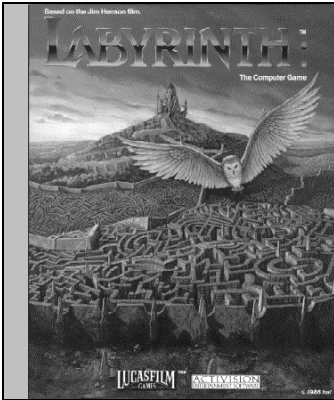


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# The Guide to Classic Graphic Adventures

Edited and Compiled By Kurt Kalata



## Labyrinth: The Computer Game

Initial Release Date: 1986

Platforms: Commodore 64 / Apple II / MSX

Designer: Douglas Adams, Christopher Cerf, Noah Falstein, Stephen Arnold, Brenda Laurel

Developer: Lucasfilm Games

The first Lucasfilm Games production to actually be based on a Lucasfilm movie, *Labyrinth: The Computer Game* is officially the first adventure title out of the company, despite having little in common with its successors. It is a frustrating game, perhaps even moreso than Sierra's competing titles at the time, but it's also got some of the clever humor that went on to typify the company's output.

At any rate, the movie *Labyrinth* was not a financial success release, although it has since reached cult classic status as a highly imaginative fantasy film. Starring a young Jennifer Connelly as a girl sucked into a mysterious name – the titular *Labyrinth*, of course – she is tasked with finding the Jareth, Goblin King, who has kidnapped her little brother. She must overcome numerous bizarre situations and meet up with many weird characters, friend and foe alike. The movie is most well known for David Bowie's role as Jareth, whose glam rock hair and enormous armadillo-stuffed crotch went on to sexually confuse a whole generation of children. Despite being a king, he apparently has little better to do than lounge around his castle and sing 80s rock songs to his legion of Muppet followers, so he's not exactly a threatening character, but he is nonetheless an iconic visage of this particular cinematic era.



*These goblins are slow, but will chuck you in the dungeon if they catch you.*

In *Labyrinth: The Computer Game*, you do not control Jennifer Connelly, but rather, you play as yourself, with the ability to choose male or female avatars. It starts off in the “real world”, as a text adventure, where you're tasked with going off to the movie theater and seeing the hottest new movie. Of course, once you get in, David Bowie's pixellated visage pulls you into the screen and places you into the *Labyrinth*. It's where the game truly begins, as the perspective switches to the third person, and the full text parser gives way to the game's “slot

machine” interface. The large character graphics typified early Lucasfilm adventure games – you can see how it evolved into the style used in *Maniac Mansion*, and similar visuals can be found in the company’s the early online game *Habitat*.

Although your character is controlled by the joystick, all interaction is handled by the two columns of words at the bottom of the screen. On the left are verbs, on the right are nouns. Both can be cycled through with the arrow keys, although you can also begin typing and the game will automatically pick the closest word. It is slightly more convenient than the text entry in Sierra AGI games, because you never actually need to type full sentences, and you technically never need to guess a word, because they’re all listed.



*Even in low-res 16-color graphics, David Bowie will rock your world.*

But from a design standpoint, *Labyrinth* otherwise lags behind its peers. Rather than the fully explorable world of Sierra’s games, most areas of the maze consist of long, identical hallways which scroll horizontally. Each area usually consists of a few such hallways, linked together by a variety of doors. The overall goal is simply to find your way to the next area, but there are usually items to find, and most of the time, they are lying out in the open for you to grab. Even though each area is pretty small, it’s easy to get confused, at least until you get a grasp on how the doors link together. The excessive loading times between areas just make things worse. You’ll also find crystal balls lying around, of which you’ll need at least one to beat the game, as they are essential for the final battle against Jareth.

Your journey is mostly identical to the one in the movie, so you start out in the brick hallways, before graduating to more stone hallways, the hedge maze, the Bog of Eternal Stench (you can fall in and stink for the rest of the game, unless you got the perfume from the vending machine earlier), and the Goblin Village. You’ll meet most of the characters too, like the guards Alph and Ralph. One of them lies, one of them tells the truth, but it’s impossible to tell which is which. You’ll meet the Wise Man, who challenges you with riddles. There’s also an appearance by Sir Didymus, who mostly just acts as a roadblock until you manage to rescue Ludo, a hulking but adorable hairy beast thing. There are only a handful of puzzles in the traditional adventure game sense, and most can be solved simply by watching the movie. To get past the door knockers, for instance, simply get one of them to start talking, and then shove a bracelet in its mouth, allowing you to enter. When you fall into the Wall of Hands, a creepy shaft filled with disembodied arms, just listen to how underappreciated they are and congratulate them for a job well done, and they’ll be happy to help out.

Since this is an early adventure game, there’s more emphasis on arcade elements, which, as expected, are terribly implemented. Your character is extremely clumsy and slow to move. It’s not hard to outrun goblins in the maze hallways, since you’re faster than they are, but a few scenes where you need to outwit them – by luring them into traps, or hiding in various houses

in their village – end up being painful. The worst, by far, is one where you need to chuck rocks at goblins in front of a castle, and it’s nearly impossible to time your throws correctly.

There is a certain “point of no return” after flipping the disk, so if you missed any essential items, you’re out of luck. But otherwise the only real way to lose is to run out of time. You’ve got a total thirteen hours to reach the end, which is way more than enough to beat it. However, getting caught by any enemy will get you tossed into a dungeon. There are half a dozen ways to escape these little holding cells, most of them quite silly. You can “adumbrate elephant” and then “call elephant” to create a mammoth sized hole in the wall to allow you to escape. (“Adumbrate” is an extraordinarily obscure word meaning “to foreshadow”.) You can call the nerd from the movie theater at the beginning, who eventually annoys you so much that you end up climbing up the wall, allowing you to escape. Sometimes a trapdoor will open and transport you out, other times a coin slot will let you escape, provided you have some change. You can also chant magic words or eat a peach, if you’ve found any, but these sacrifice an hour of in-game time. With the exception of these last two, the other techniques only work randomly. Indeed, much of the game is random, with locations appearing in different order every time you play.

There’s definitely some funny bits, which can probably be credited to the involvement of famed comedy/sci-fi writer Douglas Adams, who contributed to the design. Various other aspects of development were handled by David Fox, Gary Winnick and Noah Falstein, who went to work on other Lucasfilm titles like *Zak McKracken* and both *Indiana Jones* graphic adventures. Christopher Cerf, the writer/director of the film, was also involved in the game’s creation. It’s authentic in the way it follows the movie without resorting to banal platforming action or some such, and does so by involving a player in a unique way, but ultimately it has aged poorly, as the extremely slow character movement and tedious exploration make it nearly unbearable without using a speed-up function of an emulator.



*Despite playing as “yourself”, you’ll follow in the footsteps of Sarah, Jennifer Connelly’s character.*

*Labyrinth: The Computer Game* was technically published by Activision, and initially released for the Apple II and Commodore 64. These versions are largely identical, but it was also ported to the MSX in Japan by Pack-in Video. This version has completely redone visuals with much smaller characters, although a higher overall resolution for less pixelated graphics. Pack-in Video also created a *Labyrinth* game for the Famicom, which is entirely unrelated to the computer. Rather, it’s an overhead action-RPG vaguely similar to *The Legend of Zelda*, although far more obtuse and way more confusing. Despite being based on an American film, this version was never translated into English, and as an import cartridge, remains a curiosity for fans of the film.

# Maniac Mansion

The graphic adventure genre was born from text adventures – *Colossal Cave* begat Infocom's *Zork* which begat Sierra's *Mystery House*. Sierra was constantly pushing forward, eventually inventing *Kings Quest*, developing a fully visual world with a controllable avatar. Despite its advancements, the character was still controlled by the keyboard, and interaction was accomplished solely through typing. The next step was to implement a fully cursor based interface, allowing the player to point and click to move and interact. Although the first popular game to successfully implement this was ICOM's *Déjà Vu*, the most famous was Lucasfilm's *Maniac Mansion*.

The game development studio was part of George Lucas' production company, who initially began developing action and flight simulation games like *Ballblazer*, *Rescue on Fractalus!* and *Koronis Rift*. The company had minimal experience in adventure games, having only worked on an obscure translation of the film *Labyrinth*, but it was *Maniac Mansion* that would change the genre landscape completely, and effectively position the company, later renamed Lucasarts, as one of the most notable developers in the field.

*Maniac Mansion* was built using a system called SCUMM (which, appropriately enough, stands for Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion), allowing for easy porting between platforms. It was reused and improved throughout the years before it was retired after *The Curse of Monkey Island*, and gave way for the 3D GrimE engine, for use in *Grim Fandango*. *Maniac Mansion* was largely directed, written and programmed by Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick, both of whom also worked on *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade: The Graphic Adventure*, as well as both *Monkey Island* games.



## Maniac Mansion

Initial Release Date: 1987

Platforms: Commodore 64 / Apple II / PC DOS / Amiga / Atari ST / NES

Designer: Ron Gilbert, Gary Winnick

Developer: Lucasfilm Games

*Maniac Mansion* begins with a meteor crash landing in the backyard of a large, rickety house. The story fast forwards twenty years, as Dr. Fred Edison, owner of the mansion, kidnaps Sandy, a local teenage girl, to conduct a number of mad, brain sucking experiments. These two events are not coincidental – the Meteor is sentient, and has taken control of the not-so-good doctor. Sandy's boyfriend Dave is none too pleased by this, so he assembles a group of his friends to stage an impromptu infiltration and rescue her from the Edison's basement laboratory. Dr. Fred lives in weird company, with his crazy wife Nurse Edna and military nut son Weird Ed. Even though neither of them takes too kindly to intruders, they're equally as concerned for Dr. Fred's deteriorating mental health, and your troupe can attempt to befriend them to provide aid for the greater good. Also inhabiting the house are two sentient tentacles – the green one, who looks fearsome but mostly just lounges around and dreams of being a rock star; and the purple one, who is actively evil and aids Dr. Fred with his schemes. There's also Dead Cousin Ted, the

mummified remains of a long deceased family member who nevertheless seems to maintain a fairly decorated living quarters.

Before Dave begins his trip into the mansion, you must pick two of his friends to join him. Although Dave has no special talents, the rest of his pals are defined by their various skills, which allow for different solutions for any of the game's puzzles. Bernard is a tech nerd who can fix anything; Razor is a punk rock musician who can help Green Tentacle with his singing career; Wendy is an aspiring writer who can turn the Meteor's memoirs into a work of literary genius; and Michael knows his way around a photo lab and can develop pictures to help out Weird Ed. There are two other cast members – Syd, a new age musician who's functionally the same as Razor, and Jeff, a wasted surfer dude who is essentially useless, since his only skill is being able to fix telephones, which Bernard can also do. You only control a single kid at a time, and each explores the mansion independently, although you can switch to any other member via the "New Kid" command. There are a total of three "good" endings (with a number of variations) based on who you bring with you. It's a very freeform approach to design that most successive adventure games – further Lucasarts games included – tended to leave by the wayside for a more focused experience. It allows for tons of replayability, because you need to play through the whole game at least twice to see all of the possible endings, much less find the multiple solutions to the puzzles.



*Though it features larger characters, Maniac Mansion runs on similar technology to Sierra AGI games.*

It's just as well, since *Maniac Mansion* isn't a terribly long game. Although the mansion is quite large, there are really only a few major obstacles to overcome – open the two locks to get into the secret lab, find some way to distract the Purple Tentacle, and get rid of the Meteor. But while Lucasarts games had a tendency to be very player friendly (at least compared to Sierra games), please note that this design philosophy didn't kick in until Loom. In *Maniac Mansion*, it is entirely possible to find yourself in a dead end and requires that you reload an earlier save, or possibly even restart. You can also get your characters killed, although most of these require some conscious effort on the player's part. Some of them are almost easter eggs unto themselves – try stealing Ed's hamster, sticking it in the microwave and giving him the charred remains, or playing the record of Tentacle Mating Calls in the presence of the Green Tentacle, both rather silly ways to send the kids to meet their maker. Sending one of them to their grave doesn't necessarily mean you've lost, but if their skill was vital to solve a puzzle, you're basically out of luck. There are also a few ways to blow up the entire mansion, usually by senselessly mucking with the Edison's nuclear reactor, which will obviously bring the entire game to an end.

The action also flows in real time, with scripted events occurring at specific points. Sometimes this simply triggers cutscenes (often documented as the first time they were implemented in an electronic game) as the Edisons talk to each other, while at other times it will

send one of the members wandering around the mansion. You'll learn this quickly when you enter the kitchen and find Nurse Edna rummaging through the refrigerator. You can choose to either wait a few moments until she leaves, or simply run away from her – due to a programming glitch (present in all versions) she'll simply disappear if you leave the room. Alternatively, getting caught means you'll get tossed in the dungeon, which is very easy to escape from. Unless you're using a walkthrough, the initial playthrough might be a wash unless you have an idea of when these events occur and how to react to them. (Make sure to steal that package before Weird Ed can get to it, because it makes the game a lot easier.) The puzzles themselves aren't really very difficult, as most simply revolve around finding specific items and knowing where to use them, and none of their uses are too obscure.

Given that *Maniac Mansion* was one of the first completely cursor driven adventure games, there are a lot of quirks which might seem odd in retrospect. For example, the game will not indicate hotspots when you highlight them – you need to click it first, or use the "What Is" command, which will allow you to comb the screen for stuff you can interact with. There is no "Look" command – about the closest you can do is "Read" certain items. As a result of the genre's roots in text adventures, there are a number of verbs that feel extraneous, like "Turn On/Off", "Fix", "Lock/Unlock" and such, later adventure games simply replaced them with an all purpose "Use" command. There is also no way to "Talk" to anyone, as all character interactions are initiated by the mansion inhabitants. The inventory is listed as text beneath the commands, although only a small number are available at a single time and need to be scrolled through. There are a lot of unnecessary items too, even though you can carry an unlimited of amount of stuff. The inventory is not shared between the characters, so they'll need to be in the same room to give items to one another. There are no dialogue trees either, so the kids are mostly just defined by their looks and their skills – otherwise, they don't have much personality. They all look a bit weird, with thin, stick figure bodies and large heads with very, very silly grins.

Still, even though its functionality is fairly rudimentary, the game possesses a really weird faux horror vibe that's easy to find engrossing, even years later. It's not nearly as a macabre as the blood splattered logo might make it out to be, but there's an inherent silliness in the premise, as well as many of the puzzle solutions. Some of it is intentionally baffling – there's a staircase that simply reads "Out of Order", which can't be climbed (nor fixed) no matter what you do. And then there's Chuck the Plant, a household plant who serves no great significance other than somehow having its own name. This little bit of greenery has since become a running joke in many future games, Lucasarts or otherwise. So while *Maniac Mansion* is often overshadowed by its sequel, these elements, combined with its less linear design, still make for a perfectly playable experience.



*Green Tentacle is a whiny loser, but he's far from useless.*

*Maniac Mansion* was originally developed for the Commodore 64 and Apple II in 1987, and ported to the IBM PC in 1988. These versions are essentially identical, featuring blocky low-res 16 color graphics. It's not a pretty sight. The only real difference between these versions are due to the sound capabilities of each computer, with the Apple II and PC speaker sounds losing out to the SID chip of the Commodore 64. There's barely any music or sound effects though, so it's not a big deal.

An enhanced version was also released later in 1988 for the Commodore Amiga, Atari ST, and again for the IBM PC. It features greatly improved graphics, with double the resolution and far more detail in both the characters and backgrounds, even though it still sticks to a 16 color limit. Although the Edisons were originally flesh colored, this version turns them all blue, for some reason or another. The PC version is still stuck with lousy PC speaker sound though. Functionally, these enhanced versions are the same as the original release, except the Star Wars poster in the arcade is replaced with a Zak McKracken poster. If you try to read it, your character will muse how they could never find a use for the gas can on Mars. This is a reference to the chainsaw found in the kitchen in *Maniac Mansion*, which is useless because there's no gas anywhere. Both PC versions, as well as the Amiga and Atari ST versions, utilize a copy protection scheme, which requires that you look in the manual to open up the blast door on the second floor. In all of the other versions, it's unlocked and stays open.



*The NES port would be the definitive version, if it weren't for the censorship*

*Maniac Mansion* was also ported to 8-bit Nintendo systems, but the Japanese Famicom and American/European NES versions are completely different. The NES version was developed by Realtime Associates (who also ported Lucasarts' *Loom* to the TurboGrafx-16) and published by Jaleco. The graphics are totally different – better than the first computer release but not quite as good as the enhanced version – but it controls smoothly and quickly. The characters are actually a bit better proportioned in this version, even though they're animated somewhat awkwardly. The Edisons are still blue, and Weird Ed now wears a garish purple beret, and looks a bit less freaky. Some of the rooms have been condensed into a single screen, but the puzzles and layout are faithful. Using the controller isn't as handy as using a mouse, although it's more than suitable. Some of the extraneous verbs are removed, like Fix and Unlock, and you can cycle through the three most used verbs with the Select button. But most importantly, it will automatically identify items when you place a cursor over it, eliminating the need for the "What Is" command. In all of the other versions, you can also need to click the mouse button a second time to confirm your action, whereas that is no longer needed here. It features a battery backup save, although since there's only one slot, it is perfectly possible to screw yourself over.

