

The Inventory

A magazine for adventure games only

PREVIEW:

Pilot Brothers

INTERVIEW:

Jonathan Boakes

REVIEWS:

Still Life

Mysterious Island

White Chamber

Shivers 2



ANKH- overed

5-page preview, exclusive screenshots
and a gorgeous 3-page comic based
on this hot new 3D comedy adventure

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Prologue

Welcome to the 24th issue of The Inventory. Before I talk to you about the contents of this issue, I would like to announce that the website Adventure Europe is now open to the public at www.adventure-eu.com. You can find more about this new exciting adventure site in our gossip section.

Now talking about exciting things...how about a preview of Ankh. Our new writer Sudeep has had the chance to play an early build of Ankh and let me tell you, he is excited. Actually I got to play around with this early build myself too, and frankly, I haven't been so excited about an adventure game since I heard about A Vampyre Story. It looks that good. But I'll let Sudeep do the explaining. Once you have read the preview, make sure to also read the comic based on Ankh, on page 11. If you would like to read the comic in better resolution, you can always do that in www.adventure-eu.com if you become a member of the Adventure Europe club (free membership).

Alex ASP from Russia writes a preview on an adventure game that is already released in Russia, called Pilot Brothers 3D, and that will probably appear in other countries as well soon. Fans of comedy adventure will probably want to read that one.

Ben Keeney returned this month with two reviews. First of all, the long-awaited Still Life, that received no less than 88 by Ben. Ben also reviewed Return to Mysterious Island that made surprised him in a positive way. Justin Peeples also made a return with a review of The White Chamber, a freeware adventure that will please anime-fans.

Jordy Tubman is another new writer whose goal is to make The Inventory more interesting for fans of puzzle/adventures. He conducted a very interesting interview with Jonathan Boakes about his upcoming Lost Crown, and he also reviewed Sierra's Shivers 2. Well that's all for now so let's Ankh-over a great game for you.

Dimitris Manos

ANKH

Our new writer Sudeep Pasricha, had the chance to play a very early build of this exciting upcoming comedy adventure. Let's see what were his first impressions of Ankh, a 3D adventure that makes use of a point and click interface



Assil

Four-score and seven years ago, a small German game developer that went by the name of Artex Software released a point-and-click adventure game called Ankh for the Acorn RiscPC platform. Unfortunately, the Acorn platform never really took off – only 500,000 machines were sold, a majority of them in Great Britain where they were bought by British schools, while the rest were purchased by private users scattered in Germany, France, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand (practically none were sold in the United States). All of which meant that Ankh was doomed to obscurity, never really being accessible to the primarily PC platform based adventure gaming community. Which is a shame really, because the game had a lot going for it. The story was set in Egypt and revolved around a boy named Domi trying to prove himself to his father. As anyone who has played an adventure game before would know, trying to “prove yourself” in an adventure game can quickly degenerate into a nightmarish romp for the protagonist, and poor unsuspecting Domi soon found himself fighting deadly crocodiles in the Nile, fixing a broken time machine for a troupe of break-dancers, playing catch with a vicious hound from

hell and plotting to rescue a princess in distress. Ankh had all the ingredients of a successful adventure game – a wacky storyline, witty dialogues and beautiful graphics. But success remained elusive, and Ankh probably found its calling as a real stumper of a question in a 90's time capsule edition of Trivial Pursuit.

Fast-forward seven years to the present. Frankfurt based developers Deck13 have acquired Artex Software and are busy working on an adventure game based on the original Ankh, again set in Egypt, but this time for the PC platform. While there have been many adventure games set in mysterious Egypt of late (Riddle of the Sphinx, The Egyptian Prophecy, Egypt 3: Fate of Ramses to name a few) none of them have been designed to make you grin or maybe even laugh out loud, as you explore your surroundings and progress in the game. Ankh: The Tales of Mystery is being developed as a third person point-and-click comic adventure, in the tradition of classic ticklers like the Monkey Island and Discworld series. The hero of the game is Assil, a lazy son of a rich pyramid architect who likes to party and gets into trouble without trying too hard.



**Left: The cursor for walking.
Below: An Arabian damsel in distress and another scene from Ankh**

Since I am a big fan of adventure games with a sense of humor, and also happen to be a closet armchair Egyptophile, it was very exciting to get hold of a prototype-demo from the developers and have the opportunity to see how the game is shaping up.

As the demo begins, a series of vignettes are shown which tell the story of how Assil stole the key to the Great Pyramid to hold a forbidden party and woke up the next morning with a terrible hangover and a curse from a dead Pharaoh. To escape his fate in the Underworld, Assil must somehow convince the only person who can remove the curse – the mighty Pharaoh Iphenep. And he must do so with haste, since the Ankh, the magic symbol of life, which he stole from a tomb (mistaking it for a nice bottle opener) lures a lot of evil characters out of their dark holes. The groundwork for the story having been laid, I am handed the reigns with Assil standing outside the VIP backdoor entrance to the Pharaoh's festivities. Assil needs to get in to meet the Pharaoh. Seeking an audience at the main gate is not an option, since it would take an ordinary citizen such as Assil at least a year or two to get his turn. Therefore the immediate problem is to somehow get in via



the VIP backdoor entrance. Now that entrance happens to be guarded by a pot bellied bouncer named Boulboul, who is the type of character with whom you'd find yourself fighting the desire to look into his ear to see if you could spot daylight coming the other way. Boulboul doesn't seem to like Assil, and denies him entry on account of him not being a VIP (since he wears no necklace, cannot dance and is not "groovy"). After making small talk with him, Assil learns of the Camilla Loca, a dance invented by the Pharaoh himself ("two steps left, two steps right, turn around once, clap clap!"). There is also a trash pit dangerously close to where Boulboul is standing. Hmm. If Assil can only get him to dance the Camilla Loca, the trash pit would take care of the rest. However, try as he does, Assil is unable to get Boulboul to shake a leg. With all conversation with him exhausted, I decide to explore my surroundings and figure out a way to get in. A short distance from the entrance, Assil finds a cellar with a rotten wooden beam inside ("what was once a proud tree is now a danger to architecture" he quips), but there is nothing to do there, at least yet. Across an alley nearby, Assil notices a prison cell window from which a female voice is calling out for help. On talking to her, he learns that she is the daughter of the Arabian ambassador, who got into the Pharaoh's path and was told by him, "Be off, mere mortal", to which she retorted "Get lost, you old fart", which resulted in her being promptly sentenced to a few centuries without sunlight in a prison cell. So now Assil must honor adventure gaming tradition and help the damsel in distress by getting her out of the prison. A quick rummage through the assorted junk for sale at the El-Buyall Import-



A mummy character on the transition from concept art to 3D.



Export roadside stand nearby reveals a jar of hurricane termites, which Assil can pocket, since the owner is nowhere to be found. Releasing the termites on the rotting beam in the cellar makes the prison floor collapse, freeing the Arabian ambassadors daughter. After sorting out the problem of finding something for her to wear (she cannot leave the cellar in her prison clothes), Assil requests her to play music for him with an ancient flute he finds nearby. With music playing, Boulboul now starts dancing the Camilla Loca (apparently the music is so catchy he cannot resist) and tragically falls into the trash pit, thus leaving the backdoor entrance unguarded. The demo ends as Assil enters through the backdoor.

After blazing through the aforementioned demo, I must say I was pleasantly impressed. Ankh: The Tales of Mystery boasts of some fantastic 3D graphics. All the characters and the backgrounds have been beautifully modeled in 3D. A particularly noticeable aspect of the graphics was the extremely effective use of lighting which considerably enhances the look of the game. What really



Give fish burger to shy assassin

Assil will interact with all sorts of street merchants in Ankh

impressed me the most however was the way in which the camera swooped and panned as Assil moved around his surroundings. The smooth and graceful transitions gave the game a very polished, cinematic feel. The developers have also sidestepped a common pitfall in 3D third-person games involving camera angles that block out the character from your field of view because of an obstructing object (such as a pillar) which comes in the way. When such a situation arises in the game, the obstructing object becomes translucent, so your view of the character you control is never blocked.

As for the interface, it is an extremely simple mouse-driven affair, with the cursor changing to an appropriate action (pick up, look etc.) when over an object on the screen which can be interacted with. A left-click performs the action, and is also used to get your character to walk around on the screen, while a

right-click gives more information about the object being pointed to by the cursor. Pressing TAB pops up a TODO list of items, which can come in handy if you're the kind of gamer who needs clear and concise directions in an adventure game.

