hard at work on their first commercial title. This time however, the game is being produced under the banner of Himalaya Studios (www.himalayastudios.com) and the characters are in prerendered 3D. We are happy to welcome the AGDs once more to our Lounge. So let's see what they have to say about their new upcoming title and the future of Himalaya Studios.

Yourselves:

- How many of AGDI members are a part of Himalaya Studios? Are Wookie, the writer of KQ2 remake, or Tom and Dianne Lewandowski, musicians, involved with Himalaya Studios?

Our most dedicated team members, who played pivotal roles in the development of our previous AGDI titles, have also lent their talents to our current Himalaya Studios project. Wookie has worked extensively on the game's design, creating clever puzzles, witty dialogue, and lyrics for a number of songs. Tom and Dianne Lewandowski have composed a number of beautiful melodies, reminiscent of their previous work, but additionally adding a Western spin on things. Expect to hear their piano playing talents as well this time around!

- Are there any new members in your team, and if so would you like to say a few things about them?

There are several new members, most independent contractors from around the world. We've also had a number of interns working for us from different Art Institutes. Most of our new workers are employed in the 3D art department, taking on such roles as modeller, texture artist, rigger and animator. We also have a fabulous new background concept artist as well.

- During your time in Tierra/AGDI you preferred to stay anonymous. Many thought that the reason for this was the unauthorized nature of the King's Quest remakes and the possibility that Sierra might decide to sue the developers. How come you 'reveal' yourselves now in Himalaya Studios? Does that mean that you are no longer afraid that Sierra might seek any legal measures against AGDI?

We were never concerned about

being sued by Sierra. We mentioned on our site from the very beginning that we would gladly take down our remakes if we were asked to do so by Sierra. They never did ask us to do such a thing, and we were very pleased by this, as the sole purpose of our remakes was to rekindle an interest in nostalgic adventure gaming and pay homage to Sierra itself. The reason we never took credit for our work, is because we wanted the credit to go to the very people who deserved it- the creators of the original Sierra games. Now that we are creating our own original content, we will accept responsibility for the work that we create.

- Is there any special reason for naming your company Himalaya Studios?

There is, actually. Himalaya Studios climbs mountains, both figuratively and literally. We take a "haba na haba hujaza kibaba" approach in all that we do--we take it one step at a time. This philosophy continues to bring us to our ultimate goals when creating computer games. Additionally, it is a goal of ours to climb the world's Seven Summits (the highest mountain on each of the

seven continents). With two down, Kosciuszko in Australia and Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, we will continue to climb the mountains placed before us until we ultimately reach our final goal of tackling Everest in the Himalayas--hence the company name!

AI Emmo:

- When did you first start thinking of developing a commercial adventure?

We first started thinking of developing commercial adventures several years back, shortly after the release of King's Quest I VGA. There were a few reasons for this decision. First off, naturally, we wanted to continue to challenge ourselves, and making our own project from scratch was a good way to do this and to continue developing our skills. Secondly, we knew that there would only be a limited number of remakes that we could create, as there is a definitive number of Sierra titles. Making remakes is very rewarding, but not entirely feasible in the long run, as it takes us immense amounts of time, energy and money to finish each release. But more

importantly, we realized that adventure gaming still had a market, with hundreds of thousands of people starving for these games. Making remakes was the starting point of gaining corporate attention, but in continuing our battle of reviving the genre, we feel it is necessary to sell original games commercially. If we can show other companies through concrete numbers that people are willing to purchase adventure games, there is a much higher likelihood that our favorite developing houses of yesteryear will consider making adventure games again. We'd actually appreciate the competition from other developers, as this would help strengthen the commercial adventure game market. Other companies would jump on the adventure bandwagon if they saw it as a flourishing genre instead of a struggling one. Additionally, we'd also like to be able to make a company that can sustain itself, so we personally can continue to create and offer adventure games for those who yearn to play them. We are not only adventure game developers, but we are some of the genre's biggest fans-we know the types of games that the gamers want to play, because they are the same type of games that we like to play-we will offer nothing short of this.

- When did you start developing AI Emmo and the Lost Dutchman's Mine?

The concept started long ago, shortly after King's Quest I VGA was released, but serious work began on the project after the release of King's Quest II VGA. In January of last year, I moved to Australia, where Chris and I worked on finalizing the game's design, creating high resolution backgrounds, illustra-

ting character portraits, and scripting the game from beginning to end. Six months later, I returned to America to set up the official company, while independent contractors continued to work on 3D animations. Since then, I have returned to Australia to meet with both Chris and Wookie to hammer out more details of the story, and will most likely visit again this upcoming January. Shortly thereafter, Chris plans on visiting America to oversee voice acting auditions and recordings with me.

- Were you inspired by Al Lowe's Freddy Pharkas when starting up Al Emmo?

Interestingly enough, the design of Al Emmo was already created well before we realized that Freddy Pharkas even existed! We were quite surprised to realize that Sierra had created a Western, and that we hadn't heard about it, and see this as a failure of their marketing department-we assure you we would have bought the game had we known about it! More surprising still, is the game was co-designed by our mentor, who also happened to be the voice actor for Graham from both of our King's Quest remakes, Josh Mandel!

- Is the name Al Emmo a pun?

Yes it is.

- Will the story be comedy-oriented?

Yes, it will be. The story is a fine blend of humor and sentimentality. You will be able to deeply identify with the characters, and there is a sense of realism, yet, Wookie's typi-

cal wittiness shines through in all dialogue, and the theme of the game is definitely comedic in nature.

- Could you describe to us the plot of the game?

The basic premise is you are Al Emmo, a dweeby, middle-aged man from the East coast, on a mission to make your family proud-you have headed out West to bring home a wife. However, when Al arrives in the desert town of Anozira, things do not go quite according to plan. Being stood up by his "would-be" spouse and missing the only train back home, Al finds himself stranded in the desert town for a week -- with no money, no accommodation, a dorky outfit, and totally unprepared to endure the desert elements and the local citizens. However, Al's attention is soon drawn to a beautiful local woman who is way out of his league. Al soon discovers rumors of a lost mine, filled with riches, somewhere out in the desert, and makes it his mission to locate this mine in order to impress the woman. You have a week to accomplish this "easier said than done" feat, and will meet up with much conflict, danger, and memorable characters along the way!

- Could you tell us a little bit about Al Emmo? What is his personality like? What does he do for a living? Where is he from?

Al Emmo is a short, unsophisticated, balding, 42 year old dweeb from New York who has little luck with the ladies (please don't sue us George Costanza). He lives at home with his parents, has never been married, has no career (but does receive a weekly allowance from mom

and dad), and feels it is time to make his mark in the world. Although he starts out as a major pushover, his character develops more confidence throughout the course of the game. Yeah, we know… we know… you're probably thinking he sounds identical to Larry, but there are some marked differences; the main ones being that Al's personality is more placid, and he doesn't wear a cheesy white leisure suit/gold medallion. (Ironically enough, the creator of Al's character has never played any of the Larry games before!)

- Would you like to talk about some other key characters of the game?

There are a handful of fun and significant non-playable characters to meet. Some of them have even played a role in the developer's real lives, and have made the cut into the game! One character you will meet is Kevin, the quick-witted Irish saloon owner and bartender from Liverpool, who is based on an amusing employee who used to work at a coffee shop I frequented often in Germany. Koko, the cosmic entrepreneurial pharmacist, is a masterful blend between my sister's ex boyfriend (who started his own ill-fated religion and rock band), John King from CNN International, and Dean, Australia's number one nurturer of wombats, who we met while on our Seven Summits adventure! One thing is certain, each character isquite a character, and rather unforgettable!

- How many characters/locations will the game feature?

There are multitudes of characters

in the game-somewhere around 35 is a good estimate, some being human, others animals. Off the top of my head, I'd say around 70 locations.

- The graphics of the game will be slightly different to what we have got used to see from AGDI. You have decided to use 3D characters on 2D hand painted backgrounds. Some people in adventure forums have said that 3D characters look strange on 2D hand painted backgrounds. Why did you decide to use 3D characters and what do you reply to the previous statements made in forums?

> **"The characters will actually be prerendered 3D. So while we use a 3D program to model and animate them, they are still rendered and displayed as 2D sprites in the game."**

To clarify this, the characters will actually be prerendered 3D. So while we use a 3D program to model and animate them, they are still rendered and displayed as 2D sprites in the game. We've been nothing but impressed with the work of our 3D team, and believe that the highly-detailed backgrounds match extremely well with the detail level that can be achieved with 3D animations. The hand painted backgrounds have been further digitally edited to match the style of the 3D characters and they fit very well together. We believe that we've developed a unique artistic style of our own. We also make use of alpha-blending in-game, which ensures that the character's edges blend smoothly into the backgrounds, rather than merely looking like they've been "pasted-over". This effect goes a long way to eliminating the perceived 2D/3D mismatch. We actually began animating the game entirely in 2D and had a considerable amount of work done, but once a proposal and

work submission was made from a talented 3D modeller, our opinion was quickly swayed. I have no doubt that the fans will be pleased with this decision as well. The choice to go 3D allows for much more fluid movement and more complex animation sequences in a shorter period of time; all while capturing the characterized look of our previous 2D animations-the best of both worlds, really!

- In your site it is mentioned that the game will feature detailed dialogue portraits of over 24 interactive characters. Will the faces of the characters appear in 3D in these portraits or in 2D?

Character dialogue portraits have been illustrated and animated in 2D. When characters are incorporated into cut-scenes, close-ups will be rendered in 3D.

- KQ2 remake featured a wide variety of cutscenes, from 3D sequences to 2D still-shots. What kind of cutscenes should we expect to see in Al Emmo?

Like King's Quest II, expect 3D cutscenes, but more frequently. Cutscenes in Al Emmo will be similar to those in The Curse of Monkey Island, in that there will be a few of them played at certain points in the game which provide incentive to keep playing. 2D still-shots will be included as well at choice times during gameplay.

- You said that you will release a speech pack. Will we get to hear some of the actors that appeared in the KQ remakes? Is Josh Mandel going to participate in

this project?

You will indeed be hearing some of the actors who were featured in King's Quest II's remake-this time, recorded in a professional studio. Additionally, we will be bringing in a number of other professional actors to the team, to create a top-notch gaming experience. Josh Mandel is currently not associated with the project, but we have not eliminated the idea of approaching him again.

- What kind of music do you plan to use for the game?

Amazing music created by Quest Studios! Tom and Dianne have really outdone themselves this time, creating a number of original pieces, including many piano numbers. A lot of the music is rife with sound effects to enhance the atmosphere in special moments of the game. I also might mention, their music is very reminiscent of their work on King's Quest II VGA, but at the same time, it is also evolving-they've been experimenting with new techniques, such as randomly generating tunes, which ensures your gaming experience is different each time you play.

- Is the interface of the game going to be similar to the interface we all know from the Sierra games? (If yes) Do you plan to use some new features in the interface of Al Emmo compared to the usual Sierra interface?

The new interface is of our own design, but simple with many of the same features you would find in the Sierra games, as to not confuse the player and take away from game play.

- Could you describe to us what kind of problems players will have to solve in Al Emmo? Could you give us an example?

