

# THE THRILLVILLE

Pondering about LucasArts past, present and future.

## QUARTERLY

*December 2009 - Issue #1*

## **Anticipations of joy**

*Write on this issue:*

Santiago A. Méndez

Gabriel Schenk

*“My spirits were elevated by the enchanting appearance of nature; the past was blotted from my memory, the present was tranquil, and the future gilded by bright rays of hope and anticipations of joy.”*

— Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, 1818.

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*Letter From The Editor*

# A New Hope

by SANTIAGO MÉNDEZ

Dear reader,

Welcome to this spick-and-span publication. I hope this issue finds you in complete prosperity and good health, but in the unfortunate case you find yourself agonizing a horrible unhurried death, I trust the contents of this quarterly journal will make of those atrocious moments nothing but an absolute delight.

If you are reading these pages it probably means you are well versed in LucasArts past and present. If you are not, you should educate yourself (and re-think your life) because **a)** we'll consider many facts and concepts to be of common knowledge amongst our readership and **b)** you are missing out on a pantheon of adventure gaming wonders and a great deal of fun.

During the last few years LucasArts was under the shadow of its bleakest era. Interminable release after release of penurious Star Wars titles, endless promises of a new wonderful Indiana Jones game, an absolute lack of new IP (intellectual property), complete denial of their legacy and... Jim Ward. As a long-time admirer of LucasArts, I was deeply confused and on the verge of losing any remaining interest in the company. Just then, something happened, something nobody was expecting but undoubtedly most of us appreciated. Something occurred, which created a need for its existence... **The Thrillville Quarterly**. You'll be able to read about this events on the pages of this issue, in which you'll also find a deconstruction of LucasArts' new game *Lucidity* and an essay about the Celtic influences on *The Curse of Monkey Island*.

Henceforth, it is in goodwill that we shall provide a timely report and thoughtful analysis of LucasArts actions on a quarterly basis.

Yours faithfully,

- The Editor

# A Season of Faith's Perfection

by SANTIAGO MÉNDEZ

In previous years I found myself surprised when LucasArts released *Thrillville*, its first new IP in years, to a degree of wanting to do something about it. So, I aimed to create a fake fan website with the real intention being that of showing to new generations of LucasArts gamers a glimpse of the golden years; at the time, I was hopeful, believing that *Thrillville* could mean there would be more attempts at creating new original titles. By the following year, *Thrillville: Off The Road* was released and all my hopes were squandered. You see, I grew up (like you, probably) playing such extraordinary games as *Secret of Monkey Island*, *Full Throttle*, *The Dig*, *Indiana Jones and The Fate of Atlantis* and even the occasional Star Wars title like *Rebel Assault II*, *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces 2* and even *Yoda Stories*. Many of those games were as much a part of my life as was learning to ride a bike; they were great adventures, amazing stories that would not only entertain me but also enkindle a curiosity in topics from diverse areas in history and science at a young age. Those are the kind of traits that come with reading good books and that's exactly what those LucasArts games were like.

As the years passed and the game industry (d)evolved, one by one all the great LucasArts game designers left the company and the new IPs were becoming increasingly scarce. If that wasn't enough, the great classic titles were ignored and buried as if they had never happened, probably as a way to avoid the

embarrassment of having their current titles pale in comparison with the creativity and greatness of those old games. Or maybe they just didn't care about them.

When *Thrillville: Off The Road* came out I thought it was time to update the website. I felt obtuse for having put hope in LucasArts and I didn't hesitate in expressing that feeling. I basically pointed the readers in the direction of two new games that reminded me of the quality there once was in LucasArts games. At the time I even failed to realize that *Thrillville* was not even developed in-house at LucasArts - it was developed by Frontier, an English studio. Boy, was I goosey.

I recall that earlier this year I found myself a little embarrassed by following LucasArts on its brand new Twitter account, but not long thereafter I noticed (with a slight amount of distrust) that *Fate of Atlantis* was mentioned with increasing regularity. I knew that it was mainly due to the fact that in *Indiana Jones and The Staff of Kings* the game can be unlocked, but there was more to it than that...