The background music score is pleasant and soothing, with liberal use of instruments from the East, which adds to the atmosphere and draws you into the environment. Deck13 have revealed that the full game will have a cinematic soundtrack as found in recent movies such as *The Mummy* – dramatic at certain places and very soft at others. The soundtrack is being created by the famous German Dynamedion studio that did the sound for *Spellforce*, *Neocron 2*, *Moment of Silence* and also some previous Deck13 titles. All the characters in the game have been voiced quite well, apparently by professional voice actors with British accents. The effect of hearing the characters

in ancient Egypt speaking in British accents is quite amusing, and coupled with the witty dialogues, makes it worth your while to exhaust all possible conversation options with the characters. My only (minor) gripe with the voice acting is that I could make out some inconsistencies with the English accents of the characters. For instance, a character would be speaking perfectly good English with a British accent but then intermittently use an American accent to pronounce certain words, which sounded strange. But that's just me being finicky for the sake of it, and for the most part I found the voiceovers entertaining to listen to.

My overall impression of *Ankh: The Tales of Mystery* is very positive and I really enjoyed playing the teaser prototype-demo (although I must admit I am partial to games with plenty of humor, eccentric characters and zany puzzles). The storyline is very promising, the dialogu-



es are funny and engaging, and the musical score and voice acting are of high quality. The characters that I encountered were animated beautifully and were quirky enough to be instantly likable (the developers assure us of as many as 50 "weird" characters in the game). The interface is intuitive and so simple that even someone who has never played an adventure game before can get the hang of it instantly. And the exotic Egyptian locales (mostly in and around ancient Cairo) will surely be a treat to explore, especially with the gorgeous 3D graphics that the game boasts of. As an avid adventure gamer, I have to admit I'm really excited about the game and can't wait to be the first in line when the game finally hits the shelves of my favorite gaming store!

Finally, let me leave you with a blurb describing Ankh: The Tales of Mystery from the developers: "Cairo... the ancient city of thousand shapes, colors and smells. And of Pharaohs, crocodiles and assassins. It won't be easy for Assil to get an audience at the palace to get rid of his death curse. Even worse, the number of his foes is growing faster than his curse takes possession of him. And that's already quite fast. Only a keen mind can save Assil from certain death: You! During his quest, Assil meets a whole bunch of weird people, from happy slaves to frightened crocodiles and finally Osiris himself, the god of the underworld. Get ready for a wild adventure in ancient Egypt which will make the adventures games of the recent years look like a Teletubbies episode!" The game is expected to hit the shelves sometime in September 2005. An international release is planned under the label of "Rebel Games". Screenshots and more can be found at: <http://www.deck13.com/english/index.html>

- Sudeep Pasricha

Pilot Brothers 3D

Our reporter from Russia, Alex ASP, discovered for us a very interesting point and click adventure game called Pilot Brothers 3D. The developers of the game plan to release their title worldwide. So let's see if Alex thinks that Pilot Brothers 3D is a title worth waiting for.

Pilot Brothers have a long history. First they appeared in the stories of the famous Russian writer for children Eduard Uspensky which were a parody on the soviet detective series popular in 1970s. A lot of Eduard Uspensky's stories were later converted to cartoons. The stories about our detectives were not an exception. Several series after our detectives changed their names to Chief and Colleague, their appearance to hand-drawn (instead of doll-made), the cases they solved became more spy blockbusterish and funny. It was a great success which they owe to a gifted animator Tatarsky. In 1997 they managed to make their way to the PC. Pilots Brothers: On the Track of Striped Elephant was one of the first (if not the first one) Russian adventure game. Again, it was a great success and it allowed authors to make the second game in the series: in 1998 "Pilot Brothers 2: The Case Of Serial Maniac Sumo" appeared. Since then till 1999 brothers were busy studying German language and as a result they were ready to amuse people in German-speaking countries with the local version of their first adventure. There were rumors that Pilots also tried to learn English but they may have failed, who knows? After several years of silence Pilot Brothers appeared again in 2004 in 2 games: an adventure called "Pilot Brothers 3. Back Side of the Earth" and an



arcade "Pilot Brothers: Olympiad". And soon they once again changed their appearance and returned to us in the new adventure game. "Pilot Brothers 3D. A Kitchen Garden Wrecker Case" planning to make a tour with this game even outside their own country.

First of all, don't let this «3D» label in the name of the game fool you. There's no real 3D there. Characters were created as 3D models but later they were converted to 2D sprites. Backgrounds are pre-rendered with the animated fragments here and there. As a bonus, almost on every screen you can find active objects that do not play any role in the game and inserted only for amusement such as a Freddy Fish-like thing. You may ask if the game became better from all these

new features. Don't know really. I've played the first games of the series and think it didn't. Nevertheless the game looks quite nice and in a cartoony style though in a different way than the first games of the series were.

So here is the story. One bright morning the Pilot Brothers read a newspaper where it was written that a collection of mummies was brought to the local museum in Berdichev, the town where our detectives lived. The brothers decided to visit the exhibition but suddenly remembered that they hadn't fed their domestic rat. So they had to go to the garden instead of the museum. When they came to the garden they found that it was completely destroyed. They also noticed a strange Man in Black and decided to



Pilot Brothers 3D has a unique graphics style. The two heroes look goofy but likeable at the same time.



find out what had really happened there and to catch a person responsible for all this mess.

This is a comedy-detective game and that means that you should laugh while playing it. Or smile at least. It was so in the first installments of the game - Pilot Brothers were known for their specific humor. Too bad that the new engine and the new development team mostly failed to keep the spirit of the previous games. Alas, there are no more animation gags (damn, they really should have done this instead of animating useless objects). Authors tried to compensate this with the extensive use of

wordplays in dialogues. Sometimes they succeeded, sometimes not. More often I was really puzzled with what have they done it for. I really can't tell how all the wordplays and jokes will be translated but the developers vows they should do their best.

All in all, the story is not bad. A unique atmosphere of Berdichev, a strange town lost in time, a detective plot, a bit of humor, a practical course of how to insert a word play in every sentence for the sake of wordplay (grin)... But the specific charm of the first games is not there, sorry.

The soundtrack is rather

short, 2-3 tunes only and even they are not a piece of art and start to annoy you after a while. The voiceovers are a bit better. Aleksey Kolgan, a voice of both brothers did a good job and adorned the dialogues with his talent. I want to believe that localizers will find an equally 'Pilotish' actor for this role. It's a pity that there are bugs in the game, which sometime allow both brothers to speak at the same time and sometimes prevent you from skipping dialogues.

In "Pilot Brothers 3D: A Kitchen Garden Wrecker Case" you have a map and can choose a location to visit. More locations will

become accessible through the map during gameplay. Each location is divided into 3-5 screens where inventory puzzles wait for you to solve them. Each location has its own set of inventory items and when you pass from one location to another the set of the inventory items is automatically changed. But don't worry, all the items you found will appear again in your inventory on your return to the location. It is a nice approach to simplify the gameplay especially if you keep in mind that the target group of this game is kids-to-teenagers. If you are stuck in one location you can go to another with its own set of inventory items and puzzles and then return to the first one with the new strengths.

If you have ever played the Goblins series by Coktel Vision, then you'll find that these two games have much in common. A division of labor principle is also used in 'Pilot Brothers 3D: A Kitchen Garden Wrecker Case'. The Chief is responsible for intellectual work, the Colleague is for physical one. Each one of them has its own inventory. If you find an item, it will be placed in

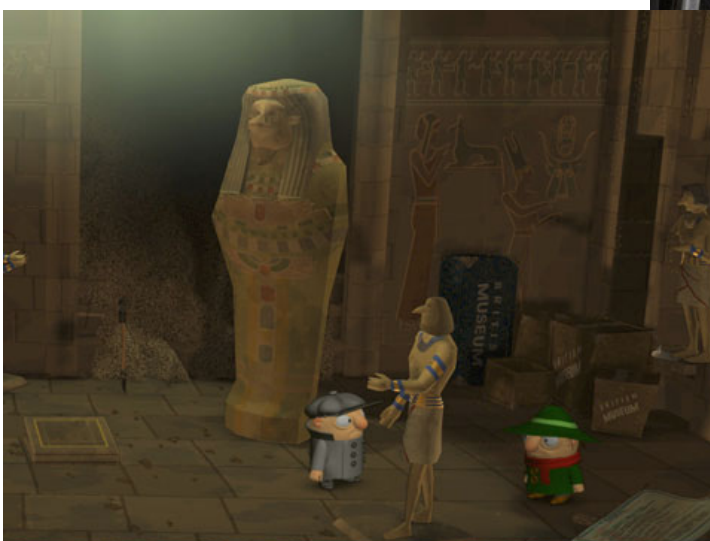
the inventory of the detective who will use it later. You'll never have more than six items at a time in the each brother's inventory, so no inventory scrolling needed. Neither will you exchange items between brothers.

Puzzles are quite easy (again, just keep in mind that this game is aimed for kids-to-teenagers or so I think). Moreover, each successfully done action will be rewarded with the obligatory wordplay-in-the-dialogue which is actually a hint on what to do next. There are several mini-games in 'Pilot Brothers 3D: A Kitchen Garden Wrecker Case'. Unfortunately they are quite dull and uninspired. Good thing, the developers forgot to disable save feature during action ones. Just save from time to time while climbing the photo-fir and reflecting laser rays and you'll finish these mini-games quicker.