One major problem, is figuring out how to woo ladies when you are a middle-aged, dorky man who still lives at home with his parents. You will need to come up with creative solutions! As far as game puzzles are concerned, they are just very reminiscent of the ones you would find in any classic Sierra or Lucasarts adventure game. We've tried to take the best elements of our own favourite comedy adventure puzzles and use the logic of first communicating hints to the player, mixed with witty dialogue from NPCs, and provide a humorous outcome at the end. Solving each puzzle should feel like a mini-reward for the player and using comedy is often a nice way to achieve that feeling of reward.

- What is the release date for Al Emmo?

2005, some time after the release of AGDI's Quest for Glory II VGA.

- Do you plan to release a play-

> "One major problem, is figuring out how to woo ladies when you are a middle-aged, dorky man who still lives at home with his parents. You will need to come up with creative solutions!"

able demo to the public before that?

Our main concern is getting the game out on schedule. We have toyed with the idea of releasing a playable demo, but plans are not currently underway, as all effort is going into working on the game itself for the time being. It is more than likely that a demo will be made available at some point, however.

- In your site you state that you are thinking of CDs and downloads as distribution methods. Have you decided yet which one you are going to use? Will the CD come in a box like the games sold in stores, or will it be a normal CD case? And would you deliver CDs worldwide in that case?

Probably both distribution methods. We have yet to decide on packaging. As for delivery, we are doing everything in our power to enable international shipping.

- If a publisher expressed interest, would you consider selling the game in stores?

We have been approached by interested publishers, and would consider it if the deal was right. Currently though, we are more interested in self publishing, as we would like to retain all rights to the game and its characters, as well as follow through with certain business goals.

-How much do you plan to charge customers for Al Emmo?

This has yet to be announced. Stay tuned!

General:

- We conducted an interview with you on our third issue, something less than 2 years ago. Back then I asked you what do you think of the state the adventure genre is in and you replied: 'it's in a poor shape at the moment'. Now, almost 2 years later, do you still have the same opinion? Do you think the adventure genre is still in a poor shape or have things started getting better recently for adventurers around the globe?

I think adventure gaming has made a transition-it's currently in limbo. It is obvious that the big publishers have taken notice that adventure games do have a market, but they are not quite sure how to interpret this very obvious information. They are starting to create adventure games again, but then drop the project mid-development. Other companies make adventure games, but upon release, it becomes apparent that they are nothing more than an action game with an adventure title. We hope by creating genuinely traditional, commercial adventure games, publishers will start to understand what it is that adventure gaming fans truly desire. Overall, it does seem that they are slowly getting the idea, but are sluggish in jumping on the bandwagon. The few games that have been released which actually ARE true adventure games, like Siberia 2, are great! They cater to a modern audience who have grown up in a world of 3D and take advantage of the new hardware and technology that is available. We, on the other hand, plan to take the opposite approach and go backwards in time, to the

point in the 80's and 90's when we believe that adventure games were truly at their peak. Time will tell which style the majority of modern adventure gamers really prefer, and this may dictate the future direction of our games.

- Al Emmo is the second commercial adventure using the AGS engine. The first one, Fatman, didn't manage to become a success, something that resulted in other AGS developers hesitating to release commercial titles and most of them usually opt for short adventures that are distributed for free. Do you think that a possible success of Al Emmo could give birth to a new wave of commercial AGS titles that will be longer in length and will provide better quality?

Definitely. AGS is an amazing tool, and deserves to be used to its full potential. We hope that the success of Al Emmo will encourage others to create full-length, high-quality adventures. These adventures could also do their part in reviving the genre! I believe that our previous work at AGDI speaks for itself-people already know the quality of our work, and therefore can feel confident in their purchase.

- Is AGS free to use when it comes to commercial titles, or will you have to pay some sort of percentage to the creator of the engine?

AGS is free, regardless of whether a title is commercial or not, but we have been discussing compensating Chris Jones in some way for his hard work. We owe a lot to him-he's

truly an admirable, hard-working individual who we'd like to support, just as he's supported us.

- Have you played any of the AGS adventures that have been released so far? (If yes) Which ones were your favourites, and do you think that some of them could have been released as commercial titles?

I have played a few, but since making games and commitment to a number of outside obligations takes up so much time, I don't have the free time I'd like to play many games -- commercial or otherwise. Among those that we've played are Pleurghburg, Larry Vales, 5 Days a Stranger, 6 Days a Skeptic. I believe that all have a very strong plot basis and great puzzles. With a good supporting development team to strengthen individual elements of each game, and an extended plot for some of the shorter titles, I see no reason why these games could not be released as successful commercial titles. If you can make a game in the first place, then you're already halfway there!

- Does the fact that you are releasing a commercial title mean that we won't be seeing another remake from AGDI?

Not entirely. These are two separate entities, and what goes on at Himalaya Studios doesn't necessarily have to determine what is going on at AGDI. Each company has its own staff, with minimal crossovers in labor usage, but managing both companies can be a taxing and very time consuming task. I must admit, we've created (or are in the process of creating) remakes for

most of the Sierra games that we were really interested in, and we would like to start concentrating more on our own, original titles in the future.

- How many times have KQ1 and KQ2 been downloaded so far?

It's hard to give an exact number, as we only have the numbers available on our site. The game has been offered from various other locations as well. But, our personal count as of now is: King's Quest I VGA downloaded 216325, King's Quest II+ VGA downloaded 170021 times.

- What does the future hold for Himalaya Studios after Al Emmo? Could you envision yourselves expanding into a bigger company with more employees that would release 2 or even 3 adventures a year, like Sierra used to do? Could you see yourselves becoming the Sierra of the 21st century?

I envision Himalaya Studios being like Sierra from the early days. Emphasis will be placed on creating quality games, in a quality, family-like work environment. We are not looking to become rich-we are looking to make a living, doing what we love, and offering the product of this passion to our fans. We would definitely like to get to a point where we could release several products a year, yet would like to avoid making so many games, that we lose site of the main goal at hand-creating quality games.

- It's been some years now since you started the endeavour of reintroducing classic adventu-

> " I never in a million years would have thought that our efforts in making adventure games would make such a huge and lasting impact on the course of our lives!"

ring to new gamers. Did you ever think you would go that far when you first started? Have you regretted something that you did throughout these years and would you do it differently if you were to start from the beginning?

I look back at how it all began, and I'm utterly amazed. I never in a million years would have thought that our efforts in making adventure games would make such a huge and lasting impact on the course of our lives! I can whole-heartedly admit, I don't have any regrets.

- What is the most valuable piece of knowledge you have gained since you started creating adventures that will prove really useful in the development of Al Emmo?

We know the spiel-we understand the process of making a game. Now that we are past that learning phase, we can concentrate on improving the details of the game and offer a product of even higher quality. By creating King's Quest II VGA, we have learned how to make an extensive, though provoking and immersive storyline; additionally, we have worked on storyboards and cut-scenes. By working on Quest for Glory II VGA, our scripting skills have been challenged and ultimately improved. Each game has offered us insight into trials and tribulations faced in the game development process, and we've learned from them, in the end allowing us to make a better overall game.

-I recently read in your site that you attended the latest E3. What were your impressions of this

expo? Did you see any adventures that you thought were interesting? Did you try to create any business contacts that would benefit the production of Al Emmo?

The E3 was an exciting event to attend. I was happy to see a station set up for nostalgic gaming, and noticed that a lot of people seemed interested in reminiscing over these past titles. As for adventures, I was disappointed to see that most adventure game titles were either cancelled or were not truly adventure games at all! I did speak to a number of companies while at the E3, but mainly on the topic of AGDI.

- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Chris and I have been going on real-life adventures in support of the adventure gaming genre. We've been documenting our Seven Summits adventure on our official site. If you'd like to read more about these quests, please check out our journal page: http://www.himalayastudios.com/africa_blog.htm
We also have a competition running. Five people who sign up for the Newsletter will be drawn at random to win a free copy of Al Emmo & The Lost Dutchman's Mine! So if you want a chance to win, you know the drill! The Newsletter is also intended to give the latest updates on the game and Himalaya Studios in general, so it will keep people informed on progress and an eventual release date.

Thanks for taking the time to interview us.

Interview with Tale of Tales

Tale of Tales is a new company that produces a 3D adventure game called 8. The developers themselves like to describe 8 as a poetic entertainment title that offers peaceful and playful non-linear interaction with a continuously evolving immersive environment and a mysterious and charming autonomous character. We invited them to our Lounge so that they can share details about their promising game with us. All the screenshots you will get to see in the interview are work in progress so expect them to look better in the final version of the game.

Yourselves:

- Could you tell us a little bit about yourselves?

We are Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn. We lead a small young company called Tale of Tales in Belgium. Our background is in internet art and web design (see http://entropy8zuper.org). We have done several projects that have gamelike elements, some of them in real-time 3D. But "8" is our first full game.

- Do you play adventure games in your free time, and if yes could you name some of your favourites?

We play a lot of games. But not just in our free time. We consider it a sort of research. And in our research, we have found that we are not too fond of traditional adventure games. We tend to prefer games that mix up genres a bit. We love the Silent Hill series, Ico and Shadow of Memories. We think one can consider these adventure games. We lean towards the more horror/adventure titles, like Project Zero, simply because there is much more of an emotional reaction to

them, real fear! But we enjoyed the new Myst game too, primarily because it is so well made.

8:

- Could you describe to us the story of 8?

The story of "8" starts with the traditional folk tale of Sleeping Beauty. A Queen becomes pregnant after having desired a child for a long time. At the feast to celebrate this event, the fairies give the newly born gifts like beauty, virtue, a talent for singing, etcetera. One fairy, however, was not invited and crashes the party. She curses the princess to die at age 16 from a

"When the game starts in the present time, 500 years after the day when the princess fell asleep, the Wicked Branches are on the verge of completely destroying the palace. All inhabitants are still sleeping and alive. But probably not for long"

prick in the finger while spinning flax. After she leaves, the youngest fairy converts this curse into a spell of 100 years of sleep. So on the 16th birthday of the princess, while everyone is busy preparing the grand feast to celebrate victory over the curse, the young girl pricks her finger and the whole palace falls asleep. To maintain the spell, the fairies install a power center in the platform in the mausoleum upon which the princess sleeps. And they surround the palace with an impenetrable forest. So that, in 100 years, when the princess is awakened by a kiss from the one true prince, life can continue where it had stopped. But in our scenario, the Wicked Fairy is not pleased with this spell of sleep at all! She sets out to ruin the palace nonetheless. The collaborative magic of her sisters prevents her from intervening directly, so she helps eight unworthy princes to break into the palace telling them that they are the One True Prince. Failing to wake up the princess or to escape the palace, each one takes a vital object from the fairy power center in the mausoleum. This causes the spell of sleep to break. Furthermore, the presence of the princes allows the Wicked Fairy to invade the palace herself in the

form of a parasitic plant, which we refer to as the Wicked Branches. This entity grows from the protective forest that surrounds the palace. When the game starts in the present time, 500 years after the day when the princess fell asleep, the Wicked Branches are on the verge of completely destroying the palace. All inhabitants are still sleeping and alive. But probably not for long. And the Princess nor the palace are in a state worthy of receiving the One True Prince.

- The architecture of the buildings and the clothes that the characters wear bear resemblances to Indian traditions. Yet you say that the story is inspired by The Sleeping Beauty and by other fairy tales. Could you mention some of these other folklore tales that inspired you while creating 8?