Between June and July of this year, a series of announcements by LucasArts left me flabbergasted. Games like *Loom*, *The Dig* and *Fate of Atlantis* were being released on Steam! *The Secret of Monkey Island* was re-released in a brand new special edition and a new series of Monkey Island games would be developed by Telltale! I couldn't

believe it. That meant new generations of gamers could discover these titles and play them for chicken feed. And if that wasn't enough, it was later announced that *Lucidity*, a brand new IP, would be released - somebody pinch me in the arm!

I know I probably shouldn't, I know they still have a Brobdingnagian amount of work to do to make up for all the mediocrity they have unleashed over the last few years, but I can't help it. As the poster on Fox Mulder's office prays: I want to believe (again). ●

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# The Celtic Curse of Monkey Island

by GABRIEL SCHENK

As I stand in the lonely churchyard of Morwenstow Church, populated only by the falling autumn leaves and the bodies of the forgotten dead, I see, on the Norman doorway, the figures of dolphins, whales, and mermaids carved onto its archway. The faces of the merfolk are indistinct, blemished by centuries of Cornish wind and hail. Their features are all but obliterated: blotchy contours represent only the memory of a face. The Thumb of God has rubbed away the efforts of former men. There is still enough resemblance in the faces to recognize them as mermaids, though. There, in the deep recesses of the worn rock, you see the remnants of hair, teeth, and eyes. If the sun is positioned low over the churchyard wall, and the clouds are absent, then it is possible for the light to shine onto these features, bringing them back to life. I have only seen this once, when I visited Cornwall in 1968, but for that moment it seemed that the mermaids were looking directly at me, glowing in the beams of an orange sun.

It is well known that mermaids were to be included in the credit sequence of LucasArts' videogame *The Curse of Monkey Island*, but were deleted before the game was finished, for mysterious reasons. We are told, from official sources, that the mermaids simply "did not fit into the world of Monkey Island." Such a statement depends on there being a single world of Monkey Island, however, and the variety shown in the recent installments to the series shows that this is not the case, with many cultures

and mythologies interacting together in, most recently, *Tales of Monkey Island*. Indeed, in that series, the mermaids have been put back in. The first two Monkey Island games were singularly American, however. Coca-Cola parodies and Hot Dog Huts abound: even the French Mardi Gras is represented by the American New Orleans tradition. We begin to see a change in perspective from *The Curse of Monkey Island* onwards, when Larry Ahern co-created the game with Jonathan Ackley. Ahern is, of course, a Celtic name – though it is unknown whether he traces his routes to Kernow, or Éire, or some other Celtic nation. Ackley, in contrast, is Anglo-Saxon; the letters flow back to a time when Britain was invaded by Germanic tribes, and the British people, such as Ahern's ancestors, were swept to the edges of the land. Could it be that echoes of this ancient conflict are present in *The Curse of Monkey Island*? Can we feel the shape of a mermaid's face, and see its eyes looking back at us, though it has long since been darkened by time's long and devastating stretch?

Sometimes, when the sun breaks out from the clouds, it is possible to see hidden messages from the past.

The character of the "Flying Welshman" is a stark example of an Anglo-Saxon perspective contrasting with a Celtic one. He is, as we know from his name, Welsh – yet he does not sound Welsh, being voiced by the American Tom Kane. His back-

ground reflects his split identity: trapped forever between two islands, unable to return home. The cursed ring of LeChuck is a similar perversion of Celtic identity: whilst there are numerous magic rings in the stories of old, their attributes are positive, incurring invulnerability or invisibility on the wearer. In the game, the cursed ring traps Elaine like the Flying Welshman, both physically and temporally. When she is freed she imagines that no time has passed at all. Likewise, the ghost of Minnie Goodsoup is trapped in her crypt, and trapped in the memory of a passed age, and she, too, has an old ring on her finger.

The inclusion of these trapped characters is no accident: they are part of the Celtic connection, unconsciously active in Larry Ahern's mind, that resulted in characters riven by opposing cultures and times.

I recently returned to Morwenstow church, hoping to recognize the mermaids' faces one last time. Little had changed in the forty years of my absence, but work had been done on the Norman doorway; English Heritage had replaced the stone faces of the mermaids, restoring what they thought was their "former glory". The tails had been turned into cloaks; they had made the mermaids into humans.