So should I buy this game one may ask. The decision is up to you. Can't say that the game is quite good, can't say the game is too bad. Here are two more facts that may help you make a decision: 1) this

game was sold in Russia on 2 CDs (1.2 Gb maximum installation) but when I tried to compress it just for the sake of interest, the final archive was 450 Mb; 2) you'll finish the game in an evening. Yes, you've heard it right. It will take you 4-6 hours to finish this game. And don't expect that in the end you'll understand everything. Pilot Brothers 3D was supposed to be a series of games consisting of three parts. When you'll be reading this review the second part of the game should appear in Russian game stores. Well, if you wanna spend an evening playing an easy cartoon styled comedy detective which you'll easily forget about the next morning you can buy 'Pilot Brothers 3D: A Kitchen Garden Wrecker Case'. But if you speak German I would rather recommend you to search for a copy of the first game in series, 'Pilot Brothers: Die Suche nach dem gestreiften Elefanten' instead. It was released by Mitcom and can be found from time to time in online stores for about 10 Euro.

- Alex ASP



Adventure Europe is now online

We are glad to announce that Adventure Europe is now open for business!!! Visit this new website for adventure games at www.adventure-eu.com and make sure also to join the Adventure Europe club so that you can have access to exclusive material such as Adventure Comics, Adventure Art, Video Interviews and Contests. When you join the Adventure Europe club you also get the chance to interact with the site, you can vote in polls, give your own ratings to the adventures we have reviewed and also participate in the Adventure Europe forum. Adventure Europe is available in 4 languages so far, English, French, German and Greek. We are currently looking for more staff to join Adventure Europe. We need editors for other local sites, translators, writers, moderators, PR managers, flash coders and graphic artists. If you would like to join the Adventure Europe team send an application letter to d.manos@adventure-eu.com. **Developers** and **publishers** of adventure games are also very welcome to contact us if they would like us to feature articles or downloads related to their titles.

Hottest gossip in the adventure block

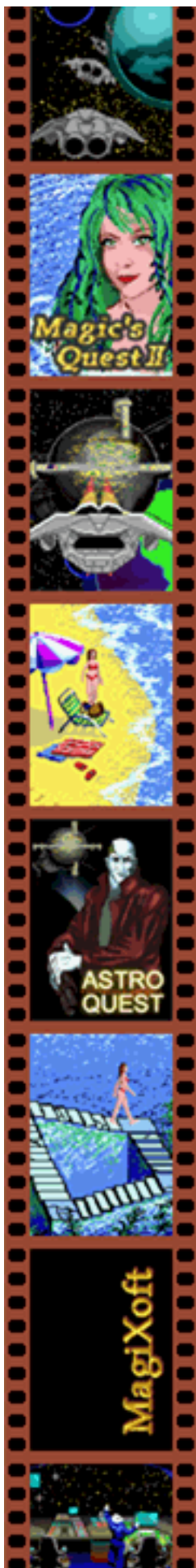
Ok so last month we gave a little hint to our readers that something had changed in the community, and we were talking about Bad Brain Entertainment and Autumn Moon Entertainment splitting up. Now this time around we have even more hot gossip for you. It is being rumoured within the community that a newly formed team of respected developers have bought the rights to a famous license from a 'heavyweight' publisher. It is also being rumoured that this team is also in talks with another very famous artist, for the acquisition of yet another very, very, very popular license among adventure fans. We will have more for you once we have an official statement..

Metronome announced

Swedish based independent development team , Team Tarsier , revealed that they are working on a third person adventure game called The Metronome. According to the developers website the game will contain some unique fetures such as using the sounds as a major part of the gameplay which could remind adventurers of the classic Loom. There are also a few screenshots and cocnept arts posted in their website which proves the game will feature beautiful graphics in real time 3d. Team Tarsier is currently looking for a publisher for their promising Metronome. Check out their website: www.tarsier.se/metronome

King's Quest IX release date

The team behind the unofficial King's Quest IX said that they will announce the their game's release date and other important news during KQ9.org's Birthday Chat, being held on Sunday, May 15th, 2005 at 4PM EST. The chat will take place at the following link: <http://www.kq9.org/chat/> . During this chat, users will get the chance to ask the members of the KQIX development team specific questions about the game.



ANKH





?!



SPLINK

HURK!



THAT BED OF NAILS!
FOR THE PHARAOH'S
SAKE, REMOVE THAT
BED OF NAILS
WILL YOU!



THIS WELL-CRAFTED
PIECE OF FURNITURE WILL
ONLY MOVE IF SOMEONE
PURCHASES IT!



BUY? ARE YOU TOTALLY NUTS? I'M HANGING HERE ON A WORN-OUT BANDAGE...



FINE, IF YOU DON'T WANT IT... I ALSO HAVE ORIGINAL EGYPTIAN SCARABS!



OK, OK, FINE, GOOD!



ONE HUNDRET COINS.



WHAT? ONE HUNDRED? NEVER EVER!



TWENTY.

EIGHTY!

ALL RIGHT. NINETY. FOR A FRIEND.

ZITech!



LNGHH!

SUSS!



...SHALL I WRAP IT, OR DO YOU WANT TO USE IT RIGHT AWAY?

Interview with Jonathan Boakes

Jonathan Boakes became famous within the adventure community when he released his 1st person mystery adventure, Dark Fall. The fact that the whole game was the work of one man only impressed fans and press alike. Right now Jonathan is working on his third title, called 'The Lost Crown: A Warning to the Curious', Our new writer Jordy Tubman talks with Jonathan in the Lounge this month about his future title and adventure games in general.

Tell us a little about yourself and XXVProductions: Where are you situated, how did you get started, and how many people work at your studio?

Hello there, I am Jonathan Boakes, the developer of both Dark Fall games, and author of a various websites. The web based material covers subjects from retro television to paranormal investigations. I currently work from Cornwall, England. My role as a developer began 7 years ago, with the construction of my first full game, entitled "The Displacement". As for my "studio", I work mainly from home, but get back to London to tackle larger, and more complicated, operations.

It's been said that 'Dark Fall: The Journal' was created as an homage to adventure games of yesteryear. Are adventures your favourite game type, or do you have a passion for other genres as well?

The first Dark Fall game was definitely a "homage" to the adventure games played between 1996-2002 by my fellow adventurers, and myself. Much of the genre's quirki-



ness and characteristics were utilized, as well as inventing some new ones. A 'classic' point and click interface was featured, which complimented the 'don't look behind you' effect being presented by the narrative. I always liked to think of adventure games as digital pop-up books, with animated and inventive 2D illustrations.

At the time of conception, I was yearning for new point and click adventures, as the UK was starved of them. Thinking upon the genre, at the time, led me to believe it was a dead art form, and I wished to produce an adventure game featuring the trappings and style, which I had

grown to love.

I have always played "other genres". I am a big fan of the first person shooter. I enjoy the exploration, and open environments that the genre offers. I also dip my feet into the occasional RPG. I fell in love with Morrowind, and rate Bloodmoon (second official expansion pack) as one of the best adventure games I have played. More recently, I was very impressed with the "Ravensholm" chapter of Half Life 2. There was a revolting and wretched feel to the levels, which reminded me of "They Hunger 1 & 2". They were fanmade MODS of the first Half Life game,

which I am also a big fan of. Both examples featured a blacker than black atmosphere, and generated some genuinely scary sequences. A feeling of actual dread is hard to accomplish in a game, without having to fall back on the simple tricks, such as those utilised by Doom 3. Do interplanetary demons really have closets?

Would you say that, in general, having worked from beginning to finish on two critically-acclaimed commercial releases that the overall experience was positive, or were there some down moments?

There are always downsides, but thankfully they do not affect the overall impressions of both ventures. I would love to talk about these downsides, but cannot. Much of the heartache, and discomfort, felt during the months after "Lights Out" was published could have been avoided. Certain 'experiences' have left a very bad taste in my mouth, which I am looking to avoid from now on.

My favourite aspect on both occasions has been reading online comments, theories and impressions of the Dark Fall games. In my view, games are made for gamers, so any direct feedback is a huge bonus, and makes my efforts worthwhile.

Game creation, especially in the early phases, can seem nearly insurmountable. How do you personally go about the the initial steps? Do you get the storyline worked out first? The gameplay? The setting? Where do you start?

The first thoughts are always about

the medium. What can be achieved with the budget, which on both occasions has been from my own pocket, and what would make the game unique and interesting. This is where the story comes in, and every effort is made to present a narrative which is fully researched, personal and engaging. I was thrilled to see many players (and reviewers) pick up on my feelings towards tourist attractions, and how they present known history. Can history lie? Can we change our own fate, and how much influence do we have on the timeline stretching out before us?