Not exactly other fairy tales have inspired us, but tales that are similar to the story that we know as Sleeping Beauty. A very old version can be found in the Icelandic "Volsunga Saga" and contains the story of the sleeping Brynhild who is awoken by the hero Sigurd (later used by Wagner). But the versions of Giambattista Battista Basile and Charles Perrault are better known to us. We have also discovered a similar tale in Arabian Nights, probably even older than Volsunga and seemingly Indian in origin. This was one of the motivations for the choice in style. Another was the fact that 19th century orientalist paintings had an atmosphere that was already very close to what we wanted: a luxurious palace filled with people doing next to nothing. I would say this is the heaviest influence and as a result the style will

lean more towards the Middle East than India. But it is by no means historical. We prefer mixing cultures and styles. The fact that the palace fell asleep during the preparations of a feast with many invited guests, motivates this even more. In our scenario, we have mixed these - often contradictory- stories together, and added much of our own invention.

- Could you describe to us the main character of the game? You state in the website of the game that she is deaf/mute. How does this affect her interaction with the gameworld?

The main character of the game is an eight year old deaf mute girl. We did this to create a certain situation of distance and also for gameplay reasons. We wanted the game to not be text based but to make the player rely on observation of what is seen and heard, to communicate with the girl in other ways. She is a mysterious character. She is chosen by the fairies as the "innocent one who can set the world to rights" but the girl is completely unaware of this. She is just a child, curious and playful. When she gets trapped in the palace, her desire to return to her mother starts running parallel to the desire of the princess to wake up. Her interaction with the gameworld is not limited when you compare it to other game characters. In practice most game characters are deaf mute. We just made it explicitly so.

- You also state that she is an autonomous character and that her behavior is influenced by the style of the player and by the environment. This is obviously quite original in the world of gam-

ing. Could you elaborate on that and could you give us an example of the autonomous behavior of the little girl.

The most important aspect of this is that the player and the main character are seperate entities. One of the goals of the game will be for the player to discover his or her own place in the story. Initially, the interface to the game will be quite similar to traditional point-and-click to tell the character where to go. Her autonomous behaviour will start manifesting itself in the way that she walks towards that point. This may express joy or sadness or another emotion. Later, she will start doing things on her own: picking up objects, sitting down when she's tired, playing, etcetera. The motivation for doing any of these things comes from a combination of circumstances and mood. And these are influenced by the player who can take her to areas that the girl finds pleasant or dislikes, pushing her forward through the game or spending some time to play with her, etcetera. We do not have the ambition to create virtual life with full-blown artificial intelligence. Our primary purpose is to create the circumstances in which an emotional bond between the player and the girl might occur. Her autonomous behaviour is one of the techniques we use to try and accomplish that.

- Could you talk to us about some of the other key characters in the game?

The eight princes are all dead. After they got trapped in the palace, they lived their lives there. Traces of these lives can be found throughout the palace. Each prince has a certain symbolic "profession". There's a

poet, an actor, the brother of the princess, a tailor, a hunter, a traveller, and a priest. They all have their own reasons why they think they would form a suitable husband for the princess, and their own ways of trying to save her. The things they have left behind, give clues to what happened in the palace over 500 years and how you and the girl can put things right again. The Sleeping Princess plays a crucial role, of course. You do not get to interact with her at all but she is the epicenter, one could say the whole gameworld revolves around her.

Then there's the royal court of the palace with the evil Queen who is the high priestess of a Secret Cult that adores an Ogress monster that is hidden in one of the towers. The King is a much more modest character who has started an affair with the nanny of his daughter. And last but not least there's the fairies. We're not sure how much of their presence you'll be able to find in the game, other than the very obvious Wicked Branches everywhere, but they are definitely there, influencing things.

- You make mention of an evolving gameworld. Could you tell us in what way does the gameworld (in this case the palace) evolve?

When the game starts, the palace is a mess. Fountains have stopped running, plants have wilted, the garden is overgrown, everything is dusty and things have been broken or stolen by the Princes. The core goal of the game is to clean up the mess so that the palace and Princess return to a state in which the one true prince can be given a proper welcome. The main tools for doing this, will be eight magic spells that the girl acquires as the player
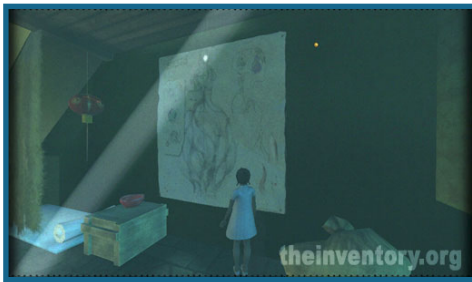
progresses. Over the course of the game, the palace will look more and more nice and alive.

- How many characters will we get to meet (or see sleeping) and how many locations will we get to visit in 8?
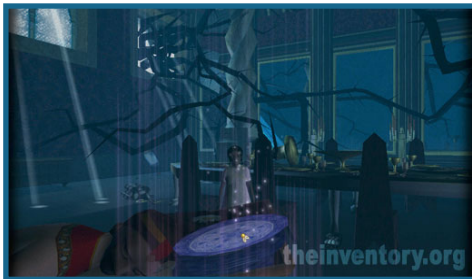
There will be hundreds of sleeping characters, thirty or so of whom will be featured in animated sequences. While the game starts in a modern day park and one must travel through an enchanted forest, there is only one location, really: the palace. It has a large garden and a courtyard with different areas. There are eight towers and about a hundred rooms.

- Talk to us about some of the features of the graphics engine you are using for 8.

Our graphics engine uses the features of Direct3D 8.1. We use a few vertex shaders but are trying to stay away from pixel shaders for the sake of compatibility. We don't have any ambition to follow the "vertical" trend towards photographic realism, in favour more "horizontal" exploration of features that already exist but haven't be exploited much. Our goal is to make a world that feels (emotionally) real and not neccessary one that looks real.

- Why did you decide to use real time 3D graphics instead of pre-rendered ones?

As designers, we feel very comfortable in 3D space. It feels more natural. 3D was one of the reasons why we moved away from the 2D web stuff that we were doing before. But I would say that "real

time" is an even more important aspect. We want to create a simulation of a living and breathing world with elements that have their own logic which is acted out in real time, not just triggered by some event. Also, pre-rendered graphics restrict the motion of the camera severely. And we think that this motion is vital to give people an impression of the third dimension on a 2D output system like a normal computer screen. We consider this experience of three dimensional space to be very important for immersion.

- What is the highest resolution that the graphics will reach?

I don't think there is a limit. It's real-time 3D. Anything that your machine and graphics card can handle should work. The highest that we have tested it at is 1600x1200. And it runs fine. With todays videocards, resolution doesn't seem to be the biggest bottle neck anymore.

- How many polys will your characters' models consist of?

By today's standards, relatively little (between 3000 and 5000). One of the reasons for this is that we actually like the way low poly models look. We like the element of abstraction that comes along with this limitation (something that modern art has worked so hard on). We feel, however, that often these shapes are ruined by pseudo-realistic textures. We will try to avoid that in favour of stylization. Think of it as more painterly instead of photographic.

- What kind of music will you compose for the purposes of 8?

We are going to work with local musicians Gerry De Mol and Eva De Roovere who have recently made an album called "Kleine Blote Liedjes". "Small naked songs" is probably a good description of the music that they will end up making for the game. Simple intimate acoustic music, probably with many exotic instruments, and a gorgeous voice.

- Will you take care of the voice-casting yourselves or do you plan to ask publishers to take care of that for you?

There will not be any speech in "8". No written words and no spoken words.

- Judging by the video you have released on your site I would assume that your interface is similar to the one used in Gabriel Knight 3, i.e. the players are able to control both the camera and the character of the game through a 1st/3rd person combo. Do you plan to handle this as it was handled in GK3, i.e. players control the camera with the keyboard and the character with the mouse or do you have something else in mind?

I must say that we have only started looking at other adventure games recently. It was never our intention to make an adventure game. We were surprised when we discovered the interface of Gabriel Knight. We thought we had made it up! ;) But it was good to see a similar thing in action. Our interface will be a little different. "8" will be fully playable with just the mouse. The keyboard will offer extra options but will not be required to play the game. You will be able to move the camera independently but there will also be a way for you to stay close to the girl. All with one hand!

- Could you talk to us about other features of your interface?

Originally we were going to have no 2D interface (menus, buttons) at all, except for the cursor. All interaction would happen with things in the game world. But after working with International Hobo on the game design and some playtesting, we have come to the conclusion that it may simplify the gameplay quite a bit if we offer the players some easily accessible 2D interface elements. These will be very simply and minimal. There still won't be any menus, scroll bars or tabbed dialog panels.

And there will be no inventory. Sorry. ;) We hope that interacting in "8" will be very intuitive and transparent. Our game is mostly about being present in a virtual environment and we feel that any type of complex interface would hurt the illusion. It is also much less of a "game" than most of the others. You don't really need to do all those game things so much. Just relax and have a bit of fun.

- Reading the game's story it is obvious that magic will play an important role in 8. Will we get to cast spells and if yes what kind of spells? How will the players control this feature?

As mentioned before, these spells will pertain mostly to restoring the place to its former state. So you will get to do exciting things like cleaning floors, watering plants and restoring walls, magically! ;) Then there will be spells that allow you to heal the wounded and see the dreams of some sleepers. And most importantly, perhaps, you will be able to prune away the Wicked Branches that have invaded the palace and are threatening to destroy everything. It will all be quite spectacular! We are actually currently considering a redesign of the control of this feature. So we'll have to pass on that question until we're done, if you don't mind.

- What kind of problems will the players have to solve in order to proceed in the game? Could you give us some examples?

This is a feature that we will develop in close collaboration with a British company called International Hobo (you may remember them from Discworld II and Discworld Noir).

The problems to solve will all be simple puzzles. "8" is not a puzzle game nor a twitch game. It's more about active exploration and emotional experiences. The main thing you are doing in the game is solving a mystery of what it is that happened in the palace, and even the mystery of "who you are" as a character in the game.

- You are making mention of non-linear gameplay and multiple puzzle solutions. Will the way the game ends depend on the actions taken during the game (i.e. will there be multiple endings) or is this non-linear gameplay just a set of different ways in order to arrive at the same end?

Neither. Yes, there is only one ending. But, no, this does not mean that the structure is branched. There will be a certain very basic simple structure underlying the game, but most of the time the player will be free to play with things in the gameworld. That's why we call it non-linear. There is a branching line that can be followed, but it's relatively short. The joy of the game will be in doing all the small things, some of which could be considered "side quests" but most are just playful interactions that are fun to do.

- The main character is deaf/mute and all the other characters have fallen asleep! Does that mean that there won't be any dialogues in the game?

It does indeed.

- Would you describe 8 as a difficult or as an easy adventure?

We hope it will be extremely easy. Like reading a novel. Everyone can

do it. You just read the letters, then the words and then the sentences. And then you turn a page. Nothing to it!

- Approximately how long will the game last for an average adventurer?

We would guess a minimum of 10 hours. But you'd be insane to run through it like that.

- What is the release date for 8?

We hope to release it in 2007. But much will depend on our publisher.

- Have you found a publisher yet for the game?

We wish we could say yes. But we can't. We're close but not quite there yet.

- Do you plan to release a playable demo before the game's release and if so do you know approximately when?

