Ben There, Dan That! / Time Gentlemen, Please!

Even though Sierra and LucasArts gave up on adventure games around the turn of the century, there are still those who hold on to the belief that the genre is very much alive. But without the continuation of games like *Monkey Island*, *Space Quest* and *Simon the Sorcerer*, what we have are, mostly, legions of humorless entries with depressingly dry CG backgrounds, plus the occasional cartoonish adventure that tries to be funny but fails spectacularly. Former adventure creators still make some great work, of course. Tim Schaefer, of *Grim Fandango*, spent a long time working on *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend*, both of which were hilarious despite not being adventure games, while Telltale, formed with some of the other LucasArts staff, comes close to the glory days of the genre. But it's not quite the same.

So it was more or less out of nowhere that a tiny group of Brits called Zombie Cow Studios brought out two of the funniest adventures since... well, since ever, perhaps. *Ben There, Dan That!* and its sequel, *Time Gentlemen Please!*, are both low budget hits made with Adventure Game Studio and have a graphical style most consistent with elementary school notebook doodles, but succeed tremendously because they're so brilliantly written. One could call it "The British version of South Park!" and that wouldn't entirely be wrong, but that's a glib summation of it. While both creations have uber low-fi visuals, subversive plotting, and more than just a bit of toilet humor, Zombie Cow's games replace *South Park'*s libertarian cynicism with a self aware affection for adventure games, LucasArts in particular. They're loving self-parodies that have their own voice and never copies LucasArts style, despite obviously being in love with them. By the virtue of being independent games that nebulous quality defined as 'soul' permeates both experiences, in ways that their prettier, more 'professional' comrades sometimes lack.

Ben There, Dan That!

Initial Release Date: 2007
Platforms: IBM PC
Designers: Dan Marshall, Ben Ward
Developer: Zombie Cow Studios

Ben and Dan are two London flatmates, and quite experienced adventurers. Though both are a bit off, Ben is the leader and the smarter of the two (and the one the player directly controls), while Dan is his partner, dodgy pathfinding routine and all. Dan is acknowledged as being Max to Ben's Sam, and is controlled via a specific icon for specific purposes, usually flipping light switches or other tasks that Ben deems too gross or otherwise beneath him. Both the heroes are quite aware of the nature of adventure gaming and, being how it's essentially a self-insertion fic, fans of the genre itself. There are posters of *Maniac Mansion* and *Full Throttle* that adorn their walls. The font is even lifted straight from *Day of the Tentacle*.

In the beginning, we join our heroes in the middle of a dire situation – Dan has gone off and gotten himself killed, while Ben has rigged an overcomplicated and particularly adventure-game-y contraption that will somehow bring him back to life. Thankfully, since this puzzle comes pre-solved, all you need to do is push Dan to trigger the device, eventually bringing our heroes back to stodgy old England. Desperately wishing to catch the *Magnum P.I.* marathon but aggravated at their lack of decent reception, they stick a wire hanger out the window, only to be abducted by mysterious aliens.

Left to their own devices aboard the spaceship, Ben and Dan discover a series of doorways that lead into different parallel dimensions. In one, you'll find a land overwhelmed with a

rampant zombie infestation. In another, you'll enter a video game development studio populated by dinosaurs. In yet another, you'll find a land where England has been annexed as the 51st United State of America, where the local population complains about the crappy beer and lack of proper footie, while a group of washed-up, self-important video game journalists complain about crappy games and scheme to destroy the world. And then there's the dimension where everyone has their own, mostly marginal, super power. Somewhere along the line, the developers just got tired and tacked on typical fire and ice worlds. Each of the doors leading to these dimensions is initially closed, and can only be unlocked by finding some arbitrary item in one of the other dimensions. It's a very loose, slipshod way of connecting together the whole thing, but it's suitable given the intentionally low quality graphics.

The love towards LucasArts games is palpable

Ben and Dan have definable faces and bodies, but their appendages are sticks, and they animate with two mere frames. The backgrounds are coarse, scribbly, and not at all in proportion. One gets the feeling it's not entirely unintentional. Yes, this game was done cheaply by two blokes in their spare time, so why not consciously admit it, use it in the game's favor to carve a completely silly atmosphere, and move on with it?

And so, most of the strength lies in the writing. Ben and Dan are the typical comedy duo, and their constantly self-aware exchanges are what drive most everything forward. Your tolerance level to their ironic dialogue may depend on how many similar AGS games you've played before, but it usually still manages to be quite funny regardless. In addition to its particularly British verbiage, it's also a bit more ribald than the usual affair, and the humor is much more contemporary. Although LucasArts games were primarily aimed at adults, there was rarely anything particularly offensive about them, at least as language, sex or violence was concerned. This game isn't overwhelmingly dirty, but you can expect occasional exchanges like:

Ben: "Do you want to go on a date with me?"
Supergirl: "That depends, honey. What's your superpower?"
Ben: "HAVING A VERY LARGE PENIS."
Supergirl: "Oh, that's a shame. Another of my powers is having a very small vagina."

There's also the recurring joke that whatever method Ben uses to further their adventures, they always somehow end up killing (mostly) innocent folks in the process, an amusing aside to the occasionally sociopathic tendencies of adventure game protagonists. It's also prepared a

response for interacting with nearly everything, making the feel quite rich. If there's a sore point, it's that the writing is so damn good that it begs to be properly voice acted. Given its status as a freeware game, though, that would be asking a bit too much, and the text-only dialogue does channel the quaint era of 3.5' 1.44MB floppy disks. As it stands, it's easy to imagine the two blokes with their off-kilter British accents, slang and mannerisms. Also, other than a few bits of music, the whole game is almost depressingly silent, which runs opposite of the goofiness throughout.

These British gents are none too pleased with the state of American bars

Compared to their obvious inspirations, the puzzles are actually quite easy and straightforward, at least one of which involves activating a fully functional miniature model Death Star. It's a short game, too, and one that ends on a twist and a pseudo-cliffhanger, nicely leading into its sequel. But it's all so masterfully executed that it stands out proudly amongst its freeware peers.

Time Gentlemen, Please!

Initial Release Date: 2009
Platforms: IBM PC
Designers: Dan Marshall, Ben Ward
Developer: Zombie Cow Studios

Time Gentlemen, Please! begins with an intro cinematic that slightly embellishes some of the events of its predecessor, before picking up right where it left off. At the end of *Ben There, Done That!*, our heroes learn that the aliens that kidnapped them were really versions of themselves from the future, who were carrying out a particularly diabolical plan of world domination. Due to the flimsy nature of time travel, Future Ben and Dan vanish into a puff of paradox, leaving Present Ben and Den, unwilling to rule the world, to pick up their pieces. With the powers of the Time Stick, the two devise a brilliant plan to travel to the past and stop the invention of the coat hanger, thereby eliminating the item that got them in this very predicament in the first place. Through a series of misadventures which aren't entirely explained, the Time Stick somehow winds up in the hands of Adolf Hitler, who uses it to screw up history even further. The entire

game is spent climbing out of the hole our boys have dug for themselves, mostly by skipping through the ages via a series of rips in the fabric of space and time.

Time Gentlemen, Please! is certainly much more involving and better structured than its predecessor, which created an (intentionally) flimsy excuse to get Ben and Dan into wacky predicaments. Here, it's a bit more focused, with about a dozen locations in total, easily accessible from a map screen. The ultimate goal is to infiltrate Big Ben which, in the future, has been converted into a vicious, trap-filled tower. Technologically it's a bit improved too, with the game running in 800x600 resolution, plus nicer icons and bigger fonts. The visuals still maintain the same slapdash look, but the backgrounds are more refined. There's actual music in each location too, which does a lot to make everything feel more alive.

Ben and Dan are hardly a match for Hitler's dinosaur army and giant mecha

There"s a laundry list of oddball things, from dinosaurs to robots to Nazis to Nazi dinosaur robots and so forth, and a lazier game would be content that its wacky quotient was suitably through the roof. *Time Gentlemen, Please!* goes pleasantly over the top, though, such as their portrayal of Herr Hitler. How do you make the most despicable human being in history even worse? By turning him into a pedophiliac vampire, apparently. One of the kookiest gags is the 'Racism' slider in the Options menu, which doesn't really seem to do much of anything, although it's impossible to set to absolute zero – a self acknowledgment that yes, Germans probably shouldn't take this too seriously.

But like its predecessor, it keeps its spirit through both affectionate parodies and cleverness. There are still plenty of LucasArts references – apparently with all of the time travelling, *Star Wars* is now a 1940s cult film directed by Ed Wood, and there are even references to *Labyrinth*, a film which Lucas and company have been happy to ignore. At one point, Dan suggests different ways to proceed through the adventure, based on WITS, FISTS and STEALTH, a reference to the three paths in *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*. (Fans will recall that the trio should be WITS, FISTS and TEAM, which Dan will note despondently.) Your choice doesn't actually affect the flow of the game, although it does change a few running gags.

The most clever parodies aren't the ones where Ben and Dan acknowledge their wacky situations aloud, but rather when the wacky situations acknowledge themselves. Upon talking with a guard dinosaur who needs to be disposed of, he mentions that he can't go back to his house because it's infested with a rat. No problem – give him a mouse trap and he marches right off, only to be replaced immediately by another dinosaur bloke who proudly announces, "Man, I

love spanners!", making for a quick and easy puzzle. Ben even refuses to get into a conversation, claiming, "I don't want to get roped into a conversation about spanners."