Apart from a few amazing examples, I would say it is the narrative and set-up, which most people remember about a game. To me, a good story is essential, and should form the backbone of the experience.

Next in line is the construction stage. This is longest period of development, and can often break a project. A steady but relaxed approach is taken, otherwise the work can overwhelm. Self doubt, self-loathing and a personal hate of your own work is always hiding around the corner, so a good support group is essential. Getting regular feedback is also a bonus, and the adventure forums should be praised for the devotion they exhibit towards independents and the smaller development studios.

A lot of excitement was generated among fans of your previous work when news of your new project, currently entitled 'The Lost Crown: A Warning To The Curious', surfaced. Could you tell us a bit about its premise? Is it an adaptation?

Well, "The Lost Crown" will be more

of an extension, rather than a straightforward "adaptation". With fear of being pretentious, I would call my approach to the existing story a "re-imagining". M.R.James wrote the original story in 1925. It is based within his knowledge of history, his impressions of the supernatural, and his experience of the East Anglian coastline. The endless expanse of sandy dunes, the lonely wooded hillside and the forgotten personalities of a bygone time will all feature in "The Lost Crown". There will also be new and frightful additions to add uncertainty, and fear, but I won't be including silly horror motifs like zombies, or werewolves. James's story has plenty of foreboding, and atmosphere, and it provides a wonderful platform from which to work.

One of the highlights of your past games has been the presence/activity of otherworldly phenomenon. Will there be ghost hunting gadgets, or will there be some other interaction with the unseen, if at all?

There will definitely be a ghost. It is essential to the story. James often visualised the ghost puppet, from the traditional Punch and Judy show, when creating his many phantoms. It's a ghastly creation, with a long, pale and drawn-out face. Immediate comparisons could be made to the 'Ghostface' character in the 'Scream' movies. It's the same source of inspiration.

Just recently, I have been increasing my knowledge, and experience, of the paranormal. A research team was setup to investigate the possible hauntings, and ghost stories, encountered during my time in Cornwall. As a county, Cornwall provides all the influence

Jonathan Boakes

and inspiration an artist would need. Our investigations have included isolated train stations, cave systems and ancient stone circles. Much of what will be included in "The Lost Crown" will have a direct link to a real haunting, or paranormal event experienced by the team. Our investigations can be found at: www.thishauntedland.co.uk

The ghosthunting gadgets featured in "The Lost Crown" will be very much based in reality, and allow gamers to experience the thrills and findings we experience in real-life haunted locations. Many of our most impressive results are achieved through simple experiments, and it would be a pleasure for me to illustrate our work in a gameplay environment.

The website that is currently associated with your new production (being <http://www.awarning-tothecurious.co.uk/>) is an incredible breath of fresh air, in its layout and style. It's a joy to explore! What inspired you to make a more free-form and interactive website, than follow the orthodox "News, Information, Media..." template?

First of all, thank you for such a wonderful compliment. There has been some delightful feedback regarding the website, but I always wonder if I am doing 'the right thing'.

Websites devoted to games usually have simple goals: to raise the profile of the game, and sell lots of copies of that game.

There is a dull predictability, and formula, to many promotional websites. They are built to expire once the website has served its purpose. I thought it would be nice to dispense with the usual menu furni-

ture, and build something I could use myself. Over the coming months I will be adding links, writing articles and exploring the themes presented by the story, and talk about my experience of game building.

I did not wish to build a cynical site, with obvious agendas. There has been a recent rash of "making of" sections which feature nothing more than two or three 'wireframe' images, with text along the lines of "first I built a model, then I textured it, then I rendered it". It's meaningless and rather old fashioned. I felt something with a little more flesh was required.

As time passes, more obvious links will appear to the obligatory screenshots, and basic story outline. For now, I am happy to compile my online scrapbook, and leave cryptic clues for inquisitive gamers. I should also mention that James has a huge following, and I don't think his fans would appreciate me publishing a trashy site to sell copies of computer games. So, I have made an attempt to build something a little more opaque, and intriguing. Basically, some effort was needed, and I was required to think outside of the box.

The "Creation" section of the 'Dark Fall: Lights Out' webpage has proven to be very insightful, with much encouragement and assistance given to those who desire to contribute their efforts to adventure gaming. Will there be further tutorials given as you develop your new game?

Yes, I hope so! The "Lights Out" tutorials were very basic, and were intended to inspire confidence rather than provide knowledge. The

next few months require that I learn many new tricks, skills and software packages. It's a steep learning curve, but I have been in that position before. If the production provided no education, and experience, I would not bother. Anxiety is essential for me to produce decent material.

Your last two creations each featured a central architecture, respectively the Train Station Hotel and the Lighthouse, that a large amount of gameplay took place in. Will 'The Lost Crown: A Warning To The Curious' feature a similar style, with a particular site linked to the gameplay?

That's a fascinating observation. I had not thought of the games like that, but it makes sense. I grew up watching the cheaper end of TV sci-fi and fantasy. The budgetary restrictions were often very evident. Set designers worked on the premise that one small, but good quality, set was better than lots of poor sets. I feel this practise rubbed off on me, which is ironic given the freedom 3D creation offers. Thinking small also allows for experimentation with the lighting, and detail. I enjoy dressing my environments, and a singular set piece is easier to work with.

Having said that, The Lost Crown will be featuring an entire seaside town on the coast, several large interiors and the East Anglian coastline. That's a lot of space to dress, light and present to gamers. James had a wonderful talent of illustrating his landscapes, which I feel he shares with Thomas Hardy. James called it "word painting" in A Warning to the Curious. He was fully aware of what he was accomplishing. Both authors have an almost



magical way of presenting a fully realised world for their characters to step into, and find their fate. It is also interesting to note that both authors also shared a desire to present the English landscape as haunted by its past, and ready to re-enact events should the opportunity arise.

'Dark Fall: The Journal' had, for the most part, an undefined main character so the player could assume the central role. 'Dark Fall: Lights Out' had a defined main character and this led to some interesting story developments. Which method do you feel will be employed in 'The Lost Crown: A Warning To The Curious'?

The interesting experiment with Dark Fall was not stating the gender of the player. Reading reviews, and walkthroughs, revealed many gamers decided on the sex of the protagonist based on no information whatsoever. I find that fascinating. It reveals much about the perspective of the writer, and their thoughts on game characters, and genres.

"Lights Out" definitely requi-

red that the main character be sexed, and defined. The relationship, suggested between him and the cause of the troubles, was quite important to the story. A bond was needed, and sexing the player offered much in the way of conflict, and interest. The Lost Crown will also be featuring a sexed main character. This story needs to be explored through interaction (with other characters), and explore how the world reacts to the character. In an ideal world, sex or sexual orientation would not matter in the slightest. Sadly, we do not live in that world, and impressions are made based on the most simple facts and observations. It is not sexist to state the characters gender, but I do sometimes wish I lived in that ideal world pushed by the liberal media.

Puzzles/Challenges. They play a large role in games and can be difficult to balance. Too easy versus too difficult, too transparent versus too opaque. Are you going to be featuring more the puzzle elements or the exploratory elements? Perhaps a balance of both?

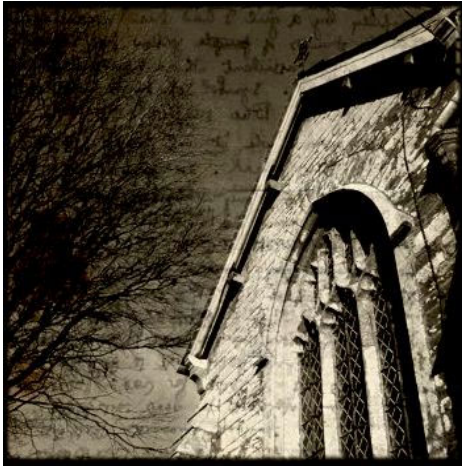
I can happily state that there will be a lot more puzzles than "Lights Out". In offering a free, non-linear space, I neglected the puzzle department in some areas. I will be redressing that balance. It is essential to include immersive, and realistic, puzzles for the player to feel involved in the story, and world presented. Too few puzzles suggest an interactive film, rather than a game. All real life games require some puzzle solving or interactive pursuits. The Lost Crown will be featuring a variety of puzzles, from Victorian ghost hunting techniques, to side missions involving human behaviour and conversational techniques.

In a discussion at a forum you stated that this new game would "be quite a dramatic shift away from the [Dark Fall] games". Will this shift be reflected gameplay-wise, or is it more of a change in atmosphere?