We are thinking about it. It's a bit problematic given the open structure of "8".

General:

- Is 8 the first game you are working on?

Yes.

- Why did you decide to create an adventure game?

We didn't. We never chose any particular game genre. The adventure game genre sort of chose us.

- If you would have to identify a problem that many adventure games share what would that be?

Lack of originality in story, game design and even architectural style. Lack of sympathetic characters. Unfounded intellectual arrogance. Absurd, convoluted and artificial puzzles.

- Do you think that adventure games have to evolve and if yes in what way?

It's really a shame -if not a disgrace for the human race- that adventure games tend to be the only peaceful games around. But this being the way it is, we think adventure game designers have a huge responsability. They are the only ones that can lure people away from the childish and violent games that currently flood the market. We hope that adventure game designers will stop being so stubborn and purist about their genre conventions, and simply try to make nice games that many people can enjoy. Not only will this revive the genre, it may also improve the quality of life in society at large.

- What does the future hold for Tale of Tales after 8? Another adventure maybe? Have you planned anything already?

We have a design for a multiplayer game that has nothing to do with "8". And there are ideas for making several games about fairy tales with the same main character. But whether they will be adventure games will probably mostly depend on your definition.

THE WESTERNER

The game I am about to review is published under two different names in Europe and the US. In Europe it is known as The Westerner while in the US it is known as Wanted. I chose to call the game by its original name given by the developers (The Westerner) since it is what most of adventurers have gotten accustomed to for a long time before its release.

Recently a post in the Just Adventure forums referred to a very interesting article regarding games with a comedy theme. The article was written by Stephen Totillo, it had the name 'Why aren't video games funny?' and you can read it in its entirety here: http://slate.msn.com/id/2109202/ . The author emphasizes the lack of comedy titles in the gaming industry since the fall of Sierra and Lucasarts. I happen to agree with many of the points that the author makes. If someone met me last month and asked me when was the last time I played a genuinely funny adventure, I would have to go back as long as 1997 to find a suitable answer. That was when I played Curse of Monkey Island, which was a game that had me laughing from beginning to end. It's true that The Longest Journey, Syberia and Runaway had some funny moments here and there but they were certainly not what you would call comedy adventures.

On the other hand if someone asks me today the same question I could proudly answer: 'Last week, when I played The Westerner'. I am happy to say that The Westerner is one of the best adventures I have played the last 5 years and is a serious contender for best adventure game of the year. Let's see why…

Story: Fenimore Fillmore is a cowboy that is wandering the Wild West looking for love and adventure. One night he happens to pass by Joe Bannister's farm. At the same time some gunmen approach the farm and demand from Joe to give them his land. Joe refuses and when the battle is about to begin Fenimore (thanks to a cactus bush) accidentally jumps between the two parties. The gunmen try to shoot Fenimore but he manages to dodge their shots and lead them out of Joe's ranch. Joe Bannister in return invites him to stay there overnight and share their dinner. It turns out that the gunmen work for the town's wealthiest man, John Starek and that he plans to steal the farmers' land for himself. Fenimore decides to give Joe, his family and the rest of the farmers a helping hand.

That won't be an easy task for Fenimore but it will certainly give him some moments to remember for the rest of his life. The Westerner is an exceptional story full of unforgettable characters. They will often crack you up with their quirky behavior. If I were to
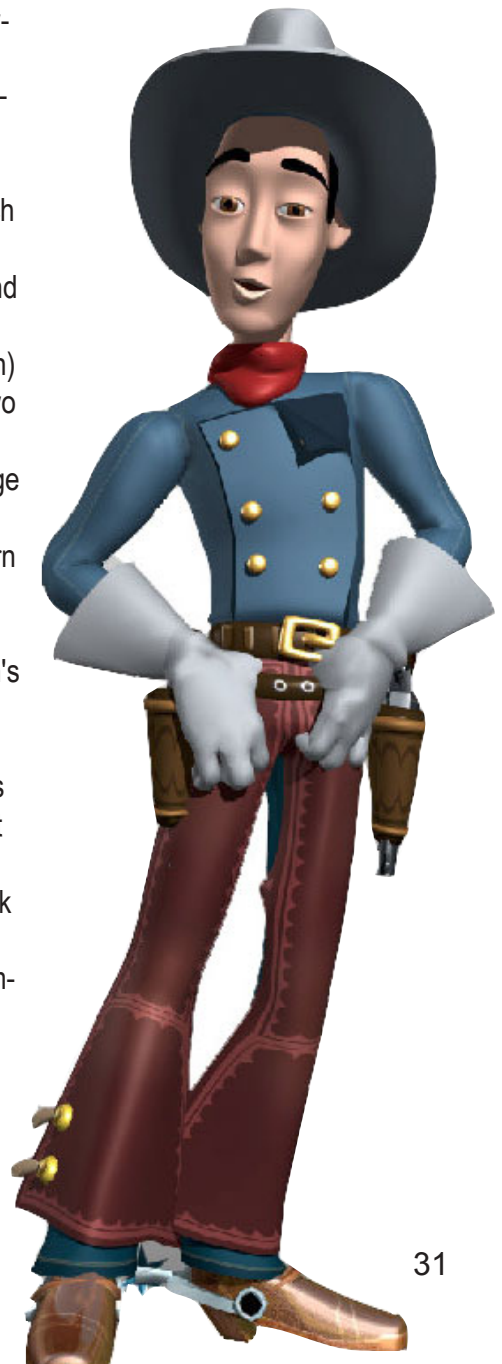
From top to bottom:
1. Fenimore will take care of everything
2. Those kids bring only trouble...but they are funny
3. Wake up Fenimore, your pancakes are ready
4. Yes it's a dollar.

describe the funniest of them I wouldn't know with whom to begin with, but let's start with the main character, Fenimore. He's naïve at times but his strong will usually gets the better of him and drives him forward. He has a weak spot for the local teacher, Miss Rhianon and he'd go to extremes to win her heart. Then you have the over suspicious Sheriff who will distort facts so that they coincide with his own premonitions. The farmers' kids are keen on trying new games and make Fenimore's life more difficult. The local doctor is a man with a distinctive passion for alcohol. The list of funny characters could go on and on and on, but better you play the game and meet them yourselves. You haven't seen such a bunch of hilarious personalities gathered together in one game since the golden days of Sierra and Lucasarts.

Bearing in mind that nowadays you often buy a 50 dollar game to play for approximately 10 hours, out of which 6 are spent on super-obscure puzzles with no feedback whatsoever, it is refreshing to play a game that lasts for a good 20-25 hours and that has a story that progresses steadily. The ending is also one of the best I have seen in adventure games. It is very cinematic, it is not abrupt and it comes as a natural climax to a satisfying story. You also have to admire the developers' efforts to go the extra mile and include … outtakes that you will get to see right after the game ends and that are completely hilarious.

Graphics: The Westerner's graphics are absolutely gorgeous. What really struck me was the fluid animation of the 3D models. Sometimes I felt like I was watching a Pixar movie. The facial expres-

sions are probably the best you have seen in 3D models in adventure games as of yet and they give a distinctive and at the same time natural look to the characters. The backgrounds look also amazing, the colours are always vibrant and lively. The developers have absolutely managed to capture the comic feeling with the graphics surpassing every other attempt in 3D we have seen in comedy games.

Having said that however, the graphics are not completely flawless. Lip-synching is almost non-existent. Apparently nobody thought of adjusting the lip-synching for the English version since a lot of times you see the characters opening their mouth long before and after they start and finish talking. Adjusting lip-synching to the localized version should not be that difficult and the fact that it wasn't taken care of shows a small degree of carelessness for the English version. Also some effects like shadows could have been done better. One example could be when Fenimore climbs a post, and you can see the shadow of Fenimore climbing up but there is no shadow for the post itself. And a last minor complaint (and you have probably already noticed that yourselves) one can't help but notice that Fenimore looks very familiar to a famous … toy star.

I can't also forget to mention that The Westerner has some of the best cutscenes I have ever watched in adventures. They are quite lengthy, they usually act as a very nice treat for accomplishing a task and they add a lot to the overall cinematic feeling of the game.

Sound: The Westerner had been released in Europe long time before it was released in the States. The game had received excellent gra-

des getting around 80% from most publications and the screenshots showed already that this game had a lot of potential. Thinking about lots of recent English releases however, I was worried that this game might also get messed up by amateurish acting. Fortunately this is not the case for The Westerner. Most of the actors did an excellent job. Some of the most memorable performances were Fenimore himself, Miss Rhianon, Joe Bannister, Alvin, Tom, Livy and the telegraphist.

The music is average. The tracks played during the game are suitable for the western theme but they become very repetitive after a while. Same goes for the sound effects, which are few. It feels very cheap when all doors and wooden closets sound the same when they open up or close. I would say that when it comes to comedy and horror adventures, sound effects play a bigger role in creating the right mood compared to the rest of the genres and the developers could have paid more attention to this small part of the audio.

Gameplay: Unfortunately I happened to run across a couple of reviews of The Westerner on the Internet that lambasted it for its arcade sequences. An interesting issue is that these reviewers who ripped the game were obviously older than the coveted twenty-something demographic. It is also interesting that some people try to pass off the myth that the majority of adventurers are 'older' as the absolute truth and that all adventures should be tailored to their needs. Well guess what, that's completely unjustified bull....excrement. There is no scientific study that proves that most adventurers are over a certain age. Adventure

games appeal to all ages and sexes, apparently some ages might be more presented than some others but since there is no proof of that I don't think one can make a rule out of it. I am not saying that developers should not think of the older people as well but there is no reason why all adventures should be made only for the more mature gamers. As the audience is diverse so should the games be too. So what does a 23 year-old male like myself think of the arcade sequences in The Westerner? There are three arcade sequences altogether. Two of them are extremely easy to solve. And as for the third one, a shooting gallery, that the above-mentioned reviewers were complaining about… If you ever been to arcades or a theme park you have probably played something similar there. You are looking on a board and there are villains coming up suddenly on the screen as well as innocent people. You have to shoot a specific number of villains without hitting any of the innocent ones. I was through with the shooting gallery on my second attempt. There has been rumors that the certain arcade sequence might be influenced by your system's settings resulting in the villains coming up at a

Fixing the cart is one of the problems Fenimore will have to solve

Developer:
Revistronic
Perspective:
3rd person
Interface:
Point and click
Site:
revistronic.com
Difficulty:
Easy

Below: **Fenimore has a tendency to go where trouble is waiting**

If Vivendi was publishing The Westerner they would release an uncut version

Hang on to that...pig cowboy!

The local bartender likes hefty tips... so you can't be stingy with him

I spent all that time making this artichoke dinner and he won't even eat it!

very slow speed, making it impossible to beat the last stage, but I did not experience something like that and I thought that it was very easy to win the shooting gallery. I am a person that does not enjoy action/adventure games, but 3 arcade sequences taking 10 minutes altogether to solve in 25 hours of total gameplay do not make a game an action/adventure. Likewise, 2 or 3 door puzzles in Doom do not make it an adventure game. Furthermore the arcade sequences do actually fit in the story and they do make sense, they are not just 'tucked in' there for the sake of adding them.

