Adventure Lantern

Interview with Bryan Wiegele on Delaware St. John Episode 4 Kickstarter

Reviews:
- Amnesia: The Dark Decent
- J.U.L.I.A.
- Dead Cyborg: The Beginning of the Death
- Puzzle Agent 2
- Limbo
- Cthulhu Saves the World

Editorial

In the news section of our March 2012 issue, Jonathon wrote about the astonishing success of Double Fine's Kickstarter campaign to develop an adventure game. The project reached its $400,000 goal in approximately eight hours, proceeding to raise over $3.3 million over the course of a month. The tremendous support for the upcoming adventure game was truly inspiring. In fact, several other adventure game developers have already followed suit and launched their own projects.

For those that may not be familiar with the Web site, Kickstarter is designed to provide funding for creative projects. Since the site's inception in 2008, Kickstarter has been utilized to raise money for a variety of concepts. Anything from cook books to musicals and video games can be funded through the site. A typical project page consists of a video presentation and a text description explaining why the money is needed and how it will be allocated. Individuals interested in seeing the project to its completion can pledge donations. The pledges are only fulfilled if the funding goal is reached. In return for supporting the project, contributors are promised various rewards. Each project offers different reward tiers based on the amount of money being donated. As such, Kickstarter is an excellent way to connect project ideas with consumers and channeling funds toward concepts the Internet community deems most desirable.

Several highly-promising adventure game projects appeared on Kickstarter shortly after Double Fine's phenomenal success. For instance, under the leadership of David Marsh, Zojoi is trying to raise money for re-mastered versions of Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective adventures. If the project is successfully funded, these nine FMV adventures will be released for PC and Mac, along with phones and tablets. Similarly, Replay Games is seeking funding for a remake of Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards. It would certainly be a treat to play new versions of these games on modern computers.

There are efforts to develop brand new games as well. Bryan Wiegele has started a project to finance the fourth episode in the Delaware St. John series. More recently, Jane Jensen, the legendary storyteller behind the Gabriel Knight series, started a new company called Pinkerton Road. The company has several adventure game concepts, including a third-person adventure called Moebius and a sequel to Gray Matter. Ms. Jensen is seeking funding from Kickstarter to begin development efforts on these games. Contributors will help determine which game Pinkerton Road will release first. In May, Project Fedora will launch to fund a long-awaited sequel to Tex Murphy: Overseer. It has been more than a decade since we last saw the good detective. I would be personally thrilled to see the next chapter of Tex's story. You can find more information about these projects and several other new adventure games in our news section.

It is truly exciting to see so many efforts to develop adventure games. I would love to see each of these projects successfully funded and completed. My only concern is that some of these Kickstarter campaigns were launched too close to one another. After all, most of us can only spend a limited amount on video games in a given month. With several fundraisers running at the same time, individuals that would otherwise support almost all adventure games may have to carefully pick and choose how they make contributions.

In addition, several projects may fail to get noticed amidst the competition from other titles. Nevertheless, Double Fine's success and the launch of several other projects illustrates the strength of the adventure gaming community. If traditional sources of funding are no longer viable, community-driven financing could become a great alternative for development and widespread distribution of adventure games.

Here at Adventure Lantern, we will continue to follow these efforts and bring you updates as new information becomes available. This month, we are also have an interview that highlights one of the current Kickstarter projects. Bryan Wiegele kindly agreed to provide us information about the fourth episode in the Delaware St. John series. Judging from Mr. Wiegele's description, episode four sounds very promising. Here's hoping the project is successfully funded and we get to play the game next year.

Besides Jonathon's lengthy news roundup and the interview on Delaware St. John episode 4, this issue features reviews of the newly-released sci-fi adventure J.U.L.I.A, Amnesia, Dead Cyborg, Puzzle Agent 2, Limbo, and Cthulhu Saves the World. It is the longest Adventure Lantern PDF we assembled in the past several months. Many thanks to Jonathon, Nick, and Gnome for their contributions. This issue would not be possible without their writing and Jonathon's work on editing and formatting. Here's hoping you will find something to enjoy in the following pages.

Until next time,
Ugur Sener

Contents

Nothing Earth shattering this month for once. We did get a few interesting new games appear, a few others draw ever closer to release, and a few exciting new releases. Most interesting to any Sherlock Holmes fan should be the announcement and Kickstarter campaign for the remake of the Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective vidoe game series. We also saw the release of Pendulo Studios latest game, Yesterday. The announcment of a Tex Murphy sequel. And some brand new IP in the form of Vsevolod. But these games are only the icing on the cake, so to speak, you will have to read on for the rest.

- Jonathon Wisnoski

The Grand Adventure:
Adventure Games Through the Ages
& Making a Comeback
Destructoid published part 1 & 2 of The Grand Adventure article last month. It is a series about the history of the genre as seen by: Al Lowe, creator of Leisure Suit Larry; Dan Connors, CEO of Telltale Games; Dave Gilbert, creator of the Blackwell series and founder of developer/publisher Wadjet Eye Games; And Josh Nuernberger, creator of Gemini Rue.

Beyond the Limits: Innovation in Adventure Games
Agustin Cordes, developer of Scratches and Asylum, just wrote an article for the German site Adventure-Treff. It is about the past, present, and possible future trends of the genre and how the genre has and has not innovated over the years, and how it should innovate into the future.

Announcments

Make Leisure Suit Larry Come Again!:
Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards remake
Al Lowe himself, and other Sierra On-Line veterans, will be working on this 25th anniversary, ground-up, remake of the original Leisure Suit Larry game. the game will have a modern point and click style interface and sport high-res graphics and a fully voiced cast.

Tex Murphy
Tex Murphy is getting a long awaited sequel with a Kickstarter champaign slated for May 15th. While the rights to Tex Murphy have been in flux for quite some time, they have recently made their way back into the original creators hands, and with them comes Project Fedora, the sixth Tex Murphy title.

PROJECT FEDORA

Sherlock Holmes
Consulting Detective

9 Video Adventure Mysteries for PC, Mac & Mobile Devices
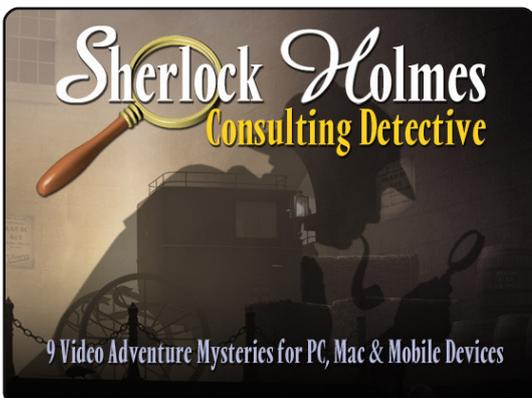
Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective
Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective is a remake of a 1991-1993 trilogy by the same name, both of which are based on a critically acclaimed boardgame by the same name. It will be made up of nine cases, which you, as Sherlock Holmes, must solve. This is not done in any standard adventure game fashion but instead something far more unique. You are given some basic clues for free, or at least given the ability to deduce them for yourself; But after that you must choose how you want to investigate the case, spending clue points. The less points you spend in solving the case, the more successful you have been. Currently the game is on Kickstarter, trying to raise $55K.