There's a bit more to distinguish the leading characters this time around, who sort of blended together in their first adventure. The highlight is when Ben finds himself disabled and Dan is put in the limelight – he immediately panics and fumbles his way through the next set of solutions, until deciding that it's probably best he stay as a sidekick. Some of the sillier secondary characters include Eckles, a sad old war prisoner who seems predestined to be shot in the cock, and the Sex-Ed Clown, who teaches about the horrors of unprotected sex via balloon models. (For fun, ask him for one in the shape of AIDS.)

This being a story revolving around time travel, there are a few instances where you need to change the past to fix something in the future, with the usual strange effects. There's also a strange machine which can age or de-age any item, either returning it to its original state (presuming it's worn or broken) or inflicting upon it the ravages of time. So, flip it to 'age' and stick in a pig to turn it to leather, or flip it to 'de-age' to turn a severed skeleton arm to a severed fleshy arm. The results are intentionally unpredictable, which is why it's such a weird device, but its over usage causes it to become a bit tedious throughout.

The cleverest bit is when the duo discovers an unfinished text adventure, *The Space Adventures of W. T. Pal, A Human.* Their shenanigans puncture an even deeper hole in the time-space fabric, eventually plunging them right into a visual representation of this game-within-a-game. Playing the text adventure in the 'real world' controls the hero in the 'game world', an intrepid Victorian-era explorer named William, who is ultimately helpless without Ben and Dan's intervention. It's all very pleasantly meta. There's also another retro point n' click adventure game where you control Hitler, one of the many puzzles to conquer the innards of Big Ben. Of particular note is the 'Invade' verb, distressingly amusing when used on the toilet. (Something about having already invaded 'poo-land'. Awful, yes.)

Ben and Dan get into some crazily metafictional situations

There's no doubt – this is one of the funniest, most clever adventure games ever made. With *Time Gentlemen, Please!,* Zombie Cow Studios elected to go 'professional' and charge £3 (or $5-ish) for it. It's more than a fair trade. The guys behind these games should be extremely proud of themselves for creating what is not only a loving homage, but two excellent entries into the halls of adventure gaming. Although there are just these two entries as of current, Zombie Cow is working on a new episodic adventure, with the first one being *Revenge of the Balloon-Headed Mexican.*
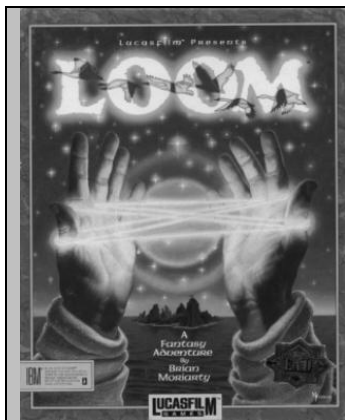
Loom

Initial Release Date: 1990
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Atari ST / Macintosh / Turbografx-16 CD / FM Towns
Designer: Brian Moriarty
Developer: LucasArts

Out of all of LucasArts' adventure games, only one is rooted in the genre of high fantasy (not counting their very first adventure based off of the film *Labyrinth*). This game is *Loom*, the invention of Brian Moriarty, a former employee of Infocom. Moriarty was responsible for some of Infocom's better titles, including *Wishbringer*, *Trinity*, and *Beyond Zork: The Coconut of Quendor*. *Loom* was the first game in LucasArts' graphic adventure library to institute the company's unofficial policy of no deaths or unwinnable situations. This made *Loom* notable for its time, not to mention the gorgeous graphics, fantastic sound quality, and the original plotline which made for an engrossing fantasy epic.

There is a fair amount of backstory that doesn't appear in the game, but can be found in a half-hour audio drama that was included on cassette tape with the original releases. It's mostly gravy, as you can figure out most of what's going on in the game itself, but it explains a few things that help to better understand the context. *Loom* is about the Guild of Weavers, who have grown powerful and moved on from simple cloth to sewing patterns into time and space itself. The Weavers have been ostracized for their reality-manipulating powers, cast out into a small island from the rest of the Guilds for their fearsome witchcraft. They have named their island "Loom", after the great multicolored loom which is the focal point of their powers. Cut off from the rest of the world, the Weavers suffer and dwindle in numbers.

A troubled Weaver, Lady Cygna Threadbare, decides to use the great loom to help by planting a gray thread into the loom. This thread causes an infant to appear out of the loom, an unforeseen event that earns Cygna the wrath of the Guild's Elders. Her punishment is to be transformed into a swan and be banished from the "pattern", the universe as the Weavers had made it, essentially condemning her to an existence in between dimensions. Kindly Dame Hetchel takes in the loom infant and names him Bobbin Threadbare, but she is forbidden by the Elders from teaching Bobbin any of the Weavers' techniques. The Elders are jerks and they fear that Bobbin will eventually unravel the pattern of existence, but Hetchel believes in young Bobbin and decides to teach him about weaving nonetheless.

That's quite a mouthful, and while the "devil child cast away from society" story is not the most original plotline around, it's the most developed story LucasArts had made up until this point. Despite the company's tendencies to write their stories with a lot of humor, *Loom*'s story is relatively serious (though not bereft of funny moments) and starts out on a grave note. Bobbin, the dreaded "loom child", is summoned to the Elders on his seventeenth birthday, but when he gets to the main hall, he finds his adopted mother, Dame Hetchel, being chewed out by the Elders. They found out that she taught Bobbin about weaving despite strict orders to not do so. For her intransigence, she is subject to the same fate inflicted upon Lady Cygna; however, she is mysteriously transformed into an egg instead of a swan. On that note, a swan flies in from a dimensional pocket and plays the draft of "transcendence" on the great loom, transforming all

of the Elders into swans themselves! All of the swans fly off into the blue yonder, leaving the village empty and Bobbin thoroughly confused after having beheld this inexplicable event.

Loom is a distinct oddity in the graphic adventure genre, as it shows no commands on the lower half of the screen, nor does it display an inventory. There is only one item Bobbin carries with him throughout the majority of the game: the distaff, a magical stick which has the power to manipulate the physical properties of objects. All you have to do is click upon an object and play a four-note tune on the distaff to cast a "draft", a spell from his clan's Book of Patterns. This musical mechanic is similar to the ocarina from *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, but *Loom* predates Nintendo's classic by nearly a decade.

This is the work of the demon boy.

WORDS

After acquiring the staff, the first order of business is to look at the egg into which Hetchel was transformed. Doing so causes four notes to ring out from the loom, and astute observers will notice the graphic of the distaff on the lower part of the screen and the three sections of the staff with the notes of "c", "d", and "e" below them. The notes on the loom play out with colored sparkles, and these colors are also coded with the notes beneath the distaff. The four notes that resonate with the egg form the draft of Opening, which is always e/c/e/d, and will open up any door or container like the egg. Bobbin learns many other drafts later, but each new game alters the notes of most drafts, except for the Opening draft and a few others which are vital to the storyline. Some drafts can be played backwards to achieve their reverse affect; playing the Opening draft in reverse (d/e/c/e) makes it the draft of Closing and seals off open passages. However, some drafts are palindromes (like f/g/g/f for example) and cannot be reversed. Loom's primary gameplay consists of finding drafts and applying them to solve puzzles. Drafts are usually acquired by looking at key objects and listening to the four-note tune if they have a draft to teach. On the highest selectable difficulty level, you need to recognize them strictly by sound.

It's an innovative mechanic that lends the game a unique identity, but it does have a somewhat frustrating old-school problem. The instant a draft is learned, it is not stored in any sort of menu that can be referred to for later use. They have to be memorized or ideally written down. (To aid this, the original release came with a book to record them.) There are a few drafts that Bobbin learns early in the game that will be used much later, and by then there is no way to relearn those drafts from their appropriate objects. Also, as previously mentioned, many drafts are randomized on each play, so drafts cannot be recorded for one playthrough and be applied to all subsequent playthroughs.

Despite this problem, the adventure itself is actually quite short, and players who know what they are doing could conceivably beat the game in about an hour. Bobbin's goal is to find out to where the Elders and the mystery swan disappeared. His adventure starts on Loom Island, which is completely barren after he frees Hetchel from her eggshell prison and she goes off to find the swans.

The emerald city is quite gorgeous.

Bobbin's journey takes him to the mainland where he comes across three other Guilds: the protective and agricultural Guild of Shepherds, the artistic and pacifistic Guild of Glassmakers, and the reclusive warmongering Guild of Blacksmiths. The Glassmakers reside in Crystalgard where the hospitable Master Goodmold shows off the radiance of their crystal city. The Shepherds live in the Fold, a once-peaceful pasture of sheep where the livestock is constantly terrorized by a fearsome black dragon. Fleece Firmflanks, a gorgeous maiden of the Shepherds, laments that she cannot defend the sheep, but Bobbin just might have the ticket. The Blacksmiths constantly toil in the Forge, their massive anvil-shaped fortress. He finds a loafing young Blacksmith named Rusty Nailbender sleeping around an iron graveyard, and the only way Bobbin is going to get into the Forge is by committing a severe case of identity theft.