Now that we made that clear let's talk about the rest and far more important features of the gameplay. First of all, Revistronic deserves congratulations for creating a 3D interface that actually works! So far I used to say that Jane Jensen was the only developer that had managed that with Gabriel Knight 3. From now on there are two great examples on how an adventure game can be presented in 3D. The way the point and click interface of The Westerner works is simple: The graphics are in 3D but you interact with the environment like you would in a 2D point and click adventure.

The camera angles are predetermined and they change automatically when you move Fenimore far away from the center of the view. If you move your cursor to the left or right edge of the screen you can slightly scroll the view towards that direction but not much. There are some slight problems in terms of path finding but they only happen on a few spots throughout the whole game. If you pass your mouse cursor over a hotspot you have two options. One is to look at

it from a close distance and the other is to perform an action with the selected hotspot (pick up/use an object, close/open a door/closet or talk to a character). On the top of the screen you can find all the objects that Fenimore picks up throughout his adventure.

The tasks that Fenimore has to accomplish are for the most part logical and original at the same time. There are no puzzles of the slider/lever-pulling sort so if you are into this kind of thing this adventure is not for you but if you enjoy inventory-based tasks and character interaction The Westerner will send you first class to adventure heaven baby! The gameplay is non-linear and you can visit most of the locations already from the very beginning of the game. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time. It is an advantage because it gives you a sense of freedom in terms of exploration but it is a disadvantage because gameplay slightly looses structure and it might seem quite vague (especially to inexperienced players) what has to be done next in order to proceed to the game. The developers have managed to address this issue to a certain extent by dividing the gameplay in tasks that Fenimore has to do for the farmers and by making most of them easy to accomplish. There are however 2 or 3 moments where the solutions to some of the problems are quite vague. For example *Spoilers* Fenimore has to light a fire and in order to do that he has to cut the logs first in a special machine in Alvin's farm and then put the split logs on a tree stump and cut it further with an axe… There is no feedback by the game whatsoever throughout this whole process and I didn't understand

that I had to cut the logs once more at a different location. Another quite vague problem solution is when Fenimore has to send a telegram to the telegraphist by climbing a post and connecting a… mobile telegraph to the connection on the post… there was again no feedback whatsoever that Fenimore needed to connect the mobile somewhere. *End of Spoilers*. Apart from these few examples however, all the rest of the tasks make sense and result in very amusing situations.

There are also some unusual errands that Fenimore will have to carry out in the game and that reminded me a bit of the Quest for Glory series. You need to ride your horse to go from one location to the next. Your horse has 5 points of stamina. Every time you pass by a location the horse looses one point of stamina. If the horse reaches 0 points you can't go to another location. In order to restore the horse's stamina you have to feed it with carrots. There are carrots almost in all locations and you can plant new carrots in Joe's farm, but it is advised that you get a lot of them with you from the very beginning so that you don't get stranded at one location. This is something that could have been handled better, i.e. the horse could spend only one stamina point for every 5 or 10 locations you are visiting so that you wouldn't have to water carrots and pick them up all the time. Another issue you have to take care of is money. You will have to buy some of the items you need and to do that you have to find the money first. You can find money by looking in places … you're not allowed to, by loaning money from the bank or by fooling other people to lend you some money. I found the

money aspect quite fun, as it became a task that was intertwined with the rest of gameplay.

General Info: The Westerner, known as Wanted: A Wild Western Adventure in the US, is actually a sequel to the lesser-known 3 Skulls of the Toltecs. 3 Skulls of the Toltecs was given as a bundle offer with the Westerner in some of the European releases, but this is unfortunately not the case for the US version. Although the first version of The Westerner in Spanish became notorious for its numerous bugs, the English version I played was flawless and I did not encounter a single bug. The game offers unlimited save slots, although it would be nice to have the option to delete saved games.

In a few words… If you miss playing an adventure that made you laugh out loud and that gave you the feeling you are starring in a comedy movie, then make sure to not miss out on The Westerner. I have not played The Moment of Silence yet, so I cannot say with all certainty that The Westerner is the best adventure this year, but it is definitely the best comedy adventure I have played since The Curse of Monkey Island. Adorable characters, luscious graphics with fluid animations, a 3D interface that lets you enjoy the game while you lie back on your couch instead of fighting with the keyboard and a witty scenario with a great ending will make you remember this game long after you finish it. It is not perfect but it is damn right close to it. Revistronic and The Adventure Company deserve congratulations for delivering such a great title to the adventure fans.

- Dimitris Manos

Will he make it? You'll have to play the game for yourselves to find out

" If you miss playing an adventure that made you laugh out loud and that gave you the feeling you are starring in a comedy movie, then make sure to not miss out on The Westerner."

Highs: Hilarious characters, great looking graphics with the best animation you have seen in adventures so far, nice interface
Lows: Lip-synching, some vague problem solutions, picking up carrots

The Verdict	
Story:	97
Graphics:	92
Sound:	78
Gameplay:	85
Overall:	**89**

Overall = (Story x 2 + Graphics + Music + Gameplay x 2) / 6

AURA:

Fate of the Ages

Developer:
TAC
Perspective:
1st person
Interface:
Point and click
Site:
auragame.com
Difficulty:
Very Hard

Weird contraptions are all around in Aura

The animation is not up to today's standards

I would like to take this opportunity to apologize up front. I was initially supposed to write a preview for this game, but time issues would have put it out just after the game was released. Then I got a copy to review, but schoolwork kept piling up so I never got around to it. I'm now sitting down, in front of my computer, preparing to write a review for a game released four months ago, already reviewed by every other website and magazine that exists in the world of man. The question arises, how can I produce an article that is worth reading, when I cannot really add any new perspective to this game? How, dear reader, can I make this interesting?

In a misguided attempt to answer this question, I have decided to produce a challenge for myself. Firstly, I will entirely refrain from making the obvious comparison between this game and Myst. It's been done, and I refuse to reiterate it. I will not mention Myst for the remainder of this article. Secondly, I shall be writing with one hand tied behind my back. There is no way to prove this, but just take my word for it, okay? Thanks. Thirdly, and for no sensible reason whatsoever, I shall compose this review entirely in song. Seriously. Enjoy.

Story: (To the tune of "American Pie" by Don McLean)

A long, long ways away,

there's this guy named Umang and he's hunting for these magic rings. And legend says, if he succeeds, and pulls off other noble deeds, he can make them do some pretty dandy things. So he will travel 'cross the Ages, and meet with other friendly sages. From there it gets confusing, and frankly, left me snoozing. The plot is just a tangled mess that tries to hard but can't impress, which leaves me but to say, I guess… the story's kinda lame.

But hey, hey, there's no need to dismay, 'cause the story's not important and just interrupts play. It's dull, and boring but I guess that's okay. Exploration is what matters, I say… exploring is the heart of Game-Play.

Gameplay: ("A Modern Major General" by Gilbert and Sullivan)

The interface is similar to much that I have played before; you move the mouse to pan the view, you click to move, and thus explore the universe of clues and puzzles that you find most everywhere, but bring with you a pen and pad or you may suffer great despair.

The puzzles are so difficult they border on insanity; so very irritating you'll be screaming in profanity. You will be spending hours looking for the clues you might have missed, but I did not mind all that much, 'cause I'm a mental masochist.

A couple problems do appear, like pixel-hunting once or twice, and puzzles which cannot be solved 'till you've asked someone for advice. But overall, though slightly flawed, I truly feel I must proclaim, it's all around a playable and puzzling adventure game.

Graphics: ("Somewhere over the Rainbow" by Yip Harburg)

These aren't very good graphics, I must say. Worlds should be much more vibrant than this game can portray. No, not very good graphics, they're quite dull. Static images bring the action to quite a lull. There's nothing moving when it ought, (some waterfalls and fires notwithstanding) the grass should sway, the leaves should blow but very little moves and so it seems so bland… ing… (sorry)

Yeah, not really good graphics, but I should state, they'd have been real impressive way back in '98. The rendering is thorough but this detail isn't really what disturbs me. The plants ant people all look fake and plasticy, a big mistake, and that perturbs me. No, not very good graphics, but not that bad. Could be easily better… but I'm really not that mad.

Sound: ("The Sound of Music" by Rodgers and Hammerstein)

There's not very much of what you'd call music. There's ambient sound, and it's pretty good. The game's atmosphere makes the worlds more vivid, enhancing their feel as a good game should. The

Left: **Some of the 3D models that you get to see in cutscenes**
Right: **A nice snowy location**

sound of the wind and the rain in the nature worlds make them vibrant and real. Machines all supply an electrical hum of an alien feel. The voice acting's dull in the cut-scene shots, but this issue is small, and the story's so bland that it doesn't much matter at all. I think overall, that the sound is decent (with maybe a few bits that could improve), enhancing the feel of the game experience, and I do approve.

In a few words... I'm out of songs. Okay, to summarize: not bad, but not very good either. Graphics are sub-par, sound is good enough, story would have been better if there were less of it. Puzzles are hard but kinda fun if that's your thing, though some are just ridiculous. Its not that it isn't worth the $20 I think, it's just that, um, that game I said I wouldn't mention at the beginning of this article?

Yeah… see the fourth one of that is out now and frankly beats the pants off this game. But, if you got an itch for this sort of game that you just need to scratch, then by all means pick up a copy of Auru: Fate of the Ages Beyond Myst... Ah, crap…

- Justin Peeples

"Not bad, but not very good either. Graphics are sub-par, sound is good enough, story would have been better if there were less of it. Puzzles are hard but kinda fun if that's your thing, though some are just ridiculous ."

Highs: Simple and immersive gameplay mechanics, many challenging puzzles.
Lows: Weak and inconsequential story, mediocre graphics and acting.

The Verdict	
Story:	70
Graphics:	65
Sound:	85
Gameplay:	85
Overall:	**76**

Overall = (Story x 2 + Graphics + Music + Gameplay x 2) / 6

A review tribute to

The Last Express

Ben Keeney writes a review tribute to one of the most original and unique adventure games. The Last Express is the only adventure created by Jordan Mechner who is famous for his Prince of Persia games. It will be difficult to find it nowadays but if you, Ben recommends that you buy it.

Developer:
Jordan Mechner
Perspective:
3rd person
Interface:
Point and click
Difficulty:
Medium

Below: **Our hero has a talk with the gorgeous Austrian violinist, Anna Wolff**

Jordan Mechner is basically Tim Schafer in reverse. Schafer went from creating wonderful adventure games, like Grim Fandango and Day of the Tentacle, to working on an Xbox platformer called Psychonauts. Mechner, on the other hand, designed Karateka and three Prince of Persia games prior to trying his hand at the adventure genre. Based on the result, one would assume him to be a veteran. Mechner has created a masterpiece in The Last Express, an unforgettable experience to put it lightly, and it's a real shame that in the subsequent seven years he's never made another game like it. Nor has anyone else.

Indeed, The Last Express is a stronger game now than when first released. It has much in common with brilliant films; those that are buried under scores of mainstream releases in their initial run, only to be rediscovered in an art house theater many years after the old competition has long been forgotten. In 1997 and 1998, we all heard the hype about Westwood's Blade Runner adventure game, and how it would be a constantly changing world played in real-time. I think people were unimpressed with that idea because they figured games were headed in that direc-

tion regardless. Of course, as everyone now knows, Blade Runner's designers were full of deceit, and gaming did not travel down the path everyone had expected. Hindsight is 20/20, as they say, and Jordan Mechner is the man who actually created an interactive experience that lives and breathes, ladies and gentlemen. No game has ever been made, before or since, that is like The Last Express. To this very day it remains an original. It's a real shame that it can take seven years to realize how ahead of its time something was, but the facts have become impossible to deny. The Last Express was, and in many ways is, ahead of its time.