Upcoming Releases

Samorost 3

No release date yet, Samorost 3 has been in development since March 2011, Amanita Design has stated it will be a big game that will likely be released on many platforms and consoles and will focus even more on the weird and wonderful environments and be even easier, so in a nutshell Samorost is getting more Samorosty.

Anna

The upcoming, free-roaming, psychological horror, adventure Anna just got two new trailers showing off some gameplay. Set to be released in April it has garnered quite a lot of attention already, and looks like it deserves it.

Memento Mori Sequel

The upcoming adventure title Memento Mori 2: Guardian of Immortality has been given a trailer as it heads towards it 2nd quarter launch date. In this sequel the original stars Max and Lara return as newlyweds who are sent to investigate a museum heist in Cape Town, where Max goes missing and is presumed dead.
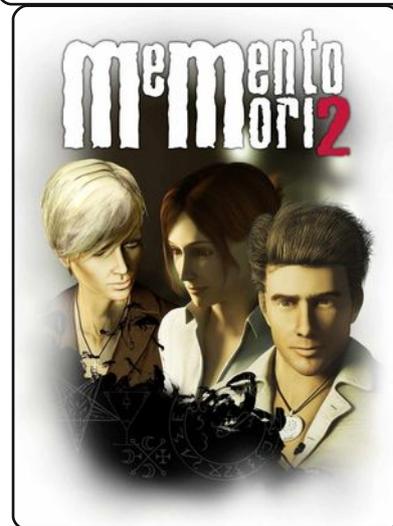
The Walking Dead

The upcoming Telltale adaptation of the hit comic book and TV series The Talking Dead just got a trailer. This adventure game, instead of being a survival horror, will instead focus on the life and choices of people caught in a zombie apocalypse and foreshadows the events in the main series. Additionally, the game promised to have a somewhat winding path with choices in all episodes affecting the entire series. To be released in April, The Walking Dead will be a five part episodic adventure for the PC, Xbox 360, and PS3.
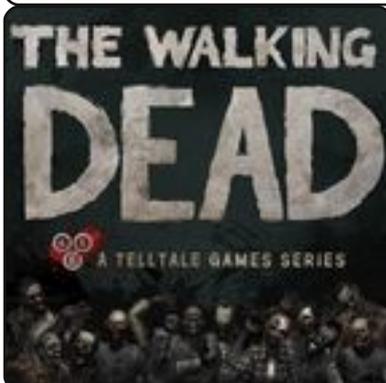
Vsevolod

Set in an alternative 19th century Earth, where Christianity never existed and the colorful paganism of the Slavic and Germanic peoples is alive and well. The island republic of Britannia is at war with these counties while a nobleman and archaeologist searches for the fabled artifacts of Lord Svarog the Creator himself. The game is a traditional 2D adventure, with hand-drawn graphics, the normal inventory/logic puzzles, and the more exotic magical musical spells and other unique abilities. No word on a release date, in fact the team seems to still be working out most of the details of development and publishing, but we already have access to a two hour demo and a bunch of nice screenshots and musical tracks.

New Releases
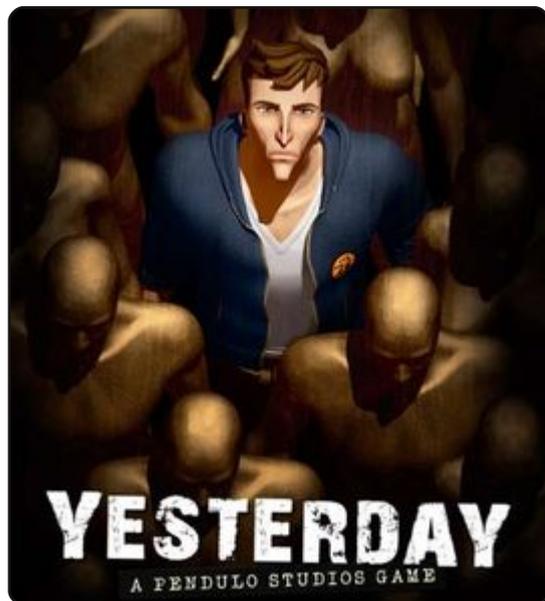
Yesterday

The latest adventure by Pendulo Studios was released late last month to good reviews. It is a dark mystery thriller with four endings, three playable characters, and takes place in many locations spanning the globe. In the game homeless people are disappearing and turning up later burned to death and mysterious scars are appears on apparently unrelated people. Solves these mysteries and many more, in this twist filled, high tension, adventure game.

Adam's Venture 3: Revelations

Adam's Venture 3: Revelations closed off the trilogy last month with Adams death defying escape from Solomon's crumbling palace and subsequent adventure including all of those good Templar secrets, villainous Clairveaux Corporation plots, valiant rescues, other stuff you have come to expect from the series.
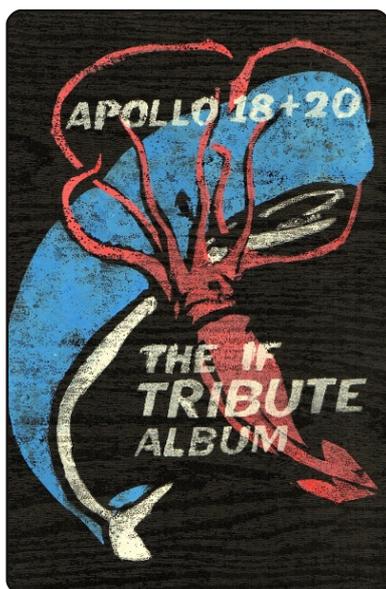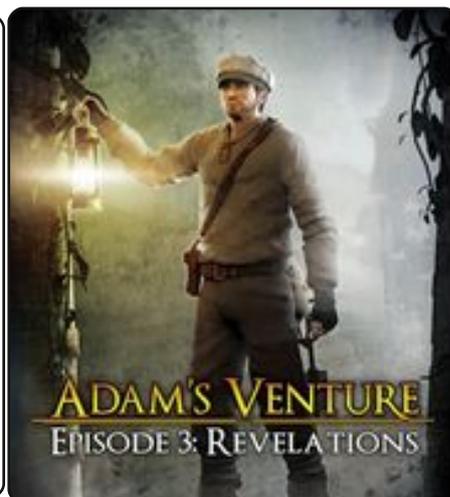
Apollo 18+20: The IF Tribute Album
Honoring the 1992 album by They Might be Giants

A bunch of interactive fiction authors have gotten together and have celebrated the 20th anniversary of the album Apollo 18 by creating a text adventure for every single song on that album. They are all rather short, some of them being single move games, and they all can be played online or downloaded.

Lone Survivor

The latest game by Jasper Byrne's Super Flat Games (creator of Soundless Mountain II) was released last month to great reviews. After many years of development and different iterations, Jasper Byrne's preeminent survival horror game is available for Windows and Mac, with a demo, for $10 (or $50 if you want the special edition).

News from the Big Blue Cup

Pick of the Month - March: Big Blue World Domination
A non-adventure that has you striving for world domination from your secret lair in this polished management game.

PSP Emulator
It looks like someone has made playing AGS games possible on the PSP. AGS version 2.50 or higher games are supported, also resolution limits can be a limiting factor.