The best feature, though, is the soundtrack. Each character has their own specific theme (which can be turned on and off via the CD player in their inventory), and all of them are excellent, because they add a lot of personality to what are otherwise blank slates. Dave's theme is upbeat rock, Wendy's is classical, Michael's is funky, and Razor's about as close as you can get to heavy metal on the NES. The music was all supplied by George Sanger and his studio, Team Fat, who provided soundtracks for many computer games of the era, including *Wing Commander* and *The 7th Guest*.

The NES port would be the definitive version, if it weren't for all of the censorship. With Nintendo of America gravely concerned about its family friendly image in the 90s, it demanded the removal of several elements. Dr. Fred's speeches were toned down, removing any mentions of "sucking pretty little brains", and Nurse Edna's sexual innuendoes were gone entirely – lines like were changed from "How silly of me! I should've tied you to my bed, cutie!" (if you're a male character) or "You're lucky you're not a boy, or you'd be in BIG trouble right now!" (if you're female) to "Just wait until I talk to your mother." or "You'll be safe here until the police come."

The note scribbled on Ted's wall was changed from "For a good time call Edna" to simply "Call Edna". The reclining nude statue in the hallway, and the suggestive mummy picture and Playboy calendar from Dead Cousin Ted's room, are all gone. The skeleton in the dungeon is missing too – apparently Nintendo thought it somehow implied that Dr. Fred was a cannibal. The arcade game *Thrill Kill* was renamed to *Tuna Diver*, tying in with amusing G-rated insult "tuna head". In the released version, you can still microwave Ed's hamster, but Nintendo later found out about this after the game hit the market, so it was removed from the European version. What's particularly odd about all of these changes is that the uncensored version was exhaustively featured in an issue of *Nintendo Power*, so many players were exposed to some of these elements anyway. It's possible to disassemble the NES ROM and import it into SCUMMVM, which adds mouse control and a better save system, although as of present the color palette is a little screwed up.



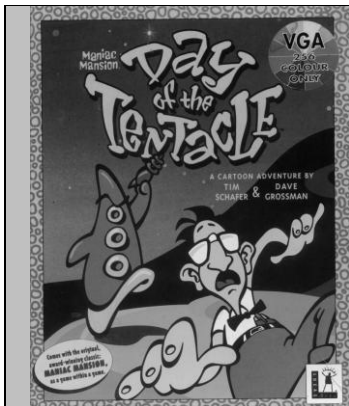
*The Japanese version of Maniac Mansion is bizarre, to say the least.*

The Famicom version, released a year earlier in Japan and developed by Jaleco themselves, is a substantially worse port. The graphics are, again, totally different, and the characters have been redrawn to look smaller and cuter. All of them, what with their empty eyes and vacant smiles, look like they jumped out of a Cathy comic strip. This is the only version to have a real Game Over screen, which shows the characters as angels and looks particularly ludicrous. The box cover shows them all as super deformed dwarves, although at least there's some cool

artwork in the manual. The rooms are even more compact than the NES version, and the ones that are multi-screen don't scroll at all. Various background details are missing (Chuck the Plant is gone entirely, as if the programmers didn't get the joke.) Sandy now wears a full dress instead of a tube top, and Weird Ed looks more like a stereotypical nerd, although it does have the nude statue that was taken out the NES version.

There are other small changes due to the localization – the dime becomes a 100 yen coin, and the Three Guys Who Publish Anything apparently have an address in Tokyo. There's even a Japanese style mailbox in the first screen, which doesn't entirely make sense, because there's a regular mailbox in front of the porch two screens over. Outside of a few original tunes here and there (and an especially aggravating "Pause" ditty), most of the game is played without music, much like the PC versions. The only noises are the annoying footstep noise when your character shuffles from place to place. Unlike the NES version, the characters walk slowly and awkwardly. The hotspots don't give descriptions, but you can see their descriptions holding down the B button and highlighting them. There's no save system, and is instead replaced with 104 character passwords, making them one of the longest of any game on the system.

In 2004, a group of fans developed *Maniac Mansion Enhanced* with the Adventure Game Studio tool. Although most of the visuals are based off the enhanced PC version, the rest of the graphics have been totally redone in 256 colors, and the whole game looks substantially better. The interface has been updated to mimic its sequel, *Day of the Tentacle*, condensing the actions into nine verbs, adding visual icons for all inventory items, and the context sensitive right mouse button. With the addition of a Look command, many items have newly written descriptions, although several just trigger generic comments which differ depending on which character you use. There's also music throughout the game, mostly borrowed from *Day of the Tentacle*, which changes on location rather than the characters used like the NES game. A few minor puzzles and inconsistencies are fixed too, although most of the game is identical. It's an excellent effort, and well worth playing.



### Maniac Mansion: Day of the Tentacle

Initial Release Date: 1993

Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh

Designer: Tim Schaefer, David Grossman

Developer: LucasArts

*Maniac Mansion* was, of course, a decent success and began a steady stream of adventure games from Lucasfilm, including *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders*, *Loom*, two *Indiana Jones* games, and two *Monkey Island* games. By this point, Ron Gilbert left the company to join Humongous Entertainment, while his previous collaborators on the *Monkey Island* games, Tim Schaefer and David Grossman, went on to direct the only *Maniac Mansion* sequel: *Day of the Tentacle*. Due to the change in direction, it shows a marked shift in both humor and tone, leaving behind the faux horror vibe in favor of Looney Tunes-style wackiness. That is in no way meant in the pejorative sense, because it also might be one of the funniest, most brilliantly designed adventure games ever created.

The animated intro begins with Green and Purple Tentacle outside the mansion, pondering a stream of sludge created by one of Dr. Fred's crazy inventions. On a whim, Purple Tentacle

takes a gulp and somehow sprouts opposing limbs, opening up the potential for crazy plans of world domination. Dr. Fred manages to capture both tentacles, but not before Green sends out a cry for help via Weird Ed's hamster. It reaches the dorm of Bernard, now living up the college life with his roommates, a burnt out roadie named Hoagie and a vaguely psychotic med student named Laverne. The trio infiltrates the mansion and quickly frees the tentacles, only to have Purple escape and resume his schemes to enslave humanity. Dr. Fred comes to the (rather extreme) conclusion that the only way to stop him is to travel through time, precisely one day in the past, and prevent Purple Tentacle from drinking the sludge in the first place. The three are quickly enlisted into service and shoved into three Chron-o-Johns, portable toilets that can travel through the ages.



*Pictured here is Bernard in the Chron-o-John, a time traveling portable toilet*

Something goes wrong, of course, as each of them are sent through the expanses of time – Hoagie lands 200 years in the past, during the time of the American Revolution, and Laverne ends up 200 years in the future, where tentacles run the planet and humans are mere pets. On the other hand, Bernard ends up right back where he started in the present day. Each has their own quest to return back to the proper time and foil Purple Tentacle's scheme – Hoagie must find and charge a super battery, a difficult task given that electricity had yet to be properly discovered, Laverne must find a way to blend in amongst the tentacles to recharge her own Chron-o-John, and Bernard must somehow obtain the funds to buy a replacement jewel for the time machine. Like *The Secret of Monkey Island*, *Day of the Tentacle* is clearly aware of the absurdities it presents – surely there are much easier ways to stop a hopping tentacle that bending space and time – but the game gleefully rolls with it, for the simple fact that it's a lot of fun.

Once past the intro section, *Day of the Tentacle* greatly opens up, almost to intimidating proportions. In the present day, the mansion has been converted into a hotel, which is holding a practical joke convention. In the past, it's housing the forefathers of America, with the Declaration of Independence ready to be signed in its very living room. In the future, it's Purple Tentacle's headquarters. While Laverne is stuck to a few areas since she's a prisoner of the tentacles, both Bernard and Hoagie have free run of the mansion in both time periods. Unlike the first game, the characters don't possess any special talents, although each starts with their own personal inventory. It's also structured a bit more like a typical adventure game, in that it no longer runs in real time, although there are still occasional humorous cutscenes that pop up from time to time – these include musings from the forefathers in Hoagie's time, newspaper clippings of Purple Tentacle's rise to power in the present era, and hate-fueled rants by an aged Purple Tentacle in the future.

Even though it removes the alternate puzzle solutions, it's still a lot more freeform and non-linear than most adventure games. The *Monkey Island* games usually gave you several quests

to tackle at once, under the assumption that if you get stuck at one, you can always move on to another. *Day of the Tentacle* takes that to a further extreme – you have to play around, find every item that you can, and identify the puzzles to be solved. Most of these aren't readily apparent, but nearly all of the major ones have to deal with time travel in some capacity, or finding ways to bend the rules. For instance, the three characters can teleport items to each other through the Chron-o-John (which is thankfully abstracted simply by dragging an item to their portrait) but it doesn't work on anything living. Keeping in line with the first *Maniac Mansion* game, you'll need to capture Ed's hamster again, but you need to figure out some way to get it to Laverne without directly sending it through the time machine.

Some of them are pretty ridiculous, right from the outset. In order to Laverne to wander around freely, she needs a costume. One of the only items she has access to is a medical diagram of the tentacles. Meanwhile, Hoagie runs into Betsy Ross, who is in the process of designing the American flag. You need to have Laverne send the tentacle diagram to Hoagie, who gives it to Ms. Ross, thereby altering history and turning the American flag into the shape of a tentacle. Then Bernard can climb the flag pole, send it to Laverne, and voila! (No matter, of course, that Laverne looks ridiculous in it, but the dimwit tentacles in the future somehow find her incredibly attractive in her obviously fake get-up.) It's something of an absurd puzzle, and at least a few of them involve screwing up American history for your own personal gains. They're all hilarious to muse about despite their obtuseness, but most of them offer some kind of clues. There's a reason why Thomas Jefferson has a time capsule, and while Laverne can find that same time capsule 400 years later. There's also a very specific reason why the laundry room is completely identical in the present and future eras. Some of them are even silly without relying on the time travel stuff. Right at the beginning, once Bernard frees the tentacles and Dr. Fred sends you on a task to find the plans for his time machine, implying your first great quest...only to find them a couple feet away from you, in the same room, tacked to a cork board.



*Hoagie pays a visit to our founding fathers*

Outside of the gleefully deranged puzzles, *Day of the Tentacle* is amazing to look at. In the six years between games, technology had moved from oddly gangling teenagers to a fully fleshed out cartoon. While *Monkey Island 2* (and most Sierra games at the time) elected to use painted and scanned backgrounds, *Day of the Tentacle* takes a page from classic cartoons and sticks with more solidly colored backgrounds, which removes the graininess of the 256-color limit while making the world much brighter. The backgrounds are all drawn in odd proportions with even odder angles – nothing is quite straight on, which perfectly matches the deranged nature of its inhabitants. Even more beauty lies in the character sprites and their animation – Bernard marches, pants hiked up far too high arms at his side, chugging along like his old *Maniac Mansion* sprite. Hoagie lumbers, hands in pockets, hair that always covers his eyes, and an unfortunately

visible plumber's crack. Laverne has a weird bulging eye and doesn't so much walk as prance gleefully from place to place, a widely moronic grin as she skips and a blank expression of perpetual bewilderment when idle.

The rest of the characters beyond the three protagonists shine just as brightly. As one can see, the relationship between the heroes and the Edisons have changed quite a bit from the original *Maniac Mansion* – Dr. Fred and his clan are no longer enemies (and the Meteor is gone completely) and their personalities have changed too. Nurse Edna is more of an insane cackling witch than a sexual deviant, and Weird Ed is more of a restrained weirdo who obsesses over stamps than a militant nutjob. (Apparently the microwaving of the hamster from the previous game was canon, because Weird Ed hasn't quite gotten over it.) Dead Cousin Ted is still around as a mummy in all three time periods (and needs to be dressed up by Laverne to win a "Best Human" contest.) Various other Edison ancestors and descendants are found in each period, although the most amusing are the caricatures of American's founders – as it turns out George Washington and Ben Franklin were kinda jerks! It's a bit of a shame none of the rest of the *Maniac Mansion* crew is mentioned at all, although Razor was initially meant to return before getting cut in the planning stages.



*Laverne tries desperately to win the "best human" contest in the future*

*Day of the Tentacle* also offers full speech in the CD-ROM version, and the exceptional dialogue mixed with the brilliant casting and acting is impeccable. Bernard is a typical weenie, Hoagie goes on irrelevant tangents and seems to be the least flummoxed by the situation they're in, and Laverne is prone to mad giggles between her lines. In taking another page from classic American cartoons, a good number of the voices are plays off famous actors and characters – a vandal randomly sounds like Jack Nicholson, Thomas Jefferson is reminiscent of Dudley Do-Right, and both John Hancock and his lousy great-great-great-grandson salesman both sound like Woody Allen. In the past, there is also a talking horse, for some reason or another, sounding a bit like Mr. Ed. (It really doesn't seem that out of place, considering the sentient megalomaniacal tentacles and whatnot.)

Although *Day of the Tentacle* can possibly be criticized for its arcane puzzles, and it lacks the replay value of its predecessor, it's otherwise one of the few nearly perfect adventure games – gorgeous visuals, an incredibly innovative setup, memorable characters and hilarious dialogue. If there's any true "canon of adventure gaming", this one deserves to be on the top.

The entirety of the original *Maniac Mansion* is included as a bonus in *Day of the Tentacle*, accessed by using the computer in Weird Ed's room. Unfortunately, it's the initial release with the really blocky graphics instead of the enhanced version. This function also doesn't quite work with SCUMMVM – you just have to look at the resource files and add *Maniac Mansion* separately on the main menu, and launch it from there.

## ***Maniac Mansion: The TV Show***

*Maniac Mansion* was somehow translated into sitcom, produced in Canada in 1990. There were 66 episodes in total for the Family Channel, a cable network that, at the time, had pretty low penetration. It was largely known for the religious show *The 700 Club* and has since morphed into ABC Family.



*The Edison family in the TV show bears little resemblance to their game counterparts*

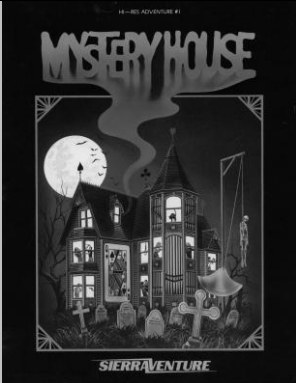
*Maniac Mansion* is only very, very loosely based on the Lucasarts game. It ditches the whole bit with the teenagers and just focuses on the Edisons, except the Edisons are nothing like they are in the game. Sure, the head of the household is named Fred, he's a mad scientist, and there's a meteor in his basement (which isn't sentient like the games), but that's about all they have in common. The rest of the family is completely different, albeit with some quirks due to his experiments – his four year old son was turned into a hulking, halfway mentally handicapped giant with an annoying falsetto voice, and his brother-in-law was turned into a fly. None of their names rhyme with "ed", as they should. The developers of the game had little hand in the TV show's production, naturally.

The quote on the cover of the sole VHS tape release, "The Love Collection" says that New York Post claims it's "The '90s equivalent of the Addams Family". It isn't. It has none of the same horror-fueled charm as the Addams, nor even the schlocky atmosphere of the game. The house isn't even so much a mansion as just kinda large, and the family certainly isn't crazy enough to be considered maniacs. Anyway, it's a pretty standard sitcom, so the family faces dilemmas which they handle in humorous ways, and then everything's happy at the end. Some consider it a spiritual successor to the Canadian sketch show *SCTV*, since a few of the same people worked on it. It stars Joe Flaherty (best known recently for his role as the crazy dad in the excellent *Freaks and Geeks*) as Fred and was created by Eugene Levy (Jim's dad from the *American Pie* movies.) Despite its comedy roots, the show really isn't very funny outside of its slightly offbeat premise.

# Laura Bow Mysteries

Envisioned by Roberta Williams, co-founder of Sierra, Laura Bow was the star of a short lived series that drew from classic mystery novels. Based on a healthy diet of Agatha Christie novels and games of *Clue*, the heroine would find herself in situations where her compatriots were all being murdered under mysterious circumstances. The games drew heavily on mystery tropes, and thoroughly acknowledged this fact, giving them sort of a classic feel. Laura's first game was *The Colonel's Bequest*, and followed up with *The Dagger of Amon Ra*.

Based on silent movie actress Clara Bow, at least in name and looks, the starlet of William's series was meant to personify the spirit of the Roaring 20s, much as woman she was based on. On practice it didn't quite work out like this – she was largely a silent protagonist in *The Colonel's Bequest*, like in Sierra's other games at the time, and morphed into a polite Southern belle in *The Dagger of Amon Ra*. Laura Bow is still unlike any other protagonist in any video or computer game, not only for her personality but for the setting. Despite being a cornerstone of American history, the 1920s have rarely been explored in gaming.

 The box art for the game 'Mystery House' features a dark, atmospheric illustration of a large, multi-story Victorian mansion at night. A full moon is visible in the sky, and a ghostly figure is seen in the windows. The title 'MYSTERY HOUSE' is written in a stylized, gothic font at the top, and 'SIERRAVENTURE' is at the bottom.	<p><b>Mystery House</b></p> <p>Initial Release Date: 1980 Platforms: Apple II / PC-6001 Designer: Roberta Williams Developer: Online Systems</p>
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The lineage of the *Laura Bow* games can be traced way back to Sierra Online's very first game, *Mystery House*. Based very loosely on Agatha Christie's novel *Ten Little Indians* (also known as *And Then There Were None*), you play an unnamed character locked in a mansion with seven other guests. With a vague note telling of jewels hidden within house walls, you soon find the other characters scattered around, all quite dead. With a killer on the loose, you need to find the hidden treasure, uncover the skeleton key to unlock the front door, and escape with your life.