As I walked away from the church I came across Saint Morwenna's Well, now hidden in weeds and gorse. The water that once flowed over sick pilgrims' hands now came from a pipe

supplied by a faraway reservoir. But as I looked across at the sea I remembered the day that I saw the mermaids, and they looked back at me. And the wind sung through the trees and cliffs, and sounded like the call of the merfolk; and it made me realise that the past is never lost, even if it is forgotten. Sometimes, as in *The Curse of Monkey Island*, the past is only trapped, waiting to be given back its long-sought freedom. •

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# Open (love) Letter to LucasArts

by SANTIAGO MÉNDEZ

Dear LucasArts,  
I'm writing to you in an enchanting spring night, a subtle breeze entering my wide open window and Beethoven's 7th Symphony allegretto filling the room with life. While I'm unsure of how to say what I have in mind, I'm quite sure of what I want to say.

At first I was considering addressing this letter to the current LucasArts director, Darrell Rodriguez, being ultimately responsible for the company's operations. But then I realized I wanted to talk to every single part that contributes in moving the machine forward. Nevertheless, I do have something to say to Mr. Rodriguez. Even

though most likely you never knew about it (just like most of the current readership), I previously claimed you would probably never release any creative and new original games. Therefore, I publicly apologize, even in the presence of such a harmless and noninsulting claim: I did misjudge you and I feel sorry about it, as I was without a doubt proven wrong. Apologies done, I may now proceed.

Oh LucasArts, you dream weaver, you fancy machine, maker of wonders, creator of joy. Once upon a time you filled my life with fun and excitement, but then, just like a drunken wife-beating bastard who once was charming and humorous, you took it all away and turned everything into sorrow and weeping. You disappointed me, neglecting all those marvelous things you did, shutting down your factory, thinking in numbers, having others produce for you and stamping your name on trash, turning yourself into something nobody could ever be proud of. But then, when I had lost all hope and was getting ready to walk away from you for good (or try to), just then, you did something unexpected. You suddenly acknowledged and re-released many of the wonderful things you did, you provided an opportunity for one of those to be continued, and... you created something new, all by yourself.

I couldn't help but turn my eyes to you again. I couldn't avoid getting excited once more. You are not the same I first met long ago, but there is a spark that reminds me of those days. You have changed, but so have I. I'm not happy because you are

pleasing me again, I'm content because those things you are doing are beneficial for yourself. Still, you have a lot of hard work ahead of you in order to make up for all the misery you put me through. I will never let you forget what you did, but I'm willing to cease tormenting you as long as you keep walking this path.

I want you to think of me as your guardian angel, looking after you from above. But be warned: whenever you make foolish choices I'll be there to point them out in harsh mockery; and should you ever disappoint me again, like you did before, then you'll find yourself never again being able to wake up from an endless and tortuous nightmare. Doomed for all eternity. But worry not, darling, I'm sure you'll do just fine.

Even though our relationship is not the same anymore (and probably never will be), if you keep impressing me like you are doing, who knows, we might even dance together one more time, for old times' sake.

Wishing you nothing but the best,  
- The Thrillville Quarterly •

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# Unexpected Lucidity

by SANTIAGO MÉNDEZ

It's funny how ironic things can turn out to be. Last year, in my state of "giving up on LucasArts" I wrote about two independent games I was really looking forward to (one of which recently came out and I strongly recommend you to try). Those games have one thing in common (well, maybe more than one, but I'm trying to make a point here): they both look absolutely beautiful and their artful visual presentations should be more than enough of an invitation for anyone to want to try them. It is comical that I was showing two games I thought were completely outside LucasArts' range of reality (or even fantasy), to find myself a year later enjoying the delicious irony of witnessing a LucasArts game whose artistry can perfectly coexist with those other two titles.

*Lucidity* is the first non-Star Wars, non-Indiana Jones title developed in-house by LucasArts since *Gladius* (October 2003). Yes, your math is correct, it's been exactly six years since an internally generated IP was released. I could talk about why that six year period was the bleakest in the company's history, or I could just talk about *Lucidity*. I think the latter is more optimistic.