Adventure Game Studio
PSP - 3.21

Resonance
The release date for Resonance gets ever more specific with the announced that it will be released sometime in May, this year. Resonance is a game being developed by Vince Twelve, developer of AGS titles Linus and Anna, and more recently Wadjet Eye Games have even been contributing. It is about the death particle physics and the search for his hidden knowledge.

New Releases:
- **UNGA needs MUMBA - a prehistoric graphic adventure** (L.E.M. studios) - Set 25,000 years ago in Stone Age Central Europe, Unga Needs Mumba the (fully voiced!) story of a hunter in in his quest to slay a gigantic and delicious Mammoth.
- **Crow and Foxy** (Pierrec) - Made in 48 hours for a French competition and based on Jean de La Fontaine's tale "Le Corbeau et le Renard" (the crow and the fox), which is inspired by the Aesop tale of the same name. Crow and Foxy is a comedy where you play a NPC in a classic adventure game.
- **Never Alone Hotline** (Pierrec) - Made in 48 hours in December 2010 for Ludum Dare #21, theme: Alone, in which it is quite well. It is a interactive story, where you cannot lose, only experience the dialogue and graphics. In Never Alone Hotline you pay a girl working a hotline for lonely people.
- **The Sacred Tablets of Tibet** (steptoe) - In 1500 B.C. the God of Hope gave three tablets of enlightenment to mankind. These tablets had the power to bring peace to mankind, but could also be used to destroy or enslave mankind. To prevent the tablets from being used for evil, they where separated and hidden, where they remained safe for thousands of years. It is now 2012 and The Tibetan Holy Secret Society has decided that it is time to reunite the tables and bring peace to mankind; They have sent you, Jonesy Smith, to do this.
- **Suppa Ninja** (Cleanic) - Part of the February 2012 MAGS competition. Play a ninja on a mission.

Never Alone Hotline

The Sacred Tablets of Tibet

UNGA needs MUMBA

# Interview with Bryan Wiegele on Delaware St. John Episode 4 Kickstarter

Conducted by Ugur Sener

It was February 2006 when I played through the first episode of the Delaware St. John series. The episode was called _The Curse of Midnight Manor_. In the game, you assumed the role of private investigator Delaware St. John. Delaware specialized in investigating paranormal events and bringing rest to troubled spirits. His partner, Kelly Bradford, provided Delaware assistance every step of the way. The episode took place in an abandoned hotel called Midnight Manor. Players were tasked with uncovering the mysteries of the hotel and helping the ghosts roaming its corridors find some peace.

I was immediately captivated by the game's story and atmosphere. Delaware and Kelly made for highly likeable protagonists. The interaction between the two characters was delightful. The game also made excellent use of Delaware's unique abilities. Sure, the game did not boast cutting-edge graphics. However, it was clear from the start that The Curse of Midnight Manor was a labor of love. What the game lacked in technology, it made up for in heart.

The second episode, called _The Town with No Name_, was already available by the time I completed The Curse of Midnight Manor. It offered gamers a similarly enjoyable experience. The third chapter of the series, called _The Seacliff Tragedy_, was released in 2007. As Wendy Nellius put it in her review, besides providing another engaging adventure-gaming experience, episode three "had a doozy of a twist at the end." Wendy concluded her article saying "I can't wait for the next one to come out so I can find out what happens next." Five years later, we might finally have a chance to see the next chapter of the story.

The fourth episode of Delaware St. John has been delayed due to a lack of funding. As such, under the leadership of Bryan Wiegele, the development team is asking the adventure gaming community for their assistance in financing the project. Mr. Wiegele has started a _Kickstarter project_ to fund the development of episode four. As backers started to pledge their donations, Mr. Wiegele kindly agreed to answer a few questions and describe what he has in mind for episode four.
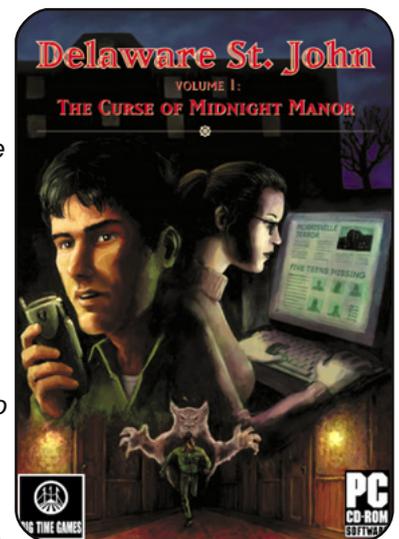
[Adventure Lantern]: Nearly five years have passed since the release of Delaware St. John Episode 3: The Seacliff Tragedy. Can you tell us a little bit about the projects you worked on in the intervening time?

[Bryan Wiegele]: The last five years have been pretty busy. I oversaw the development of a game for Playstation 2 and another for Playstation 3. I also created a social party game for Xbox 360. Last fall I worked on a new horror series called Relics. Currently I'm wrapping up work on an iOS game.

[AL]: What were some of the reasons for the delay between the release of the third episode and starting work on the fourth chapter?

[BW]: There really is only one reason for the delay; money. Without funding to make projects happen, they just kinda sit on the back burner until an opportunity presents itself. And you just never know how long it'll be before that opportunity comes or even if it will.

[AL]: What were some of the challenges you faced as you developed the first three episodes of the series?

[BW]: I've been very fortunate to be able to work with very talented people who were able to accomplish a lot with very little. With the first three games our biggest challenge was trying to create a quality game experience without the luxury of time or money. Our initial thought was if we can get a series going and show people we're committed, we'd pick fans up along the way and be able to increase our production values. As with life though, things just didn't work that way. We were able to increase our production values in small steps with each game but we still weren't able to get out from under the "low budget" blanket.

[AL]: How do you think the Kickstarter project can help overcome these challenges?

[BW]: With a real budget we would be able to commit our efforts to this single project and have resources previously unavailable to us. This budget also covers a year of development time where previous games had to be done in six months. All of this means we will be able to refine the gameplay and polish the features to present the high-quality experience we've had the goal for all along.

But before we even get that far, what I'm most expecting Kickstarter to help with is finally answer a question: How many fans of the Delaware St. John series are actually out there? The games have been sold literally around the world and translated into four additional languages. But at the end of the day I've no way to gauge the series' impact. Through this experiment I'll finally be able to get that answer and it'll be one of two outcomes; either we have the fans who want the series to continue or we don't. I sure hope we do but if we don't, well, it'll be closure and I'll know I can just put this series to bed and move on to other things.
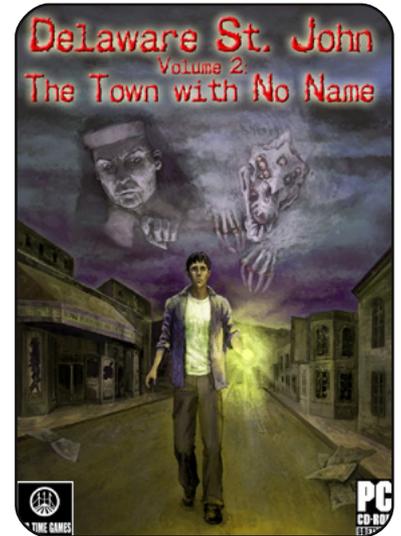
[AL]: What are your overall goals for the next chapter in Delaware's adventure?