Story: Let's not forget, the game tells a great story as well. The year is 1914, the world is on the brink of World War I, and as if that's not enough, the game's three days are played out on one hell of a classy train; the Orient Express. With tensions running high throughout Europe, and all the different cultures represented and confined in such a small space, you'll really get a sense of the contrasting motives, underhand dealings, and general mistrust going on.

Even your own character, Robert Cath, is a bit of a mystery.
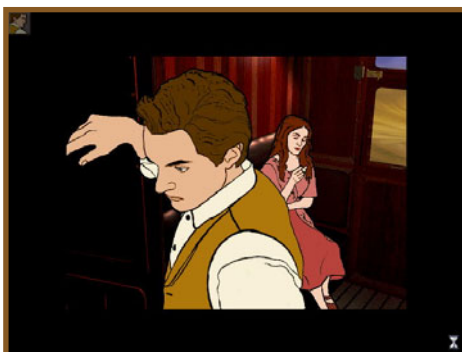
He's a young American on the run from the police, who receives a telegram from an old friend named Tyler Whitney. He's been invited to join Whitney on the Orient Express, presenting our hero with the perfect chance to lay low for a while. Unfortunately Cath arrives late, leaping onto the train from a speeding motorcycle, and there's a surprise in store for him when he finally discovers Tyler's compartment. It's Tyler. Murdered. Now it's up to Cath, assuming Tyler's identity, to discover what is going on. Who wanted Tyler dead and why? What did Tyler want to show him? The plot thickens as the minutes tick away, literally.

During your journey from Paris to Constantinople you'll face many dangers and uncover numerous conspiracies, but you'll also meet some fascinating characters. There's the extremely beautiful Anna Wolff, a splendid Austrian violinist traveling with her dog, Max. You'll learn that the German industrialist, August Schmidt, seems to have been involved in some kind of shady deal with Tyler. You'll be summoned to the richly decorated private car of Kronos, a prince who is under the impression that Tyler had something he wants. Then there's the teenage Russian girl, Tatiana Obolensky, who is traveling with her grandfather, Count Vassili. She discovers that a childhood boyfriend of hers is also aboard, the anarchist Alexei Dolnikov, who despises Vassili.

You'll also meet, under terrible circumstances, a Serbian revolutionary called Milos Jovanovic, and his band of thugs. Of course, it would be impossible to forget George Abbot, the British man with more to his character than meets the eye, or the colorful

Boutarel family whose young son is constantly running up and down the corridors blowing a whistle or trying to catch beetles. There are more characters, to be sure, and they all have their own backgrounds and personalities that you'll be able to unearth as you play. It's all extremely fascinating, well done, and quite frankly, unforgettable.

Gameplay: Despite all of the time and effort that so obviously went into this production, you won't get to appreciate all of its riches in one or two trips through it. Believe it or not, this isn't a flaw, but an attribute; a testament to the way this game functions as a true to life enclosed world. Time is really passing, and with each moment that goes by the train is getting closer to its final destination.

Everyone aboard has their own schedule and goes about their business regardless of what you are doing, even if this means you miss overhearing an important conversation because you were busy sneaking into someone's compartment at the time. Indeed, this game gives the player extreme amounts of freedom. If, for instance, you find
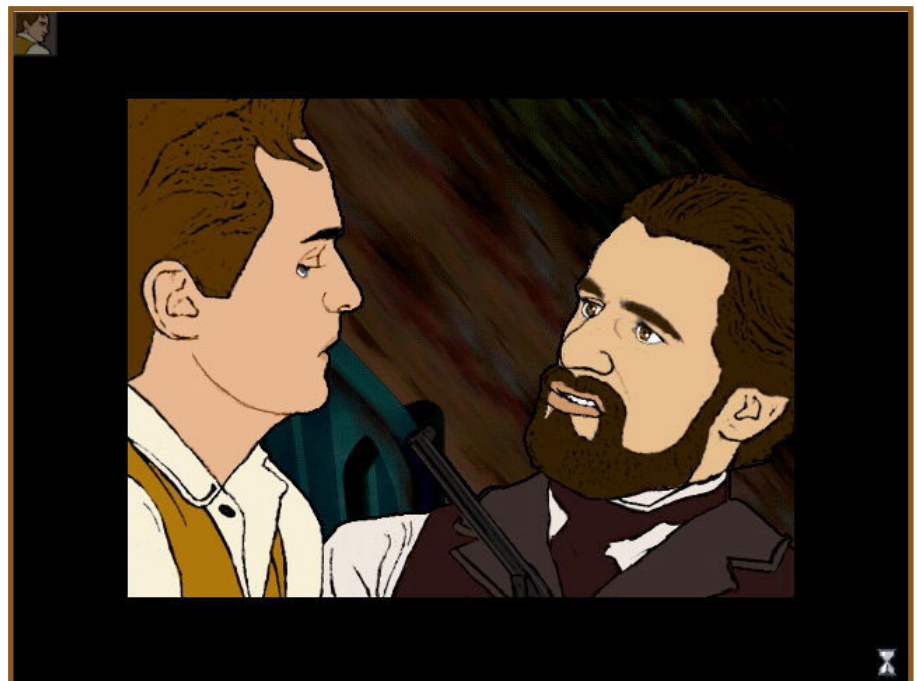

They don't look too pleased to see an American on the train.

If only everyone on the train could be so peaceful.

Below: Mr. Cath, please don't piss off the revolutionary

This game is a beautiful, stylistic piece of work.

Below: What a lovely European attitude...

Don't worry, he won't understand. he's an American.

out that someone is going to be meeting someone else in the dining car; you can stay and eavesdrop on what they say or go to the rooms of the passengers involved and nose through their stuff while they're away, or you can do something entirely different!

It's all left up to the player to essentially write their own version of events. Even the outcomes are different. There is one major, "true" conclusion, but there are other endings you can achieve earlier that also present satisfying (or unsatisfying) closure to the tale. Don't misunderstand, there is certainly a point to the game and a fully developed plot to go along with the open design, but how much of the story you unravel in the allotted time is completely up to you. For the average gamer, it will probably take about three or four trips through The Last Express to see absolutely everything it has to offer, thus enjoying the full story and all the subtle nuances of characterization.

The gameplay is efficiently handled, reminiscent of Syberia (or would that be the other way

around?) in the way it strips away several of the genre conventions to supply the least cumbersome journey possible, allowing the player to focus on the experience itself. It's presented in a first-person perspective which shifts to third-person during cutscenes involving your character. You'll be able to click your way through the train, moving forward or backward, spinning 180-degrees, and often looking up or down as well. If you wish to traverse an entire car of the train in speedy fashion you simply double click straight ahead, and off you go.

To further simplify aspects of the gameplay, your inventory is never larger than about ten items, and you won't be combining any of them. There aren't many traditional puzzles either, though the ones that do exist are entirely believable and enjoyable. The challenge of this game lies more in what you do with your time. If you don't do enough, you will eventually meet your end. Sometimes, to avoid ending up dead, you'll even be forced into a fight. These are never too difficult, nor do they require any kind of arcade control.

For all but one of them, you simply click the mouse to dodge when your opponent lunges, and then click the fist icon on them to let them taste knuckles. It's the same concept for the most complicated fight in the game, but this time you have to block and duck as well. Additionally, if you lose a fight, you can simply try again immediately. The game further allows you to rewind the game clock, at any time, to earlier positions if you feel that you've missed something important. Overall, the game is simply a pleasure to play. You will die enough to realize it's not easy an easy adventure, but not nearly

enough to assume it's too hard. Mechner strikes a perfect balance.

Graphics: In terms of presentation, The Last Express is absolutely top notch. The graphics are very inspired by Art Nouveau, which fits the period of the game flawlessly as this style was extremely popular between 1890-1914. The train itself is exquisitely designed based on an actual sleeping car of the period that the design team was able to explore and photograph. It is within this computer generated creation that the characters, a combination of animation and live actors, move about and interact with one another.

The animation is generally not fluid, it's done in a style that cuts from position to position which, as many people have pointed out, gives the game a feel similar to an early 1900's comic book. I personally find the style to be highly original in gaming, and I believe that it doesn't lend itself much to aging. This game feels new when played today.

Sound: No small part of the achievement is also indebted to the sound. The Last Express features what I believe to be the best use of sound in an adventure game. In a world that now features games in the genre like Dark Fall, where sound is used to chilling effect, I understand this seems like misplaced praise. Nonetheless, I am convinced otherwise.

The sounds of the train in motion, pulling into a new station, the toot of the horn, the sounds of fine silverware tapping plates in the dining car, the various bits of preparation heard when you walk past the kitchen, the realization that the rooms being searched are moving closer and closer to your own, the way the voices behind doors sound muffled, the way the wind zips by when you are on the roof, etc. This game constantly keeps you further immersed in its world through the marvelous sound effects. The musical score is also quite impressive, and it's put to vivid use in a two hour concert sequence (which you can attend or leave at any time). Without a doubt, the production values here are tops.

My last comment refers to the voice acting as well. It's impeccable. If you're the type who appreciates realistic accents and dialects in games, as opposed to pitiful acting jobs that try to artificially pass for the scripted manner of speaking, then you'll be right at home. Every character not only sounds genuine, but is also extremely well performed. The man you play knows a few languages aside from English as well, which affords the game one of its greatest strengths; characters can speak in their native tongue and you can understand what they are saying via subtitles. For a game taking place on the Orient Express, this becomes a very important feature, making the experience that much more believable.

In a few words... Quite simply, The Last Express captured my imagination from the start. I felt like I was truly embroiled in a web of bizarre happenings aboard this legendary train, speeding through the European countryside. With its nearly peerless combination of visuals, audio, storyline, characterization, and addictive gameplay; The Last Express sits comfortably among the very best in the genre.

- Ben Keeney

Shall we have a seat in the dining car? Or shall we question some of these suspects?

"With its nearly peerless combination of visuals, audio, storyline, characterization, and addictive gameplay; The Last Express sits comfortably among the very best in the genre."

Highs: Beautiful, original visuals. The best sound ever heard in an adventure game. A timeless story of adventure and romance. Brilliant, real-time gameplay that remains impressive after seven years.

Lows: I'm sure some players may not enjoy the fights or they may mention a lack of puzzles. But for my money, there aren't any flaws worth noting in this masterpiece

The Verdict	
Story:	96
Graphics:	96
Sound:	100
Gameplay:	95
Overall:	**96**

*Overall = (Story x 2 + Graphics + Music + Gameplay x 2) / 6

Bits and Bytes
The Hardware Corner

In the last issue Oliver talked about the latest graphics cards. Now in this issue Oliver gives us an introduction to digital cameras for those of you who like to keep a memory or two slightly better than your average Joe does.

During the last ten years the ordinary home PC has converted from a mere text machine to a complete multimedia machine. In combination with a simple digital camera the computer can become a real photo lab that would have cost a hundred times as much during the analogue times. And while applications like Photoshop, the standard for professional picture editing, can even make a bad picture look good it is essential to take care that the source material is as good as possible right from the start so a good picture will even look brilliant. This month's Bits & Bytes gives an overview about what features are important and which are not when looking for a digital camera.