The one responsible for the disruptions in the pattern is Bishop Mandible, a callous cretin hailing from the Guild of anti-secular Clerics who wishes to (guess what) take over the world. He somehow manages to harness Bobbin's distaff for his own evil needs and summon the forces of the dead to rip the pattern asunder. The bastard brings Chaos, the high demon of the dead, into the world and causes...well, chaos. It all falls on Bobbin to mend the damage done by the dead and confront Chaos to try and restore order to the threads of reality. How does it all end? Rather suddenly. *Loom* becomes painfully easy after Mandible summons Chaos, and figuring out what to do takes an almost insultingly small amount of effort. The "final battle" against Chaos has the game practically shoving the correct drafts into your face, and it all culminates in a rather unsatisfying cliffhanger. It's almost as if the game was only two-thirds finished when the developers decided to attempt an experimental method of programming the last third while sleepwalking.

Loom may be a bit light on the gameplay department, which was amusingly mocked in Sierra's *Space Quest IV*, where a parody game called "Boom" described as having "no conflict, no puzzles, no chance of dying, and no interface [that] make this the easiest-to-finish game yet!" But it does excel in aesthetics with some of the finest visuals to be found in any adventure game

of the time. The graphics give the game's world a whimsical appearance that reaches just about across the range of the color spectrum.

As was the case for most of LucasArts' earlier releases, the graphics come in two distinct flavors: 16-color EGA for the original computer releases, and 256-color VGA for the others. Specifically, the 16-color palette is used for the original PC release, as well as the Atari ST, Amiga, and Macintosh versions, with only subtle differences between the versions. The bright EGA color scheme actually works in *Loom*'s favor and really adds to the world's surreal fantasy appearance. The Turbografx-16 CD version uses the EGA graphics as a basis, but improves them slightly with more color and detail. The VGA graphics are still preferable, and can be found on only two of the releases: the 1991 release for the Japanese FM Towns CD home computer (which is still playable in English), and the 1992 IBM PC CD-ROM re-release.

This was the first LucasArts game to prominently feature music, as opposed to their previous titles, which mostly played in silence. All of *Loom*'s music consists of excerpts from Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*, which is not only fitting for most situations, but also symbolic for the overall theme, what with the swans being a vital plot point. In the EGA versions, as well as the IBM PC CD version, the music plays once before it fades into silence, but the Turbografx-16 and FM Towns versions have the music running throughout the entire game.

Naturally, the music on the CD versions is the best, and while it's not recorded with a full orchestra like you'd find on most classical CDs, the synthesized renditions still sound excellent. The IBM PC CD version is the only one that features voice acting, technically making it the first dubbed LucasArts adventure, pre-dating *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* by a few months. The voice acting is decent for its time, with most of the characters speaking with classy British accents, but does not add a lot of impact to the game. The problem is that all of the voices are recorded on the CD's redbook audio tracks, rather than being compressed as samples like most other dubbed games. Since this technique takes up a monumental amount of space, a good deal of the original dialogue needed to be cut short and altered. Furthermore, many of the character closeups were removed, since the developers had problems lip-synching the dialogue. The FM Towns version lacks the voice acting, but it has the 256-color graphics, the CD music, the full dialogue, and the closeups. Thankfully, this version is easily playable on ScummVM, even though finding a legitimate copy is extremely difficult and overwhelmingly expensive.

While *Loom* is an overall short game lacking in substance, it is still an entertaining and visually alluring adventure game certainly worth a playthrough. The dialogue is well-written, and despite being serious overall, it allows for a good number of humorous bits, such as when the black dragon talks about her last mating season and the assistant to Bishop Mandible gets a bit too pesty with Bobbin. It may be over too soon and end unceremoniously, but *Loom* is a fine game that adventure aficionados will likely enjoy.

However, while it met with moderate critical success for its time and became a veritable cult classic in later years, LucasArts unfortunately decided to not follow up on the game's story. *Loom's* dire cliffhanger ending is the result of plans that eventually fell through due to lack of developer and audience interest, but what could have been would have tied up the loose threads of the story (pun slightly intended). The second game, *Forge*, would have starred Rusty Nailbender, Bobbin's blacksmith pal, fighting to regain control of the Blacksmith's stronghold after Chaos and the forces of the dead wrested control of it. The trilogy's end, *The Fold*, would focus on Fleece Firmflanks of the Shepherds, joining forces with Rusty and Bobbin to ultimately obliterate Chaos and restore peace to all the land, uniting all Guilds in harmony. It could have been an adventure epic in the making, but the developers of Loom were already focused on other projects at the time, and Bobbin's quest remained the only game of its kind.

Loom is also notable for its reference in *The Secret of Monkey Island*. Here, a minor character from *Loom* named Cobb appears sitting in a bar. He's dressed as a pirate and wears a button that reads "Ask me about *Loom*". When spoken to, he'll reluctantly reply to nearly every dialogue option with a succinct "Aye", but when asked about *Loom*, he goes off on a long winded spiel about how amazing it is, while the word "ADVERTISEMENT" flashes at the top of the screen.
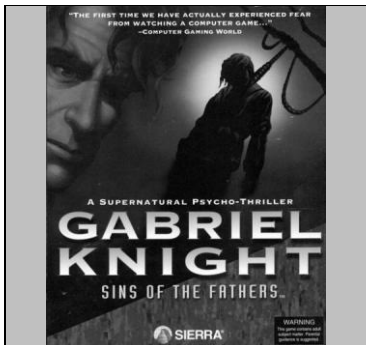
Gabriel Knight

As computer gaming ages, there's a growing call for the media to mature, to tell more adult stories beyond the pulp fantasies of a vast majority of games. Many graphic adventure games from the likes of Sierra or Lucasarts, while enjoyable, erred more on the cartoonish side, telling light and humorous stories. Sierra's sole "mature" series was *Police Quest*, although that was little of interest to anyone who didn't care for crime drama, and it frequently fell into goofiness anyway, despite its best efforts. In 1994, Sierra introduced *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers*, in an attempt to take adventure gaming to a new level.

Gabriel Knight is the creation of Jane Jensen, an aspiring author who eventually became an actual author after the death of golden age Sierra (officially bookended with the release of *Gabriel Knight 3* in 2000). Working her way through the ranks, she eventually assisted Roberta Williams with the story in *King's Quest VI*, which is largely regarded as the reason why that entry is so remarkably better than the rest of the series. Given the chance to write and direct her own game, she created one of the deepest and most adult computer games ever developed.

Gabriel is the titular star of the series, an American author turned demon hunter. It neatly straddles the line somewhere between mystery and horror genres – its closest literary comparison would probably be Stephen King, but even that arguably sells the games short. He and his partner, Grace Nakimura, investigate a series of crimes, each heavily entwining historical fact with mythological fiction.

There are three games in the series, each radically different from a technological standpoint. The first game is like most Sierra games – 2D, VGA graphics, with an icon-based parser – and covers Gabriel's investigations into several voodoo-related murders in New Orleans, as well as his own family's secret past. The second game heavily utilizes digitized photography and full motion video using live actors, and takes place in Germany, as Gabriel hunts down an apparent herd of werewolves. The third game is entirely 3D using polygonal graphics, and takes place in a small chateau in France, where Gabriel solves a mystery regarding vampires and the Holy Grail.

Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers

Initial Release Date: 1994
Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh
Designer: Jane Jensen
Developer: Sierra

Gabriel Knight, our hero, is a New Orleans native. He's smart and handsome, but also a bit of an arrogant jerk, and a huge slacker to boot. His few novels have failed, and he resorts to living in the backroom of his New Orleans book store, St. George's, which also isn't exactly raking in the dough. His assistant is the lovely Grace Nakimura, the sole employee of his sad little book store. She's repelled by his chauvinistic mannerisms – to be accurate, the word she uses to describe him is a "lout" – but she finds herself subtly attracted to him nonetheless.

Sins of the Fathers begins with a nightmare – images of spilled blood on a ritual dagger, and a woman burnt at the stake, culminating in a foreboding image of Gabriel's own limp body hung on a tree. This dream, actually a vision of his distant ancestor, is explained further in the included graphic novel. Waking up in a cold sweat, Gabriel stumbles up out of bed to face the world. Upon reading the newspaper, he learns of a series of "voodoo murders", ritualistic

killings that appear to have tracings with the voodoo religion. The experts dismiss this as crockery, but Gabriel sees it as opportunity to get some inspiration for his next novel and sets off to investigate. He just happens to have an in – Detective Mosely, his old childhood buddy, has been assigned to the case, and allows Gabriel access to the crime scene in exchange for a place in his book. What begins as a casual curiosity soon explodes into not only an expose on the underground voodoo cults of New Orleans, but also an exploration of Gabriel's long forgotten – and cursed – family history. He soon becomes involved with Malia Gedde, a wealthy socialite with deep ties of the history of New Orleans, an affair which brings him closer to both his past and the mystery. He is also pestered by the constant messages from a German who identifies himself as Wolfgang Ritter. Gabriel eventually flies to Europe to meet him, where he learns that he's the last in a long line of Schattenjaegers, demon hunters from the days of yore. From there, Gabriel must not only solve the murders, but meet his ancient destiny, and stop the nightmares that have plagued his family for generations.

Gabriel spends much time in New Orleans researching the history of voodoo.

The game is divided into ten "days", each day beginning with Gabriel getting a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper, keeping up on current events. From there, you can access a map to ride around New Orleans including the famous French Quarter and Jackson Square, and the surrounding areas, including Tulane University and Bayou St. John.