[BW]: I consider the fourth game to be a turning point in the series. With the third game we did go a bit darker but four is intended to cross the line and take it from "creepy" to "frightening", a bit more towards horror than the previous games. Additionally I want this game to include all of the things we had to cut in previous games. With this new game engine we won't be limited in puzzle designs. With the additional time we won't be cutting back stories. And with a solid budget our animated sequences will be polished and more detailed.

[AL]: How much funding is needed to meet your goals? Can you briefly describe how the funding will be allocated?

[BW]: We need just over $280,000. This money will cover the cost of six team members plus about nine voice actors for twelve months of development time.

[AL]: If the Kickstarter effort is successful, how will the scope of the fourth episode differ from the previous chapters?

[BW]: The most exciting thing about this answer is despite the answer being a lot is changing, at the end of the day the player isn't really going to notice from how they interact with it. The kinds of changes we've got planned are all taking advantage of a great 3D engine. Probably the biggest, most notable change will be in how the player navigates and explores. Thanks to the real-time 3D environment the player will be able to look around in full 360 degree motions. Additionally, environments will have ambient animations and support characters in the scenes. A wider variety of puzzles and more in-depth stories to the characters will also be a part of that larger scope.

[AL]: When are you planning to release episode four?

[BW]: If we raise the money, it'll be wrapped for release in June, 2013.

[AL]: Are there any story details you can share at this point?

[BW]: The story opens a few weeks after the events at Seacliff Amusement. Delaware and Kelly have had a falling out and Delaware has been consumed by depression. He even chooses to ignore his latest visions but Kelly can't. After he tells her of his vision of a hospital she can't help but feel responsible and finds the location herself. Delaware goes after her and they spend the game trying to find each other in this huge old building. But before they'll reunite they're going to cross some very devious characters.

[AL]: What kind of a setting can players expect to explore?

[BW]: I don't want to give away too much but a large part of the game will take place in the past so we've got both the modern day, dilapidated dark hospital as well as a version that was in-use and fully staffed. It's actually really exciting since Delaware is tossed between these two versions of reality against his will.
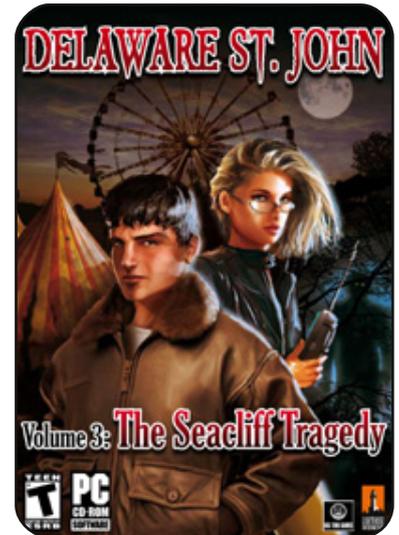
[AL]: What can you tell us about the overall style of the game? Can we expect a similar interface to what we saw in episode 3?

[BW]: The style is 100% the same as the previous games but with the additional features I mentioned before. It's a classic point and click interface that previous fans of the series will instantly recognize and understand. However, this time the features on the tool bar such as taking photos and recording sounds will play a more pivotal role.

[AL]: Will the voice acting cast from the previous games return?

[BW]: Yes. We've gotten all of the original cast members back on board and ready to go! Phil Quinn as Delaware St. John, Sonnet Quinn as Kelly Bradford, and David Vardy as Simon Foss. It just wouldn't be the same without the original actors, right?

[AL]: How can Delaware fans support the project? What is the deadline for contributing to the project?

[BW]: They can visit our Kickstarter page here. They just have to click the Back This Project button and pledge the amount they wish to contribute. It's absolutely no risk to them. They are only charged if the project gets funded.

[AL]: Are there any incentives for individuals that make contributions to the campaign?

[BW]: Yes, first you will have our thanks and gratitude. We realize it's difficult to ask people to put money towards the future so we're grateful for every contribution we get. Of course there are physical rewards as well. There is a list of incentives on the Kickstarter donation page. $15 or more gets the contributor a free digital copy of the game when it's released. A $50 donation gets them a digitally re-mastered copy of each of the original three games plus a special edition collector's version of the game on CD!

We've been listening to what people have been saying and we've updated our rewards accordingly. We'd love for this to be a success and hope we can find enough people that agree with us!

Adventure Lantern thanks Mr. Wiegele for taking the time to answer our questions. Judging from the information Mr. Wiegele provided, with the appropriate amount of funding, the fourth episode of Delaware St. John could provide a highly entertaining experience. Building on the storyline laid out in previous chapters, having additional financing would allow the development team to deliver a more robust and engaging adventure game.

If you tried and enjoyed any of the previous games in the series, please consider contributing to the Delaware St. John Kickstarter project. To find out more about the project and make a pledge to contribute, please click here.

Disclaimer: While I personally chose to make a donation to the project, Adventure Lantern has no financial interest in the Delaware St. John series or the upcoming fourth episode. This interview was solely posted to increase awareness about the fundraising effort.

Amnesia: The Dark Decent

Review by Nick Burgener (originally appeared on The Nocturnal Rambler)

Amnesia is an intelligent game that has a firm grasp of what makes horror scary. Making the player defenseless gives you reason to be anxious about your environment; the less you see of a monster, the more your imagination takes over; climactic moments work best with a slow and steady build-up. On top of the well-crafted horror, Amnesia boasts intelligent puzzles, interesting scenery, and a fairly intriguing story.

This is one of those games that comes along and changes everything.

The year is 1839. You play as Daniel, a young man who wakes up in a dark castle with no memory of his own past. Stumbling around the castle, Daniel finds a letter that he wrote to himself, explaining that he'd purposely wiped his own memory, and that he must reach the inner sanctum of the castle and kill Baron Alexander.

Amnesia plays like a first-person adventure game. With horror, of course, but I'll get to that later. A large part of the gameplay is navigating a 19th century castle, collecting inventory items, and solving puzzles in the environment. For the most part, these puzzles boil down to your typical "pathway is blocked, find a clever way through or around it" kind of situation, and yet they always manage to feel fun and creative.

The puzzles are engaging because, unlike in a lot of adventure games, you're not just collecting elaborate, improvised keys; you're physically interacting with and manipulating the environment. When a doorway is blocked by a fleshy fungus, you have to mix acid to dissolve it. But instead of just finding four chemicals and combining them in your inventory, you put them onto burners, turn on the fire, open the gas valves, and pour the concoction into a new container.

When the elevator's broken, you have to 1) find gears and physically carry them around, placing them right on the axels, 2) physically move chunks of coal into a burner, close the compartment door, and throw the lever, 3) find three control rods and put them into the corresponding slots, and 4) manually set the pressure of the steam by cranking the right levers. Step 3 requires you to go on branching paths to find the rods, and setting them correctly requires you to "solve" a riddle. Setting the steam pressure is another puzzle/riddle on its own.

The elevator example may sound like a long-winded exercise in tedium, but it's really not. It manages to be rewarding because it gives you a lot of freedom to explore and figure things out on your own, while also being pretty clear about what you eventually have to accomplish. And there's always lots of reinforcing feedback to let you know that you're on the right track.