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

One of the most important adventure games ever made, *Mystery House* was the first in the genre to add graphics, whereas all previous games were entirely text-based. The visuals are, of course, quite rudimentary, consisting of shakily drawn white lines against a black background. The characters look as if they were lifted from a first grader's notebook, and even minor items like knives and shovels are crudely drawn. It's all understandable given the game's age – it had to fit in the limited RAM of the Apple II, and since there were no real drawing programs on the market, Ken and Roberta Williams had to assemble their own device, combining a graphics tablet with a mechanical arm.

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

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

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

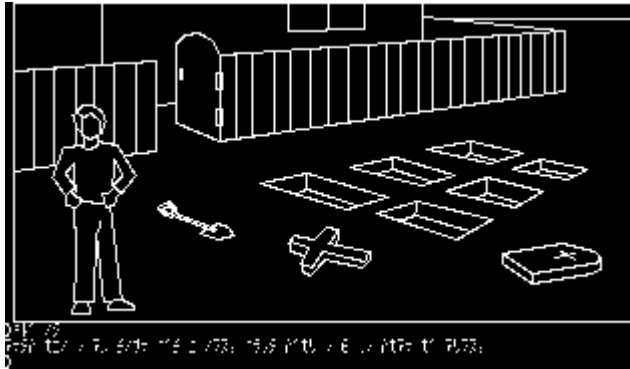


*The renditions of your fellow treasure hunters are crude, to be kind*

Most of these quirks are outlined in the instruction pages before you begin, so at least it sets down its grammar rules and inconsistencies from the beginning. But it's still a pain to play, and there's little of interest to be found here beyond its historical value. In 1987, Sierra released the game into the public domain. It can be found on the *Roberta Williams Anthology*, along with the

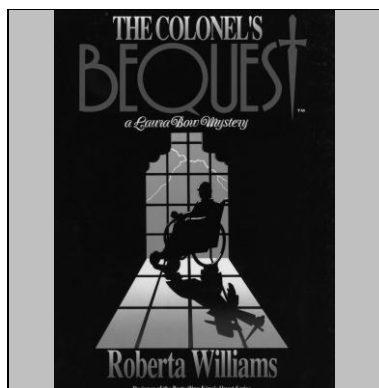
rest of Sierra's High-Res Adventures, although they need to be run through an Apple II emulator. The game was also ported to the iPhone by a company completely unrelated to Sierra.

In 1983, a Japanese company called Starcraft ported *Mystery House* to Japanese computers like the PC-6001. (There was another graphic text adventure developed by Microcabin using the same name, although it was entirely unrelated to Sierra's game.) This means there were two games on the market with the same title – one a shoddy ripoff, the other quite authentic. While Starcraft's port is very similar to the original Apple II version, all of the graphics have been redrawn and improved. It still uses the simplistic black and white line drawings, but all of the characters now have vaguely realistic proportions, despite not having any faces, and the visuals look far less rough. Part of this may have had to do with better technology, but the Japanese PCs also ran at a higher resolution than the Apple II, allowing for more screen real estate.



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

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

	<p><b>The Colonel's Bequest: A Laura Bow Mystery</b></p> <p>Initial Release Date: 1989 Platforms: IBM PC / Apple IIgs / Amiga / Atari ST Designer: Roberta Williams Developer: Sierra</p>
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Sierra published several more text adventures before introducing Kings Quest and changing the landscape of the genre forever. In the new age of graphic adventures, they occasionally found themselves revisiting and revising some of their older games. Kings Quest, for example, was

loosely inspired by *The Wizard and the Princess* (AKA *Adventure in Serenia*), Sierra's second game, while *Leisure Suit Larry* was explicitly a remake of *Softporn Adventure*. While taking a break from the *Kings Quest* games, Roberta Williams decided to once again develop a mystery game. While not technically based on *Mystery House*, it borrows elements from the same Agatha Christie stories, reusing many of the same themes, although obviously much more fleshed out with more advanced technology.

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



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

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

There are many problems with the whole package, the least of them being that the mystery just isn't terribly interesting. The characters are all mystery archetypes, and most are named after figures from the era, like the suspicious doctor Wilbur C. Feels (W.C. Fields), the untrustworthy lawyer Clarence Sparrow (Clarence Darrow), and the stuck up actress Gloria Swansong (Gloria Swanson). The French maid is named Fifi, and the butler is named Jeeves, of course, while Colonel Dijon is a not-so-subtle reference to Colonel Mustard from the board game *Clue*. Despite their naming conventions, they are sparsely characterized, as they're mostly defined by their vices or conflicts, and little else. Therefore, it's hard to feel for the characters when they get killed, and much of the drama is lost. Laura has no real personality either, and it's almost sociopathic the way she stumbles upon body after body, act horrified for a moment, and then completely carry on for the rest of the night as if nothing happened. Laura can, of course, get

herself killed, usually by walking into some place she shouldn't. These are easily avoidable once you know where they are, but there are a few sticking points, namely the railings on the second floor. It's entirely too easy to stupidly fall to your death here, because it's quite narrow, and you end up passing this point dozens of times. And that's not counting the chandelier which will randomly fall on you if you walk underneath it. (There's also an amusing reference to Psycho if you decide to take a shower.)

The most frustrating issue is with the way time is structured. There are eight acts, one for each hour, and each hour is further broken down into fifteen minute quarters. The clock does not operate in real time – instead, it advances when certain triggers are met, usually when walking in certain rooms or interacting with certain people. There's rarely any indication of how to do any of this without stumbling around, which leads to another problem – it's far too easy to propel forwards through the plot, missing important events without meaning to. You might find two people yelling at each other and have it make absolutely no sense if you failed to view an establishing scene from earlier on. When you barge into two people chatting and they get pissed off, you were supposed to crawl into one of the many secret passages and spy on them. Although this requires judicious save scumming to get it right, at least you know when you screwed up and why. This doesn't always happen though, and it's very easy to feel lost. There are only a few scenes that are required viewing, since they're the ones that advance the clock, and they're mostly so Laura can happen upon the dead bodies.

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

By its own admission, *The Colonel's Bequest* really isn't even a traditional adventure game. There are very few puzzles to solve, and most of those involve a treasure hunt that reveals a bit of background on the Dijon family, and is entirely optional. When you break down the components, all you do is explore and spy on the family members, which translates into stumbling around and being very meticulous. The onus is put upon the player to question the other characters, discover their motives, and attempt to solve the mystery for themselves before the night is over. Despite all of the stuff you can miss, it's all just to flesh out the story, and none of it is actually vital to getting to the end.

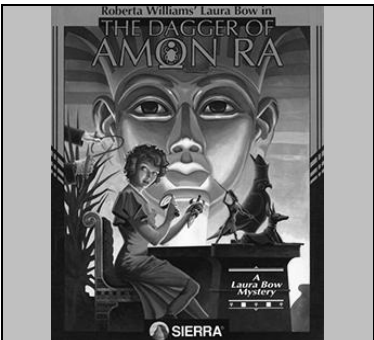


*The maid and the butler don't exactly go to great lengths to hide their affair*

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

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

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

	<p><b>Roberta Williams' Laura Bow in: The Dagger of Amon Ra</b></p> <p>Initial Release Date: 1992 Platforms: IBM PC (Disk &amp; CD-ROM) Designer: Bruce Balfour Developer: Sierra</p>
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With the traumatic night at the Dijon Manor behind her, Laura finishes up college, bids farewell to Louisiana, and starts her new life as a newspaper reports in New York City. Her first assignment is to cover the Egyptian exhibit at the Leyendecker Museum, which is slightly complicated by the fact that it's mysteriously gone missing. Things get worse later that night when, during a party, the bodies start piling up, and each of the remaining characters has their own motive. Is it Ziggy, the extremely shifty speakeasy owner/stool pigeon? Pippin Carter, the snobby archaeologist, the one who discovered the dagger, or Dr. Ptahsheptut Smith, who

believes the dagger belongs to the people of Egypt? Or perhaps it's the cold and calculating Dr Olympia Myklos, or the sultry French secretary Yvette Delacroix? Maybe it's the Colonel Klink-esque security guard Wolf Heimlech or the curator's ex-wife, the Countess Waldorf-Carlton? Going above and beyond her role as a mere reporter, it's up to Laura to solve the mystery and bring both the thief and the murderer to justice.

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

Once again, the story is divided into several acts, although the scope is much larger. The first takes place as Laura explores the city, investigating some of the people that will soon become involved the plot. The second is, again, mostly for setup, as Laura attends the museum party and spies on the various attendees, learning of their personalities, their quirks, and their conflicts. Questioning people plays a huge role in both of these chapters, a sore point in the original due to the text input. This is something which should have been improved here with the mouse-based interface, but really wasn't. To ask a question, you need to click the "question mark" icon on someone, which brings up Laura's notebook. Then you need to go into a section and choose a topic, right click to change to the "exit" cursor and left-click again to actually exit. You need to go through all of these steps each and every time for every topic, of which there are at least two dozens, for each and every major character, of which there are at least ten. Why not just list all of the topics and have them immediately respond when you click it, like what was eventually implemented in *Gabriel Knight*? At any rate, once you reach the end of this act, the first murder takes place, and more characters are disposed throughout the third and fourth chapters, as Laura explores more of the museum and its many passages. It's here in the middle part of the game that *The Dagger of Amon Ra* mostly closely resembles its predecessor.

Each act usually consists of a handful of time blocks, although this time they're triggered by passing events or solving puzzles instead of simply walking into a certain room at a certain time. Still, they aren't nearly as important as *The Colonel's Bequest*, nor are they handled in any logical manner. The point of them, at least in its predecessor, was to identify where each of the characters was at a specific point in time, to give the impression that everyone had their own schedule. *The Dagger of Amon Ra* largely throws this out, because you will find the French girl seducing three different men in three completely different locations, all within the same short time span. It's somewhat disappointing that such a unique concept was mangled in this game, almost to the point where it would make more sense if it just wasn't a part of it.



*Laura fruitlessly questions a frightfully unconcerned party guest*

The final chapters act as "tests", more or less. The fifth chapter is a action-packed chase scene, as the murderer chases the defenseless Laura through the museum and must use her ingenuity to not only slow down her attacker, but defend herself from the numerous snakes and rats found in its tunnels. These sort of timed sequences are irritating enough on their own, but they're much worse here, because your success is entirely dependent on objects gathered earlier in the game, objects which are fairly easy to miss. Once you've reached this act, there's no way to get them again, so then you're pretty much screwed if you've missed any of them. Other similar games solve this problem by refusing to move onto the next events unless you have all necessary items, but *The Dagger of Amon Ra* does not provide such a luxury.

The sixth act consists entirely of an interrogation, as the coroner seeks to piece together the mystery of the Dagger's disappearance, as well as the murders. Unlike its predecessor, the game does not reveal the killer or any of the solutions, so understanding is entirely dependent on the notes you've taken, and the questions you've asked. For each of the crimes, you need to point to the perpetrator, as well as the motive, in addition to other questions. You also need to have gathered all of the required evidence to implicate the criminal. If you fail either of these requirements, then you're left with the bad ending, which is so overwhelmingly bleak that it wraps around from "depressing" to "borderline hilarious". Perhaps this over-the-top style was done to soften the blow, because it's practically impossible to get the good ending the first time though. It's also a stark contrast to *The Colonel's Bequest*, which let you get a satisfactory ending even if you had no clue what was really going on beyond the core murder mystery. Here, you absolutely NEED to pay attention, answer everything 100% correctly, or else you lose. There's a lot to pay attention to, and the mystery is quite confusing, especially if you've missed any of the vital clues.

And that's the big problem here. The puzzles themselves aren't terribly difficult, but it's extremely easy to miss details that prove to be vital. It doesn't help that it's remarkably glitchy too. Beyond the normal crash bugs, you'll occasionally find that events won't trigger, or your system panel will disappear, leaving you temporarily unable to save or reload your game.



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

*The Dagger of Amon Ra* uses the SCI1 engine, and while the visuals are missing the dark creepiness from the first game, they still do a good job of replicating the 1920s era. In keeping with that, the museum isn't quite as moody but it is atmospheric in its own way. On the surface it's a bit small, consisting of a main rotunda, a gift shop, and exhibits on Egyptian artifacts, medieval armor, dinosaurs, death masks and paintings. But there are numerous hidden passages, leading to underground storage rooms, laboratories, offices and shrines (!), giving the whole place sense of wonder and mystery. And while the deaths in *The Colonel's Bequest* were relatively

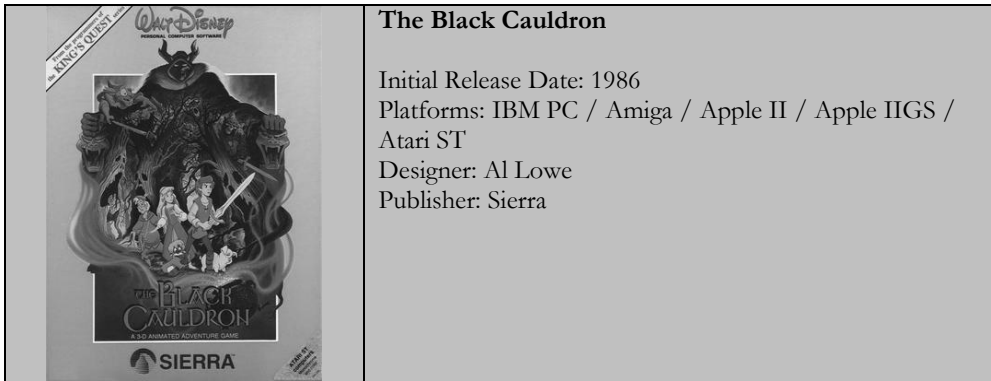
bloodless, they're quite gory here, with the first victim found in a sarcophagus with a dagger through his heart, the next impaled by the beak of a fallen pterodactyl, with his head chopped off with a paper cutter and stuck on the life mask exhibit, and the next stabbed to death with a porcupine. Combined with the chase scene near the end of the game, there's a greater sense of danger, even though, again, most of the death just come from Laura doing stupid things, like falling down steps, or getting attacked by snakes, rats, and in one case, flesh eating beetles.

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

The CD-ROM version ditches the copy protection – which asked questions about Egyptian artifacts at various points, and got Laura fired if you got them wrong – and also adds voice acting. Being one of their earlier CD titles, this was before Sierra decided that they needed to hire professional actors, so most of the voices were provided by various developers around the office. Leslie Wilson does a decent job as both Laura Bow, whose overdone Southern accent is still somehow charming, and the narrator, whose polite British manner make some of the sarcastic writing all of the more amusing. The rest of the cast ranges from serviceable to horrendous, largely in part because the characters are all written with a variety of accents and speech impediments, and the amateur crew just can't pull those off without sounding totally embarrassing.

Like its predecessor, *The Dagger of Amon Ra* ends up falling all over itself, although it fails for different reasons. But again, its atmosphere and its unique method of storytelling – and mystery solving – make it worthwhile enough as a unique entry in Sierra's adventure gaming library.

*The Dagger of Amon Ra* didn't quite take off, and thus spelled an end for the series. Sierra continued with mystery games with the *Gabriel Knight* series, which ditched the "uncover the mystery for yourself" parts and replaced it with a dose of supernatural fiction. In one of the posters in the first *Gabriel Knight* game, *Sins of the Fathers*, you come across a poster advertising an event with the speaker Laura Dorian, revealing that she had settled down and married the hunky stevedore from *The Dagger of Amon Ra*.



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



*The Horned King's castle is suitable spooky.*

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

That's not exactly to its detriment, as *The Black Cauldron* is one of the few Sierra game with branching events and different endings. Taran's first task is to escort Hen Wen to a fairy

village, which is hidden away roughly three screens from your starting point. The sky is filled with monsters who will randomly attack and steal Hen Wen, but unlike the enemies of King's Quest, this does not end the game. Instead, it just means you need to go through some extra steps to rescue her when you reach the Horned King's castle.



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

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

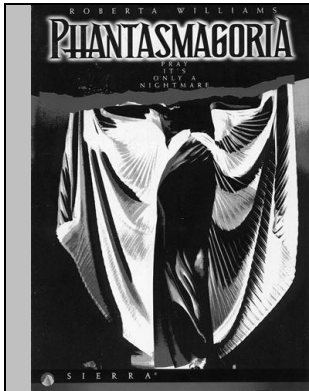
It's still a fairly compact quest – you need to infiltrate the castle, get the sword (and rescue Hen Wen if necessary), find some magical creatures so you can reach the witches that possess the Black Cauldron, then head back to the castle for the climactic encounter. If you know where you're doing, you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

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

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

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

# Phantasmagoria



## Phantasmagoria

Initial Release Date: 1995  
Platforms: IBM PC / Saturn  
Designer: Roberta Williams  
Publisher: Sierra

Would it be too harsh to criticize Roberta Williams? She was undoubtedly a pioneer of the adventure gaming scene, but years and years genre evolution have revealed that maybe she wasn't the best game designer. Still, while *Mystery House* and *King's Quest* remain important landmarks – the former for introducing graphics to text adventures, the latter for implementing full visuals and character controls – *Phantasmagoria* doesn't command nearly the same respect. It's certainly revolutionary, by combining full motion video of live actors in the framework of an adventure game. History eventually confirmed that FMV based games were an evolutionary dead end, however, marking *Phantasmagoria* as a call-to-arms for a war that never happened.

It didn't help that, by most accounts, the game was pretty bad.