The interface utilizes more icons than the standard Sierra game – in addition to "walk" and "look", the standard "use" icon has been broken down to "push" and "operate". You can also choose to "talk" to people for brief dialogues, or "interrogate" for more in depth questioning. In some ways, the extra verbs make it feel like an earlier LucasArts game, but all it really does is overcomplicate things. The screen view is letterboxed, with the icon bar appearing at the top of the screen, and the dialogue on the bottom. Not only does this lend to the movie-like feel, but it also prevents the text from blocking the visuals.

The writing is almost uniformly excellent – with the occasional slightly silly line – bolstered by some excellent voice work found in the CD-ROM version. Tim Curry provides the voice of Gabriel Knight, which is a love-it-or-hate-it ordeal – it's distinct, to be certain, but there's still something off about a British actor trying to do an American Southern accent. Leah Remini plays Grace with an appropriate amount of sarcasm that makes her amusing without coming off as caustic, and Mark Hamill does a less overdone Southern accent as the voice of Mosely. The narrator is played by Virginia Capers, an elderly African-American woman with a very thick New Orleans drawl. She adds plenty of color, but she also talks really slowly, to the point where it's better to enable text and click through the descriptions.

There are a number of reasons why *Gabriel Knight* stands out amongst its peers. For starters, its approach to storytelling is much more mature than practically any other game out there,

adventure or otherwise. It's more than just violence, sex and profanity – there's plenty of that, although it's rarely too explicit. Simply, *Gabriel Knight's* writing and characterizations are head and shoulders amongst any other adventure game. In most Sierra games, you just click the "talk" icon on someone and exchange a bit of dialogue. In *Gabriel Knight*, these are far more fleshed out. They take place on an entirely different screen, on a black background, with portraits lip-synched with the spoken dialogue. You can ask any of these people about any of the important topics regarding your investigation. Most of them are in some way relevant to the mystery, but the last option with any character is simply to ask them about themselves. Assuming you're talking to someone who's willing to open up, here they will go into huge depth about their background, their likes and dislikes, and other tidbits about their personality. It makes every other character in every other adventure game look like nothing more than a cardboard cutout.

Gabriel, too, is far more fleshed out than your average protagonist. In this game, you can visit your aging grandmother, and have lengthy discussions about your family history, how your grandparents (and parents) met and fell in love, their immigration into America, their life ambitions. You can talk to Mosely, who's gone from Gabriel's childhood buddy to a detective with the New Orleans police, and either chat about the case or simply reminisce about old times. You can even exchange playful insults, if you want, which highlights the boyish nature of their relationship. You rarely see depths plumbed this deeply in any kind of interactive narrative.

It also highlights some of the contrasts between video game narratives and literary narratives. During the course of the game's ten days, you spend about seven of them simply wandering around New Orleans, interrogating people, following up on leads, conducting research, and generally just providing background info. It's not until the seventh day – roughly 3/4 through the game – that you actually leave New Orleans for a quick jaunt through Gabriel's ancestral home in Germany, before leaving for a tomb in Africa, and then finally returning home for the climatic encounter. In other words, it takes a sizable chunk the game in order for the "adventure" to truly begin. As the story progresses, it also introduces more supernatural elements, although like *Indiana Jones*, they're saved for the climatic scenes. It might feel a bit slow paced at first, but all of this back-story is necessary for the final stages of the game, and make the payoff all the more satisfying.

St. George's Books, Gabriel's store, is slightly pathetic.

Where the characterizations really pay off is right at the very end, where you're presented with a very clear "good ending/bad ending" choice. Suffice to say, the bad ending is...pretty bad, where the surviving characters mourn the departed ones. During the course of the game, death scenes are rare, but when they do happen, they're really gory – a quick run-in with a mummy results in Gabriel's heart being torn from his chest. It's shocking, but perhaps required by something that would call itself a "horror" game. So many adventure games, especially Sierra's,

have prided themselves on haphazardly killing the player characters, for the sake of humor or frustration. Here, it's legitimately emotional, and even a bit heartbreaking. And that's when you know that Jensen has done a damn good job.

It's also clear that Jensen is pretty astounded behind the history of voodoo, particularly the brand that originated in Louisiana. New Orleans voodoo is a mixture of African traditions and Catholicism, which sprung up due to the slave trade in the South in the 1800s. Much time is spent exploring the history of voodoo, its misconceptions, and most importantly, how real voodoo has nothing to do with the ritualistic murders being committed in game. It's pretty educational, and this depth of knowledge largely characterizes the *Gabriel Knight* series.

The structure does lead to some irritating problems when it comes to progression. Each day will end once certain events are accomplished, and oftentimes you find yourself running around in circles until you stumble upon the trigger that allows the game to continue. Compared to some other Sierra games, though, *Gabriel Knight* is much friendlier. While the puzzles can be difficult, they're rarely too illogical. Some of them are typical adventure puzzles, like distracting police offers with a doughnut cart. Others involve interpreting drum codes (which is pretty easy) and translating a symbolic language (which isn't). Since the game won't progress unless you solve all the necessary puzzles, there's really no way to get stuck, not counting a few instances if you save in a stupid place at the end of the game. In other words, it's pretty progressive, as far as adventure games go.

The soundtrack was provided by Robert Holmes, and it's one of the best heard in a Sierra title. The song most often heard is Gabriel's theme, done as a dramatic orchestration on the title theme, and as a lighter, piano theme in St. George's Books. Much of the music is to bolster the atmosphere, and does an excellent job at that, too.

The CD version can also be run in SVGA mode – optional for DOS, but mandatory for Windows. In truth, it's pretty cheap – the icons and character portraits have all been redrawn in the higher resolution, but the backgrounds and sprites have just been resized, so there's little actual benefit. The Windows version also improperly scales the font, making it look jaggy and ugly. The game is also notoriously buggy, and was hard to get to run on modern PCs for a long time, but thankfully there are some fan made patches and installers available now.

	The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery
	Initial Release Date: 1995
	Platforms: IBM PC
	Designer: Jane Jensen
	Publisher: Sierra

The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery, picks up roughly a year after the end of the first game. Gabriel has moved to his family castle in Germany, and is living off his first successful book: *The Voodoo Murders*, starring one "Blake Backlash", which is very transparently Gabriel himself. His family reputation as demon hunters is soon revealed, and the local townspeople beg him to investigate a series of mutilations. They appear to have been caused by wolves, so naturally the blame lies on a pack of wolves that escaped from the local zoo. Further investigations, however, reveal the entanglement of a local hunting club, a secret animal smuggling ring and, most intriguingly, werewolves. It's here that Gabriel meets Friedrich Von Glower, a wealthy baron who runs the club. He sees much promise in Gabriel and they share many of the same interests – wine and woman, in particular. His role sort of mirrors that of

Malia Gedde in the first game and while their relationship is not overtly romantic in nature, there are some vague homoerotic undertones.
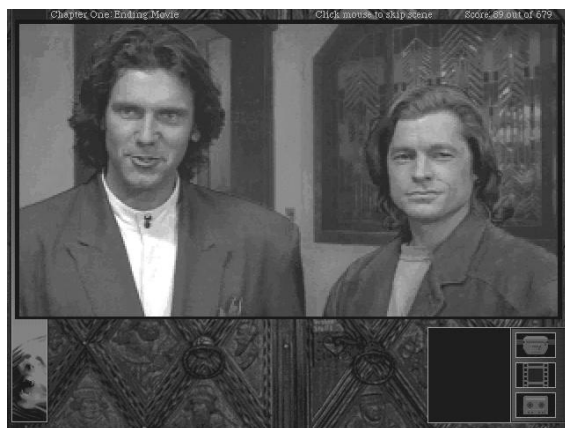
Gabriel, on the right, hangs out with his new best bro Baron Von Glower.

Meanwhile, Grace decides that she's wasting her time back in America and flies off to Germany, only to find that Gabriel has left his castle for Munich. Frustrated, she sets off on her own research, slowly uncovering the mystery of Ludwig II, the "last true king of Bavaria", as the locals call him. Ludwig II was a bit of an eccentric, often dismissing foreign matters in favor of living a lavish fantasy life, and constructing castle after gorgeous castle. The government tried to declare him insane and remove him from power, but Ludwig was later found mysteriously drowned in a nearby lake. Whether it was murder or suicide, nobody quite knows, but it's a long standing national mystery in Germany. Grace is determined to prove that werewolves were somehow involved with Ludwig II, and ends up discovering a long lost opera composed by Richard Wagner, a longtime friend of Ludwig.

Chapter One begins with the player controlling Gabriel, then the view alternates between Grace and him for the next few chapters, until their stories and paths meet in the sixth chapter at the end. The game is spread over six CDs, generally one chapter per CD, but there is some disc switching for certain scenes. Apparently the original design documentation called for eight chapters, with at least one of them putting the player in control of Ludwig II, as he tries to hide the opera scrolls, but unfortunately that was cut out in the planning stages due to budgetary constraints.

The Beast Within runs on the same engine as *Phantasmagoria* and uses many of the same techniques. Every interaction is shown with full motion video, which accounts for the number of discs. By default, the video is interlaced and looks rather ugly, but a fan made patch can disable it. There are still some compression artifacts, but in general the video quality is actually pretty good. The less is said about the CGI werewolves, though, the better.