The other fun aspect of the puzzles is how logical and straight-forward they are. When you're presented with a problem, the most realistic solution, the first thing you think to do, and the one thing you'd be doing in real life, tends to actually work. A pulley system has a hunk of wood jamming it, so you stand on a barrel to pull it out or throw a rock and dislodge it. A flight of stairs breaks down, and so you grab planks of wood and make a ramp out of them. It's little moments like this that I sat there in disbelief going "Wow, the game actually let me do the simplest, most logical thing," and felt a rush of euphoria.

So the game's got some good physics that let you solve puzzles in somewhat creative ways (although not as sophisticated as in Half-Life 2, since the physics in Amnesia are a little more scripted), but it also adds tremendously to the atmosphere and immersion. When your character is physically doing all of these manual taks, you feel more involved in the experience because you're doing more specific actions to make things happen.

Opening a door, for instance, requires you to click and drag the mouse, either towards you or away from you. Same for opening drawers, pulling levers, cranking valves, and so forth. These are ultimately very simple tasks, but they work extremely well at immersing you in the game. But it also makes things even more tense when you're running away from a monster and need to frantically crank a valve or open a door, only to find that it opens a different direction than you thought.

Speaking of frantically running away from monsters, let's talk about the horror.

Amnesia's horror works pretty well, and most modern "horror" games (any that came out after Resident Evil 4, which turned survival-horror into action games) would do well to take a few lessons from it, because having a lot of action in a horror game tends to make it much, much less scary. Enemies cease to be scary when you're a walking arsenal that can kill anything in sight, and they become familiar and mundane when you're constantly bombarded with them.

In Amnesia you're completely defenseless. It's not the first game to do this, mind you, but it's been a while since I've played a game that pulled this element off successfully. Being defenseless makes you feel vulnerable, because your only options are to run or hide. When you're out exploring, you don't have a shotgun to keep you safe. If something jumps out at you, you're completely screwed, either forced to take a lot of damage to your health (or sanity), or to be brutally slaughtered and killed. So when you start hearing footsteps coming towards you, you panic.

Instead of thinking "I need to kill this stupid thing," you think "I need to get out of here." Instead of wondering "how do I kill that," you wonder "is it still out there?" Instead of looking for the next living thing to deal with, you're hiding in a corner wetting your pants. To put it simply, playing Amnesia puts you in a different mindset than what you get from playing other games. If you're not convinced of how effective Amnesia is as a horror game, just watch some gameplay videos of people playing on YouTube ("Amnesia WHAT THE F***" comes to mind).

Now, I've got nerves of steel, so I wasn't nearly as scared as some other people, but I did experience some moments of genuine terror and panic in Amnesia, which is something that I can't say of many other so-called horror games. There were times when I literally had to stop playing just because I needed a

break from the tension, and I was almost always wary of advancing the plot or venturing into new areas because I was concerned about monsters spawning and coming after me.

One of the more brilliant aspects of Amnesia is that the enemies are only ever scarcely seen. Looking at enemies causes your sanity meter to deplete, which blurs and distorts your vision, triggers extra on-screen horror cues, and causes your controls to lag and act up. If you're already scared by the situation, looking at an enemy will make it even worse, and could get you killed if you're frantically trying to run away. So it's wise not to look at the monsters too much, which helps maintain their element of mystery (the "fear of the unknown"), and that keeps them creepy.

The scariest enemy is invisible. It's terrifying precisely because you cannot see it. You have no idea what it is, other than that it wants to kill you and everything you do only pisses it off even more. The monsters are more frightening when you don't get to see them a lot because your imagination fills in the details, it makes you internalize the game more, the experience becomes more vivid.

Maintaining your sanity is bit of a catch-22 that adds some good depth to the gameplay. You need to look at the enemies to see where they are so that you can get away, but doing so will lower your sanity. Enemies can see you in the light, so you have to hide in darkness to avoid detection, but being in the dark lowers your sanity. You're constantly balancing your instinct to survive with your desire to stay sane. You want to light torches in hallways and rooms so that you can see better, but you still want to have darkness so that you can hide.

There's also a fun level of resource management that plays into the light and sanity thing. Your only ways to light up a room are to use your lamp, which consumes oil and casts a radiating glow around you, or to light candles with single-use tinderboxes. The game is ultimately way too dark for you to stay in the light constantly, especially since you have a very limited supply of these items. Basically your options are either to play in the dark and conserve your items for when you think you'll need them, or to use them often and run out quickly. And there proves to be a fun level of strategy with using these items effectively.

Another thing that Frictional Games, the developer, understands well is that trial-and-error can ruin a good horror game. Repeating the same sequence multiple times completely ruins the scariness of the situation and makes you frustrated with the gameplay. When you die in Amnesia, you typically won't have to repeat the sequence again (there are two or three exceptions to this). Instead you'll just respawn in a nearby location and continue on with the story as if nothing happened. It might not be realistic, but it keeps the game moving forward and keeps each scare unique.

As you explore the castle Brennenburg, you find more scattered pages from your diary (and other notes you'd written to yourself) that reveal the backstory of your erased memory. As Daniel learns more about his past, he even starts to have visions of events that occured within the castle walls. The pieces progressively come together as you learn what Daniel was doing, how he got to the castle, what all transpired at the castle, and why he has to kill Alexander.

The story is fairly straightforward and not especially remarkable, but that's not to say it's bad or uninteresting. It's actually pretty good, but it's just not the main emphasis of the game. In the very beginning you probably won't care much about Daniel and will just take the story as it comes to you (since it's primarily meant to provide a structure for the gameplay), but there are some nice twists along the way that will grab your interest and bring some unexpected depth to the experience. Especially with a couple of different endings, depending on your final decisions.

In short, Amnesia is a solid game in basically every way. There are very few things for me to nitpick, and if I had to criticize anything, it would merely be that the story could be told in a slightly more interactive way than just reading journal entries. But that doesn't detract from the experience at all, and the rest of the game, from the adventure elements to the puzzles and the horror, are just so well-crafted that it's very easy to recommend Amnesia. Unless you don't like scary games, in which case you'd probably want to skip this one.

Even then, you should just man-up and play it anyway.

Amnesia: The Dark Decent   PC, MAC, Linux Adventure
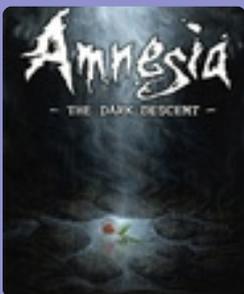
Bright moments:
Immersing atmosphere, intelligent puzzles that are intuitive and fun to solve, and top-notch, frightening, horror.

Fumbles in the dark:
The story is told almost entirely through journal entries, which isn't especially engaging.

Verdict:
Amnesia may be the scariest game ever. It's the new standard for what horror games can accomplish.

★★★★★

Developer: Frictional Games
Publisher: Frictional Games
Release Date: September 8, 2010

System Requirements:
- OS: Win XP, MAC OSX 10.5, Linux 2010 release or newer
- CPU: 2GHz
- RAM: 2GB
- Video: GeForce 6/RadeonX1000 or equivalent
- HDD: 3GB

J.U.L.I.A

Review by Jonathon Wisnoski

You, Rachel Manners an astrobiologist, awaken from cryosleep with all of your recent memories gone, in a ship recently damaged by meteorites. Other then yourself, the crew are gone, but the resident AI, J.U.L.I.A., makes a comforting companion with her emotion chips. Unfortunately, She does not seem to remember much else after all the damaged caused by these meteorites.