By the mid 90s, Roberta Williams was still mostly known for her fairy tale-style *King's Quest*, with a few dalliances in murder mysteries with the Laura Bow games. *Phantasmagoria* was to be something different, a truly adult horror story. If *King's Quest IV* dared to make gamers cry, while *Phantasmagoria* dared to give gamers nightmares. It's an admirable attempt, but like practically every FMV-based game, it falls victim to two things: terrible production values and incredibly sparse game design.

The story of *Phantasmagoria* is cribbed almost directly from Stephen King's *The Shining*. Donald Gordon and Adrian Delaney, a young married couple from Boston, find an astonishing deal on a gorgeous mansion out in the boonies of Massachusetts. It is, of course, haunted – as if the room full of weaponry and the functioning electric chair weren't some kind of tipoff. As Adrian begins to explore around the mansion and discover all of its secrets, Don gets possessed by an evil spirit and begins acting psychotically abusive. Furthermore, Adrian's sleep is disturbed by gruesome nightmares. As Adrian eventually discovers, the mansion was previously owned by a magician named Zolton Carnovasch, who had more wives than Henry VIII. (The "Phantasmagoria" is the name of an escape wherein he's tied to a chair and must escape before his head is sliced by a slinging blade.) Each of his ladies died under tragic circumstances – it should be no shock that he murdered them. It should also be no shock that the same demon that inhabited Zolton has inhabited Don, whom Adrian must outwit in the climactic chase sequence in the final chapter.

As any horror fan can tell you, suspense is all in the buildup. The plot is so easily telegraphed that you can figure it all out within the first five minutes of play, but there are seven whole CDs to be filled. A good chunk of it involves Adrian wandering around the mansion, unlocking previously locked doors and conversing with the sparse townsfolk. It feels like time ill spent – there is literally one whole chapter (and one whole CD) solely devoted to Adrian visiting town and buying drain cleaner. As such, it feels more like you're just clicking hotspots until the next video sequence plays.

*Phantasmagoria* arrived a few years after *Myst*, and its design seems to be trying to capitalize on the casual audience that made Cyan's game such an enormous success. It was also released during a time when clicking around and looking at the pretty pictures was considered an acceptable game mechanic. To be fair to *Myst*, there were at least some puzzles so it justified itself as more than just a slideshow. *Phantasmagoria* has puzzles in a vague sense, inasmuch as there's an inventory, and occasionally you'll need to use items on other places to move on. They're never actually difficult, but most of the trouble involves figuring out exactly where the items are. Most of the game world focuses on the mansion, which is relatively expansive, and it's tough to find exactly what you're looking for. Your directions are rarely clarified in the narrative, requiring you to hit the red skull button on the bottom of the screen, who gives you not-so-subtle clues to your current goal. How lazy. This is all in place to draw in the casual game playing audience. The game also realizes that maybe players could get stuck – in this case, you can immediately start up with any of the seven chapters, although you usually miss some introductory videos. Up until the late stages of the game, there's no way to die, either. The final gameplay segment is the type where you need to click on very specific items in a short period of time or else you'll be killed. It's intense, yes, but not much fun when you have to do it over and over and over.



*Phantasmagoria's mid-90s era CGI has aged surprisingly well*

In spite of how large and detailed the mansion is, there's not much to interact with. *Phantasmagoria* eschews the multi-icon interface of Sierra's earlier games in favor of a single cursor to move around and interact with stuff. You don't directly control Adrian, but rather, she stands faithfully, arms at her side, staring off into nothingness. Until you click on a hotspot, which she'll then take a few steps towards and then the scene will transition. There's no look command, and very little to interact with. The SVGA backgrounds are quite pretty – they were rendered in that time in the 90s when computer generated graphics were very artificial but quite attractive, and the mansions and its grounds are still pretty, even today. The fact that it's so devoid of other characters does lend to the sense of isolation, and it does feel rather creepy.

Despite all of this, there's still some incongruity in the visuals. Although there are some video cutscenes, which play at a lower resolution and are a bit blocky, most of the action consists of the live action characters walking over the CG backgrounds. The visual quality of the actors vary, but they always look out of place against the background. It doesn't help that there's still some traces of ghosting around their edges, a remnant of early blue screen technology. The main musical theme is a standard Gregorian chant – clichéd, but effective. The rest of the music is MIDI, and while it's pretty decent, its tinniness on an FM synth card does it no favors.

Beyond the vapid game design and mixed visuals lies the video itself. Let's be honest – the production values are awful. Adrian, played by Victoria Morsell, isn't too bad. Although you never see much of her personality, she plays the role well, and her acting is rarely cringe worthy. Don, played by David Homb, is far too over-the-top to be taken seriously. But even they are better than the embarrassing supporting cast.



*Don and Adrian in one of their many uncomfortable quarrels*

There are numerous scenes that are meant to be disturbing that come off ridiculous. Many of these involve Harriet, a homeless lady living in the mansion's yard, and her mentally challenged son Cyrus. There is a scene where he's up against a wall, doing something nasty to Adrian's cat. The way the scene plays out, Adrian walks up behind him and basically says, please, stop beating my cat. He looks confused, puts the cat down, and then walks away. It's all extremely awkward. Perhaps Williams had shades of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* in mind, twisted into creepiness, but it doesn't play out that way, at all. What's even weirder is that the guy who played Cyrus – Steven W. Bailey – is the only cast member to actually step into a successful acting career, eventually landing a prominent role on the ABC medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*.

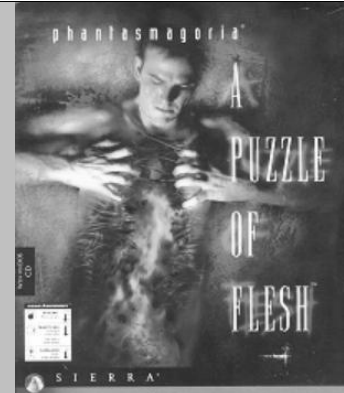
Although the game is filled with weird moments like these, by far the worst is the much vaunted rape scene, which seems to have been inserted solely to prove how "adult" Phantasmagoria was. It worked – it garnered tremendous PR, it was mentioned in every preview in every magazine, computer gaming or otherwise, and it even got it in a bit of trouble with retailers, especially considering there was no ESRB back in 1995. But it's still really badly done. It actually not too graphic and starts off relatively tastefully – as tasteful as a rape scene can be, anyway – as Don seduces Adrian gently but quickly grows violent. As Adrian falls to the floor, weeping, Don looks off into the distance, furrows his brow in befuddlement, wipes out the hair out of his face, and then sorta just wanders off the set. The gravity of the scene is totally ruined. It's ludicrous, is what it is. The whole production is just as bad as any of the Z-grade movies that have been parodied in Mystery Science Theater 3000 over the years, but even most of those never held the deluded self-importance that seems to permeate throughout Phantasmagoria.

About the only time that the game ever becomes truly enjoyable (and just not amusingly horrid) is the final portion of the game, when Adrian stumbles upon the ghosts of Zoltan and his dead wives. These poor girls each had a hobby/vice, which Zoltan then used to kill them in ironic manners. They're bloody. Later, when Don really gets violent and stick Adrian in Zoltan's torture device, it can also get bloody. When a cheap looking CG demon pops out of Don and tears Adrian's face off – that is, obviously, extremely bloody. All of these death scenes manage

to be squeamishly horrifying and grippingly intense, so at least that's one promise that the game fulfills. At the same time, they're also amusingly silly, something which was a bit of a trademark of early Sierra games. Like the rape scene, these were probably meant to be taken completely seriously, and while they veer off the mark, at least they're of some worth.

So *Phantasmagoria* is really just a bad, bad game – it's something that would struggle to qualify as a direct-to-cable movie, and only barely earns the "graphic adventure" moniker. It's actually surprising that Roberta Williams herself picked this game as the one being most representative of her gaming career – it probably should've been the one that she would want forgotten.

*Phantasmagoria* was developed for PCs, with DOS and Windows versions shipping on the same discs. However, it was also ported to the Sega Saturn, although it was only released in Japan by Outrigger, where it was renamed *Phantasm*. It's stretched out to eight CDs, and comes in a slipcase that holds two double size CD cases, making it the largest game available on the system. Due to its contents, it was also given a "yellow" age warning, suggesting it's only for gamers 18 and older without being offensive enough to get a "red" rating, which marked softcore porn. The port is faithful, although everything is dubbed in Japanese. The FMV quality is a bit worse than the PC version, seeing how the Saturn didn't have great video compression (without the MPEG card, anyway, which this game does not support) but it's passable. The visuals do suffer during the gameplay segments, due to the drop in resolution. The graphical interface framing the main window is gone though, leaving only black borders.

	<p><b>Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh</b></p> <p>Initial Release Date: 1996 Platforms: IBM PC Designer: Lorelei Shannon Publisher: Sierra</p>
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Despite its mixed reviews, *Phantasmagoria* sold extremely well. Sierra continued its line of FMV adventure games with *The Beast Within*, the second in their *Gabriel Knight* series. While it still had some issues, it was a substantially better product, with better acting, better writing, and some actual puzzle elements. After this, they released their third FMV/adventure title – *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh*. Despite the name, it has very little to do with its predecessor from a storyline standpoint – it's a psychological thriller as opposed to a story about a haunted house, and other than one minor reference to Adrian Delaney, there's no storyline connection at all. Roberta Williams also stepped aside as the designer, leaving the task to Lorelei Shannon, who previously worked with Williams on *King's Quest VIII: The Princess Bride*.

Although only released two years after the first *Phantasmagoria*, *A Puzzle of Flesh* is a huge technical improvement. The graphics utilize 16-bit color, and the video compression, though not up to DVD quality, is still substantially better. It also ditches the computer rendered backgrounds (for the most part) and uses real locations. While it does lack the attractively rendered visuals of its predecessor, the visual style is also much more consistent, which makes the whole production look substantially less cheap. The music is remarkably tense, and despite some occasionally cheesy synth instrumentation, is quite excellent. Overall, it's still not fantastic, but at least it's been upgraded to the level of a Sci-Fi Channel original movie.

The story focuses on a young man named Curtis Craig, who we are introduced to as he's a resident of an insane asylum, strapped to a gurney and being treated with electroshock therapy. It jumps forward a bit, and we find Curtis back in the real world, seemingly well adjusted with a standard office job. But then he starts having numerous eerie visions, which at first creep him out a bit. But then one of his co-workers – a fellow he didn't particularly care for – is brutally murdered. He begins to doubt his sanity even further, which also attracts the attention of the police. Soon, more of his co-workers end up dead, his visions become crazier, and he begins to dig up all kinds of sordid memories regarding his childhood. All of this, he gathers, is somehow related to the pharmaceutical company he works for, which seemingly is conducting all kinds of nasty experiments, and is presumed to have murdered his father. Furthermore, he's caught between two women – his adoring sweetheart girlfriend Jocelyn, and the aggressive S&M queen Terese, whom he's attracted to for reasons he can't quite understand.



*Curtis spends much of time with his arms at his sides, clearly disinterested in his surroundings.*

Like its predecessor, *A Puzzle of Flesh* tries to approach the themes of psychology and sexuality with more maturity than most video games. It does a better job of it, partially because the writing's better, and partially because the acting isn't nearly as abysmal. There's a lot of exploration of Curtis' childhood, told through counseling sessions with psychologist, that deal with his attraction to not only sadomasochism, but also to his buddy Trevor. While Trevor has some stereotypically gay mannerisms and acts mostly to lighten the mood, it's never forced or flamboyant. He's undoubtedly the most likable character in the whole game, and perfectly fulfills the role of a concerned friend without devolving into a negative caricature.

The treatment of all of this is interesting – in 1996, it was rare to have such a prominent gay character (and is still rare today) and Curtis might perhaps the first bisexual game character ever. For the most part, it's all handled in a mature manner, even though some of the S&M scenes provide some unintentional humor. (The best? While Curtis is suspended from series of chains, he looks around nervously at the leather-clad Terese and remarks "I don't think this is such a good idea.") But the story doesn't tie any of these themes together in any meaningful way, as if it's just trying to being controversial for the sake of it, something with the first *Phantasmagoria* was also quite guilty of. The packaging proudly wears its RSAC rating (the predecessor to the ESRB), promising "provocative frontal nudity" and "blood and gore". (Not coincidentally, the actress who plays Jocelyn seems to be a fairly prolific softcore porn actress.) It's definitely no worse than an R rated film, but it was enough to get it pulled from certain retail stores and banned in Australia.

The impact of these adult subjects is also undermined by the final segments, which go completely off the deep end. At this point, the game stops being about Curtis' inner struggle

with his sanity and more about aliens from Dimension X. Wait, what? Yup, it's a completely jarring transition from psychological horror to science fiction, and while it's an interesting twist, certainly much more compelling than the story of the first *Phantasmagoria*, it never feels like it fits. It's not like it's played off to be ambiguous either – one could potentially make the claim that this final chapter represents Curtis' final descent into madness, but there's nothing that supports this beyond mere conjecture.



*Horrifying or hilarious? Nobody can quite be sure.*

Despite its occasional bouts of lunacy, the movie segments are still an improvement over the first, but *A Puzzle of Flesh* ultimately commits the same gameplay sins. There's very little to interact with, and roughly 90% of the game involves clicking on everything possible to find all of the triggers to progress. Wake up, talk to your rat, go to work, talk to your co-workers, talk to your psychologist, go to a restaurant/bar, and then repeat in the next chapter. The puzzles are extraordinarily sparse – most simply evolve figuring out passwords, which is never hard to do – and other solutions are lying around scribbled on Post-It notes.

The few other puzzles are terribly integrated. Right at the beginning, Curtis discovers that his wallet is missing, and upon some searching, finds it under the couch. The solution is not to move the couch, but rather, to get your rat, send it to retrieve your wallet, then lure it out with a granola bar. How absurd. For a standard adventure game, this isn't that crazy of a puzzle, but when you've removed the layer of abstraction that replaces cartoon characters with live actors, you'd expect the puzzles to work in a vaguely rational manner. And then, just like the plot, the whole design veers off course in the final chapter, where you're expected to solve a puzzle involving an alien circuit board without any instructions whatsoever, as if the developers felt like they needed to make up for the simplicity of the rest of the game. There's also another series of timed "click the right spot or you die" events, and they're just as annoying as before, although you still get the nice, gory death scenes when you fail.

The folks at Sierra were fully cognizant of how barebones their game was, so they added in a secret Easter egg hunt. Hidden stuff is nothing new to adventure games, but there are literally dozens upon dozens to find, and even a scoring system. They're practically impossible to find without using a guide, but they give some incentive to play through the game once you've already seen it. Most of them are silly sound effects (including a few from *The Simpsons*) but there are also a few wacky outtake clips, including one where one of the directors walks into the scene dressed as Batman.

The biggest question, though, is why exactly is *A Puzzle of Flesh* a computer game and not a movie? Electronic games are a perfectly valid medium for storytelling because it makes the player an active participant rather than a passive observer, potentially allowing for closer

emotional resonance. For as insubstantial as *Phantasmagoria* was, at least there was a sense of isolation and exploration as you made your way through the manor, making it easier to empathize with Adrian. There's nothing like that in *A Puzzle of Flesh*, at all – the game world is too small to get involved with, and it never feels like you're really involved in Curtis' life. There are a few nice touches – you can read through your e-mails, and amongst idle banter and corporate memos, you'll find (imaginary?) e-mails from Curtis to his co-workers outing himself as a lunatic, or job offers straight from Satan himself. Too bad there weren't more things like this.



*Quality special effects like these provide much unintended amusement.*

*A Puzzle of Flesh* is also quite short – there are technically about four hours of video spread over five CDs, and since there's very little gameplay beyond watching these, the game doesn't last much longer than four hours either. That's okay though, because while it's still heavily flawed, its ambitions are a bit more fully realized, and despite the near total lack of interaction, it's still strangely engrossing.

Both the DOS and Windows versions are included in the same package. The DOS version is limited to 8-bit color, while the Windows version looks substantially better. The videos are all interlaced, but a fan patch lets you disable that, as well as properly scale the display to your system's resolution.

# Legend Entertainment

It's easy to admire Legend Entertainment, simply for fighting the good fight. The purchase of Infocom by Activision in 1989 was essentially a death knell for text adventures, as the company clearly had no idea what to do with it, other than some awful "interactive comics", a few semi-relevant *Zork* games, and sticking the label in places it didn't really belong, like their localization of the NES game *Tombs and Treasures*. Despite losing traction against visual adventure games from the likes of Lucasarts and Sierra, Legend believed that there was still an audience for interactive fiction, and hung tightly to ideal, for at least a few more years.

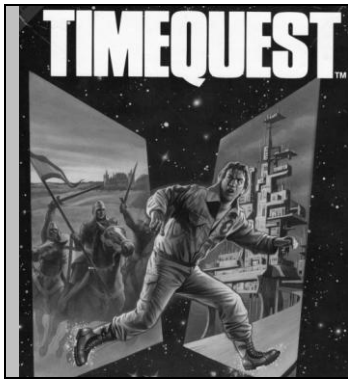
The company was formed by Mike Verdu and Bob Bates, the latter of whom had developed *Sherlock: The Riddle of the Crown Jewels* and *Arthur: The Quest for Excalibur* for Infocom. Legend also realized that the sort of games they tended to make attracted the book reading audience, so many of their titles were based on various literary properties like Frederick Pohl's *Gateway*, Terry Brooks' *Shannara* and Spider Robinson's *Callaban's Crosstime Saloon*. Though Bob and Mike worked on many of the company's titles, they often called in other industry vets to help with the development. The famous Steve Meretzky, another former Infocom employee, developed their *Spellcasting* trilogy, while former Sierra employees Corey and Lori Cole, and Josh Mandel, worked on *Shannara* and *Callaban's Crosstime Saloon*, respectively.