In most of the scenes, you don't directly control Gabriel or Grace, although they're present on the screen. Instead, you simply click on an area to investigate it or walk to a different screen. The backgrounds are all high resolution photographs, which look fantastically gorgeous – it may as well be a promotional device for the German tourist industry, because like the New Orleans feel of the first game, *The Beast Within* completely nails the modern German atmosphere. However, in spite of its visual splendor, it still feels like there's a strange disconnect between the characters and the scenery. There isn't nearly as much to interact with or comment on as in the first game, leaving each screen feeling hauntingly beautiful yet depressingly empty.

Of course, the deciding factor of any full motion video game is the acting, and this is where *The Beast Within* hits some shaky ground. Dean Erickson certainly looks the part of Gabriel, and

while he's significantly less boorish, he's also a bit duller. Joan Takahasi plays Grace, and while she's too cold and unlikable in the early chapters, acting openly hostile to Gabriel's live-in maid, she eventually warms up as the story progresses. They both do a decent job, but their personalities just aren't as lively as they were in the original. Still, in an era where most FMV games barely surpassed high school drama level, *The Beast Within* is relatively decent.
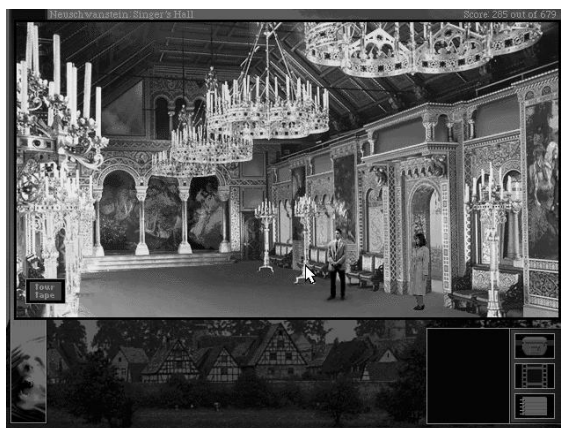
The castles that Grace visits are completely stunning.

More problematic is the issue of direction and pacing, because some scenes just go on way too long. There's a reason why exposition scenes in TV and movie are brief – it's because watching talking heads discuss various issues for ten minutes straight just isn't all that engaging, especially when there's no music. When using live action, you need **some** kind of dramatic tension, especially when there's so much video, and it just isn't here.

Like the first game, you spend a lot of time interrogating various people. There aren't quite as many topics to dig into, because that would simply require far too much video. When you're just reading text and listening to voice acting, you can click through the dialogue to speed things up. You can't do that with video – you either watch the whole scene or skip it entirely. (Thankfully, this is one of the boons of the game – there's an FMV scene with almost every action, but they can be easily bypassed with a single click.) There are no subtitles either, although another fan made patch has added them, at least in the Windows version. All conversations are recorded for later playback, so you can review conversations if you've lost track of something.
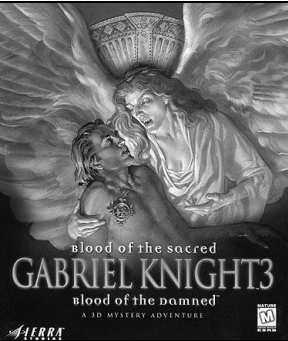
Even more annoying is that large parts of the game are simply hunt n' click fests. There's one whole chapter where you play as Grace, simply walking around museums and looking at things. That's fine, but the area layouts are quite confusing, making it extremely easy to miss one of the many, many triggers. If you miss even one, you can't proceed, which is liable to drive anyone nuts, as you comb and re-comb the same areas over and over, trying to find the one semi-visible part you missed, and then interrogating the same people over and over in hopes that new conversation topics have popped up. There's a vague hint system which lets you know which locations still have tasks to be accomplished before you can move on to the next chapter, but it's still easy to feel frustrated and aimless. A few of the puzzles can get quite difficult, especially one early on where you need to splice together a very specific set of words to create a hidden message.

The final chapters are far more dramatic, and include a wolf hunt through a darkened forest – which, despite its tension, is little more than a "choose the right path or die" sequence – and a rather bizarre real-time puzzle/strategy segment where you morph into a werewolf and need to hunt down your opponent in an enclosed space. It's actually pretty cool, as the whole segment takes place from the first person perspective, complete with off-colored visuals.

While some of the puzzles can be pretty difficult throughout, the most annoying ones are right in the first chapter. Early on, Gabriel needs to impersonate someone by splicing together bits of a previously recorded conversation. Of course, there are numerous lines of dialogue to comb through, so the hint function is really the only way to get the precise wording that the game demands. This one at least makes sense – near the end, you need to infiltrate a sporting club by distracting the maitre d' by buying a cuckoo clock and hiding it behind a plant – very weird.

Robert Holmes returns to supply the score, along with some additional helpers. Many of the themes will sound familiar to fans of the first game, but they've been arranged for orchestral quality, and all sound fantastic. The highlight is the "lost" Wagnerian opera, which is certainly an accomplishment. Despite its high quality, a huge majority of the game is played in silence, with only sound effects and character voices. Indeed, the most impressive is the opera scene, which tries to mimic Wagner's style. It's only one act of it, so it's obviously pretty short compared to a real opera, but it's impressive to see the lengths that Sierra went to make this feel authentic.

In spite of its pacing issues and sparse environments, *The Beast Within* still manages to be engaging. Jensen once again is clearly enamored with the subject material – German castles and the conspiracies surrounding them, long lost operas, werewolves – and does a fantastic job in sharing them with the player.

	Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned Initial Release Date: 1999 Platforms: IBM PC Designer: Jane Jensen Publisher: Sierra

In the late 90s, the adventure game genre was dying. LucasArts' fantastic *Grim Fandango* had more or less flopped, Sierra's latest entries in the *King's Quest* and *Quest for Glory* series were practically in different genres, and titles from competing developers were few. And yet, those few faithful heralded the coming of the third *Gabriel Knight* game. After all, the previous two titles were critically acclaimed hits that sold extremely well, plus it would be fully in 3D. Surely this would be the game that saved the genre!

That didn't quite happen.

Instead, the third *Gabriel Knight* game, subtitled *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, is jokingly referred to as the game that nailed adventure gaming's coffin shut. This is a somewhat unfair assessment of the situation, because it's really not a terrible game, but the fact is that it was also the last true adventure title published by Sierra – the offices were essentially shut down after its release.

As with the first game, the prologue is told via a comic book enclosed in the packaging. Gabriel and Grace have been invited to the house of Prince James, the exiled monarch of Scotland. During their visit, Prince James' youngest son, a mere baby, is swept away during the night. Gabriel hops on the train and follows them to the small French village of Rennes-le-Chateau. Although it may seem like a tiny little place out in the middle of nowhere, Rennes-le-Chateau has strong connections to the Holy Grail legend, which in turn is intertwined with the history of Jesus Christ. As luck would have it, a tour group is in town, each participant coming from a different part of the globe to hunt for the town's treasure. Included in this group is, oddly enough, Detective Mosely, who claims to simply be vacationing, but whose motives aren't

entirely clear. Once Grace shows up on the next day, the action picks up as two of Prince James' men are found murdered, completely drained of blood. Naturally, Gabriel expects the supernatural and begins to investigate the possibility of vampires.

Gabriel and Mosely find a body out in the countryside.

In conducting research for this game, Jensen integrated elements from Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln's controversial book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which examined the possibility of Jesus having children with Mary Magdalene. It also suggests that the Holy Grail may simply be a metaphor for the bloodline of Jesus Christ, and that his descendents mingled with the nobles of Southern France to spawn the Merovingian dynasty. The story also involves the legendary Knights Templar and the Priory of Sion, both involved with the mystery behind Christ's lineage, as well as the story of the Wandering Jew, who was doomed to near immortality after taunting Christ on the crucifix.

The story also treads some of the same ground as Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The DaVinci Code*, although it can hardly be faulted for that, since *Gabriel Knight 3* was released years prior to the book's publication – Brown and Jensen just simply happened to read the same book. There's also some vague crossover with Revolution Software's *Broken Sword*, although they're still both quite different stories. What can't be excused is the game's final chapter, where Gabriel must pass a series of tests that are just a little too close to the trials from the end of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. And, compared to the tight integration of voodoo mythology and werewolf lore in its previous games, the vampires barely play a part in the story at all – they just kinda show up right at the end.

All things told, it is fascinating stuff, but the story doesn't really pick up until the third chapter, and just meanders up until then. The previous games have been a bit slow, too, but they still managed to be somewhat engrossing. The writing, too, isn't quite up to par – it's fun to see Gabriel, Grace and Mosely interact with each other, even though it's odd that Mosely now apparently has a crush on Grace, but the secondary cast is largely made up of ill-defined nitwits. That may be the point, that anyone who would come on vacation to a small town to search for a mystical treasure may very well be loony, but it doesn't make for interesting storytelling.

Like *The Beast Within*, the player alternately controls both Gabriel and Grace. The story takes place over the course of three days, which are in turn subdivided into "time blocks", although it ultimately works the same way as the previous games – walk around and investigate stuff until you find the triggers for the next time block.