After fixing the ship, a simple and quick matter, your concerns turn to the missing crew; What happened to them, why were you in cryosleep alone, and why are you even doing in this solar system? You came to this solar system on a mission to find non-human life. The rest of the crew went down to the planet you are now orbiting, and for reasons unknown left you behind. Lacking anything else to do, and your curiosity tingling, you decide to look into the mystery of the missing crew and send an automated AI probe down to the surface to look for them. Ultimately, you explore the entire solar system, uncovering even more mysteries and loads of adventure.

JULIA really surprised me. I was expecting a rather normal point and click adventure. I was expecting to explore alien planets and ship corridors in some kind of 2.5D or 3D first-person view; Maybe do a little pixel hunting for objects, solve a few logic puzzles, read through dialogue trees. But that is not what JULIA is at all.

Instead, they start you off with a Mass Effect 2 style resource gathering mini-game; You end up doing this a few times, and while it is far from a gaming masterpiece it is a non-horrible diversion. Next, you get a series of reflex based games (and by "series of games" I mean the same one over and over again); here the graphics are poor and the gameplay unequivocally uninteresting.

Finally, we get to the meat of the game, by exploring the surface of the planet underneath you through interacting with the probe. This is done through a multiple choice, text adventure style, interface. The scenes are described using beautiful poetic spoken language with your options being listed underneath. The only issue with these sequences is how shallow they are. You explore small environments with very little choice of actions; But at least all of these text adventure sequences are linked, with some going back and forth between them being necessary, and

can be attempted in any order. Minimalistic, simplistic, gameplay is not bad inherently, and these sequences are quite enjoyable; Yes, I see room for improvement, but they are very well done nonetheless.

This is pretty much how the entire game plays out: mildly interesting minigame, boring minigame, text adventure. All in all, there are a few completely unlikable minigames, some neutral ones, and a few enjoyable ones, all of them very easy and simple; Sadly, There is really only one challenge/puzzle /minigame in the entire game that I would classify as very good. I wish more of the game would of been text adventure, that is by far the most interesting part, and I feel that as it is now the game is technically bad.

But the game does not feel bad. While at least 1/3rd of the game is absolutely, unequivocally, not worth playing it at least serves to portion out the game and build up a desire to see more of the story. It does not artificially lengthen the game, so much as it simply does a bad job of keeping the game at a reasonable length for the story. Fortunately, the gameplay is not the most important aspect of many adventure games and in JULIA every other aspect of the game is superior to its gameplay.

The presentation is one of the best features of JULIA. The graphics are simply top-notch and high resolution. Add to that a good soundtrack and a fully voiced cast and you have a great presentation surpassing most of its peers.

The story is good, maybe not any better then that, but I love how it unfolds. It is told mostly none-linearly and is rather interesting and enjoyable. The most significant portion of this story is told in the conversations between the protagonist and the ship's AI J.U.L.I.A.; and this is probably also where some less then stellar dialogue comes in. Most of it is good, but the emotional AI in particular can become corny and hackneyed at times. There are a few other

conversations with others, a few crew logs, the delightful and visceral text descriptions, and finally beautifully crafted cutscenes; Similarly to the gameplay, I would say that the text adventure sequences are the best part of the story.

JULIA is a two man, indie, graphical adventure for the PC. It is of a moderate length, has great high resolution graphics, and a science fiction storyline. It is made up of a collection of minigames and the question is, is it more then simply the sum of these minigames; I think it is.

J.U.L.I.A   PC Adventure

Bright moments:
The delightful descriptions in the text adventure sequences.

Fumbles in the dark:
The handful of absolutely horrible minigames, most notably guiding Mobot through the ice tunnel.

Verdict:
A good, strange, adventure that will not appeal to everyone.

Developer: CBE
Publisher: Lace Momba
Release Date: March 02, 2012

System Requirements:
- OS: Windows XP or newer
- CPU: 1.5GHz
- RAM: 1GB
- Video: 256MB, DX9
- HDD: 1GB

Dead Cyborg: The Beginning of the Death

Review by Jonathon Wisnoski (originally appeared on The Indie Elitist)

Dead Cyborg is an independent, mostly freeware, episodic, adventure game. It is set in a wonderful, cyberpunk, post nuclear apocalypse universe, with undertones of comedy. The first episode was released last year by the single developer Endre Barath and he is only waiting to get enough donations to release the other episodes, which is what I meant by "mostly freeware".

Inspired by old-school text adventures, FPSs, and classic sci-fi literature, Dead Cyborg, at its core, is a serious game about life, death, and human existence. It uses a level password system to save your position and has about 2-3 hours of play per episode. The story is separated into three episodes, the first of which I am reviewing here. No other episodes are released yet, but a little over half of the required amount for episode 2 has already been donated (with something around $3000 being the total amount necessary).

In the beginning of the game you wake up in a cryotank with no memories. The place is a mess, with rusting metal, deteriorating machines, garbage strewn everywhere, malfunctioning robots, and small messages everywhere. The world you are on, most likely Earth, appears to be in the middle of a post-apocalyptical nuclear winter. This place does not look like it has not seen any humans in a long time, and longer still for any type of human civilization. But long bereft of their fleshy masters, the robots seem to have almost developed a culture themselves, though a quirky insanity might be closer to the mark. This world is realised in fantastic 3D animated style graphics, with both the animation and the plot being very cyberpunk.

There are three other cryotanks in the room you wake up in, but they are empty, their inhabitants long gone. You feel sick, it is likely the radiation of this toxic place. You must explore this facility, uncover its mysteries, figure out how to stay alive, and find out who or what woke you from cryosleep.

The gameplay is pretty standard adventure fare. A lot of exploration, much item use, and a few light logic puzzles. they are not bad in any way, but the puzzles are the least appealing aspect of the game in my opinion. It really could use more brain teasers.

Dead Cyborg is an extremely stylish adventure. The story, the location, the graphics, are all unique and very enjoyable and while the puzzles are not as good as they could be, they do not take away from the achievements of the other elements of the game. All in all, it is a good game, and I personally adore it. If you feel at all the same way, then please donate.

Dead Cyborg Ep. 1: The Beginning of the Death   PC, Linux Adventure

Bright moments:
The unique and abundant style.

Fumbles in the dark:
The puzzles do not live up the quality of the rest of the game.

Verdict:
A great adventure and a personal favorite.

Developer: Endre Barath
Publisher: Endre Barath
Release Date: July 14, 2011

System Requirements:
- OS: Windows XP or newer, Linux
- CPU: 1.5GHz
- RAM: 1GB
- Video: DX9
- HDD: 1GB

Puzzle Agent 2

Review by Jonathon Wisnoski

With mysteries remaining in Scoggins, Minnesota detective Nelson Tethers just cannot get it out of his thoughts or the gnomes out of his nightmares, even if the case is officially considered solved. So taking vacation leave Tethers returns to Scoggins to finally bring the mystery of the forest gnomes and the missing people to a close.

Puzzle Agent 2 is most of all a sequel to Puzzle Agent, it has the same cartoony 2D hand drawn graphics, wacky plot, selection of mini-games, and starts off right where the first game ended. So if you enjoyed the first game you are likely to enjoy this one just as much but for anyone who has not played either of these games I will try to convince you in the following review.