Legend's games to be broken into two generations, with each running on similar technology. Their early games are basically text adventures with plenty of enhancements, but their later games ditched the text parser in favor of full mouse control, while still trying to keep all of the detail one would normally find in interactive fiction.

First, about their early games. The later Infocom games realized that the white text on a stark black background was a little too intimidating for many people, so they started experimenting with fancy interfaces and other niceties. Legend Entertainment continued that by making their games as user friendly as possible. The screen is broken up into several sections and looks a bit like Windows 3.1, despite running in DOS. On the left side are columns which contain all available verbs, prepositions and nouns, including everything in the area and in your inventory. The upper left portion of the screen shows a compass showing all available exits, as well as a few different options. The upper right portion of the screen shows a small graphic of the area, but can be changed to a map or list of your inventory. You can use the mouse cursor to point at objects in the scenery, or assemble sentences simply by clicking on any of the commands. All of the narrative text is in the largest window on the right quadrant. In its default state, it's all a bit busy, but you can customize practically everything, turning it into a pure text experience if that suits you better.

By 1994, when companies like Sierra and LucasArts were using creating worlds with 256-color VGA graphics and voice acting, it was clear that text adventures, no matter how dressed up, just couldn't compete anymore. Their second generation games are an evolution of their previous ones, but they expand the viewing window and instead use context sensitive mouse commands to navigate the environments. As time went on they got onto the multimedia bandwagon and started integrating full motion video in their titles, although they never used them as a replacement for the most important elements of interactive fiction: quality writing.

Sadly, graphic adventures were going the way of text adventures by the late 90s, and Legend Entertainment was gobbled up by GT Interactive. For some reason or another, they were tasked with creating first person shooters, with their only two releases being *The Wheel of Time*, based on the Robert Jordan's expansive fantasy series, and *Unreal 2*, the follow-up to Epic's technological groundbreaker. They were closed down after the release of the latter, a sad ending to a company that fought hard in the face of market adversity.



## Timequest

Initial Release Date: 1991  
 Platforms: IBM PC  
 Designer: Bob Bates  
 Developer: Legend Entertainment

*Timequest*, Legend Entertainment's second release, owes a huge debt to Sierra's text adventure *Time Zone*. Spanning six disks and retailing at nearly \$100, this massive (for 1982) game sent you traveling around the world through eight different time periods, meeting with many famous historical figures. While extraordinarily ambitious, it also suffered from the same sparse writing, arcade puzzles and awful design that plagued all of Sierra's other products. It was still an amazing concept through, although it took nearly ten years for it to be properly fleshed out under the care of a different developer.

The story is, you're part of the Temporal Corps, an elite unit with the ability to travel through time with a device called an Interkron. One day, a fellow officer named Vettenmeyer totally snaps and decides to totally screw with history, altering ten events that altered the course of the human species. Your job is to fix the mess he made, uncover the clues that point to his secret hideout, and take him down. Your Interkron can travel through both time and space, sends you to six different locations around the globe in nine different time periods, not counting your own. Of course, not every era is relevant to your request and therefore is not visitable, but there's still a lot of ground to cover. None of these scenarios are actually related in the game itself, as instead they're all described in a mission briefing guide included in the game's packaging. The way they're presented, it seems like you could conquer them in any order, but the items required to beat a certain scenario are usually found after completing another. You're given the starting points of each problem, but it's difficult to get a grasp on what you're supposed to be doing until you play around a little bit and discover what items you can find and piece together where they can be used.



*Most games with time travel have to involve Hitler to some degree.*

Of course, there are rules that come with playing with the time stream, and some of them are bizarre. The inhabitants rarely question your presence and you can easily sneak into many places without much of a hassle. While bizarre, it allows you to concentrate on the larger goals of each quest, rather than worrying about constantly maneuvering around guards. They also all speak modern English, although that's written off due to the futuristic translation technology.

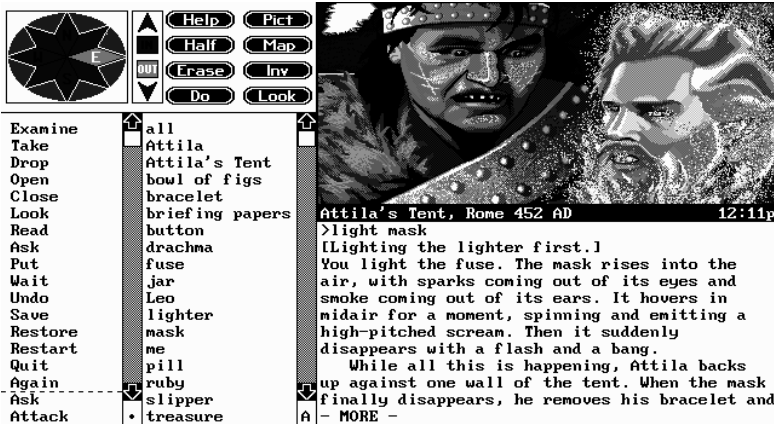
In each scenario, there's also strict time limit to get everything done. If you miss the timing, the game ends the next time you try go to a different period. It's strange, then, for a game about time travel, that you can't just travel to an earlier point, reset the events, and try again. This is because the clock essentially "stops" whenever you leave a time period, and resumes at that same exact spot when you return. It was probably to keep things from getting too complicated, or potentially from causing time paradoxes from running into yourself, but since there are dozens of ways you can get stuck in unwinnable spots it would've been cool to manipulate time to correct mistakes like this.

Once you've rationalized how it all works, you can begin correcting the timestream. The first – and most straightforward – case involves Julius Caesar, who famously killed by conspirators in a power struggle. Vettenmeyer has scheduled an "accident" to occur months before his intended death, disallowing his assassins to argue over his succession and thereby avoiding the downfall of the Roman Empire. Another involves the slaughtering of the Aztecs by the Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez. The Aztecs believed that Cortez was the human form of the god Quetzalcoatl, who had promised vengeance upon them, and therefore led to the downfall of their civilization. Their myth has since been changed so the Aztecs believe they are invincible, thereby fighting against Cortez rather than submitting to him.

The most contemporary scenario involves the Battle of Dunkirk, one of the turning points of World War II. Although the Axis was in a position to defeat the Allies, Hitler stopped his advances for three days, for reasons which are widely debated. This waiting period allowed the Allies to successfully evacuate their troops. Through the antics of your time-travelling pal, now Hitler is scheduled to continue his assault, thereby winning the battle and therefore the war. You need to convince Hitler that the Allies have surrendered, so he will not resume his attack. England has no wishes to give in, and you cannot persuade them otherwise. During this time, Churchill is giving a speech regarding the situation. The secret keyword indicating the British surrender is "cigar", so you need to trick Winston Churchill into saying it on air. Once you do so, he obviously realizes his mistake and recants it almost immediately. At this point, you need to travel to Rome, where the Axis leaders are listening to the speech, listen to the point where Churchill says the keyword, then unplug the radio so they can't hear his correction, thereby completing the ruse.

Sometimes the cases intertwine, as they do with Napoleon. During his quest for European domination, he decided against directly attacking England, fearing they would be too strong, instead heading towards Egypt to cut off their trade routes. Vettenmeyer has told him otherwise, and since it's believed that his assault on the British Isles would have succeeded, you need to put Napoleon back on course. But then there's the case of Charlemagne, the man who believed himself to be on a holy mission from God, who would then proceed to unite most of Europe. But Vettenmeyer has planted the seeds of doubt into the would-be king, causing him to deny the crown and thus potentially leave Europe in the Dark Ages. So, in an extremely elaborate series of events, you need to steal the crown, and give it the young King Tut, who keeps it buried in his pyramid for thousands of years. However, you cannot retrieve the crown yourself, because it is hidden in such a small passage. But what you can do is convince Napoleon to follow you into the pyramids (after you've gotten him to invade Egypt), whose tiny stature allows him to squeeze through and get it himself. Since Napoleon believed himself to be the rightful successor to Charlemagne, he has this engraved on the crown when he coronates himself. Then, you need to jump forward to 1940, where the crown is held in Mussolini's museum, steal it, then return it to Charlemagne, who will now be assured of his holiness after reading the engraving.

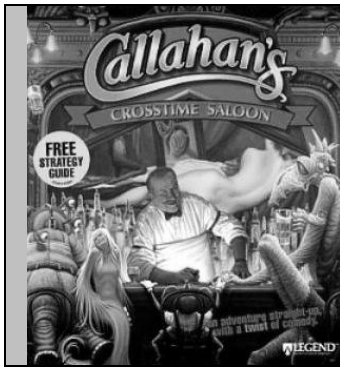
The final puzzle allows you to fool with time traveling little bit more. When facing off against Vettenmeyer, there are two teleportation pads, both of which will send you a short time into the past. When you first arrive, your future self will give you an important piece of information, which you need to use and then relate again to your past self in order to complete a full logical time loop. It's a bit mind boggling, but it makes sense if you've gotten far enough without your brain exploding.



*Attila the Hun stopped his conquest of Europe due to his fear of the Christian God, so they say.*

The convoluted scenarios are the crux of the game, but it's got plenty of other things going for it too. The writing is dry and straightforward, but there's plenty of understated humor. In contrast to the lady loving of Spellcasting 101, any potentially romantic entanglements go awry. Cleopatra invites you for a special session, but deems you unworthy for a full night of passion, and attempting to copulate with the twenty hookers you purchase in China will result in a heart attack. (You're supposed to use them to distract the guards.) Try to kill Caesar and he'll simply say that he can't fit another assassination attempt into his schedule. Try to kill Cleopatra, who was his mistress, and Caesar's wife Calpurnia cheers you on. Despite historical density of the plot, it's above taking itself too seriously, which of course allows you to do mad things like convince Attila the Hun of the Christian God's power through a fireworks display or establish yourself as the founder of a Buddhism.

There is a certain point where it's hard to believe anyone could figure them out of their own. If *Timequest* was made back in the Infocom days, they probably would've had to designate it above their already extraordinarily difficult "Advanced" class, and without a walkthrough, it will remain inaccessible to all but the most expert text adventure players. But the puzzles are so damned creative and ridiculous that it ends up working in the game's favor. Sure, some of your actions are cruel – one of the scenarios involves opening the doors to the city of Peking, thereby allowed Genghis Khan to invade, and causing the massacre of thousands – but you're just setting history right. As such, it's a dream come true for history buffs that love to see the ways the world can be manipulated, along with some of the delightfully silly things you can do.



## Callahan's Crosstime Saloon

Initial Release Date: 1994

Platforms: IBM PC

Designer: Josh Mandel

Developer: Legend Entertainment

Science fiction author Spider Robinson is the recipient of three Hugo awards, one Nebula, and the Robert A. Heinlein award for lifetime achievement. His most popular series started with *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*, which began as anthologies of short stories which soon spread out into full size books, numbering nine in total. Despite his fandom running rampant in the early days of the consumer internet – in the late 90s, the Callahan fandom registered as one of the largest non-porn newsgroups, at least according to the flaps on Robinson's more recent books. It's a bit tragic, then, that despite its previous popularity, much of his work has since gone out of print in the last decade.

Legend Entertainment often made its living on adventure games tied in with various literary licenses. Beginning with two text adventures based on Frederick Pohl's Gateway novels, they produced entries on Piers Anthony's *Xanth* series, Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Death Gate* cycle, and Terry Brooks' *Shannara* books. *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon*, released in 1997, heralds the return of a science fiction license after a number of traditional fantasy based games, but Robinson's books are a far cry from hard sci-fi. Rather, they combine fantastical elements with a good bit of comedy, and more than its share of drama.

*Callahan's Crosstime Saloon* focuses on a bar in Long Island, but not any old bar. This particular bar is gathering point for any number of beings, ranging from aliens to vampires to time travelers – and of course, humans. It's a warm, friendly place that's often compared to an intergalactic version of Cheers, a place where the regulars are more than welcome to lend their ears to the troubles of anyone who's willing to open up. This setting acts a device for a number of strange folk to join the crew and tell their own bizarre tales of pain, love and loss. The recurring theme throughout the novels (and the game, of course) is that the best way to deal with life's tragedies is through laughter. As the first story of the first book puts it, "Callahan loses a lot of his regulars. After they've been coming around long enough, they find they don't need to drink any more. It's that kind of bar."

Much like the initial trilogy of books, the Callahan computer game is set up as a series of short anthologies. As folk singer Jake Stonebender (and stand-in for Spider Robinson himself), you aid and explore the lives of five of the bar members, each with their own dilemma. Very little time is actually spent in the bar, which acts as a hub for all of the other adventures. The first three can be completed in order, and finishing those will open up the next two, before the final (fairly short) chapter.

In one chapter, the vampire Pyotr runs back to Transylvania to mourn the loss of his long time lover to another man. Jake must hitch a ride halfway across the world to make things right. Along the way he'll infiltrate the ranks of the locals and discover a bar strangely parallel to Callahan's except it's filled with monsters, drawn from mythology and horror movies alike. In another chapter, the alien Squish has second thoughts about his race's plan to bombard the Earth with a dose of testosterone inhibiting rays, so Jake and retired bomb squad cop Noah take a journey into outer space to stop it, all the while futzing with alien controls and futuristic thingamabobs. And another segment involves the time traveler Josie as she laments the

extinction of a special plant in South America that can produce the most delicious chocolate in existence. The duo must first visit the offices of Faston Casteroga, an evil pencil conglomerate that's bulldozing the rain forest, before visiting the jungle itself to make one final candy bar.



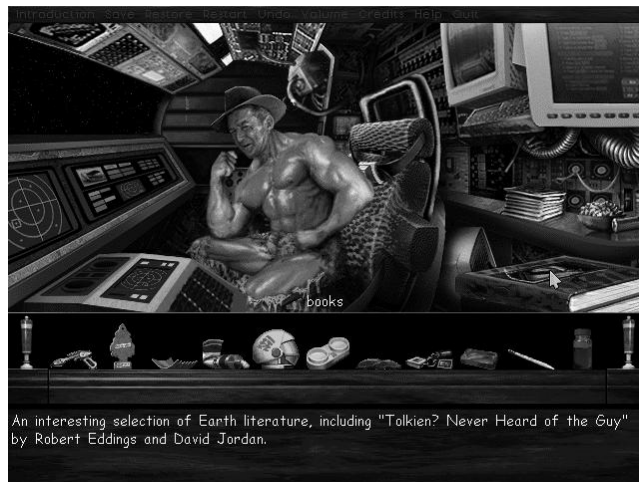
*The regulars at Callahan's are an odd bunch*

The fourth story revolves around the talking German Shepherd Ralph von Wau Wau, who has been captured by the government and is being experimented upon to learn his fantastic secrets. Jake must play the role of a super spy and sneak into a facility deep in the mountains. The fifth chapter involves the time traveling conman Al Phee, who has been cursed with uncontrollable psychic powers, coming from a future where everyone can read everyone else's minds due to drug influence. Jake finds himself jumping to the future (not at all how William Gibson described it), joining a gang, and rising through the ranks to meet with a malicious doctor to find the cure. Once all are completed, a more pressing matter comes to light – the whole universe is about to be shut down due to budget cuts, but the compassion shown through your adventures acts as a justification for humanity's continued existence. The final areas involve all of your friends visiting what is essentially the courthouse of the gods to argue your case.

This setup essentially mirrors the very first story of the very first book, where the inhabitants of Callahan's convince an otherworldly being that Earth has a valid reason for existing. (This alien, a tall gangly fellow named Mickey Finn, ends up joining the Callahan crew but only plays a small role in the game.) Although the characters are all taken from the books, the scenarios themselves are entirely new. However, for those unfamiliar with the original stories, it can take a little while to get settled in. The "Look" command offers short descriptions of each of them, and the enclosed hint book gives sufficient backgrounds for all of the major players, but going in cold feels like entering a community where everyone knows each other very well, and assumes that you do to. Once you've begun your first adventure and the stories become more focused, it becomes much easier for beginners to become acclimated to Spider Robinson's eccentric little world, but reading the books first is definitely recommended.

The interface is similar to other Legend games, although it eliminates the command bar on the side of the screen in favor a completely contextualized menu system, which brings up all relevant commands when clicking on something. This frees up some screen real estate, which is especially important because each location is not merely a single screen, but rather one large panorama image. Although each chapter contains a small number of locations, rarely numbering more than half a dozen, each location is filled to the brim with hotspots, whether interactable or just there for flavor.

The depth of writing has always been Legend's greatest strengths, and this is where *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon* excels. You can spend tons of time on a single screen, looking and prodding at everything, and many give different responses if you continuously muck with them. Most prompt commentary from Jake and whomever his sidekick is at the moment, but the best are the numerous tangents and jabs that come from investigating the most innocuous objects. Check out a random part of the bar and the game will start a rant about how certain words, like "rivulet" or "ichor" are only ever used in Stephen King novels. Investigate a box and the game will inform you that it's been psychologically profiling you the entire time and dumps a text file in your directory with its analyzations. (It doesn't seem to actually work – it appears to be the same thing every time regardless of your actions.) In keeping with Robinson's books, there's an unfortunate fondness for legions of puns, which manage to be both clever and (self consciously) painful. Although Robinson had nothing to do with the game beyond his authorization (and approval, as his introduction in the hint guide says), Sierra veteran Josh Mandel, the writer of *Freddy Pharkas* and *Space Quest 6*, does a damn fine job of capturing the spirit of the original stories, all while creating a world that's so full of colorful details that it's very possible to become distracted from the task at hand.