Gabriel spends most of his time hunting for clues about the missing baby, as well as the treasure, while Grace spends her time researching the history of Rennes-le-Chateau and its connection with the Grail legend. For Gabriel, this largely involves stalking people, breaking

into their rooms to shuffle through their stuff, and taking fingerprints, which are then scanned into SIDNEY, the helpful computer database. Most of this is preparation for the denouement near the end, where Gabriel must accuse some of the guests for a series of crimes. Although successful completion of this scene isn't required, it does greatly elucidate the plot.

Grace, on the other hand, spends much of her time trying to solve the riddles of a thirteen verse poem by analyzing maps, symbols, and other various items found throughout the adventure. You then use these clues to draw points on a map through the computer system. All of this lies somewhere between intriguing and tedious, depending on how much you like rote detective work, but it's a fair bit better than all of the click-happy chapters from *The Beast Within*.

Of course, the most infamous puzzle in the game is the one where Gabriel needs to impersonate Mosely in order to rent a moped. The first step is to steal his passport, which is done by placing a piece of candy in the hallway and snag it from his pants while he's busy unwrapping it. This in itself is weird, but not the oddest part of the puzzle. Anyway, Gabriel and Mosely look nothing alike. The logical step would be to find something to take a photo of Gabriel and then replace in the passport, but no, that would be too easy. (Strangely, you actually get a computer that makes fake IDs, but that doesn't happen until later.) So, the first step is to steal his yellow jacket. Next, you need to hide the fact that Gabriel isn't bald, so you need to find a hat. Fair enough – but then it gets more ridiculous. Your final step is to grab a magic marker and draw a mustache on the passport photo to obscure the face. Now, Gabriel himself doesn't have a mustache either, so you need to find a local alley cat, stick a piece of masking tape on a hole in a door, spray the cat with a water bottle in order to make it run through said hole, pick up cat hair snagged from the tape, and then apply it to Gabriel's face using a packet of syrup found in the dining room.

Contender for the Worst Puzzle Ever? Could be.

This kind of crazy, backwards hyper-logic might fly in a cartoonish game like *Day of the Tentacle*, but in *Gabriel Knight*, which is vaguely based in reality (supernatural elements notwithstanding), it comes off as completely absurd. Furthermore, this puzzle is right near the beginning of the game – undoubtedly half the people playing this game just gave up right here. Members of the development team have even proclaimed that they hated the puzzle, but they just didn't have time to rework it. A wiser staff would've just cut it out entirely.

It's more than just the puzzle design that's suspect – the technical aspects just aren't up to par either. *Gabriel Knight* has now gone full 3D, with the gamer controlling both the cursor and the camera. You move the camera around the environments, either by the keyboard or by holding down the mouse button and moving it around. When you want Gabriel or Grace to interact with something, you point to it and click on it, bringing up a handful of context

sensitive icons to interact with it. Although you can technically click around the screen to make your character walk around, it's not really needed – if they're off-screen, they'll warp to the camera's location anyway, and you can make them instantly jump from place to place with the Escape key. In other words, it's much closer to the *Tex Murphy* games like *Under a Killing Moon* than it is to other 3D adventure games like *Grim Fandango.*

It's filled with its own issues though. Indoor navigation isn't much of a problem, but when wandering around outside, you'll often hit invisible walls to signify that you need to make your character walk to the next area. The camera itself moves too quickly, and you need to utilize the Control and Shift keys in order to tilt the camera, strafe, or change elevation. The visuals haven't exactly aged well, either. The textures are relatively decent, at least in the indoor sections, but they're stunningly nasty in the many outdoor scenes, as the geometry is very angular and unrealistic. The characters come off far worse. The animations are stilted and robotic, and only the lip-synching looks anything even approaching natural. One could simply write it off as being a product of its era – after all, this was only released a year or two after the original *Half Life* and *Unreal* – but those were action games that didn't necessary focus on drama or dialogue. No matter the way you look at it – the technology used here just wasn't good enough for this type of adventure game.

The criticisms don't end there, either. Tim Curry returns as Gabriel Knight, but his acting seems off even compared to the first game, with his accent even more overdone than usual. New actors take on the role of Grace and Mosely, and as sound-a-likes, they do a pretty decent job. The rest of the cast is filled with a variety of accents, and waver from excellent to awful. Overall, the acting's just not nearly as consistent as the first game. The soundtrack is supplied once again by Robert Holmes, but he is joined by David Henry. The music is a bit sparse, and a few songs are reused over and over to the point where they become incredibly repetitive, but there are still some outstanding pieces, particularly the underused title theme, another piano theme, this time backed by an acoustic guitar.

So it's a bit rough to say that *Gabriel Knight 3* killed the adventure game genre, but everything – from its structure to its writing to its puzzles – is sufficiently lacking compared to the other games, and its troubled development (the title was delayed for over a year) obviously didn't help the final product. The resolution makes the story pretty worthwhile overall, but it's hardly one of Sierra's most shining moments. Too bad, too – although the plot ends on a high note, the final scene ends on a cliffhanger, with the future of Gabriel and Grace's relationship in question, which, due to the death of the studio, was never explored further.

Compilations and Novels

Sins of the Fathers and *The Beast Within* were compiled into a single collector's set, dubbed *Gabriel Knight Mysteries.* It includes copies of the graphic novels found in *Sins of the Fathers* and *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned*, along with a soundtrack CD containing the music from the second game, along with a few themes from the first. It also includes a demo of the third game. The first two games were rewritten as novels by Jane Jensen and published by Roc. The first is a fairly faithful adaptation, but the second deviates greatly from the game. The first is also easily available through second hand retailers, while the second has some degree of rarity.

Amazon Guardians of Eden

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designers: Chris Jones, Kevin L. Jones
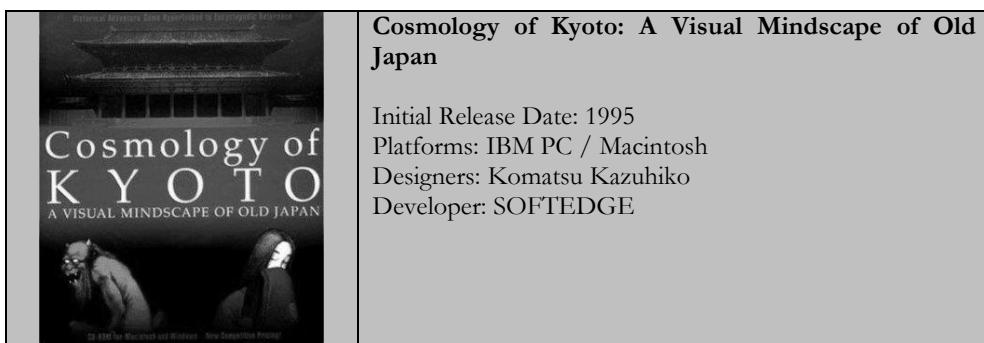Developer: Access Software

Built using the same engine as *Martian Memorandum*, Access Software's *Amazon: Guardians of Eden* puts you in the role young Jason, whose older brother Allen has mysteriously disappeared in the South American jungle. While it takes awhile to get off the ground, Jason eventually meets up with a beautiful young explorer named Maya and becomes entangled with the native's struggle over some emeralds brought by Cortex centuries before.

The story is presented like a 50s TV serial, complete with black and white projector countdown slides when you boot it up. There are twelve chapters, each ending with a melodramatic cliffhanger and featuring silly little title cards. Like Access' other titles, the plot itself is relatively serious, but all very silly – a Tor Johnson look-a-like bully is taken down with hot peppers, and guards are distracted with love-potion-laden darts. Everyone is afraid of communists, and radiation is mutating bugs left and right. The highlights are the digitized actors and the full motion video clips, which are rarely more than a few seconds long but often hilarious, especially when they involve death scenes. Watch as an explosion with four frames of animation takes out the evil Colonel Sanchez! Or watch as the dramatic tension of Allen's sacrifice on the bridge of death is totally ruined by hilarious digitized yells and Wile E. Coyote scaling effects!


The Bridge of Death scene is immensely difficult to beat, but is also one of the funniest.

But like Access' other early games, the interface is unresponsive, which proves incredibly frustrating during the numerous timed action sequences. Combined with the dead ends, it makes an otherwise amusing title borderline unplayable. Still, while *Martian Memorandum* is more noteworthy due to its affiliation with the Tex Murphy games, *Amazon: Guardians of Eden* is probably more memorable.

	Cosmology of Kyoto: A Visual Mindscape of Old Japan
	Initial Release Date: 1995 Platforms: IBM PC / Macintosh Designers: Komatsu Kazuhiko Developer: SOFTEDGE

The only video game Roger Ebert ever reviewed and enjoyed, *Cosmology of Kyoto* is a striking blend of history, philosophy, religion and myth. Intriguing and unsettling, the simple gameplay and rich storytelling lead to an experience that is sure to be long remembered.