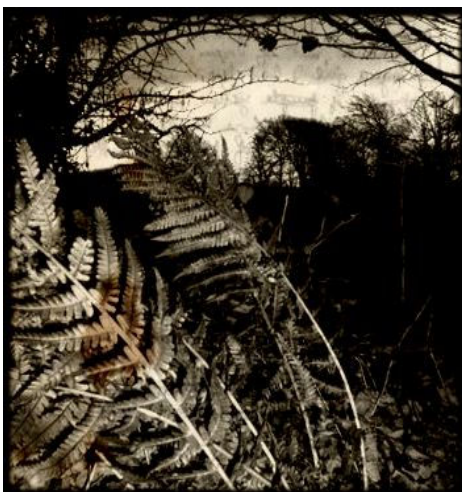
Both. There are no haunted houses planned, and no 'slideshow' presentation. This third game has no stylistic connections to the Dark Fall games, and will be presented in a very different style. At present it is difficult, and illogical, to describe what is planned, but I will be in a better position to discuss the approach in a couple of months from now.

How long is your usual game development cycle? Roughly when do you feel that the project will be ready for release? Next Year?

Hopefully, it will be late autumn, as that time of year always feels appropriate. Anything can happen in-between now and then, so I won't



“The genre is a very strange place at the moment, with some developers seeming to bite the hand that feeds them. There is an obvious effort, being made by some, to distance themselves from the community, and the wealth of games that have gone before.”



give any definite indications here and now. I will say that I am enjoying the freedom of not being tied to an impractical deadline set by a publisher, as I have no desire to be padding for a Christmas line-up. All creative work takes time to develop and produce, and games are no exception. I could run off another Dark Fall game, based on the skills and knowledge I have, but there is no appeal to make games in such a cynical fashion. Good games create a market, but I do not find exploitation appealing.

A crass question; one I've wanted to avoid, feeling that by asking it I'd only be fueling the fire to an endless debate: What is your view on the current state of the Adventure Genre as a whole relative to when you released 'Dark Fall: The Journal'?

Thank you for your tact, and understanding. The genre is a very strange place at the moment, with some developers seeming to bite the hand that feeds them. There is an obvious effort, being made by some, to distance themselves from the community, and the wealth of games that have gone before. It is all too easy, in hindsight, to find faults in the games from our past.

It will take an awful lot more than a clever soundbyte, or bombastic statement, to convince the majority of gamers that technical innovations are more interesting than story, concept and longevity. To be honest, I don't give too hoots whether a game is pushing the limits of current technology, and padding out the pockets of the graphics card manufacturers.

My first question, when

presented with a new game, is: "what's it about?" To hear it utilises "shaders" and "bump mapping" is all very interesting (I am told), but will the end product have any worth in 10 years time? I've played games with both "shaders" and "bump mapping" and can happily say I didn't notice them after 10 minutes. How? The gameplay was excellent, and I was lost in the fiction. Grading fiction on its technical merits is nice for the geeks behind the scenes, but I can open a book for nothing, without the need to upgrade.

There's just one more thing that's on our minds...if there was a single idea or thought or emotion that you would want to convey with 'The Lost Crown: Warning To The Curious', what would it be?

Oh, joy! That's an easy one. The answer resides in the title. As 'a warning to the curious', the desire to find the crown is driven by curiosity, and a small amount of greed. If you know something is lost should you really go looking for it. Some would argue that anything, which is thought to be lost, has the potential to be found. The real question is: do you want to find the lost crown, and what do you want it for?

Thank you so very much for your time, and thank you too for all the diligence and effort you expend to present us with these gifts of interactive entertainment.

That's very kind of you! I produce games for others to enjoy, but I also enjoy making them.



Still Life

Mysteries have been one of the mainstays of the adventure game genre for what seems like forever, and rightly so. In fact, 1980's *Mystery House* was the first adventure game to feature graphics as opposed to just text. Wow, what a difference a quarter of a century makes. Microid's *Still Life*, written and designed by Mathieu Larivière, is an experience very much in the tradition of the *Gabriel Knight*, *Laura Bow*, and *Sherlock Holmes* adventure games. You'll talk to suspects, explore crime scenes, solve puzzles, watch cutscenes, etc. So what exactly makes *Still Life* worth playing when it's pretty much the same old song and dance? Allow me to explain...

Story: For one, the story is the best in an adventure game since *The Case of the Silver Earring* arrived in late August of last year. You can even make things a little more interesting by playing through the *Still Life: Prelude* online at stilllife-game.com. It's about an earlier case Victoria McPherson tackled in New

Orleans that pits her against a killer known as the *Mississippi Crawler*. The game is played like a less polished version of *Missing*: Since January, but it will fill you in on plenty of interesting little details. If you care to know how Victoria met Richard, why her father is so interested in puzzle boxes, why she moved to Chicago, or if you just want some background on her friendship with Claire...it's a must play.

Anyway, after her success on the aforementioned case, Victoria is attempting to profile another serial killer, this time during a snowy winter in Illinois. As the game begins she arrives at an abandoned apartment building, the location of the fifth murder. All of the victims have been female, and the cause of death is always drowning with post mortem evisceration and stab wounds. Having few leads to speak of aside from some partial fingerprints, Victoria decides to take a much needed break at her father's home over the holidays. Intrigued by the Christmas gift her father gives

her, she decides to check the attic for more of her grandfather's things. Luckily, she discovers one of his case memoirs from Prague circa 1929. Somehow, the killer Gus McPherson was after all those years ago shares many similarities with the current villain in Victoria's case.

With that, we are taken back to another time and another place. We are suddenly in the shoes of Gus McPherson himself (the hero of Microid's earlier and less impressive adventure, *Post Mortem*), and we get to play through the very case that Victoria is reading about. Therein lies one of *Still Life*'s greatest achievements; the *Godfather Part II*-esque parallel narrative of two family members dealing with similar trials and challenges (minus the father's rise/son's fall aspect). In Gus's case, he is trying to help Ida, the woman he loves. All of the victims have been prostitutes, and Ida was formerly in that line of work.

I would be willing to bet this plot should have most players on the edge of their seats, anxious to



A pervert lives here. Victoria is just going through his stuff.

Only in adventure games do sewers look this cool.



see what happens next. Both stories are equally engaging, and when the game makes the transition between chapters and time periods you'll miss the one you were playing, but at the same time, you'll be glad to pick up the other one again where you left off. Sure, there are a few occasions where the plot veers into territory that seems to exist only for gameplay purposes (for example, a dog breaking his chain in the junkyard forcing you to solve a few puzzles to avoid him and get to where you were originally headed), but I never felt annoyed by this because I was so immersed in the whole experience from beginning to end.

And speaking of the end, here comes the unfortunate news... I'll simply say that the final moments of Still Life are among the worst to ever exist in the history of gaming. When the credits began to roll, I nearly fell out of my chair. There is no closure whatsoever; the game simply ends in the most anticlimactic way imaginable. After the credits finish, there is mention of the story being continued online (I suppose in a similar fashion to the Prelude), but that will do nothing to comfort the

players who are gearing up for another chapter in the game only to be suddenly assaulted by a black screen with names of the Microids game design team.

What this all means is that we are left with loose ends everywhere, in both time periods, and to be perfectly honest (as disappointing as it is) we never even find out for sure who the modern day killer is! Of course, anyone in their right mind is going to hop online and try to play the conclusion of the story, eager for answers in any form, but they won't find anything. At least not yet. Apparently the conclusion game hasn't been released, and I'm sure that when it is it won't make up for the horrendously abrupt ending to such a gripping storyline in the actual game. It's as if Still Life was suddenly rushed late in production or the team ran out of money. That's the only explanation I can think of. There was so much more this story needed to do that it failed to do, and yet, at the same time, I absolutely loved it up until the final cutscene. Can a whole story be ruined by a single cutscene and an unexpected ending? Surely not...right?

Gameplay: Still Life is a very balanced game. Veterans of the adventure genre will have a great deal of fun with it, but at the same time it plays great for more casual adventure game players. I can readily admit I've been stuck before in games where I was forced to consult a guide for a nudge in the right direction. Still Life, however, I was able to complete in about twelve or thirteen hours without a single hint or clue. And even though Still Life may not be as difficult as many adventure games, the reasons for that are actually a big plus. Here's what it boils down to: these puzzles are completely logical and quite frankly, I believe the vast majority of them are very well done. There are slider puzzles, poems and riddles, puzzles involving numbers and symbols, a maze (yikes, don't worry, it's not a hard one), a very cool sequence where you control a spider shaped remote bomb disposal unit, etc. Now, I wouldn't be surprised if more than a few people complain about having to bake cookies in an investigative thriller game, but I personally enjoyed that puzzle as well. Sometimes a "change of pace" puzzle is welcome, and this is one



Top: This guy just looks shady as all hell
Left: Looks like Victoria stumbled into a high-tech room

Developer:
Microids
 Perspective:
3rd person
 Interface:
Point and click
 Site:
stilllife-game.com
 Difficulty:
Easy/Medium

of those cases. The longest I was ever stuck on any single puzzle was an hour or so spent picking a lock. I'm sure that sounds boring but it was actually very addictive and ultimately satisfying. This is a far cry from the horrible lock picking of Post Mortem. In Still Life even little mundane things are presented as actual puzzles for you to solve, and they are great fun.