*It's probably better not to ask exactly what's going on here*

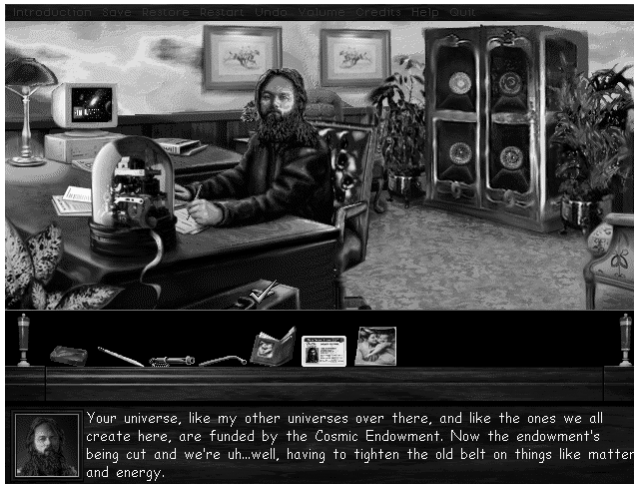
If there's any problem such richly detailed locations, it's because of the total sensory overload. There's so much to see and do in each possible screen – some of which even change slightly as you leave and reenter – that it's hard to pick out what's relevant to continue your quest. Amidst all the hotspots, sometimes just finding where the exits are can be difficult, and the quick travel arrows from the older Legend games are sorely missed. It also takes several seconds for the screens to transition, even on the fastest computers running on DOSBox, making some of the puzzles a bit tedious, especially when you need to backtrack to pick up items that you missed. In spite of the occasional headache, it's hard to really spite a game for being too detailed, especially when said detail is almost always amusing.

The puzzles, for the most part, aren't too hard once you've figured out which items are important and which aren't. The game opens with a pun-based word puzzle, as the denizens of Callahan's subject you to a series of riddles. Here, the game provides a word or a phrase and you need to think of a synonym. When strung together, these synonyms form the sounds of an entirely different word, each with its own theme. At the beginning, you're challenged to name various famous musicians. The first is: "Cranky; exist; bootlegging devices; grind teeth; additionally; green." The answer? "cranky = cross", "exist = be", "bootlegging device = still",

"grind teeth = gnash", "additionally = and" and "green = young". Put together, that yields "cross be still gnash and young", or "Crosby Still Nash and Young". There's no doubt, for those who aren't masters of the English language, these can be damn hard, especially considering this is the first puzzle of the game. Still, for this one, if you're familiar enough with American music, you can piece together most of them by figuring out a small part of the puzzle. A later permutation of the same puzzle, based off movie monster actors, is a bit more obscure, and can potentially require a bit of research (or at least some time spent exploring Transylvania.)

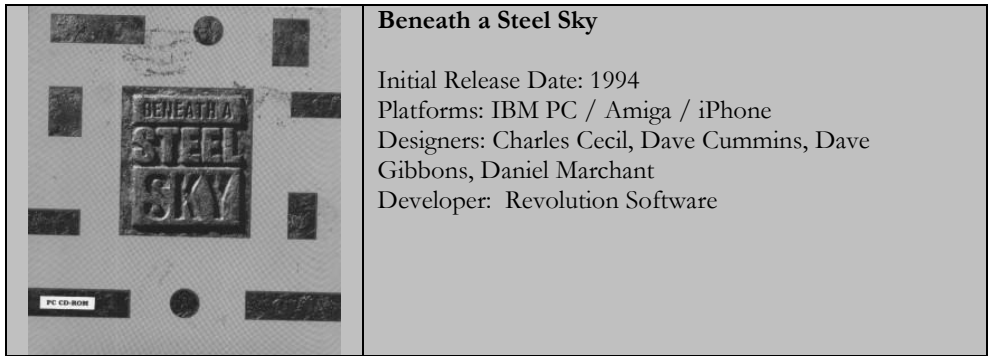
Some other puzzles require similar types of wordplay, or at least a bit of outside knowledge, enough for you to piece together that, say, the phrase "CIVIC MILL MILD DILL MIX" looks awfully like a series of roman numerals. There are a few other puzzles that might cause hiccups, but for the most part they aren't too bad. There's one involving placing small stones in various formations, although there's an in-game option to cheat past it totally. And there's a maze section where you crawl through a series of vents and disable their fans.

Graphically, it's the easily the best looking of Legend's adventures, with visuals just as detailed as the writing, with a realistic appearance that still maintains its own artistic stylings. Since the Callahan novels were never adapted to any other medium, this is the only graphical representation of Robinson's world outside of the book covers, and it looks fantastic. The animation is sparse, but there's enough to make it seem lively enough despite the fact that the characters never actually move. The voice acting, as with Legend's other games, is impeccable, with each character being brought to life with their own unique mannerisms and accents. The music lies mostly in the background when it's present, and most scenes are accompanied by atmospheric effects, although there are a number of songs sung by Spider Robinson himself. As his introduction in the hint book states, he originally wanted to be a folk singer, and this game gave him the opportunity to make up some recordings. They're only played on request at the bar, or during the credit sequences, but they're all quite catchy and usually pretty funny too.



*This is the headquarters of the universe, more or less*

There's little to actively criticize about *Callahan's Crosstime Saloon* – like the books, it's rich, funny, and even a bit heart-warming without being schmaltzy. Despite its largely light hearted tone, it's not afraid to get serious, as in the section where Jake recounts his own tragic back-story involving his departed wife and daughter. Fans of the books will find more tales beyond Robinson's work, and newcomers will perhaps find themselves as converted fans to a series that deserves more popularity.



Revolution Software was founded by Charles Cecil, Tony Warriner, David Sykes and Noirin Carmody in England in 1990 as a reaction to Sierra's adventure games. Their reasoning was simple enough – they thought they could do better. Their first game, *Lure of the Temptress*, failed to light many fires, but their second game, *Beneath a Steel Sky*, quickly became a cult favorite, and time has eventually recognized it as a true classic of the point and click genre.

*Beneath a Steel Sky* takes place in futuristic Australia, with most of the population living in huge, corporate-run cities, with a small group of outliers living in the wilderness known as The Gap. The intro, told in comic book-style panels with artwork by artist David Gibbons (*The Watchmen*), who also drew all of the backgrounds, tells the story of a young boy whose helicopter crashes in The Gap, and is raised by the aboriginals. Remembering only his first name, Robert, they give him the surname "Foster", after a beer can they find (a joke lost on American audiences due to some changes to avoid trademark infringement – the beer brand became "SS IPM RAW" or "Warm Piss" spelled backwards.) Foster is a bright boy, and manages to create a robotic companion named Joey to keep him company. Soon, he grows into adulthood, when a helicopter kidnaps him and takes him back to the expansive urban jungle known as Union City. Things get further complicated when his transport crashes yet again and Foster is left as the only survivor. If that trauma wasn't enough, the local police have classified him as a terrorist and begin hunting him down. Foster gets even more confused when the policeman sent to apprehend him is fried right before his eyes, as if some unseen force was yet protecting him. With nowhere to go but down, Foster descends through the towers of the city to find some answers.

Union City is socially stratified into various different levels, with the poor, blue collar workers practically living in factories at the top level, and the rich bourgeois living at the bottom in fancy apartments. The whole of the city is controlled by LINC, a computer which not only monitors every aspect of life, but has apparently also taken on a consciousness of its own after melding minds with one of its creators. Foster himself is subjected to quite a bit of culture shock, both due to the excessive governmental control and the weird folks he runs into.

Much of the story of Union City is told by its inhabitants. At the top are the shop workers, like the slightly disgruntled Hobbins, who doesn't really care who you are as long as you don't mess with his stuff. (This, being an adventure game, is naturally something you need to do.) In other areas, you'll find more bored and apathetic employees, enamored with seemingly boring minutiae like their clipboards and uninterested of the workings outside of their own immediate circle.

At the top of this bureaucracy sits the game's most amusing character, a boorish plant supervisor named Gilbert Lamb, who trots around in a garish fur coat ("made from the last ten beavers in the world!", he brags) while his lowly workers toil in grey jumpsuits. He's so fat that you can actually see his double chins rendered in glorious low-res VGA. He also knows little, nor cares, about what his factory actually does, but enjoys the status that his job title provides despite the fact that it's not entirely clear how he got there. It's a fun little satire of corporate

culture, which works to tie in how closely Union City's dystopic world is to our own reality. At any rate, messing with Lamb is probably the most fun part of the game, as you can drain his bank account and demote his social status, much to his chagrin. One of the game's only real faults is that there isn't more of him.

The quirky characters don't end there, though. In true cyberpunk fashion, in order to interface with LINC, you need to get an operation to get a port installed by your head. This is done by one Dr. Burke, a deranged maniac who huffs his own anesthetics. He has a patient in his office with a gaping hole in his chest, which he routinely fiddles with. (You can talk to the bed-ridden man, who's still conscious – apparently he doesn't mind at all.) You can only afford the operation by donating organs, but since you spent your life in the wilderness, free of urban pollution, you're simply far too healthy and your body parts would fetch far too much money. In return, you have no choice but to donate your testicles – which, the doctor politely informs you, are thankfully harvested after your death.



*Foster and Joey have a loveably weird bond*

Further down the line, you accidentally end up as a defense attorney in court case for Hobbins, who has been ineptly framed due to some of your earlier mishaps. The judge seems to think the whole thing is sort of game show, further convincing Foster that everyone has gone mad. You also need to request the aid of one Mrs. Piermont, the richest (and fattest) woman in the city. Revolution Software apparently felt the character was so amusing that she (or perhaps a long lost, distant relative) shows up as another minor character in their next game, *Broken Sword*.

And of course, there's Joey, your robotic companion. You escape from The Gap with his circuit board, which you can place in various different shells throughout the course of the adventure. He's initially quite disappointed – and suitably sarcastic – when you stick him in a dumpy little cleaning model, but gets considerably more excited when inhabiting a welding robot, where he does his best Dalek impression. ("EX-TER-MI-NATE!") He's easily one of the best lil' buddy robot companions since the lovable Floyd from Infocom's *Planetfall/Stationfall* text adventures.

Most of the characters are brought to life by the excellent voice acting in the CD-ROM version. Foster has a cool voice, although some of his line readings are a bit awkward – perhaps intentionally so, to illustrate his naiveté. It still doesn't explain how he has an American accent, or why everyone else has various British accents rather than anything Australian, but even extremely minor characters, like the goofy cops Sam and Norbert, remain memorable. If anything, a lot of the characters feel underwritten, and dialogue options are exhausted before you feel like you're done talking with them.

It's all a bit on the silly side, despite its oppressive atmosphere – even the music is a bit on the jaunty side – but things get a bit more serious once you infiltrate the long abandoned subway

tunnels to uncover the mysteries of LINC. In addition to reading news at the local terminals, you can also jack into the system and walk around cyberspace. Here, Foster is represented by a blue avatar, and all of the inventory objects are replaced with various commands, programs and documents. You need to jack into this space a few times, each using different ID cards to decompress and decrypt various files that you find.

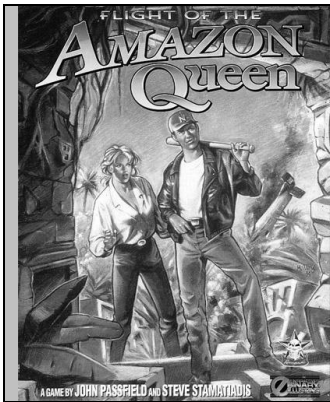
*Beneath a Steel Sky* uses an enhanced version of the Virtual Theatre engine used in *Lure of the Temptress*. The NPCs are given simple scripts that determine their patterns, so they walk around the game rather than sitting in one place. It was immensely awkward in *Lure of the Temptress*, but here it's used for an appropriate amount of realism, and it's never too tough to track someone down, because they're never more than a few screens away. The interface is quite simple, with left clicks looking at an object and right clicks interacting with them.



*Hilariously self important bureaucrat Gilbert Lamb desperately needs his own game*

The game's not terribly long or terribly difficult, although a number of puzzles involve timed elements, absolutely requiring that you bring up the status menu and set the speed to the absolute lowest setting in order to get things done. There are a few cases where you can yourself killed – including one right at the beginning if you're not careful – but generally death only comes if you're not careful enough to avoid the warning signs. For example, when wandering in the sewers, there's a foreboding crack in the wall. Walk past it, and some kind of horrible creature grabs you and pulls you to your death. Actually, it's almost better to save just to see this, because you never see the monster other than its claws and eyes, nor is it ever referenced at any other point in the game. It brings you to wonder – just what kind of crazy experiments is LINC doing?

Other than those nitpicks, there's not much to complain about, and a whole lot to praise, especially the writing. This delicate balance between humorous writing and serious storytelling carried over to the *Broken Sword* games, the series which Revolution Software primarily concentrated on. Charles Cecil has stated that he'd like to do a sequel, which would be excellent, especially considering there's enough back story involving the war between the corporate cities to tell an interesting tale. For now, we'll have to do with the slightly enhanced iPhone version, released in 2009, which cleans up some sound and adds some new artwork, also drawn by Dave Gibbons. For now, though, we'll have to live with a cameo by Foster in this promotional comic for the 2009 Director's Cut release of *Broken Sword* – which, of course, was drawn by Dave Gibbons. The original version was made freely available, and can easily be played via SCUMMVM.



## Flight of the Amazon Queen

Initial Release Date: 1995

Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / iPhone

Designers: Interactive Binary Illusions

Developer: John Passfield, Steve Stamatiadis

*Flight of the Amazon Queen* so desperately wants to be a LucasArts game. Largely designed by two guys out of Brisbane, Australia, it's best described as Indiana Jones meets Monkey Island. It's hard to hold it against them, since it emulates the style, feel, and humor so remarkably well that it quickly squashes any potential cries of plagiarism and emerges as an entertaining game in its own right.

The player controls Joe King (Pilot for Hire), who is contracted to fly the beautiful actress Faye Russell to a photo shoot in South America. They never quite make it to their destination, though, as they end up crashing in the middle of the Amazon rain forest. Leaving behind both Faye and his trusty mechanic, Joe sets off on his own to try to find a way to repair his airplane.

That never quite happens though, as Joe gets caught up on a number of offbeat adventures. The Amazon, at least the spot you've crashed into, is quite populated, as you'll run into explorers, missionaries, and a pygmy village that just happens to have a 24 hour convenience store. More important, however, is the village of gorgeous Amazon women, who initially imprison Joe for a series of mating rituals. They actually have more pressing concerns though – an evil scientist, masquerading as a lederhosen manufacturer, has been kidnapping the locales and running horrible experiments on them. At the head of this is Dr. Ironstein, an evil German scientist who's melding dinosaur DNA with humans to create an army of super mutants, in a dastardly plot to take over the world.

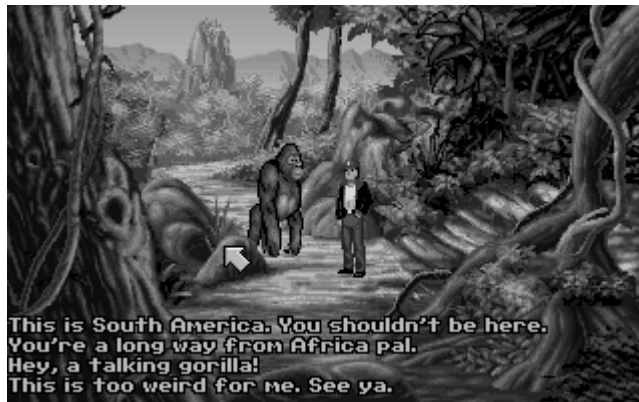


Hot Amazon babes briefly distract Joe from the task(s) at hand.

There's a lot of silliness to be had, much of which comes from affectionate parodies of 50s pulp serials. Of course, there are the *Indiana Jones* similarities – there are the evil German bad guys, of course, although they aren't technically Nazis. At one point Joe emphatically remarks about how much he *isn't* afraid of snakes, and one of the main goals of the game is to find the mystical Crystal Skull, a concept predating the actual Indy movie by more than a decade. (Small spoiler: It has nothing to do with aliens here.) There's also a hidden valley like *The Lost World*, which is still populated by

dinosaurs, and the game's climatic moment takes place amidst a Godzilla-style kaiju battle. There are references to cheesy superhero comics, and one of the major puzzles revolves assembling the necessary materials to build a jetpack.

*Flight of the Amazon Queen* also sometimes subverts the formula in clever ways. One of the first obstacles you need to get past is a gigantic gorilla. Not more than a few screens away, across a broken bridge, is a banana. It's easy enough to fix the bridge and grab it, but if you hand it over to the gorilla, he'll just eat it, smile, and refuse to budge. Instead, you're supposed to talk to him a bit, eventually revealing that he can speak English. You need to convince him that gorillas live in African jungles, not South American ones, which causes him to disappear in a puff of logic. In another segment, infiltrating the underground fortress doesn't involve any matter of punching or even sneaking. Instead you need to distract the guards through other, goofier means. To get past one of them, you need to deliver him a breakup letter from his girlfriend, causing him to become too distraught to do his job. And while the beginning of the game seems to set up Faye as a potential love interest for Joe, instead he ends up hooking up with Azula, the Amazon Queen.