The bigger the better?

The first thing the enthusiastic newbie usually looks at is the number of mega pixels (MP) printed in big letters on the case or box and the manufacturers do everything to imply that a higher number also means that the camera is better. Professional digital cameras nowadays reach up to 20 MP and with that, have topped the resolution the analogue 35mm slide films gain and almost reached the medium format category. The price however also reaches that category with about 1000 Euros / Dollars per mega pixel. Consumer compact cameras achieve between 3 and 10 MP and can sometimes be found at supermarkets with a starting price of around 150 Euros / Dollars. But can a cheap discounter camera with for example 4 mega pixels compete with an older 1 or 2 MP brand-name camera? The answer is simple… it can't!

First of all such cheap cameras never reach the promised number of MP, often the cameras software interpolates the pictures to make them "bigger" with more or less success - usually less. As addition the optics of such cameras generally are very bad because the manufacturer uses small, low-cost plastic lenses. I experienced such a phenomenon myself, my first digital camera was a cheaper 3.3 MP model from Kodak and I was never satisfied especially when I saw the photos the 3.3 MP Nikon Coolpix 990 made that many of my colleagues used at that time. So I exchanged my low-priced Kodak with an older model, a Canon Powershot Pro 70 with only 1.3 MP and what can I say, the Canon was with its almost 1/3 resolution a lot better, the pictures were sharper, clearer and more brilliant and only the lower resolution made them look a little worse than the Nikon ones but they were in a completely different league compared to the cheap Kodak camera.

While the 1.3 MP certainly offered enough resolution for photos that were only used on the computer or for the newspaper, printing them out was limited to small sizes. To print out a 20 x 30 cm picture the source material should have at least about 3000 x 2000 pixels, meaning 3 to 4 mega pixels. Good consumer digital cameras for the (inexperienced) beginner start at around 400 Euros / Dollars and have between 4 and 5 mega pixels. Higher price digital compact cameras often have 8 or 10 MP and cost around 1000 bucks. Recommendable brands are Canon, Minolta, Nikon, Olympus, Pentax or Sony. But also their lower price models (200 to 400 cash) are not recommendable because they often have the same weaknesses as the no name cameras. If one doesn't want to spend so much money on a new camera it is a good idea to look for older or used models instead. A used Nikon Coolpix 990 is sold for about 175-250 Euros / Dollars at Ebay and the results will look better as the ones from the "superior" current Coolpix beginner cameras like the 885 or 4800 that easily cost double. After all, the prices for digital cameras drop steadily and nothing is as old as last year's camera. One of the best, if not the best, 5 MP model, the Canon Powershot G5, was released last Christmas and did

cost 800 Euros / Dollars back then, now it often is sold for a little over 400 Euros / Dollars. And again this is still one of the best cameras of its kind, just that now 8 MP or even 10 MP cameras are offered on the shelves but those high resolutions are really only needed if one wants to print out very big "tapestries".

Compact or Single Lens Reflex?

Professional photographers and ambitious amateurs swear on (Digital) Single Lens Reflex (SLR) cameras and wouldn't use a compact one. Alas both types of cameras have their advantages and disadvantages. In the end it often depends on what they are used for and how much money the photographer wants to spend. There are a lot of differences between both types worth mentioning, though. The most recognizable difference is the price. Digital reflex cameras start at around 750 Euros / Dollars - without a lens. A good zoom lens will cost about the same as the camera-body itself. There are cheaper lenses and also cameras in a kit with a lens available for only 50 bucks more but mostly these lenses mean that the pictures won't show the possible quality the camera could reach with a proper one. A good example is the Canon EOS 300D (Europe) / Digital Rebel (America) / Digital Kiss (Asia) whose kit lens is just horrible even though it might be enough for the first steps.

Another significant difference is that compact cameras have a viewer that doesn't show the actual scene. To see what image would be taken it is necessary to use the LCD on the backside. Many compact cameras have a movable display that can be turned into almost every direction so it is possible to

take pictures even from odd angles without the necessity of the photographer to crouch or climb into the same position. SLR's however can't display what the lens is viewing; they can only show a picture on their display after it has been taken. This also means that a SLR can't be "abused" as video camera. Also an SLR together with a set of lenses and an external flash means a heavy weight to carry around, usually only done when wanting to take pictures for or at a certain situation. A compact "prosumer" camera on the other hand is often handy and fits into most pockets so it is ideal for snapshots. Snapshots by the way are a problem for many digital compact cameras, after trigging, the shutter of many "compacts" takes a few moments to release, too long time when the object of desire isn't moving like a snail and even portraits frequently need a few tries before the result is satisfactory because people tend to blink or flinch at exactly the wrong moment - regards to Murphy here. An advantage of the SLR's is that they usually allow for higher ISO settings and have less noise as compact cameras on the same level. When the light is dim and no flash is at hand, forget the baby flashes that are built into the cameras they are only good for a 3m distance with the target directly in front, it's a good choice to choose a higher ISO setting. While most SLR's offer up to 3200 and even at 1600 the results are pretty good without a horribly amount of noise in the picture. Many compact cameras already have troubles with ISO 400, a setting a SLR usually shows no recognizable noise at all. While many compact cameras offer zoom ranges from around 24 to 135 mm often named as equivalent
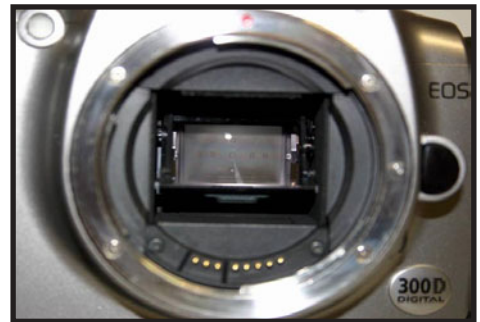
to analogue cameras. There are also super zooms with up to 400 mm but those prosumer cameras do cost a lot, too. Exchangeable lenses from a 10 mm macro to a 600 mm "telescope" however offer a wider variety - for a certain price of course especially when they have a build in image stabilizer and real good aperture values (seen at the F-stop, the lower the number(s) the better the lens so to speak, for example f/3.5-5.6 which is very ordinary for a 80 mm to 200 mm zoom lens, f/1.0-1.0 would be optimal but of course is impossible).

The last point to mention would be that while compact cameras usually have a lot of good, usable presets the SLR's are a lot easier to handle when using manual settings because many features are hidden deep down in some menu-tree and SLR's just have more buttons to fool around with, so to speak.

Beginning the SLR way of Life

When the decision is done and an ambitious hobby photographer wannabe decides to buy his first SLR s/he has a lot of models to choose from. Currently there are two cameras available that caused quite some uproar because they were the first to offer Single Lens Reflex technology for an affordable price. These are the already mentioned Canon EOS 300D (I leave its other names, now) and the Nikon D70. In a kit with a starter lens they cost about 800 and 1100 Euros / Dollars. The Canon has 6.3 MP and a silver plastic case, the Nikon offers 6.1 MP and a black metal case so it looks slightly more professional, nonetheless there is no battery grip available for Nikon's smallest SLR. The picture quality is practically identical; however the Nikon lens is a lot better so this is only correct when using a proper lens for the Canon. The exact technical details can be found at the manufacturers homepages. Let me just add a few sentences. Because besides the lower price the EOS has one big advantage:

The Canon EOS 300D technically is actually very similar to the 500 Euros / Dollars more expensive Canon EOS 10D except its case though, and it lacks many of the functions that can be found in the "professional" model, for example flash exposure compensation, mirror lock up, ISO settings up to 3200 and so on. But some smart guys found out that with a simple hack and minor changes of the firmware the 300D suddenly gets all those features for free, the price is the loss of guarantee, on the other hand it is simple to change back to the old firmware in case the camera needs to be repaired. This modified firmware can be downloaded from http://satinfo.narod.ru/en/ and is very easy to install, as precaution one should get the original firmware from the Canon homepage and store it someplace, just in case.

Cool free Software for Photo Enthusiasts

So after all pictures are taken they need to be modified, catalogued and stored. Many digital cameras are sold with some OEM versions of commercial software but some also aren't. Here are some applications that come in handy in such a case and the best is they are completely for free. The Gimp (http://www.gimp.org/) is often compared with Photoshop, the biggest difference; it's totally for free and only lacks some functions needed just by professionals like CMYK colour separation.

IrfanView (http://www.irfanview.de) and XNView (http://www.xnview.com) are famous picture viewers that offer a lot of functions for browsing files and simple modifications like conversion of multimedia data. A good place to search for free applications is http://sourceforge.net/ just type in the desired subject in the search field, for example "picture" and you'll be rewarded with tons of usable software.

- Oliver Gruener

THE AL LOWE SHOW!

The legendary Al Lowe needs no introduction at all (if you didn't start playing adventures yesterday that is). The creator of the popular Larry series sends out from his website www.allowe.com two jokes everyday to the subscribers of CyberJoke 2000. Here you can read a compilation of the best jokes he sent out this month.

The rising young executive was finally leaving the office after 7 PM when he found the CEO standing before the shredder holding a sheet of paper. "Excuse me," said the CEO, "but this is a highly sensitive and extremely important document, and my secretary has left for the night. Do you know how to make this thing work?" "Certainly," said the young executive, pleased at the opportunity to display his skills for the boss. He turned on the machine, inserted the paper, and pressed the start button. "Excellent!" said the CEO. "I need two copies."

A young woman purchased a piece of timberland in Northern California and, in order to get a good view of her new land, decided to climb a large tree on one of the highest points of her tract. Nearing the top, a spotted owl attacked her. In her haste to escape, she slid down the tree, getting several painful splinters in her private parts. After the emergency room doctor examined her, he left the room for nearly three hours! When the doctor reappeared, the angry woman demanded an explanation. He replied, "As a timber owner you should understand: I need permits from the EPA, the Forest Service, and the BLM before I can remove old-growth timber from a recreational area!"

Two boys are playing football in Golden Gate Park when one is attacked by a rottweiler. Thinking quickly, the other boy rips off a board from a nearby fence, wedges it into the dog's collar and twists it hard, breaking the dog's neck. After a reporter interviewed the boy, he wrote in his notebook, "Young 49ers Fan Saves Friend From Vicious Animal."

The young hero protested, "I'm not a 'Niners fan!" "Oh, sorry," said the reporter. "I just assumed that you were because we're in San Francisco." He scratched it out and wrote, "Young Raiders' Fan Rescues Friend From Horrific Attack." Again the young hero protested, "Wait. I'm not a Raiders fan, either." "Oh, sorry," said the reporter. "I just assumed that everyone in the Bay Area was either for the 'Niners or Raiders. What team do you root for?" "I'm a Cowboys fan." The reporter wrote, "Little Redneck Bastard Slaughters Beloved Family Pet."

Walking up to a department store's fabric counter, a pretty girl asked, "I want to buy this material for a new dress. How much does it cost?" "Only one kiss per yard, " replied the smirking male clerk. "That's fine," replied the girl. "I'll take ten yards." With expectation and anticipation written all over his face, the clerk hurried-

ly measured out and packaged the cloth, then held it out teasingly. The girl snapped up the package and pointed to a little old man standing beside her. "Grandpa will pay the bill."