Puzzle Agent 2, and more generally the entire series to date, is a very unique adventure/puzzle game. In addition to the normal conversation trees with NPCs and story progression there are numerous and diverse mini-games, which are the centrepiece of the entire game. There are optional puzzles and bonus puzzles, mathematical based puzzles and logical puzzles, hard puzzles and easy puzzles, as well as familiar puzzles and unknown puzzles, but all of them are at least somewhat enjoyable.

The graphics are interesting if nothing else. Quintessentially, cartoony and at least appearing to be hand drawn with minimalist jerky animation. They lend a unique visual style which is very charming, but I cannot say that they look great or even much better then good.

And equally as unique as the rest of the game, the plot of Puzzle Agent 2 is a direct sequel to Puzzle Agent. But where the first game has a freaky and strange plot already Puzzle Agent 2 takes this concept and runs with it, and it definitely keeps you on your toes. And like the graphics I cannot really say that is is a great plot; It serves to differentiate and give the Puzzle Agent world its own theme and mood, which is as important as anything else and it does make one enjoyable world.

Overall it is one of the more realistic fictional worlds. Everything just fits together, makes sense, and makes a finished product that is even better then the sum of its parts. The one bad part of the entire game is the length which, even while not using a single walkthrough or external hint, I was able to complete in under 4 hours, and I think 2 hours would be easily possible, for anyone who is not worrying about their score.

Puzzle Agent 2   PC, MAC, PSN, iOS Casual Adventure

Bright moments:
The cohesive and entertaining universe created to host both Puzzle Agent 2 and its predecessor.

Fumbles in the dark:
Puzzle Agent 2 is ultimatly just a collection of loosely connected mini-games, which will not appeal be everyone.

Verdict:
A charming spin on the genre that mixes it up so much that it does not have a chance ot get stale.

⭐⭐⭐⭐☆

Developer: Telltale Games
Publisher: Telltale Games
Release Date: June 30, 2011

System Requirements:
- OS: Win XP or newer
- CPU: 1.8GHz
- RAM: 2GB
- Video: 256MB, DX9
- HDD: .5GB

Limbo

Review by Nick Burgener (originally appeared on The Nocturnal Rambler)

So let's talk about Limbo. It's an award-winning indie platformer about a boy waking up in a dark and brutal forest as he searches for his missing sister. He encounters all kinds of dark horrors on his quest, solving puzzles and avoiding the many, many death traps that lay in wait. Or, in my case, hitting every single death trap. Multiple times. And having to buy a new keyboard because it got smashed to bits in an unrelated incident involving the wall and projectile force.

Limbo is a difficult game that has you dying constantly. Some people praise its difficulty as being uniquely challenging in a world of games that hold your hand too much. It's definitely true that mainstream games are a little on the easy side, but that doesn't make Limbo's difficulty necessarily good. It borders on the gray area between satisfying and tedious, leaving the game a mixed bag of fun and frustration. Which, coupled with other major problems, leaves me disgruntled with this art game.

Let's just get it out of the way first; Limbo looks really good. Despite being very minimalistic in appearance, with its monochromatic color scheme and solid silhouettes, the visual design has a fair amount of depth and complexity to it. The different layers in the foreground and background move as you move around the levels, which is not only stimulating to the eye, but adds a lot of depth and immersion to this otherwise flat world. Certain animations are also eye-catching, notably with the way shadows sometimes play and interact with the silhouetted level design.

This is a game where you can take your hands off the controls for a minute and just stare at the visuals. You might even say that it looks better in stillshots than it does in full motion, as if they might be framed and hung in an art gallery. It looks especially good in the earlier portions when you're outside wandering around the woods, in part just because I find the natural elements more interesting, but also because I feel like there's more interesting scenery and setpieces in the environment. Once you're into the more industrial areas of the second half, however, the scenery becomes more drab and less stimulating.

One minor issue I have with the visuals is the continuity shift between different environments (or lackthereof). You start out in the woods and then before you know it you're running along rooftops, and then you're deep in a machine shop or something. It's not really clear how you got to these areas, except for the understood rule of "go to the right," in part because of how non-descript the solid black visuals are. I just felt like I was running through black most of the time, instead of being a part of a persistent landscape.

Which brings up my only big problem with the visuals: because everything is shrouded in black silhouette, it's sometimes difficult to differentiate between usable items and the background environments. It's especially bad in the beginning when you have to move logs around, but they blend in with the foreground scenery. I usually wound up dying five or six times before even realizing the thing was there. Similar things happen later with switches in the industrial area that blend in with the background ambiance.

Some people talk about Limbo as if it's a horror game, with a lot of professional reviewers claiming it's the most disturbing game they've ever played. People attribute this to the dark visuals, menacing environments, and all of the somewhat graphic ways that you and other children get maimed. It's true that the kids get killed in some pretty gruesome ways, and yes the visuals are very dark, but it's really not a horror game and I didn't find it disturbing. It's just grim, and shares more in style with film noir than horror. And I liked that.

In terms of atmosphere and presentation, Limbo does something really special that's hard to put into words. It's got a very minimalistic design that also depicts a really fantastical setting. It constantly treads the line between fantasy and reality, putting it in a weird space that lies just outside of ordinary comprehension. It's almost like a contradiction, but it feels so perfect in this case. And that, I think is why people fall in love with this game.

I sure as hell didn't fall in love with it, because I was too busy raging at the obnoxious gameplay.

The difficulty in Limbo fluctuates back and forth between being a fun, satisfying challenge, and being a stupidly tedious and frustrating affair of trial and error. Bear in mind that trial and error isn't always bad, and can be a great way to give players feedback and reinforce your decision-making, much like conducting a science experiment. You try something, it doesn't work, and you learn from the experience.

The problem with Limbo is that, more often than not, you don't learn anything from your mistakes. You see a weird contraption in the environment, so you approach it and it kills you in an instant. "Ok, now I know to avoid those things," you say to yourself, but then that particular trap (or any variation thereof) never shows up again. You see a weird looking switch on the floor, so you step on it and get crushed immediately. "Ok, now I know to jump over those things," you say to yourself, but then the very next switch makes it so that you get crushed if you DON'T step on it.
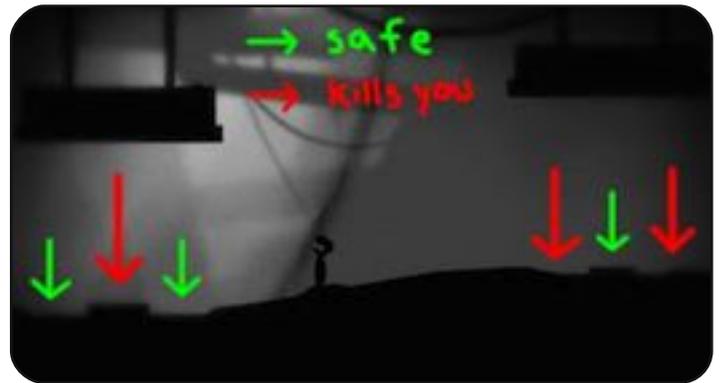
I appreciate that the game doesn't repeat its puzzles (except for the boxes that you have to push around, of which there are literally thousands), but it doesn't build on its previous puzzles and the lessons learned. And in the few occasions when the game actually does establish rules, it's quick to break them. You rarely get to feel any sense of mastery; when you die, it's not because you made a mistake and need to improve, it's just the game sadistically killing you until it becomes rote, because you know everything that's going to happen ahead of time.