*The talking gorilla is one of the game's most memorable characters.*

It's certainly got a good sense of humor on its shoulders, although the dialogue isn't quite up to *Monkey Island* levels. Still, even if the writing is missing that certainly witty snap, it's well sold by the cast of voice actors. Joe has an almost ridiculously thick Brooklyn accent, and approaches each halfway ludicrous situation with a certain amount of innocuous bravado. The minor characters are equally well voiced too. Most of the artwork is, again, much in the style of *Monkey Island*, although the comic book style close-ups during cinema scenes are far from pretty. The interface condenses the actions into a series of icons, but only four items are displayed at once, and since you have a few dozen by the end of the game, it's a pain cycling through all of them. The font is the same one used in many LucasArts titles, if the similarities weren't already abundantly clear.

There are some pretty decent puzzles too. While perhaps not as clever as the one Guybrush seems to stumble into, they're also a bit more logical. When you find a pair of comedy breasts, it's evident from the outset that the eventual goal is to find a dress and wander around in drag. The pacing slows down a bit in the final chapter, when Joe is left to explore an ancient pyramid. While the puzzles are involving enough, there are few characters to interact with, and it loses some of its charm. Unsurprisingly enough, it's the same issue that affected the later areas of the first *Monkey Island*.

*Flight of the Amazon Queen* deserves far more respect than it gets. While Interactive Binary Illusions was reportedly in talks with LucasArts to publish their game in the United States, those plans fell through. Instead, they teamed up with Warner Bros, who shuffled out the game under the radar in small quantities. In some ways, it's understandable, since it was released in 1995 and looked a bit dated compared to other similar games of the year. But its look is ultimately timeless, and it definitely warrants a look. In 2004, it was released as freeware and is compatible with SCUMMVM. It's also available for purchase on the iPhone and iPad.



## Kingdom O' Magic

Initial Release Date: 1995

Platforms: IBM PC

Designers: Sales Curve Interactive

Developers: Fergus McNeill, Matthew Sansam

SCI's *Kingdom O'Magic* is about as close as anyone got to a Monty Python skit in video game form. Oh, sure, they were actually Monty Python computer titles, but most of them were barely games. And while the likes of *Discworld* and *Simon the Sorcerer* did a pretty good job of fulfilling the “wacky fantasy humour” quotient, they don't quite capture anarchist Dadaism of the famous British troupe in the same way that *Kingdom O' Magic* does.

The heroes of this sublimely silly adventure are Shah-Ron, the absurdly buxom and incredibly clumsy female barbarian, and Thidney (should be “Sidney”, but he's got a lisp), a giant ugly talking lizard. At the beginning, you are presented the choice with three different quests. The Good Old Fashioned Traditional Quest is purportedly the easiest, and involves the slaying of a big, nasty dragon. The Magnificent 7-11 Quest puts you on a journey across the kingdom to draft between seven and eleven warriors to defend the kingdom. And the Bizarre and Slightly Twisted Quest tasks you with saving the world by hunting down the Lost Lava Lamp of the Ancients and saving the entire world by destroying the Dark Lord.

Once you've made your selections, it becomes clear that *Kingdom O' Magic* isn't a straight adventure game, so much as a low level role-playing game in adventure game trappings. It uses a standard point and click interface, and there are lots of items to grab and characters to converse with, but ultimately the game is less about solving puzzles and more about running fetch quests.

The core of the experience, though, lies in the comedy. One of the first objects you can find is a cellphone, which can be used to dial the official hint line for a clue, at the cost of a single gold coin. The manual is more of a joke book than a legitimate guide, as the troubleshooting Q&A uses the opportunity to go off on ridiculous tangents. (“I was really looking forward to *Kingdom O' Magic*. Imagine my disappointment then, when I discovered I couldn't bring my wife to climax.”) Even the interface is comical – upon confirming an action, you are asked to respond with “Yes, I know what I want!” or “No, I am filled with doubts.”)



*Disco dancing lizards? Why not?*

Examining any of the characters will bring up their data sheets, including hit points, their items, their serial numbers and where they made (as if they were action figures), and some kind of useless special skill (“Maths!” “X-Ray hearing!”). Most of the major characters are invincible, as occasionally denoted by their HP reading “IDDQD”, also known as the God Mode cheat from Doom. Yes, there are lots of exclamation points. The game is just that exuberant.

Common fantasy and RPG tropes are mocked ruthlessly. The elves are sissy weird looking weenies who gather around in a treehouse. Dwarves are stout little jerks that can think (and speak) only of war. Orcs are dressed in American football helmets and speak like proper British gentlemen. Ring Wraiths are fearsome but confused, because while they seek out Magic Rings, there are none in the kingdom, rendering their existence pointless. Others character types are perhaps even more bizarre, like the paranoid ninja baker, or the funky King Afro. Locations include the land of Riverndull and the Kingdom of De-Lorean.

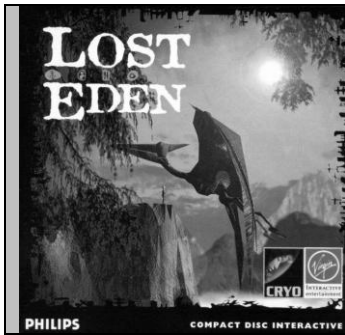
Parodies aside, it’s simply a damned weird game. Instead of politely climbing up a ladder, Shah-ron does a fancy backflip complete with *Bionic Woman* sound effects. In the countryside, you come across an elevator in the side of the mountain. Press the button for the top floor and the compartment will rocket into the sky, out into space, and calmly explode. One of the major quests involves infiltrating a nightclub and winning a disco dance contest. Your quest to kill the dragon isn’t fulfilled by finding a magical sword or anything, but rather putting a hit on it with the Elvish mafia.

But while it’s a hilarious game, it’s a huge pain to actually play. The kingdom is absolutely huge, consisting of nearly a dozen major locations, with a wide wilderness connecting them, and almost a hundred screens in total. It’s an open experience, one that’s meant to simulate an actual world rather than tell a stringently linear story, but there’s no real direction, and the sense of aimlessness can quickly grow tiring. And there are tons upon tons of red herrings – the game world doesn’t really change based on which quest you’ve chosen, resulting in whole areas, characters and events which are completely unrelated to your overall goal. It’s easy to waste a lot of time hunting down items for quests that end up being little more than red herrings.

Despite the nature of exploration, the rest of RPG elements are really quite shallow too. At any given time, there are NPCs trotting around, some minding their own business, others looking for fights. Combat doesn’t involve anything more than sitting back and watching the combatants get into a cartoonish scuffle, complete with dust clouds and wacky sound effects, as the two life bars drain. Thidney is hardier and is better at straightforward combat, while Shah-ron has better magic spells. Certain tasks also differ slightly, as well as their dialogue, so at least there’s a whole lot to see and do.

Alas, the graphics have not aged well. They’re all computer rendered, and run in clunky low resolution VGA. Character conversations are handled with gigantic close-ups, and nearly everyone in the universe is distasteful to look at. The voice acting is pretty alright, with comedian Scottish comedian John Sessions acting as the tongue-in-cheek narrator, but due to the 70,000+ lines of dialogue, it’s all incredibly downsampled and difficult to listen to.

Sitting down with *Kingdom O’ Magic* with the intent of getting anywhere is a recipe for disappointment. Instead, it’s simply more fun to stumble around, talk to the different characters and soak in the comedy. Once you’ve fully seen the game world, the tasks and their solutions begin to fall into place, and at that point it becomes halfway playable, despite all of the backtracking you need to do. At any rate, appreciation for this style of lunacy is an absolute prerequisite to get any enjoyment out of *Kingdom O’ Magic*, because that’s the only thing that will keep you going through its more tedious aspects.



## Lost Eden

Initial Release Date: 1995

Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh / 3DO / Amiga CD32  
/ Phillips CDi / PC-98

Designers:

Developer: Cryo Interactive

Released in early 1995, *Lost Eden* is an adventure game by Cryo (makers of the incredible *Dune*, the adventure game, not the real time strategy game by Westwood), with input from famed Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks author and Lionhead co-founder Steve Jackson. It had a strong emphasis on computer generated visuals, and was released for numerous platforms.

The story revolves around silent protagonist Adam in an alternate reality Earth called Eden (later on you meet a woman called Eve). It's a world where sentient dinosaurs live alongside tribes of humans and apemen. All are being wiped out by the evil Moorkus Rex and his army of tyrannical Tyrannosaurus (called Tyranns – get it?) It wasn't always like this though: Adam's great-grandfather, Priam, had built giant citadels to keep the Tyranns at bay. Unfortunately his son, Vangor, was hungry for power and so destroyed the citadels (save one which has become their home), along with the knowledge of how to construct them. Next in line to the throne was Adam's father, Gregor, who in the game is a feeble old man afraid of conflict. Adam now carries the sins of his forefathers, but is determined to stop Moorkus Rex. He realizes that to do this he must rediscover how Priam built the ancient citadels – and the first part of the game is some rudimentary puzzle solving whereupon you end up in the remaining Citadel's basement to find that dinosaurs worked together with humans in the past, with Priam commanding them to build citadels via a magical flute. So off Adam goes to unite the land.



*Lost Eden* has some fantastic artwork and a great atmosphere, but not much else.

Anyone familiar with *Dune* may see some slight similarities here, though *Lost Eden* doesn't include any kind of strategy elements like *Dune* had. Once outside of Adam's home Citadel, which plays like a stereotypical adventure for 20 minutes, the game shifts to a series of 5 maps you need to unlock. Each is made from a grid measuring 4 by 12 for a total of 48 positions, each represented by a static CG landscape image. You click the cursor to move in one of four compass directions and the CG image changes. Those set over water can't be accessed, so some

maps have closer to 40 positions, and certain areas such as beaches and forests will have items (gold, apples, mushrooms, bird nests) which need to be collected ad nauseam.

This forms the bulk of the game – you randomly wander the maps (actually, astute players should start in one corner and systematically travel in horizontal lines) collecting items while on occasion bumping into dinosaurs and humanoids. The humanoids tend to be in fixed locations, but the dinosaurs move around randomly and there's no way to tell where they are, so you need to scan all 48 positions, sometimes repeatedly. You feed the brontosaurus mushrooms and then play a flute, after which they start building a citadel. Later on raptors must be given gold to fight the Tyranns, and triceratops given bird nests to strengthen the citadels. Apples must be dropped in a body of water to lure a dinosaur that reveals which special weapon must be used in that area (these are acquired as part of the story later).

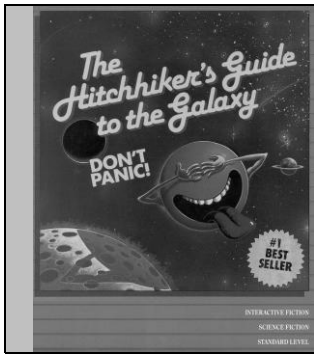
Exploration is reminiscent of *Myst*, but whereas *Myst* had fantastical CG locations, *Lost Eden's* are a series of generic, poorly rendered landscapes, none of which have any bearing on the gameplay. It's akin to playing hide-and-seek using a deck of playing cards, but not the fun kind with bare naked ladies on them, rather the kind with pictures of nondescript lawns.

How much influence Steve Jackson had is debatable (the credits say “special participation oP”), but this what he said in the manual:

“These days the quest is on for the ultimate Adventure Game – the Interactive Movie. In this respect, *Lost Eden* is something of a milestone. Cryo's painstaking design and programming work has created nothing short of an Adventure Gaming masterpiece. The action is full-screen. The animations are stunningly realistic. Game control – the Interface – is unobtrusive. And in no other game that I have played have the game characters been developed so carefully. The result is an Adventure Game with a unique feel to it. [...] I have thoroughly enjoyed being involved with its development. And I'm sure you will share my enthusiasm when you immerse yourself in the adventure plot.”

The majority of what he says is demonstrably incorrect. For starters, the joints of some dinosaurs are stunningly unrealistic in the CG videos, and almost throughout, the game feels unfinished. A seasoned and determined adventurer could easily complete it in less than a Sunday. The Shell of Tau gives clues to the few puzzles which exist, none of which are remotely taxing (the best was a three question quiz, where the answers were quite obviously items representing the sun, moon and earth). Otherwise there are no dialogue trees, making conversations quite brief and linear. For the most part you'll be collecting mushrooms and gold to start citadels, occasionally being given a key item once completed, until near the end where you're tasked with traipsing back over all the maps to find triceratops.

All of the game's challenge comes from randomization and sheer luck during exploration. A key item, the Sun Stone, is hidden in a cave in the upper left of one map – there's never a clue you need to visit this area, but considering that the dinosaurs move randomly, the easiest way to progress is to explore every single area. There's an inevitability to the game, where not only can you not lose, but winning doesn't require much thought. Which is unfortunate, since it had great potential. *Lost Eden's* strongest point is how utterly balls-to-wall strange it is, and the ingenious music throughout (it has an ethnic vibe to it, with tribal chants and cries). Characters are bizarre (one tribe look like Maori heads, others appear made of shell), the ever-present CG is of a surreal quality found only in games from the early 1990s, and all the dialogue replete with absurd fantasy names is voiced with absolute seriousness. Steve Jackson is correct in saying the game's premise and atmosphere is unique, but the actual gameplay seems determined to prevent you enjoying it. Those curious of Cryo's ability are better off seeking out *KGB* or *Dune*; *Lost Eden* is merely a strange curio. It is, at least, infinitely more interesting the incredibly drab *Dragon Lore*, released the year prior and at least a far stretch better than the middling CG adventure game affairs that typified their output until their closure in 2002.



## The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Initial Release Date: 1984

Platforms: Amiga / Amstrad CPC / Apple II / Atari 8-bit / Atari ST / Browser / Commodore 128 / Commodore 64 / IBM PC / Macintosh / TI-99/4A / TRS-80

Designers: Douglas Adams, Steve Meretzky

Developer: Infocom

Beginning at a radio show in 1978 and eventually evolving into books, television shows and Hollywood motion pictures, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is one of the well-known science fiction comedies in the English language. Written by British author Douglas Adams, the story focuses on a hapless everyman named Arthur Dent, who discovers that his friend Ford is actually an alien and escapes the destruction of Earth at the hands of a band of intergalactic bureaucrats. Their adventures continue as they meet Zaphod Beeblebrox, the two-headed president of the Universe; his gal pal, and along with Arthur, one of the only living Earthlings; and Marvin, an incredibly intelligent but perpetually morose android. Together they explore the galaxy in the Heart of Gold, a ship powered by the Infinite Improbability Drive, which is more or less an excuse for the story to devolve into ludicrous situations at a moment's notice.

There are a lot of reasons why the series is as well loved as it is, the least of which are the bizarre situations that our heroes find themselves in. Much of it has to do with Douglas Adams' writing style, which is stupefying brilliant at creating eminently quotable lines, many revolving around dry witticisms regarding the soul-crushing experience that is human existence, mixed with some immensely silly sci-fi technobabble. It also has to do with the eponymous Hitchhiker's Guide. It's an electronic device that holds all information in the known universe, basically a proto-Wikipedia, except written by actual journalists instead of random crazy people. The Guide, at least in the radio and TV series, is essentially the narrator. Regardless of the medium, it also helpfully interjects information about the universe at large, mostly in the form of humorous tangents which may or may not go anywhere. The series has seen numerous permutations across different mediums, and while the setup and characters are the same, each offers a unique experience, with different storylines and such. This allowed for a perfect method to adapt the series into a text adventure, released by Infocom in 1984. Developed by wizard implementer Steve Meretzky, in aid with Douglas Adams himself, the game puts the player in the shoes of Arthur Dent, and makes his insane journey yours.

The story begins as your house is about to be destroyed by a bulldozer. After curing yourself of a hangover, the events play out mostly the same as they do in any other adaptation – you stop the bulldozer by lying down in front of it, you meet up with Ford for a few pints down at the local pub, and you escape the destruction of the planet by hitching a ride on the Vogon fleet. The Vogons are none too keen on this and eventually kick you off, where you're saved by the Heart of Gold and its crew. From here the story uniquely branches off from the various *Hitchhiker* adaptations and becomes slightly restrictive, as you're no longer attempting to escape from dangerous scenarios.

While attempting to get the Infinite Improbability Drive working, you'll go through a number of different scenarios, in random order: as Arthur, you'll face off against the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal, a beast so stupid that, if you can't see it, it assumes that it can't say you and leaves you alone; as Trillian, during a party back on Earth; as Ford, replaying the opening segment from his perspective; as Zaphod, as you hijack the Heart of Gold; and again as Arthur, in the middle of a tiny intergalactic war. After properly getting the ship working (and getting a decent cup of tea), you'll eventually end up inside a sperm whale, which is suspended in the stratosphere and plummeting towards the ground, before finally making it to the end. The story finishes as the group sets foot on the planet of Magrathea, which was about 2/3rds of the way through the first book, and two episodes into the TV and radio series.

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* game is in a weird spot, because very little of that will make any sense to someone who's not already familiar with it, and many puzzles require at least some foreknowledge of the events. The Guide can be referenced to useful (and, at times, essential) information, though that's not always enough. But if you follow the book/radio/TV show too literally, you'll get screwed over with consistency. For example, Hitchhiker fans know that towels are one of the most useful and important items in the universe. When you first meet Ford and he offers you a towel, one would be assume that you should take it. But don't! It's a trap, because if you do, he'll decide to walk off, leaving you to die. Assuming you pass this part correctly, you'll end up on a trip to the pub for a few beers (as a muscle relaxant for the teleportation process), and you're supposed to buy a cheese sandwich and feed it to the dog outside. If you don't, it will eat a microscopic meet of invading aliens and screw you up near the end the game. (To be fair, you can fix this when you replay the segment from Ford's view, but it's still really strange.)