Inventory puzzles are also pretty common here, and the interface makes it obvious when and where an item is needed to proceed because it will actually display a "use" icon in the upper left corner. When that icon is up, you simply go to your inventory and select the necessary item (if it's in your possession). It's all quite straight forward for anyone who has played a point and click adventure. In addition to picking up new items, you can combine them in your inventory or examine them closely, zooming in and out or rotating the item, which comes in handy for several puzzles. Controlling your actual character is a simple matter of pointing and clicking as well, with little arrows popping up on your cursor to aid you. And travelling to new locations is as easy as clicking a place on your map.

Like many recent adventure

games, Still Life keeps a record of what you have done in the game. Both Gus and Victoria have a journal they keep which functions much like April Ryan's in The Longest Journey. Anytime you want to see what you did in a certain chapter, you can consult the journal. Additionally, all documents that you come across are stored for your viewing pleasure, and all conversations are recorded in text form so that you can go back and see things you may have missed. The game is polished to say the least.

The dialogue system, however, has been the target of criticism ever since the playable demo came out. Basically you just press the left or right mouse button to advance conversations. The left button is "all business" while the right button takes the conversation in a more personal direction. In practice though, players will just exhaust every option, rendering this two button system rather useless. But isn't that what we do when presented with dialogue trees as well? We just click them all until they are gone, right? Sure there are some games where your choices affect the outcome of the game, but what we have here is what the Gabriel Knight games had, we just don't see the actual topics we are going to talk

about before clicking. I was never bothered by the system used here for conversations, but given the sudden ending, I do wish we could have had lengthier, more "personal" conversations with Richard, Claire, and others.

Graphics: The visuals are similar to those in other Microids games in that they feature a third-person perspective with pre-rendered CG backdrops and 3D characters. To my eyes, there didn't appear to be as much animation going on within these environments when compared to say, Syberia 2 or certainly Myst IV. Nor are the backgrounds as crisp and clear as they were in Case of the Silver Earring, but that could have been a stylistic choice here. Regardless, the game is still extremely attractive and succeeds admirably in drawing the player into a snow covered modern day Chicago and a gloom drenched 1920's Prague. In fact, the atmosphere of the game is one of its finest attributes. As you unlock each new location you may find yourself looking forward to the art direction almost as much as the new characters or plot elements that will inevitably pop up. The world of Still Life is arguably a strong character all by itself.

The character models,



Forget the corpses and the psycho killer, there's always time to bake gingerbread men.

“Still Life is a fantastic game that would have scored over a 90 had the story not suddenly come to an end right when the momentum was building to its highest point..”

Highs: Great story and structure, moody visuals and sound, immersive environments, cool characters, and well crafted puzzles for veterans and newcomers alike.

Lows: Godawful ending that leaves many questions unanswered. Might be a bit easy and short for some players.

The Verdict

Story:	91
Graphics:	90
Sound:	85
Gameplay:	86
Overall:	88

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

again, are very similar to what we've seen in past Microids titles. One could argue that a more realistic approach has been taken here in contrast to the models in the Syberia series, and that the overall quality is equally good. All of the character animation is nicely done, with the only exception being an almost nonexistent effort to sync mouths with voices. There are also some wonderful computer animated movie sequences that serve to reward the player as progress is made, and they add visual flair to the experience while developing the storyline. These special scenes can even be viewed again at any time via a title screen menu option called the "Cinematic Viewer". If I haven't made it clear yet, Still Life is top notch visually.

Sound: The music here is genuinely creepy and adds a great deal to the mood. Aside from an orchestral piece or two it seems that the music for the modern scenes has a more electronic, experimental sound, while the score of the 1920's sequences feels more suited to the period. One piece I enjoyed seemed to combine carnival music with whistling and an undercurrent of dread, as if something just wasn't quite right. Oftentimes, however, the game confidently utilizes the more natural sounds of the environment, allowing music to take a backseat. This works very well, and the sound effects in general are put to excellent use, particularly in the movie scenes. Obviously, in a game such as this, voice acting plays an important role. Fortunately, for the most part, the performances

aren't too bad. The two leads do a decent job (with exceptions) and the supporting cast is above average for this medium. I suppose I should also note that subtitles can be turned on or off during all dialogue sequences, according to player preferences.

In a few words...In the end, Still Life is a fantastic game that would have scored over a 90 had the story not suddenly come to an end right when the momentum was building to its highest point. I loved the atmosphere and high production values, the plot and characters were interesting, the puzzles were logical and enjoyable, etc. Yet, even though Still Life is a better game in a several ways (superior puzzles, fewer bugs, and no signs of poor design) than Case of the Silver Earring was, when I look back at the latter I remember being fully satisfied with the overall experience despite the flaws. As I mentioned in my review for that game, I actually went back and played through it again immediately after completing it. Still Life, on the other hand, left me extremely disappointed. I imagine gamers will feel betrayed when it ends without an ounce of closure. But then again, up until the final two or three minutes it was the best adventure game I had played in a long time. Maybe the concluding online chapter will be better than I'm expecting. I suppose I'll give Microids and Mathieu Larivière the benefit of the doubt because Still Life, while it lasted, was a wonderful experience indeed.

- Ben Keeney



Return to Mysterious Island

It would be impossible to name all of the adventure games that have put players in the role of an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances. Since the early 90's, it seems that increasingly more games are changing this up a bit by allowing us to play an ordinary woman in extraordinary circumstances. The Laura Bow series, Phantasmagoria, The Longest Journey, etc. I was about to group this solid effort from Kheops Studios with those games, when suddenly it dawned on me... Until the later portions of Return to Mysterious Island (where a ghost and robots are in plentiful supply), the "extraordinary" stuff is nothing like what is seen in those previous games. There aren't any demonic possessions or twin worlds of science and magic. Granted, the character is faced with challenges she must overcome that are certainly nothing like what she deals with on a regular, average day. Yet, in comparison to most stories in this genre, her trials are reasonably close to "ordinary". I think what we have

here is better defined as a game that puts us in the shoes of an extraordinary woman in ALMOST ordinary circumstances. Mina is certainly, with the aid of the player and a monkey companion, a force to be reckoned with.

Story: The story basically serves as a sequel to Jules Verne's 1870 novel, The Mysterious Island. In that much earlier tale, a group of Americans stole a hot air balloon to flee the Civil War, but they found themselves stuck on the very same South Pacific island that players will explore in this game. Captain Nemo (a character many will remember from 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, another Verne classic) played a role in the story as well, and he makes a return appearance in this game. Overall, Return to Mysterious Island is faithful to the original material (with exceptions, like the fact that the island shouldn't even exist since it was destroyed in the book), while putting a modern spin on it.

You tackle the role of a young female navigator sailor named Mina

Developer:
Kheops Studios
Perspective:
1st person
Interface:
Point and click
Site:
tacgames.com
Difficulty:
Medium



Left: This is the beach where Mina wakes up and begins her journey.
Right top: A rather attractive view of the scenery.
Right bottom: Big footprints. Watch out



who finds herself waking up on a strange beach after a terrible storm. Her cel phone won't work, and she's weak from lack of nourishment. She also senses a presence nearby, and can't figure out if she's alone on the island or if there may be others. Her first order of business is to find food, and then she must search for a way off the island. Eventually Mina finds companionship in the form of an injured monkey that she helps to heal. During their journey they will find evidence of the earlier inhabitants of the island (which makes the game a bit richer if you've read the novel), but to say more beyond that would be to spoil the game. Return to Mysterious Island isn't particularly strong plot-wise, but it gets the job done by making the player feel like they are exploring a small world with a rich history.

Gameplay: The gameplay is fortunately where this game shines brightest, especially for those who enjoy inventory puzzles. You traverse the island by clicking from node to node, and you'll be free to examine your surroundings in 360

degrees at each one (exactly like *Myst IV: Revelation* and countless other adventure games). When you spot something that can be picked up, simply click on it to grab it. Almost anything that isn't nailed down can be taken and crammed into your inventory here whether you know what it can be used for or not. Strangely enough, a lot of the fun in this game occurs on the inventory screens themselves, of which there are many. Players can organize their items in any way they wish, and you can combine multiple items in the "Assembly Area" to create useful tools that let you progress. As long as you have the correct raw materials in your possession you can create bows, fishing poles, slingshots, flames to start fires, etc. Additionally, you can disassemble your creations and use the same raw materials in the making of other items. Most of the puzzles can be solved in multiple ways as well. For instance, there is more than one way to get a fire started, and each method is equally believable.