When Limbo isn't contradicting its own rules, it intentionally deceives and misleads you. It drops red herrings all over the place, making you think you're supposed to be doing one thing, when in actuality you should be doing something else. One spot had me falling into the same pit of death for 10 minutes straight due to a combination of deception and bad level design.

I was sliding down a steep rooftop, and naturally fell to my death the first time. But I saw a rope dangling and swaying down beneath this razor blade, and figured that was where I had to go. But the rope is damned difficult to get to, because if you jump too close to the edge (or with too much force) you land on the razor, and if you jump too early (or without enough force) then you come up short and miss the rope. I kept trying different combinations of speed, where I jumped from, what angle I jumped at, and how hard I jumped, but could never get to the stupid rope, all the while thinking that I was sucking at the game.

Well it turns out that there's a sign floating in the background that you can press to change the gravity, so that your feet land on the pole and you walk straight up the screen. But there are three problems with this puzzle design. First is that until this point, we'd only ever inverted gravity--we'd never made it go left or right before. Second is that we'd never interacted with a gravity switch in mid-air before--we were always standing still on flat land. Third is the fact that this sign/switch blends in with the other random crap in the background.

The sign is difficult to notice in the first place, because it's a dull gray like the other stuff in the background, instead of being a solid black, and because the lightbulb on the edge doesn't show like the other switches we'd used before. Even though I had (eventually) noticed it was there before looking up the solution to this sequence, it had never occurred to me that I should press "action" on it, because the puzzles had never introduced this kind of mechanic before (making gravity go left or right, or hitting switches in mid-air).

You remember how good Portal was at introducing the player to new gameplay mechanics while building on the previous mechanics? They introduced one new twist at a time, and then they mixed it with other tricks you'd previously learned. It was designed deliberately so that everything developed sequentially, without holding your hand, and still putting you in challenging situations where you had to figure out how to do things that the game never explicitly taught you to do.

If Limbo had taken lessons from Portal, we'd have been introduced to the "gravity can also go sideways" concept in a safe environment that let us get the hang of it before having to use it in some kind of creative scenario. Instead, the first time this concept is introduced is during a life-or-death instance where you have only a split second in which to possibly stumble upon it. That's just not good design.

You might be thinking the point of Limbo is that its world is intentionally cruel and unforgiving, and that the game would lose its charm if it took the Portal approach. Well, maybe, but keep in mind that the first time Limbo introduced gravity switches was in a completely safe scenario where you could walk around and press the switches without consequences. You weren't even crushed by a box or thrown into a spike pit or anything.

I like a game that challenges me, and I'm especially familiar with games that aren't afraid to kick your butt and make you learn the hard way. Some of my favorite games are like this. But the difficulty in Limbo is not the kind that reinforces the lessons in any kind of meaningful way, which makes a lot of its sequences a simple matter of tedium. I might be willing to excuse this obnoxious difficulty from an artistic standpoint, but I can't praise it from a gameplay standpoint in good conscience.

The whole time I was experiencing extremely annoying input lag. The kind where I press "jump" and the limbo kid doesn't jump until nearly a whole second later. In such an unforgiving game that requires such very precise timing, the input delay caused me all kinds of unnecessary frustration, especially in the game's more notorious trial-and-error sequences. I wasn't playing on a dedicated gaming PC, but its specs still exceeded the system requirements for such a simple game, and apparently other lower-end systems run into the same issues.

And, well, that's Limbo for you. I enjoyed its artistic expression, but as a video game it frustrated me with its inconsistent design elements. The challenging difficulty was really fun at first, but then it turned into a matter of tedious trial-and-error and lost its appeal very quickly. At least there are frequent check points, though, so it's not so unbearable as to make the game unplayable.

Limbo   PC, MAC, Xbox 360, PS3 Platformer
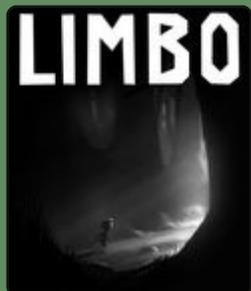
Bright moments:
Great visuals and atmosphere, with some really fun puzzle designs.

Fumbles in the dark:
Many of the puzzles rely too heavily on trial-and-error and become tedious.

Verdict:
For a 2D puzzle-platformer, this one stands out from the crowd and is worth playing.

Developer: Playdead
Publisher: Playdead
Release Date: August 2, 2011 (PC)

System Requirements:
- OS: Win XP or newer
- CPU: 2GHz
- RAM: 512MB
- Video: DX9c, Shader Model 3
- HDD: 150MB

★★★☆☆

Cthulhu Saves the World

Review by Gnome (originally appeared on [Gnomeslair](#))

I was never particularly fond of JRPGs you know; never even cared for Link's 16-bit adventures on the SNES. Cthulhu, on the other hand, now that is another matter entirely. The lovable Great Old One has always been among my, let's say, top five mythical beasts, a fact that combined with an incredibly cheap price and a high-flying indie flag led to my playing of Cthulhu Saves The World. Oh, and the Breath of Death VII CRPG the developer kindly bundled with it made the choice of buying said bundle even easier. Apparently and after 15 hours of playing with the thing I can say it was a wise choice indeed.

Cthulhu Saves The World is, happily, much more than a retro-styled, top-down RPG with turn based combat. It is a truly funny retro-styled, top-down RPG with turn based combat. It's one of the few games and possibly the only RPG I've played on a PC that sports humour that is actually any good. Really. I verified this with the help of at least three (they were four) male and female test-subjects; they all laughed and thought that the

heroic version of Cthulhu the game so obviously enjoys ridiculing is a great idea indeed.

What's more the game itself is rather good too, though definitely not exactly my kind of CRPG. It's pure hack-and-slash with minimal exploration, only slightly confusing dungeons and simplistic combat. If it weren't for the demented plot, the brilliantly hilarious cut-scenes, the hundreds of hidden jokes, the excellent and deep combat system, and the fact that the game wisely rewards gamers with something different every hour or so, I'd have probably given up on it, and would have lost one of the most ridiculous game finales this side of Monkey Island 2.

Oh, yes, also the chance to discover one single gold piece in well hidden chest in one of the later dungeons. How very silly eh? Almost on the same level of silliness of not sporting an in-game map...

As an added bonus the graphics are excellent in their retro, pixel-artsy way and the music will definitely evoke that 80s console music feeling; not that I particularly adore it, but, well, some do. And after you beat the game, you'll unlock a ton of extras and new game-modes to make sure your purchase lasts you another 10 to 15 hours. Now, that definitely is what I'd call value for money.

Cthulhu Saves the World   PC, Xbox 360 JRPG

Bright moments:
Cthulhu, enough said. Oh, and the excellent price.

Fumbles in the dark:
Lack of a in-game map and shallow exploration.

Verdict:
A hilarious, rich, incredibly cheap and actually good RPG. Get it.

⭐⭐⭐⭐☆

Developer: Zeboyd
Publisher: Zeboyd
Release Date: July 13, 2011 (PC)

System Requirements:
- OS: Win XP or newer
- CPU: 1.6GHz
- RAM: 1GB
- Video: DX9c
- HDD: 200MB