And then there's the legendary Babel fish puzzle. The Babel fish is a curious little creature, a tiny little fish which is inserted directly into one's ear and allows one to immediately understand any language in the universe ever. When you board the Vogon ship, they'll eventually capture you and subject you to the terrors of their poetry (the third worst poetry in the universe and an action equivalent to torture), before tossing you out the airlock. You cannot avoid this. There is, however, a case containing a device that will signal your rescue, but it is locked, and can only be opened by a secret keyword, which also happens to be one of the lines of the Vogon poem. You need the Babel fish to translate it – luckily, there happens to be a dispenser right when you first board.

It is not as simple as taking one, though, as they do in the book/TV series/radio drama. The machine has a button that, when pushed, will send a Babel fish flying through the air and into hole in the wall. You need to hang your gown on a hook to block it, but then it falls into a drain right beneath. You then need to block the drain, but then a cleaning robot will sweep it up, who then leaves through a small panel. You can block the panel and the robot will toss the fish into the air, where it is then captured by a second cleaning robot, which also needs to be dealt with. If you've properly set up everything, then the fish, when dispensed, will bounce off the contraptions you've set up and wind up perfectly in your ear. This is the sort of puzzle that would have been almost reasonable if the room was rendered with graphics. But when communicated entirely in text, one needs to picture the visuals of the entire situation, which isn't terribly easy to do. The situation is exacerbated because the machine has limited fish – dispense too many of them, and it will run out, forcing you to reload. Because repeatedly dispensing fish is required in order to see where it bounces, it's actually impossible to figure out this puzzle on the first go.

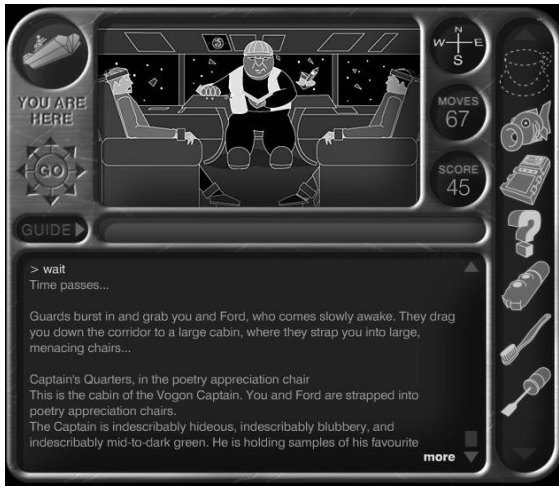
Dead ends are practically everywhere, along with numerous ways to get yourself killed. These are all in good fun though, and many are quite entertaining. If you let your house get knocked down before you reach the pub, a stray brick will knock you in the head, killing you instantly. You still have control over the text parser, although you'll be told “stay out of this, you're dead!” as it continues to describe the process of rigor mortis. Most other deaths go on similar, playful tangents.

Both Adams and Meretzky seemed to love playing pranks, which goes beyond the obtuse puzzles and wacky death scenes. The narrator will occasionally lie and screw with the player, for instance, telling them of an exit in one direction where none exists. When trying to enter the engine room in the Heart of Gold, it will refuse to let you in, insisting that there's no point to go in there, that it's boring, and so forth. After much persistence, it will let you enter, only to tell you that it's empty. Except that it isn't – again, after more inquisition, it will finally relent and describe the room.

There are numerous other fun things throughout too. After a certain amount of time, if you type in something the interpreter doesn't understand, those words up falling through a black hole and end up in a different part of the galaxy, and inadvertently bring about a bloody war between two civilizations. It's a joke from other versions, reworked for the interactive fiction medium. When you awaken at the beginning, it lists "splitting headache" as an inventory item. It also lists "no tea", a completely baffling classification, since you're technically holding an abstract concept. (This must be dealt with later in the game, when you find some tea. However, you can't have “tea” and “no tea” at the same time, unless you literally enter your own brain and remove your common sense.)

And so, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* occupies a contradictory state on the annals of computer gaming history. It's full on incredibly frustrating situations explicitly designed to infuriate

you, yet they're so intensely creative that it's impossible to admire it, at least a little bit. It is also ridiculously funny, which is only why all of its transgressions are even remotely forgivable.



*The BBC web version has some graphics and other niceties.*

After its original 1984 publication, the game was re-released in 1987 using an improved interpreter with a hint function. It can also be played online in various forms, although most of these are simply browser-based ports of the original game. However, in 2004, the BBC website put up an enhanced version of the game with added visuals. It has graphical representations of all of your inventory items, a compass which notes all exits, and of course, a central display which shows the room you're in. The graphics were done by Rod Lord, who had done the Guide illustrations in the television show twenty years earlier. They are not particularly high tech, obviously, and don't add a whole lot, but at least they're somewhat consistent with the look and feel that fans have associated with the series. There are two different versions on the website, both of which mostly use Lord's visuals, although the rest were supplied by various contest winners. The game is played entirely online, and it keeps a copy of the saved game on the web side servers. Hilariously, if your browser loses connection for too long a period of game, it will say "Don't Panic!", the slogan for the series. Ironic, then, that losing your connection is the same as being killed, because your progress isn't saved, and you need to restore a prior save game, giving some damn good reason to panic.



*The fan-made remake looks terrible, although otherwise it integrates the story pretty well.*

In 2010, two dedicated fans, James Spados and Kevin Hanley, remade *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* as a point and click graphical adventure using Adventure Game Studio. Naturally, purists will dismiss it outright, although those who will give it a fair shot will find a number of pros and cons. It was primarily made for those with an aversion to text adventures. There's also an easy mode which loosens some of the inventory restrictions. It also will stop you from getting into dead end situations. The actual puzzles aren't removed, though, it will just kill you right after you mess something up, seemingly for no reason, unless you're familiar with the original game. The interface does make it much easier to browse the Guide's database, and also lets you type in search queries to find hidden stuff. Of course, without the text input, it ends up ruining some of the jokes, although at least the Babel fish puzzle makes a little bit more sense. It's not a terrible remake, especially considering it's free, but outside of making it more approachable, it certainly does nothing to make the text adventure obsolete.

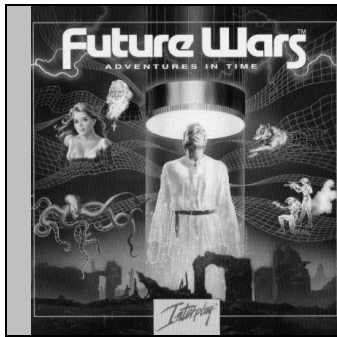
In spite of its legendary status as one of Infocom's most difficult games, it was the company's second best selling product after *Zork*, and a sequel was eventually planned. *Milliways: The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (tying in with the second novel) was put into preproduction, but a number of factors kept it from getting underway. The problem started due to Douglas Adams' notoriety for missing deadlines. After *The Hitchhiker's Guide*, he proposed a game idea entirely unrelated to any of his books. Called *Bureaucracy*, it was meant to be a humorous struggle through a nearly endless series of red tape to accomplish a fairly simple task. However, he was also distracted with the *Dirk Gently* series of novels. *Bureaucracy* was eventually finished with the aid of Infocom staff, and despite its delays, turned out relatively well, but this whole process meant that Adams was barely involved in the development of *Milliways*.

That wasn't the only issue though. Adams suggested his friend, author Michael Bywater, create the concept, but that didn't get far. Both Steve Meretzky and Dave Lebling (one of Infocom's other staff members) were asked to create their own drafts, but those didn't go anywhere either. The early designs show that the game would continue through the events on Magrathea, on to the *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, and end up back on Earth, covering the rest of the ground of the second book, and the first radio/TV series. There was also talk of time travel being one of the primary elements of the adventure. Not only was there no solid design, but there was no one to program it either. There were talks of outsourcing it overseas, but that, too, fell through the cracks. The result is that the game barely went into development – there is a prototype, but it doesn't go beyond a handful of rooms and some extremely sparse descriptions. With *Milliways* lavishing in development hell, it died in 1989 when Infocom restructured and relocated, eventually leaving behind the interactive fiction market for good.

## Rip-offs

Before Infocom published *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* game, an unofficial adaptation was made for Commodore computers under the name *HitchHiker-64*. Written by Bob Chappell and published by SuperSoft, it's an incredibly simplistic treasure hunt with a strict two word parser and sparse writing. The goal is to hunt down five various artifacts and drop them at the inn at the beginning of the game. Although you are not specifically Arthur Dent, like the Infocom game, you will run into familiar characters and items, like the infamous Pangalactic Gargleblaster drink. In addition to the British village on Earth, you also get to visit Betelgeuse, Ford's home world, as well as Kakrafood, a planet which wasn't even mentioned until the second book.

Obviously this was copyright infringement, though, so eventually the game was recalled. However, it was renamed *Cosmic Capers* and redistributed, this time with all of the offending references changed. Sure, Vogons are now Verrucans, and the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal is now the Barbaric Binge Beast of Bongo, but they're so transparently superficial that it's easy to see what they originally were. Like most really early text adventures that weren't made by Infocom, it's not really a good game by any standards, although it remains an interesting bit of trivia for fans.



**Future Wars: Adventures in Time /  
Future Wars: Time Travelers**

Initial Release Date: 1990

Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / PC-98

Designer: Paul Cuisset

Publisher: Delphine Software

*Future Wars* begins innocuously enough. As a lowly window washer, your mundane existence soon becomes substantially more exciting as you stumble upon a device that mysteriously transports you back to medieval times. Further exploration reveals some bizarre anachronisms, such as an order of monks who seem to have access to technology which has no place in the middle ages. You soon stumble upon Lear and his beautiful daughter Lo'Ann, who reveal themselves as time travelers from the distant future. In the year 4315, humanity is at war with alien invaders known as the Crughons. Their fight is at a standstill, however, so the Crughons travel back in time to plant bombs and alter the course of human history. With no real way home – and nothing better to do, anyway – you accompany Lo'Ann and aid the human resistance in the fight for the future.

French development studio Delphine International gained recognition through their two cinematic action games, *Out of This World* and *Flashback*. Prior to these successes, they had developed a trilogy of adventure games using their Cinematique engine, which, while met with some degree of success in Europe, went largely unnoticed in North America.



*The wreckage of Paris II in 4315 feels a bit like Out of This World*

From a technical standpoint, Cinematique is at a mid-point between Sierra's SCI0 and SCI1 systems. It supports 256 color graphics, although the visual depth isn't quite on the level of Sierra's scanned artwork. And while the interface is completely mouse driven, the pathfinding is extremely basic. It also takes the absolute worst design aspects of Sierra's older games, and somehow exacerbates them.

Unlike some other games that share the theme, the time traveling is merely a plot device – there are no puzzles that actually require using it, and progression is quite linear. A good chunk of the puzzles boil down to this – did you happen to grab that one nearly invisible item from three screens back? No? You can't go back and get it, so time to reload. Not only are vital items

nearly impossible to see, but trying to interact with them causes extraordinary amounts of headaches. You often need to be within a few pixels before your character can do something otherwise the game will tell you to move closer. Such taunts are maddening when dealing with dangerous monsters that you need to use an item on. "Go a little closer." "Go a little closer". Oops, too close. There are also a few screens, including a climatic dash through a maze, that require precise or quick movements of your character, and it's too sketchy to ever work properly.

The puzzles that are there are pretty dumb too. Right at the beginning, you're yelled at by your boss. You go through the window and enter a lobby, with two doors. One door is the boss' office, the other door you're supposed to enter, but the game won't let you. Instead, you're supposed to pull a prank on your superior by filling your paint bucket with water, then stick it above the boss' door. When he comes out angry, you'll automatically run to the other door, and thus into the chamber which holds the time travel device. It's an terrible opening puzzle, because you're not given any suggestions at all that you're supposed to be exacting some kind of juvenile vengeance.

Most of the story is dealt out in chunks during a handful of relatively lengthy cutscenes, although character interaction outside of these segments is minimal. The writing is adequate, with some bits of amusingly awkward humor. Your character repeatedly mishears "Crughons" as "Croutons". One character wishes you good luck with a Star Wars reference. As a plot point, you're subjected to a mind implantation which subconsciously gives you necessary information as needed. Right before an arcade sequence, this impromptu education kicks in and acts as a brief tutorial, breaking the forth wall and telling you to use your mouse to shoot enemies, something which *Metal Gear* auteur Hideo Kojima would be quite proud of. Overall, the plot is serviceable, even though the basic set up is a bit too close to *The Terminator*.



*In medieval times, our stressed hero takes a nap in a tree.*

Regardless of its many issues, *Future Wars* is still interesting in a historical context. The visuals were done by Eric Chahi, who also masterminded *Out of This World*. You can see some similarities in the artwork, such as the way the projectile blasts disintegrate their targets, or the gloomy, war-ravaged landscapes. Paul Cuisset also designed most of Delphine's other games, including *Flashback*. There are some thematic elements which bear some vague resemblance, like the futuristic train station, or the hibernetic sleep device in one of the spaceships. But otherwise, the fiddly interface has resulted in a game that has aged extremely poorly.

Interplay also published the IBM PC version of *Future Wars* on CD-ROM. While the disk versions were almost entirely silent, the CD version has redbook audio playing throughout the adventure. It's cheap early 90s synth, and not in that awesome power rock PC Engine kind of way. As such, it adds nothing of value.



## Altered Destiny

Initial Release Date: 1990  
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga  
Designer: Michael Berlyn  
Publisher: Accolade

P. J. Barrett is just an average guy, looking forward to spending the night watching television with his sweetheart. His plans go slightly amuck when his TV is mistakenly switched at the repair shop, causing him to be teleported into another world. With only his wits, P. J. is charged with saving the land from Helmar, a powerful wizard who's been terrorizing the kingdom with an artifact known as the Jewel of Light.

The whole “regular guy gets transported to alternate dimension and ends up becoming its savior” trope is practically as old as fantasy fiction itself, and *Altered Destiny* does little to shake things up. But it does have some absolutely fantastic visual design, with graphics that push the 16-color (if you're playing on a PC) or 32-color (if you're on an Amiga) limit to its breaking point. The game runs on the same engine as *Les Manley in: Search for the King*, which means it's practically identical to the SCI0 interpreter Sierra used for the likes of *King's Quest IV* and *Space Quest III*, but artistically *Altered Destiny* is not only on par with these titles, but perhaps bests them. The world of Daltere is less swords and sorcery fantasy and more fantastical sci-fi, filled with strange alien-like beings, and a land filled with whole swatches of indigenous flora and fauna.



*One of the locations in Daltere is a gigantic living tree.*

The primary colors through most of the game are pink, purple and green, and there's a unique otherworldly feel to it, not too dissimilar to Delphine International's *Out of this World*, another title with a similar theme, although one far more oppressive. That game had tentacles that would drag you underwater within the first five seconds of gameplay, and slugs who could instantly kill you with a scrape on the knee. In contrast, *Altered Destiny* has forests with dancing

pink plants, green foxes with tails shaped like gigantic leaves, and flying jellyfish things called “floaters”, which can be used as makeshift elevators to transport P.J. to the temples in the skies above. There’s also a certain dreamlike quality to certain scenarios, as you take an astral walk to the dream plane to solve a few puzzles and enter a bizarre hallucination to track down JonQuah, the twin brother of the elusive Helmar.

That’s not to say the world isn’t dangerous – an innocuous looking spring called a Hoppa will sprinkle you with dust, which slowly turns you into a plant if you’re not careful, and the lands surrounding Helmar’s castle is filled with poisonous plants and nasty enemies lying wait in the shadows. By far the most frustrating is the Canyon of Fear, a winding series of narrow platforms where a single pixel of imprecision will send you plummeting to your death. It’s just as bad as any of Sierra’s “arcade” sequences, if not worse, because half the time the pathway is blocked by scenery in the foreground.

While the folks have Accolade have painted an intensely creative world, it’s stymied by the usual adventure game issues of the area – the annoying interface and the frustrating design. Unlike Sierra games, your inventory is limited, requiring that you drop off unneeded items at the world’s hub area before you venture on. But you’re never given any indication of which items you’ll need to for your adventure, or worse yet, which ones you won’t, potentially leaving you to backtrack unnecessarily. There are also a few trick puzzles where you can use multiple items to solve a puzzle, but only one is the correct one – for example, you can use the popcorn to trap a bird, but you should be using a jar of pigment instead. You need the popcorn for a totally different puzzle much later on, and if you wasted it, it’s time to reload.



*The island surrounding Helmar’s castle is filled with danger.*

The text input parser isn’t quite up to task either, which is partially the fault of the graphics. There are so many indescribable sights and sounds that it’s sometimes impossible to find the right word to interact with them. During one point you need to give an item to a rodent-like thing, but the game won’t accept “mouse”, “rat” or anything of the like. Instead, you need to look at the screen and be told that, oh, that strange little thing is actually called a “kaylef”. During this time, many old-school adventure game designers lamented the death of the text parser in lieu on an icon-based one, but *Altered Destiny* is definitely a game that could’ve benefitted from a more modern design.

While parts of it are antiquated, there’s still a gorgeous world to be found in *Altered Destiny*, and one that’s worth exploring. It may not be immediately appreciable by anyone who grew up on modern graphics, but those with an affinity for low color artwork, the kind that forces artists to be creative under extremely limited circumstances, will find one of the most aesthetically impressive titles of the era.