This game was created by the same team that delivered *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition*. The team, known as "Labs", apparently has the mission of creating new IPs for digital delivery platforms (Steam, Direct2Drive, XBLA, iPhone/iPod Touch, etc), having those

products featured on a lower profile than those belonging to the big LucasFilm franchises. For instance, *Lucidity's* official site is the LucasArts Workshop ("Labs") blog and doesn't have its own site like *Monkey Island*. Considering the nature of a laboratory, this probably means they are experimenting, playing with new concepts while consolidating a strong development team to get it ready for the major league.

The first project made from scratch in the labs is *Lucidity*, a 2D platformer/puzzle game. I probably read more reviews for this game than for any other title (at least in such a short period of time) and almost none fails to mention *Lemmings* and *Tetris* as comparisons, and that's because *Lucidity* takes the concept of having no direct control over the character, who is in need of your god-like help (*Lemmings*), and matches this idea with one of randomizing the elements needed for accomplishing that task (*Tetris*). The combination of these two known concepts is an interesting approach, but despite its novelty it manages to fail on some fundamental levels. The most essential is the learning curve; in *Lemmings*, every time you lose is an opportunity to improve on your strategy and there is a big chance that every time you play the same level you'll be more likely to win than in your previous attempt. *Tetris*, probably one of the best games (if not the very best) of all time, involves pure logic, and while there are times in which your failure or success will depend on the next piece,

it is unlikely that you will often find yourself in that situation. Whereas in *Lucidity* there is no substantial thing you can learn that would get you through the game; in here there is only hoping for the best. The frustration factor, while absolutely damaging the gaming experience, can for the most part be forgiven because pretty much all the other elements that compose the game are absolutely beautiful. The enchanting character design by Andrea Rhodes is nothing but delightful, the animations by Jeff Brown and Saul Ruiz are incredibly alive and believable, the environment art by Molly Denmark is perfectly fitting and amazing, the music by Jesse Harling is really appropriate and creates an excellent atmosphere, while the sound design by Tom Bible fills this whole world with an equally great soundscape. Overall, the setting and artistry found in this game is one that should make many games envious, but I can't help to think they made a mistake by putting the wrong gameplay into this gorgeous world they have created.

What I get from all this is still very positive. They do have many things to learn from this first experience, but on the checklist they got most of the items right the first time. I see a promising team, capable of delivering great games in the immediate future. *Lucidity* is very, very different from all the LucasArts classics, and I think it is a good omen that, while they are certainly inspired by those great games, they aren't trying to force back that style - they are at-

tempting something new, and that feels right. This game represents the beginning of a new era in LucasArts history, and here I am, just like in *Lucidity*, hoping for the best. ●

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## Letters to the Editor

Oh, hello there, I didn't hear you coming. I was just looking through the mail and I realized (with deep, deep sadness) that there isn't any. I wonder, why would that be? Oh, right, because this is the first issue. Now that you have read it, you are probably having many uneasy thoughts in your head that are eager to pop out in the form of a written letter to us. The only problem is, you don't know how to do that. Well, let me tell you: what you have to do is write it as a proper letter and address it to either the magazine or to whoever wrote the particular article you wish to comment on. Also, you'll need to include your full real name (you can include your nickname between parentheses), your academic degree (should you have any, and there is no need to feel bad if you don't; the fact that you read this whole magazine and understood it probably means you have an IQ of at least 138), if you are proud of your job feel free to add it, and last but not least: remember to tell us where you are from (city, country). As for length, it can be anything up to 500 words. Let me give you a fictional example:

*Dear Editor,*

*It is with nothing but sorrow that I feel obliged to inform you that the writing found across the pages of The Thrillville Quarterly inevitably manages to make myself vomit.*

*My highest regards,  
Sir Chester Wilmington III,  
M.D.*

*Dean of Medicine, University of  
Northampton.  
Northampton, England.*

Bravo! What a remarkable example, that I couldn't have written better myself, except I just did. LucasArts employees or representatives are more than welcome to write, as well as any other member of the video game industry. But overall, we are willing to publish letters from anyone having something interesting to say.

Please send your letters to the following electronic mail address:

[thrillvillequarterly@gmail.com](mailto:thrillvillequarterly@gmail.com)

Letters selected for publication might be edited for length and

style (but never for content or meaning). Electronic mail will not be returned unless you indicate otherwise. Our digital mailbox facility is already functioning and our trusted computer operators are ready, waiting to process your correspondence.

Yours faithfully,  
- The Editor ●

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