The game opens with options for character creation. It is important to remember the name you give your character, because it doubles as the password when you restore a saved game. You are then able to choose what your avatar will look like, but don't be too picky – you will die sooner or later and be reincarnated as a completely different person, complete with an entirely new look. If you possess the game's actual written instructions or the included map, they will do you little good. For all intents and purposes, you are thrown outside the city gates without a dime to your name or a stitch of clothing. In the absence of any stated goals, you proceed to explore the city.
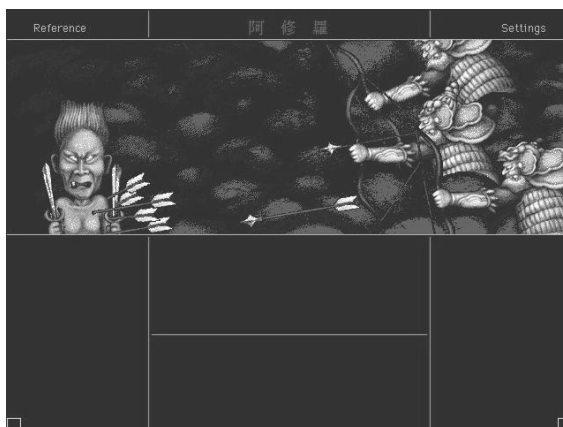
The artwork here is quite strange.

The setting is 10th century Japan in the city of Kyoto. It is a time of unrest among humans, demons and ghosts alike. Portions of the city are beautiful, while others lay in shambles. Human life is a cheap, and death comes easily at the end of a sword or by the jaws of a monster. The game makes no attempt to hide sex or violence, and it features many mature themes and situations. Thankfully, most of the graphics are hand drawn rather than computer generated, and they manage to hold up very well. The vast majority of the game is seen from a first-person perspective, and the graphics are mostly static, with only light touches of animation. Whether you encounter a beautiful woman, a pitiful beggar or an enraged demon, the game more than manages to get its point across. Music and sound effects in the game are extremely subtle, adding small accents to various events. The speech audio is in the original Japanese with English subtitles, which adds to the sense of authenticity permeating the whole experience.

Throughout the game and even outside of it, you have access to a reference file that explains aspects of ancient Kyoto, including its history and its culture. The entire library is always available, but it first gives you topics related specifically to what you are currently witnessing. For instance, if you see a flaming rock crashing down from the sky, clicking on the reference button will bring up an article about the Kanzan Stone, a sacred meteorite that is still worshipped today. These tidbits are in no way necessary to continue in the game itself, but they are extremely interesting. This simple attempt to enlighten the player would be a welcome addition to many games.
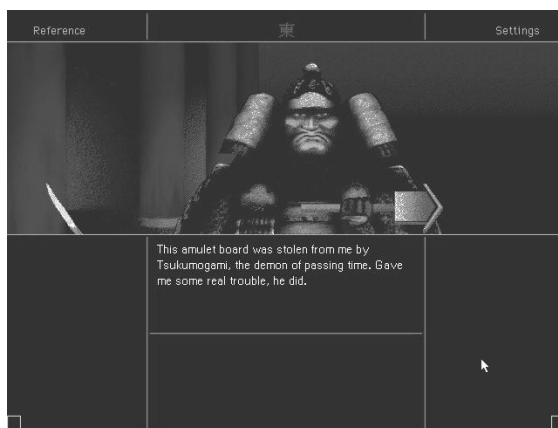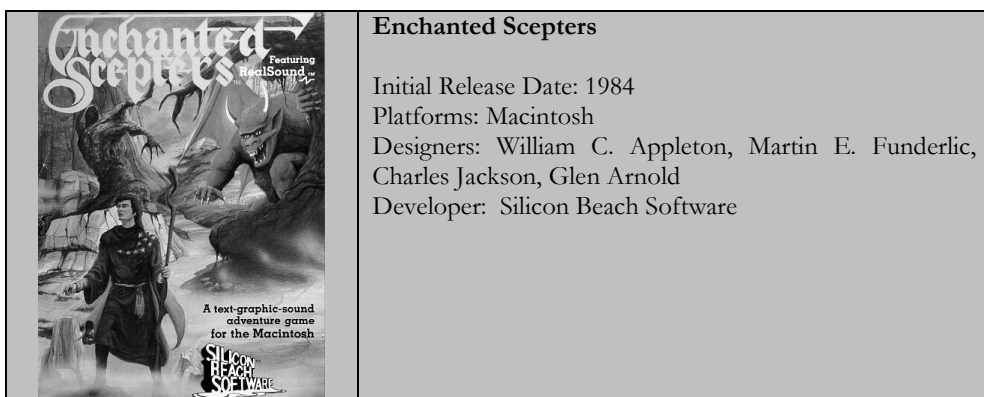

Cosmology of Kyoto is undoubtedly one of the most unique games ever created.

Gameplay is extremely basic, using the simplest of point-and-click systems. It all boils down to exploring Kyoto and living out legends, conversations, and everyday experiences of the time. There are also occasionally easy puzzles or short conversations where you must type in your response. Inventory items are mostly useless, or only used in otherwise nonessential plotlines. There is only one item that is absolutely essential for the completion of the game. As for the story, there is a decent balance between the presentation of events from recorded history and those from myths. For instance, at one point you witness the destruction of a building, which actually happened, and speak to a historic ruler. You are also shown the metaphysical side of the disaster, that demons or ghosts were ultimately responsible.

The most common supernatural tales in the game are classic ghost stories. Your character meets a woman, is led to a dark place, and then something horrible happens. Variations on this theme occur several times, and each one is related to actual Japanese folklore. *Cosmology of Kyoto* is full of these side-stories. There is an overall plot in only the loosest sense; to progress, there are certain events that must be triggered, but between these events you are welcome to do whatever you like. You can give your alms to the poor or lose them in a cock fight; it's entirely up to you. But it's only when you journey deeper and deeper into the city that you find your ultimate destiny, experiencing the circle of death and rebirth as you go.

One of the most brilliant elements in the game is its handling of character death. When you die, and you most assuredly will, you experience one of a variety of hells described in Buddhism. In these hells, your character is tortured in a wide variety of gruesome ways. You are then reincarnated either as another human or as something else. At one point, you witness a dog eating the entrails of a corpse before being devoured itself by a larger dog. You might very well find yourself reincarnated as that doomed dog, and then the cycle repeats itself.

Made at a time when designers were still figuring out how to utilize the CD-ROM format, *Cosmology of Kyoto* attempts to be many things: a game, an educational tool, and a work of art. Unbelievably, it manages to be all of these and more.

Enchanted Scepters

Initial Release Date: 1984
Platforms: Macintosh
Designers: William C. Appleton, Martin E. Funderlic, Charles Jackson, Glen Arnold
Developer: Silicon Beach Software

Enchanted Scepters, released in 1984 by Silicon Beach Software, is technically the first point and click adventure game ever made, even if it's just a graphical text adventure grafted on to the standard Macintosh interface. As a hero named Saber, you're tasked with finding four elemental scepters and returning them to the wizard Elron. It's a fairly standard adventure for its time, with a large world to explore but sparse descriptions. There are also some light RPG elements grafted on, as you'll routinely come in contact with enemies and need to use the weapons you've found to defeat them, though there aren't any stats beyond Saber's health. Like the early *Ultima* games, it tosses thematic cohesion to the wind in favor of amusingly clashing aesthetics – one moment you're wandering through caves and swinging axes at trolls, the next moment you're piloting a submarine to a computer-filled fortress and fighting robots with blaster guns.
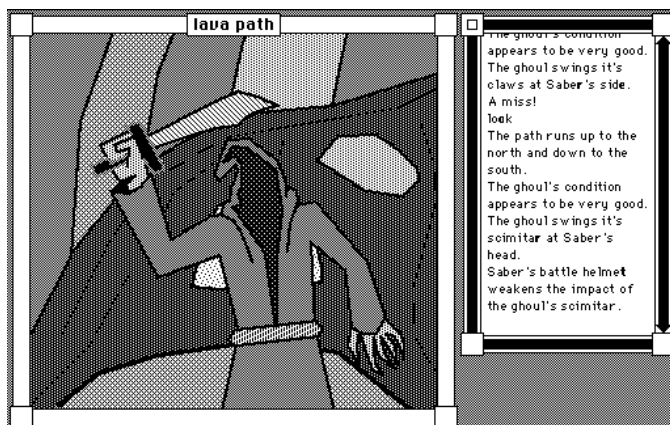
Enchanted Scepters is full is silly looking enemies waiting to carve you a new one.

While advanced for the time, the interface has a number of foibles. Although you can click on the image to interact with the world in a limited capacity, like picking up items and opening doors, you can't actually move or fight anything with the arrow cursor, which is what you'll be doing most of the time. Instead, you either pick a command from the menu bar or use a key combination. You can still type stuff in, but the game can barely parse anything other than the built-in actions. It's still playable though, and the simple black and white graphics are leagues beyond what other computers could do at the time. It also laid the groundwork for better implementations, like in ICOM's *MacVenture* series. The authoring system used to create the game was also released to the public two years later as *World Builder*, which saw several games produced, largely by amateurs.
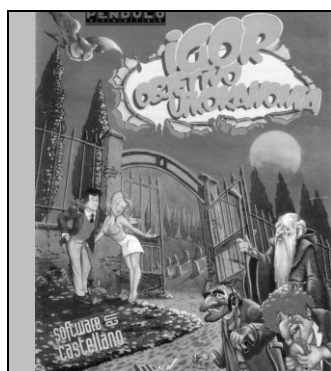
Igor: Objective Uikokahonia

Initial Release Date: 1992
Platforms: IBM PC
Designers: Joseph Kluytmans, Corinne Perrot
Developer: Pendulo Studios

The first game from Pendulo Studios, who would later go on to develop the *Runaway* series, *Igor: Objective Uikokahonia* has absolutely nothing to do with the infamous hunchback but is rather the name of a prep school student infatuated with his gorgeous classmate Laura. She's about to go on a class trip with her Biology class to the beautiful tropical island of Uikokahonia, where it appears she may be hooking up with Phillip, Igor's jerkass romantic rival. This transgression cannot stand, so Igor must find a way to accompany her. This relatively freeform adventure requires three tasks – enroll in the Biology class, find a way to cheat on the test so he can qualify, and figure out how to get the cash to pay for the trip.