The game has an excellent

point system in place that encourages players to experiment with different combinations and solutions. Some combinations result in more points, and scoring a higher total will be enough incentive for many people to go back and replay the game again. During your travels, as I've mentioned previously, you will find a monkey (Mina names him Jep) that becomes your companion. You can give him items and send him to areas that are otherwise impossible to reach. So Jep becomes a solution of sorts to several puzzles. Later in the game you'll come across some puzzles that aren't inventory based, such as slider and combination puzzles (bleh). Honestly, the biggest strength of the game are the inventory puzzles and excellent creation system. It's addictive, very well thought out by the designers, and it should get most players excited to continue exploring and discovering.

Graphics: First-person games, arguably more so than third-person, need to do a fantastic job of bringing the world around the player to life. Instead of relating to an actual char-

acter on the screen, players can only relate to the world itself. When you essentially ARE the main character as you explore, the believability of the environments is almost exclusively what provides the immersion. Having said that, it delights me to say that Return to Mysterious Island does, for the most part, succeed in pulling the player into its world.

While it would be easiest to compare the graphics here to those in *Myst IV* (due to the node-based, 360 degree viewing similarities), it's not necessarily the best choice. *Myst IV* has this game beaten visually, hands down. The world of that game was more alive with animation and detail. Return to Mysterious Island surely didn't have the production budget of *Myst IV* though, yet it still looks very good. There are traces of animation in the pre-rendered environments (birds flying through the air, turtles moving across the sand, objects swaying in the breeze), but its nothing to write home about. Thankfully, the quality of the backgrounds themselves are of very high quality so this is rarely an issue. I should also mention the interesting stylistic choice the designers took with the cutscenes. Most of them are done in the style of a black and white comic book, using voices and other sounds to give them a unique quality. It takes some getting used to, but it's actually pretty cool.

Sound: While there didn't seem to be that much music in the game, what there is sounded very good. The music on the menu screen is particularly nice, but the score generally isn't memorable, it simply fits the game very well. Of more importance are the sound effects, which are all high quality.



Even the simple sounds of wind blowing through trees, a crackling fire, or the distant sounds of the ocean do a lot for increasing the realism. There is also some voice acting, and thankfully it's top notch. Still, while the sound in this game gets the job done, it's not a part of the experience that really stands out.

I must admit, in my humble opinion this game makes Kheops Studios a developer to watch. Return to Mysterious Island is creative, fun, and very well designed. It kept me interested the entire time, and I had a blast trying to think up new creations and using the new items to solve puzzles. Some of the puzzles went a little beyond the realm of believability (as much as I liked him, I must say one or two involved Jep), the game was far too short, and there's not a lot of story to it, but otherwise it's an adventure that I recommend wholeheartedly. inventory puzzles and item combinations, and a great points system.

- Ben Keeney

Hmm...I wonder who left this hanging there

"This game makes Kheops Studios a developer to watch. Return to Mysterious Island is creative, fun, and very well designed."

Highs: Nice graphics and sound, fun exploration, a genuine sense of discovery and achievement, some wonderful inventory puzzles and item combinations,

Lows: Not much story to speak of, especially for those who haven't read the book it's based on. Some of the puzzle solutions are a bit far fetched. Also the game is decidedly short..

The Verdict

Story:	77
Graphics:	80
Sound:	80
Gameplay:	88
Overall:	82

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



The White Chamber

Okay, confession time people. I used to be, and indeed still am, a bit of an Anime dork. I know, on the surface I seem like a perfectly well adjusted video game reviewer for an online adventure game e-zine, nothing that would suggest any degree of nerd-ness. But underneath, I have waged my own private battle against, and I'm not even kidding about this, my unhealthy obsession with Sailor Moon. I've managed to fight my way over that particular low point in my life, but like the alcoholic who safely becomes a social drinker, I still dabble in the wonderful world of Japanese animation from time to time. Oh I still binge time to time on the occasional 24-hour marathon or three-day convention, but at least I'm not crazy about it any more... than I used to be...

Anyhow, I like anime, and as you may have guessed, I also like adventure games, but by tragic fate, these two passions have rarely if ever coincided. So it came as a happy surprise to hear of the recent new release of The White chamber

by Studio Trophis, an independently made Anime Adventure game. That alone makes it worth my time, but is it worth yours? Let's find out together.

Story: You wake up in a coffin, in a dark room, with no recollection of where you are, why you're here, and most troubling of all, who you are. You leave the room cautiously, to find yourself in a space station, in an unfamiliar part of the galaxy, and utterly devoid of any life. That is, any life besides you of course, and whatever it is that put you in the coffin, and seems intent on killing you. What does it want with you? How did you get here? How can you escape? Do you even deserve to?

To be perfectly frank, neither the amnesia nor the abandoned space station angle are particularly new or innovative ideas in adventure games (or anime for that matter) but they work well enough when properly used, and I'm happy to say that this game is a good example of doing justice to the tried and true.

The story manages to deftly balance itself between seeming safe enough to explore and just creepy enough to make you tense up time to time. If I must quibble (and I must) the ending is made a bit weaker by the fact that there are two, a good and a bad, and the things that affect it are fairly obvious (and as they deal with morals, kinda debatable) and neither ending is really strong. Sorry to halfway spoil there, but then again the rest of the story works so well you can forgive it.

Gameplay: The game is one of relatively few games powered by the WinterMute engine (www.dead-code.org), an adventure game interpreter that, while used much less frequently than Chris Jones' Adventure Game Studio, is at least as powerful. The interface is simple enough to pick up in seconds, left click to walk and right to look or interact. The puzzles are intuitive, neither too difficult or too easy, and have that kind of rewarding sense when solved that, when combined



with the compellingly suspenseful story, create a marvelous gaming experience that you don't want to stop playing.

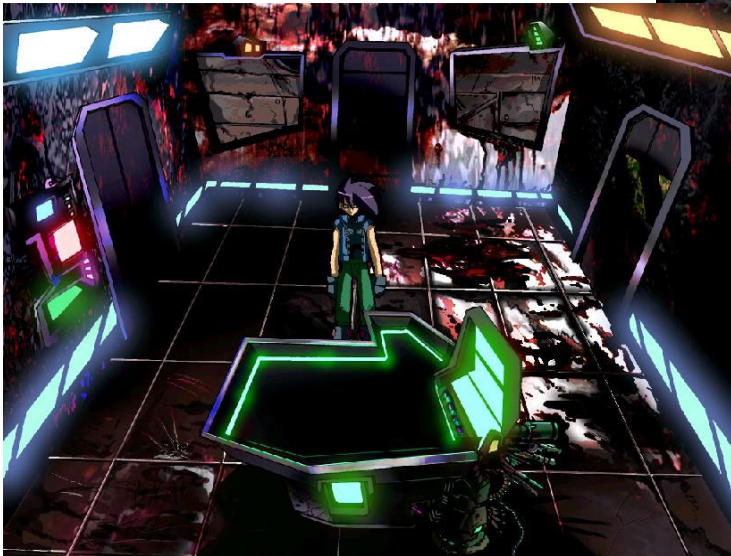
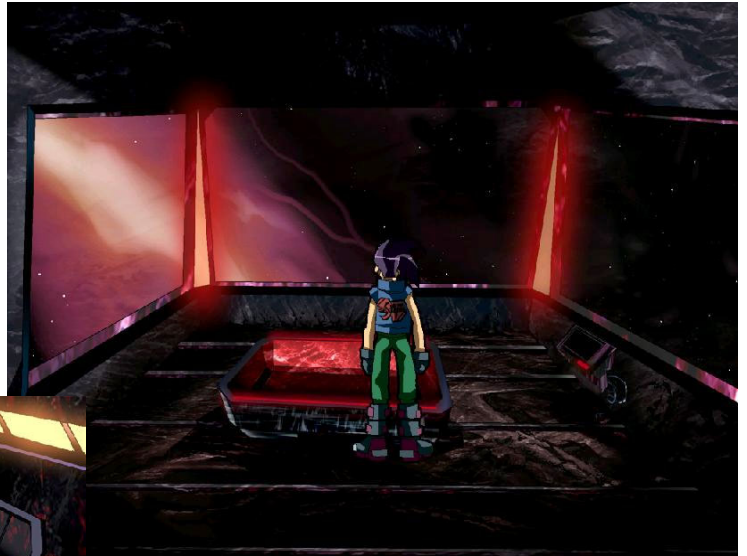
Unfortunately, while the overall design of the game is flawless, the actual programming is far from it. I have gone through the game three times now, each trying to avoid any of the numerous (though usually minor) bugs and glitches, and every time I thought I had planned a route through that would avoid any of them, I end up spotting another two. The game contains numerous graphical glitches, system logic problems, and assorted other errors. Fortunately, none of them actually cripple the game though, which is either extremely fortunate or a testament to the power of the engine to compensate for mistakes. This is Studio Trophis' first game, so these can be overlooked, and they

have said that they will be releasing an international version later that fixes the bugs and will be available in other languages.