A guy went through the checkout at the supermarket with 1 bar of soap, 1 toothbrush, a small tube of toothpaste, 1 donut, 1 pint of milk, an individual serving of cereal, and 1 frozen dinner. The checkout girl looked at him and said, "Single, huh?" The guy replied sarcastically, "How'd you guess?" She says, "'Cause you're so friggin' ugly!"

Jake and Mike were on their way to the ski resort when they got caught in a terrible blizzard. They found a farmhouse and asked its rather attractive housewife if they could spend the night. "Oh, I don't think so," she explained. "You see, I'm recently divorced and you know how neighbors will talk...." "Well, then," said Jake, "how about if we just sleep in your barn?" That seemed acceptable to all.

About nine months later, Jake got a letter from the woman's attorney. He immediately phoned his ski buddy, Mike. "Hey, Mike. Do you remember our ski trip and that good-looking divorcee? You didn't happen to sneak into her house in the middle of the night and have sex with her, did you?" "Well, yeah, I did." "And, by any chance did you happen to use my name instead of yours?" Mike blushed. "Well, yeah, I'm afraid I did." "Hey, thanks! She just died and left me everything!"

Farmer Jones stopped to visit his old friend, Farmer Brown. They decided to sit a spell on the back porch. Farmer Jones noticed Farmer Brown had a hog with a wooden leg. After they'd talked a while, curiosity got to him and he asked, "Fred, how'd that hog of yours get that wooden leg?" "Well, Clayton, that there's one mighty special hog! A while back, when I was walking in the woods, a big ol' bear attacked me.

And you know what? That dang'd hog came a-runnin', attacked that bear and chased him off. Saved my life, he did. You never saw nothing like it!" "So the bear tore up his leg?" "Nah, he came outta that one jes' fine. But some time later that old' shed I used-ta have out behind the barn caught on fire.

And you know what? That dang'd hog started squealin' like he was stuck, woke up the Missus and me all the way inside our bedroom, and 'fore we could even get there, that dang'd hog had herded all the other animals out of the barn and saved their lives. You never saw nothing like it!" "So his leg got burned in the fire?" "Nah, he came outta that one jes' fine, too. A couple weeks ago, I was drivin' my tractor out by the pond when I hit a big rock. Threw me right off'n that tractor, right into the water. The fall knocked me out!

And you know what? That dang'd hog dove into the pond and dragged me out 'fore I drowned. He saved my life again, he did!" "And that's when he hurt his leg?" "Nah, he came outta that one jes' fine too." "Okay, Fred, so just tell me. How in the hell did your hog get that wooden leg?" "Well, ya know, a hog that good, you don't want to eat him all at once!"

- Al Lowe

Invento-Mail

This is the part of the magazine where you can make yourselves heard. Send your emails to theinventory@yahoo.com and we will reply to you in this section in one of our future issues. Now let's move on to a lengthy but at the same time very interesting mail we received before our last issue was released.

Dear Dimitri (hope you don't mind, mr. Manos just seemed too official), I thought about sending you some reviews in hope of becoming a writer for The inventory (I've made drafts for Gabriel Knight 1 and Private eye), but since I don't really have that much free time these days and I wouldn't be able to write them on a regular basis, I decided to restrict myself just to some suggestions (and some criticism, hopefully you'll find it to be constructive). I have been playing adventure games, almost exclusively, for, well, over a decade now and I recall those golden times with quite some nostalgia, considering what passes now as an adventure game. I think that, though today there are many adventure titles on the shelves and in production, quantity doesn't mean quality, and it is sad that there is more in terms of story and character development, as well as feeling of immersion, in the game Mafia (a TPS!) than in most products of Dreamcatcher and Adventure company. But I try not to live in the past (though Isometimes replay some of these old classics), so I buy the titles that I see did well in your reviews. And I'm usually not disappointed.

However, I do have some questions for you.First of all, I find that your scores of fan-made games too high in compare to the commercial ones. I know you'll say that commercial games are un-innovative, have bad game play and so on, and I agree that they do not live up to the standards of the good old days, but that shouldn't make you biased in favor of the indie developers that much. I generally prefer a more serious storyline and in my opinion fan-made games are way too short and have the story and type of humor understandable to a limited group of people (but that just may be me and no one else). Also, I would like to comment on insertion of action elements. To quote you:

"There are a) pure adventure games with no action elements at all, b) adventure games with some action elements tagged on, c) action games with some adventure elements tagged on, d) pure action games with no adventure elements at all. Under b I would include games like Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis, Blade Runner, Full Throttle 1, URU, Quest for Glory etc. Under c I would include games like King's Quest 8, Silent Hill, Outcast, In Cold Blood etc. It all goes down to whether the games have the focus on story development, character interaction and puzzle solving or shooting,stealth,jumping/standing/walking in/on a right direction/position. And the products that the Inventory is going to cover are products of the a and b category. For products of the c and d category our readers should better look elsewhere."

I agree with that, but I also find it unfair of you to trash i.e. Dreamfall sole because it will have some action elements and without seeing the full game. Not all puzzles advance the story, and not all action elements are by default annoying – if done right the game can gain both on belief and on suspense. If there should be some action in the game it should be in-sync with the story, rather then just an obstacle for making the game longer. You can't have a good police/detective story with any action attached – do you find Police Quest series or Blue force, for example, less worthy then Monkey island 3? Do not forget that even your favorite series (Gabriel Knight) had action elements in it. GK 1: mummies in Benin, some timed sequences in the hounfour GK 2: chapter 5 – shooting Von Zell, chapter 6 –chasing Von Glower GK 3: day 3, 9pm-12am – temple beneath Rennes-le-chateau

Don't get me wrong, I myself tend to be a purist at times, but I find reading those endless documents only for the sake of reading and solving those nearly impossible-to-solve puzzles only for the sake of solving in Black Dahlia far more tiring then, say some fight you had to put up with in Fate of Atlantis. So, I would like you to comment that for me. My last remark would be about the interviews. You seem to interview the publishers far too often only to reveal a couple of new titles which you could preview in a page or two. The rest is just about sale figures to

show that adventures do sell – unnecessary, IMHO. When you talk to a developer you ask them a lot about themselves (their likes/dislikes), when you should focus on their product which is far more interesting for readers. A little background is okay, but you do it in great length. Also interviewing indie developers after only one hit they've made I find a bit odd on your side, remember, you interviewed Jane Jensen, Al Lowe and Bill Tiller...

That's enough of criticism (finally :)).I'm sure it seems that I'm only trashing here, and you must hate me by now, but I'm only trying to point out to some things that I think are keeping you from becoming an even better publication. And now some suggestions. I saw in the last issue that you put a column about hardware and I hope to see new ones. It would be nice if you could describe the process of making games in some form of development diary (a bit more info on Sealed Lips would be nice) so that people understand how much effort is put into developing an adventure game.

You are right to return tribute-reviews (so that the kids see what they're missing. I'd like to see reviews of whole series of games (Police, Space, King's Quests Larrys, Monkey island and so on) so that the readers can see the progress the games in the series have made.And if it is possible, I would like to see some sort of pro-con column where you could vote in a poll (put a link inside the magazine or something like that), on topics like: action elements, making sequels, selling games only through internet download, episodial download, fan games based on registered trademarks, paying for fan games etc., while giving in the article arguments both for and against and show results of the voting.

That would be all. It would be nice if you could answer my questions and give me your view on my suggestions and opinions. Again, don't feel offended by my criticism because it's not ill-intended. I do enjoy reading your magazine every month, I just think it would gain on quality if these small things are improved, that's all. Anyway, keep up the good work! Best wishes to you and the whole staff of The Inventory,

Toni Radic

The Inventory: Hello Toni. Believe me I love constructive criticism, especially when it is well argumented and when it is not ill-intended. I'll try to address some of the issues you talked about. I agree that adventures in the golden days had much more going on in terms of storytelling and character development than the adventures we have seen the last couple of years. I am happy to say though that we can distinguish a trend of change with recent titles like The Westerner, Sherlock Holmes and, although I haven't played The Moment of Silence yet, our reviewer thought that it was an excellent game with strong focus on storytelling.

As for Dreamfall, I am quoting the official website of the game: Due for the PC fall 2005, *Dreamfall is a third-person action-adventure set in The Longest Journey universe.* I'm not trashing the game in anyway, but The Inventory is strictly for games of the a and b category that was mentioned in your letter. Or if I could put it in another way The Inventory covers adventure games and adventure/action games. Action/adventures and Action games are out of our focus. And if Funcom says it's an action/adventure well that doesn't give much choice to begin with. I'm not against one or two action sequences in adventure games if they are well integrated, if they suit the story and they are not just tacked in for the sake of adding them, as you will notice from my review of The Westerner.

I can imagine that some parts of the interviews with publishers might seem boring to you and other fans, but The Inventory is being read also by people who work in publishing, members of the press, developers, gamestore owners etc,etc and some information that you find boring they might find interesting. You can easily jump over to the next question or section if you are not interested while those who are can read it instead. When it comes to grading, actually I think that we have overrated quite a lot of titles recently and our grading system needs some adjustment in general. We plan to have some sort of an online meeting with the staff and find some common ground to base our reviews in the future,so we're working on that. But I disagree with you when it comes to interviewing indie developers after making a hit. I have been creating The Inventory without any considerable profit so far and I know what it takes to create something simply out of love, so I think that those developers who work hard to develop a good game and release it for free deserve at least the attention from press and fans alike.

Expect to see more tribute reviews and hardware columns in the future. And as for new columns regarding development expect to see something of that sort in our December issue. Thank you for writing Toni, and I hope you enjoy our future issues too. As I have said many times in the past constructive criticism is more than welcome! Maybe see you at our birthday party in our forums?

Epilogue

So here we go again, entering the third year of The Inventory. It seems like we just blinked our eyes and suddenly 2 years passed. Let's see what there is going to be in the December issue now. We owe you a review of the English version of The Moment of Silence. We also owe you a review of AGON and a review of Law and Order 2. You will get all that and even more.

As we mentioned in our Gossip section, we are going to be revealing yet another new adventure (woo-hoo) and we will also try to have several features on the certain game (hopefully a comic too, but no promises yet). As for the rest of the contents nothing has been decided yet so this is all we can let you know so far.

Don't miss the online event of the year, The Inventory birthday party. Where else would you get the chance to talk to so many developers at the same time? So 29th and 30th of November, from 18:00 to 24:00 GMT everybody at theinventory.org forum and let's make these two days memorable for years to come! Check all the latest news regarding the party at:

http://www.theinventory.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=42

and make sure to join our forum and discuss about the contents of our magazine and the latest news in the adventure community.

Before I forget. Either next month or in January, we will release a special booklet with adventure awards for 2004. There will be readers' awards too, so you will be able to participate in the whole thing. We will let you know more in the beginning of December through our website. That's all for this month then. Until our next issue, have fun and keep adventuring!

Dimitris Manos

The Inventory

A magazine for adventure games only

WE ARE LOOKING FOR SPONSORS

DID YOU KNOW YOU CAN LINK TO
A WEBSITE FROM A PDF DOCUMENT?

WOULD YOU LIKE TO ADVERTISE
YOUR PRODUCTS IN THE INVENTORY?

IN THAT CASE SEND US AN E-MAIL AT

theinventory@yahoo.com