Despite having a tropical island in its title, nearly the entire game takes place at a dull university.

The game looks and feels like *Monkey Island*, but much like practically every LucasArts copycat in the 90s, the writing just isn't up to par. It's not offensively bad, but there's no reason to feel any sympathy for Igor nor his plight for Laura, since her only real asset is being really hot. There are at least a dozen folks across campus that could have been funny – the wise janitor, the sandwich hoarding classmate – yet there's barely any opportunity to interact with them. The puzzles carry some comedic weight, though like the later *Runaway* titles, they tend not to make a whole lot of sense. In order to screw with Philip, you must switch his whiskey with a bottle of strange fluid from the school laboratory, which will cause him to go crazy Linda Blair-style and force the priest to leave his post to perform an exorcism. Other such puzzles are equally silly, like promising to find an old blind lady's cat and instead giving her a fattened lizard instead. The cause-effect relationship is incomprehensible, and there's way too much pixel hunting, but at least they provide the humor that the writing lacks. A CD-ROM version with voices exists in its native Spanish, but the purported English version does not appear to exist, with only a disk release commonly available.

Shannara

Initial Release Date: 1995
Platforms: IBM PC
Designer: Corey and Lori Cole
Publisher: Legend Entertainment

Terry Brooks' *Shannara* series is one of the most prolific of modern fantasy novels, consisting of over twenty entries over the course of nearly thirty years. Legend Entertainment, fond of creating graphic adventures based on books, developed their own entry into the series, simply dubbed *Shannara*. It's technically an original story, although it functions as a sequel to *The Sword of Shannara*, the very first book, a copy of which was bundled along with the packaging. In the game, you play as Jak Ohmsford, son of Shea Ohmsford and hero of the first novel, who learns of the return of the Warlock Lord Brona, commander of the undead. He can only be defeated with the Sword of Shannara, which has, as luck would have it, been broken and rendered unusable. Only by venturing through the land can Jak and his companions reassemble the sword and defeat Brona once again. Your quest is doubly important, because Jak's life is inadvertently pledged to Brona during a summoning ceremony, dooming his eternal soul unless the nefarious lord can be stopped. It's easy to jump into the story if you're unfamiliar with the series, because while there are numerous references to *The Sword of Shannara*, it's never completely reliant on it.

When Brooks first published *The Sword of Shannara* in 1977, he was heavily criticized for blatantly ripping off J.R.R. Tolkien and his *Lord of the Rings* books. The game hews closely to those themes, and thus it never wanders from the established fantasy tropes. Jak is accompanied by his lady friend (and obvious love interest) Shella, as well as a spritely elf sage named Davio, a stumpy dwarf named Brendel and a troll named Telsek. Each new village brings the group together with another race, whose traits should sound more than familiar. The dwarves are stout and hairy, the trolls are violent and stupid, the elves are snobbish and pompous, and so forth. During your adventures, you'll have to defuse the war between trolls and elves, uncover the secrets of the legendary Elfstones, solve a mystery with the dwarves involving a missing axe, and save a castle from a marauding horde of zombies. There's little to set it apart from any other fantasy universe, which makes the proceedings feel somewhat bland.

It doesn't help the game feels remarkably stripped down compared to Legend's previous games. Since their graphic adventures evolved from text-based games, their eloquent and detailed writing helped set it apart from the crowd. Their previous titles, *Death Gate* and *Companions of Xanth*, both based off other fantasy novel series, contained far more descriptive text, and much, much more dialogue. In *Shannara*, conversations are sparse and straightforward, and you can't talk to anyone beyond what's relevant to the plot, making the world feel strangely empty. When tragedy befalls your friends, it's hard to feel much for them, because they barely have much in the way of personality. The world is quite pretty, at least – the lush, colorful SVGA graphics are a huge leap beyond any of Legend's previous games, and the detailed character portraits when talking are much improved – but it hardly makes up for its deficiencies. The game is essentially broken up into small chapters, and each chapter is rarely more than a couple screens in size – the standard automap function from other Legend games is gone, because it clearly just isn't needed.

To differentiate itself, *Shannara* is set up a little bit like a role playing game. You travel between towns via an overhead map, not too dissimilar to *Ultima* or other classic RPGs. It's really just an illusion of freedom, though, because your quest is quite linear. Venturing off the path will either result in your party members redirecting you, or plunging you right into a group of monsters. There are a number of fight scenes, with CG-rendered enemies taking the center stage, but beyond a few specific areas where you need to use special items, there's no strategy other than continuously hitting the "Fight" command. There's no point to combat either, since there's no experience system or any upgradable equipment. These parts feel like a dumbed down version of *Superhero League of Hoboken*, another Legend game which is another RPG/adventure game hybrid. During the adventuring segments, your party members' portraits appear at the bottom of the screen, but other than a few specific instances – Shella can shoot things with her bow and arrow, Trelek can lift and smash stuff, and Davio can use his Elfstones for magical purposes – they're little more than expanded inventory slots.

Shannara has some gorgeous artwork, but that's about the only thing going for it

All of this is particularly disappointing, since the game was designed and written by Cory and Lori Cole, the husband and wife team behind Sierra's *Quest for Glory* series. These were extremely innovative games that melded RPG mechanics onto graphic adventures, and it would logically seem like they'd be the best folks for the job. But not only are all of the RPG elements in *Shannara* tacked on and pointless, but the text is totally missing the devious humor that made *Quest for Glory* so amusing. The writing isn't bad, but since it follows after Brooks' style rather than their own, it's pretty flavorless and lacks distinction. At least the convincing voice acting helps the text from becoming too droll.

The whole package seems like it's aimed towards novices, those familiar with the *Shannara* novels (or at least fantasy fiction in general) but unfamiliar with the adventure gaming genre. As much as Legend's games have usually been quite excellent, they could get quite difficult, and the text could become overwhelming. By cutting those back, *Shannara* makes itself welcoming to newbies, but beyond the pretty graphics, it's missing what makes Legend's games so worthwhile. The result is something remarkably average.

	Teenagent
	Initial Release Date: 1995 Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga Designers: Adrian Chmielarz, Grzegorz Miechowski, Andrzej Sawicki Developer: Metropolis Software

Not unlike *Maniac Mansion*, *Teenagent* (typically spelled without the space) is another adventure game that focuses on surprisingly mundane and realistic affairs, with the juxtaposition of a few elements of wackiness providing most of the humor. Largely the only adventure game offering of Metropolis Software, a Polish development studio, it gained some renown in the 1990s courtesy of a demo version that generously consisted of the first third of the game.

Teenagent is the story of one Mark Hopper, who is literally plucked randomly from his everyday life by a secretive intelligence organization. He's their last hope when it comes to solving a bizarre series of bank robberies in which guards watched helplessly as stacks of gold bars vanished into thin air. The first chapter consists of Mark's efforts to prove himself at the organization's training camp and to overcome his amusingly incompetent trainer. The next chapter is spent trying to infiltrate the mansion of a secretive millionaire located in a quaint country village; once inside, he finally gets to the bottom of the mysterious thefts.

Mark's trainer isn't the sharpest sword in the box.

Although it's fairly short, *Teenagent* is competently done in almost all respects, although there are some baffling puzzles and the usual annoying pixel hunting. The bright, slightly cartoonish graphics are clean, timeless VGA sprites, and everything looks like it should, with almost every action yielding a surprisingly detailed animation – pretty much every picked-up object goes down Mark's pants one way or another, for instance.

If anything leads *Teenagent* to rise above mere competence, it's the truly stellar quality of the writing. It's hard to believe that the game was originally in Polish, though it does have its share of typos and grammar errors. Teenager though he may be, Mark is not at all edgy or obnoxious; he's just a perfectly wholesome, good-natured slacker-type more akin to Guybrush Threepwood. He even gets smitten with a girl along the way. There's also the occasional light 1990s pop culture reference (the rapping robo-safe is particularly amusing) or commentary on the need to pick everything up. The game might yet have been improved with a voice track, but the only talkie version ever released was Polish-only. It is now available as freeware.

The Black Cauldron

Initial Release Date: 1986
Platforms: IBM PC / Amiga / Apple II / Apple IIGS / Atari ST
Designer: Al Lowe
Developer: Sierra

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 to save the land. Instead, that prophecy is bestowed upon one his pigs, a cute little porker named Hen Wen. He faithfully takes up this duty and swears to protect the world 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 in most fantasy stories, he meets up with a variety of interesting characters to take on evil, including the beautiful Princess Eiolnwy 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, employing 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 games 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 theft 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 was any other Sierra game, failing to accomplish this task 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 what 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.

This simplicity 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 game's era.

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 the prompts, soon enough, you'll keel over dead. Water is easy enough to come by, 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 dismissed *The Black Cauldron* 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.