Graphics: If you dig the anime cartoon style, or heck, even if you don't, you should give this game a good look. The visual feel is not just drawn true to the style, but with a sense for the general creepiness of the environment and the ominous imposing look of what would otherwise seem normal. Characters, screens, and animations are all drawn rather well.

I've noticed that the past two sections have one praising paragraph and then a condemning one. Seems to be a pattern. Anyway, while taken individually each visual element is well done, somehow, when combined, it doesn't look quite right. For instance, the camera angle in several of the rooms really doesn't match up with

Developer:
Studio Trophis
 Perspective:
3rd person
 Interface:
Point and click
 Site:
studiotrophis.com/wc.php
 Difficulty:
Medium



“ A genuinely suspenseful horror game in a marvelously drawn anime style. All in all this game is a marvelous first outing by Studio Trophis.”

Highs: Generally good game, and you can't beat the price.

Lows: Numerous, if inconsequential bugs and flaws..

The Verdict

Story:	80
Graphics:	85
Sound:	85
Gameplay:	75
Overall:	80

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

the angle of your character just standing upright, like the room were on a slant or, I dunno, the gravity generator's is off balance or something. Also, and this is clearly accidental, some of the rooms have clearly visible and potentially useful items just sitting in the open, such as a pair of scissors or a screwdriver, and these things can't be interacted with at all. Minor gripes, sure, but you notice them.

Sound: Not really very much music, but a great deal of ambient sound that rises and falls with the tension of the game. Sound effects are also well done and add to the atmosphere with, for example, the sound of your heavy boots hitting the metal floor and echoing through the room. There is no voice acting, which isn't uncommon

in independent adventures, but considering the game is a 300-megabyte download you do feel a bit gypped. I mean seriously, there'd only be two speaking parts, you couldn't find just two people and a microphone?

In a few words... A genuinely suspenseful horror game in a marvelously drawn anime style. All in all this game is a marvelous first outing by Studio Trophis. There are a few minor problems to be sure, but they are clearly more the result of inexperience than incompetence. It'll probably take you a while to download, but its well worth the wait.

- Justin Peeples

Puzzle/Adventure:

Shivers II

Puzzle/Adventure is a new section in The Inventory, where we are going to review games that are focused on puzzling rather than story-telling. The formula we use for grading in the Puzzle/Adventure section will differ from the rest of the magazine. Our new writer Jordy Tubman debuts with a review tribute to Sierra's Shivers 2.

"Shivers Two: Harvest of Souls" is the 1997 follow up to the 1995 "Shivers", also developed by Sierra Studios; and it mostly expands upon what made the original quite a mysterious and neo-supernatural quest. With an upgraded graphics engine, enhanced audio delivery, and several intersecting plots to piece together, all wrapped up in one lonely canyon town, the stage is set for an engrossing and atmospheric adventure.

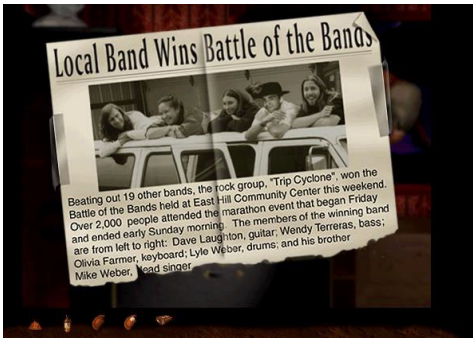
Story: The introductory setup to the actual gameplay may be a tad cliched, however it is easily forgiven considering that the 'old ghost-town' setting is tried and tested. Prior to 'you' arriving in the town of Cyclone, your five friends, who all play in an up-and-coming indie band, have gone on ahead of you to visit an aunt who lives in the town and to spend the summer there. Upon your arrival, a landslide has made entrance (and exit) to the town nearly impossible and the Motel owner seems reluctant to give you a room after mentioning that your friends are the five from the band. A message has been left for you anonymously at the

front desk which alludes to the fact that your friends have been abducted and you must become 'the warrior'. Mix this in with a town whose inhabitants have gradually vanished, a canyon that may or may not be cursed, and a car crash that claimed the life of a woman from the town some time earlier. While not EVERY story element is explained in detail, this actually lends greatly to the mystery as the player will have to fill in some of what has happened; and it really makes you feel like you've come in at the end and have to piece together what led up to the conclusion.

Graphics: At the time the graphics were quite revolutionary, literally. This was one of the earlier games to support 360 degree panoramic environments. While today the thought of running a commercial game at 640x480@256 colours would send most running for the hills, the graphics are still very serviceable. What is really striking are the colour schemes. This game has caused me to have a long-lasting love affair with the colour green. All the outdoor scenes seem to have this

Developer:
Sierra Studios
Perspective:
1st person
Interface:
Point and click
Site:
N/A
Difficulty:
Medium





“It has a solid story laden foundation and builds upon it greatly with moody graphics, haunting audio, and unobtrusive gameplay.”

Highs: Story, music, challenging and intelligent puzzles, multiple endings

Lows: Graphically dated, some plot points too convenient

The Verdict

Story:	83
Graphics:	62
Sound:	86
Gameplay:	79
Overall:	79

*Overall = (Story + Graphics + Music + Gameplay x 2) / 5

wonderful sickly feel to them (contributed GREATLY by the greenish sky) and what would normally be black and white floor tiling are actually black and pale green. While not everything has this touch, it's enough to really make the oppressive and ominous essence of the game palpable. The scenes are mostly static with not a large amount of animation, and sometimes the colours in the game look pixelated; even so, these are to be expected from an 8 year old game so it doesn't detract too much. Full Motion Video is used and the use of real people for all pictures and movie sequences truly makes the town feel real.

Sound: Incredible. Edgy. Haunting. It's so good, in fact, that the game comes with a second disc that functions as a soundtrack (something this reviewer would like to see more of!). This is probably because the music was done with actual lyrics and with all the arrangement of a genuine CD, but then parts of the songs were taken, vocals were minimized and touched up a bit for looping to be used in the game. The ambient effects are well placed and suited to the locations they 'appear' in. Another great touch is that the effects are encoded with positional audio, so if the phone rings to your left, the sound comes out of your left speaker. Once again, despite being a requisite by today's standards, was incredible back then and drew you deeper into the atmosphere of the experience. Voice acting is mostly above the average of other adventure games; I never felt like laughing at a line or its delivery, but I never really felt desperately compelled by it either.

Gameplay: There's nothing revo-

lutionary about the gameplay. Having said that, though, nothing is bad about it either; in fact it's highly enjoyable and just challenging enough. Everything is seen from a first person perspective with the cursor not changing shape much to indicate an action (however you can turn on/off a feature that lights up the cursor when on a hotspot). Aside from a few rare instances there is no character interaction, but this ties in with the storyline and despite that, there is a lot of character development through journals, notes and answering machines. There's a nice mix of puzzles, but they do tend to lean much more towards the logic kind. Puzzles may be difficult if recognising patterns, decoding cryptograms, or solving tile-sliding games aren't up your alley. A 'solve-it now' feature though is included should you get stuck at most of these puzzles (I say 'most' because the one puzzle I needed it for, it didn't work and needless to say, was incredibly frustrating) You're never left directionless because the gameplay is largely non-linear, so the order you tackle puzzles in can be decided by you, and the puzzles have logical solutions so you're never left wondering for too long how to solve them.

In A Few Words... If you enjoy games that are in a similar vein as to "The 7th Guest" or the more recent and outstanding "Dark Fall" games, you'll love "Shivers Two: Harvest of Souls". It has a solid story laden foundation and builds upon it greatly with moody graphics, haunting audio, and unobtrusive gameplay.

- Jordy Tubman

Epilogue

Unfortunately we could not reply to your emails this month due to lack of time. I personally have 4 adventure-related projects going on right now so I have a hard time finding time enough for all of them. Anyway, as you have seen the quality of the mag stays sky high, and fortunately due to the fact that new talented writers joined the team and some of the old talented ones appear to be back in action, the future looks very bright for The Inventory.

But we do need all the support we can get from our readers. Some of the way to do that involve clicking on the google ads on our front page, visiting our sponsors and buying their products (if you find them of interest of course) and joining discussions in The Inventory forum. Speaking of The Inventory forum, feel free to join (www.theinventory.org/forum) and let us know what you think of The Inventory and how it's been shaping up this year. On the other hand you could also send an email to info@theinventory.org and have your voice heard in The Invento-mail next month.

The next issue of The Inventory is going to be the last one before our summer break. Then we will be back again with more issues of The Inventory on September 2005. Until then however we will make sure to provide you with exclusive previews, thought-provoking interviews, critical reviews and entertaining comics.

That's all from us for this month. We hope you enjoyed our issue and make sure to download our last issue before the summer next month. Until then...farewell.

Dimitris Manos



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