Adventure Lantern

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Editorial

Browsing through the Adventure Lantern archives, you may notice that in the past, we typically had a single team member assigned to a game series. For example, Thaumaturge reviewed all of the first five Ben Jordan games, while I covered three games from the Tex Murphy series. There was no grand strategy behind these assignments. Some of our team members simply gravitated toward certain titles. However, reviewing series in such a manner gave our contributors a chance to compare and contrast different installments. It also helped ensure future episodes would be covered by individuals familiar with the subject matter.

Unfortunately, at least for me, having a single person review an entire game series had a downside. I deferred playing several games since the series was already being covered by a different team member. One of these series was Last Half of Darkness. Wendy Nellius reviewed both [Shadows of the Servants](#) and [Beyond the Spirit's Eye](#), which are two Last Half of Darkness games released in 2005 and 2007. I did not play either game around the time they were released. I figured I would eventually get back to the series.

It wasn't until I had a chance to play a newer Last Half of Darkness game, called Tomb of Zojir, that I fully realized what I was missing. As you will see in my review below, I was thoroughly impressed with the game's puzzles and atmosphere.

Playing through Tomb of Zojir renewed my respect for independent developers. It is hard to believe William R. Fisher single-handedly designed such a complex and enjoyable game. Reading through the magazine, you will notice that Jonathon's review of Digital: A Love Story and Rob's article on The Marionette tell very similar stories. Both titles are independent development efforts and deliver excellent gaming experiences. In fact, Digital is the first game to receive a 5-star rating from an Adventure Lantern reviewer. To make things even better, Digital and Marionette are available completely free of charge. To round out the issue, this month we also took a look at The Next Big Thing and the first chapter of The Fall Trilogy.

At a time when many commercially available games feel derivative and rushed, it felt good to assemble an edition of Adventure Lantern that contains multiple positive reviews. Here's hoping you will also find something to enjoy in the following pages. Be sure to tune in next month for a new PDF

Until next time,
Ugur

For all your questions and comments about the magazine, send an e-mail to: ugur@adventurelantern.com

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The Next Big Thing
review by Ugur Sener

It is the evening of the annual horror film awards. Acclaimed monsters are competing for the highly coveted "golden Death Chickens." This year, the ceremony is being held at Mr. FitzRandolph's mansion. FitzRandolph is the owner of MKO Pictures and an influential movie producer. Two journalists named Dan Murray and Liz Allaire have been assigned to cover the event. Dan is a remarkably pompous sports writer who got stuck with the assignment because he got on his boss's bad side. Liz is an inexperienced, but talented young journalist. More than a little eccentric, Liz has a disconcerting habit of periodically sputtering all manner of nonsense.

A few minutes before the ceremony begins, Liz and Dan pull into the parking lot outside the building. Dan tells Liz that he is not actually going to attend the ceremony. Horror movie awards are simply beneath this renowned sports writer. Understandably, Liz is more than a little annoyed with Dan's arrogant attitude. After a bout of yelling and name-calling, Liz leaves Dan in the parking lot and walks into the building. Several hours later, she returns with a recorder full of interviews. Dan on the other hand, has elected to spend his time getting drunk in the parking lot. As the journalists get into another yelling match, Dan notices an actor named Big Albert sneaking into FitzRandolph's office through a window. Liz is convinced that Big Albert is after some juicy secret. This could be her first major story. She decides to investigate and chases after the actor. Thus begins an odd little adventure full of monsters, teleportation pads, missing brains, and a healthy dose of absurdity.

The Next Big Thing (TNBT) is a third-person point-and-click adventure game from Pendulo Studios. The development company is best known for its work on the Runaway trilogy. With TNBT, Pendulo steps away from the Runaway saga and delivers a different story. Graphically, the new adventure game is on par with the previous titles from Pendulo Studios. The Next Big Thing boasts beautifully-crafted environments and excellent animation. Unfortunately, there are several issues that hold back the game. The end result is still a pleasant adventure. However, TNBT does not quite rise to the level of wittiness, whimsy, or charm attained by the Runaway series.

The Next Big Thing is divided into six chapters. Players alternate between controlling Liz and Dan throughout the adventure. The game uses a simple mouse-driven interface. A single left click moves your character to the desired location. You can double click to instantly move to the indicated spot. If you hover the mouse over a hotspot, the icon changes from the default crosshair. For instance, the 'eye' icon is used to examine objects and the 'hand' icon is used to pick up inventory items. On certain spots, it is possible to right click on an object to change the action you want to perform. For example, you might be able to switch between the 'eye' and 'speech bubble' icon to alternate between examining and talking to another character. If you move the mouse to the top of the screen, a pop-up menu allows you to access your inventory and the hint system built into the game.

The adventure begins in the parking lot outside FitzRandolph's mansion. Taking control of Liz, your

first task is figure out why Big Albert broke into FitzRandolph's office. Once you manage to get inside the office, events quickly escalate and the journalists find themselves involved in a conspiracy. It'll be up to you to sort out the mess and uncover the mystery surrounding MKO Pictures.

Along the way, you will get to meet a few characters and begin to appreciate TNBT's unique setting. This is a world where monsters are real and live among human beings. In fact, many of the monsters are famous actors and work on horror movies. Technology appears to be advanced since robots are readily available to perform tasks like cooking and gardening. Adding in the game's exaggerated cartoon-like graphics and odd puzzles, it is clear that Pendulo has attempted to create a quirky and surreal world for adventurers to explore.

The effect is magnified by the game's unusual cast of characters. You will get to contemplate death with a highly depressed and oddly nihilistic robot that is reminiscent of Marvin from The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. You will meet a poet whose only inspiration is to feel pain in novel ways. With a strong nod to the 1986 movie The Fly, you will hang out with Professor Fly, who is actually a giant talking fly that just happens to be working on teleportation pads.

The puzzles are likewise very fitting for the tone of the game. The vast majority of the challenges are inventory-based. There are also some logic puzzles that require pattern recognition and a couple of dialog puzzles. On many occasions, the puzzles have quirky , but straightforward solutions. Several inventory items are used in unorthodox ways. You may also find yourself doing strange things like purposely trying to get fired or dying a monster blue to improve his self esteem. For the most part, the game does a nice job of integrating the puzzles to the flow of the story. As

Dan and Liz encounter new situations, the game is also good at explaining your objectives. There should not be many occasions where you have no idea what you are trying to accomplish.

If you have trouble with the puzzles, TNBT has two hint systems that can be helpful. One or both of these hint systems become available based on the difficulty setting selected at the beginning of the adventure. The magnifying glass button on the top portion of the screen is used to reveal all the hotspots in the area you are currently exploring. There is also a hint button that can be pressed to receive a clue about your current objective. The clues are often indirect, providing a general hint and an image of a location you should reexamine or an item you might think about using. The idea is to nudge you in the right direction rather than spelling out the solution. Unfortunately, if you get really stuck, the hint may be too obscure to be helpful. It may have been a better idea to implement a tiered hint system that starts with a small clue and gradually reveals the solution as you click on the hint button multiple times.

TNBT's bizarre setting, interesting characters, and odd challenges are certainly effective at piquing player interest. The abundant references to old movies are also likely to be appreciated by movie buffs. The absurd nature of the story coupled with the beautifully-rendered environments generates enough of a drive to push you to the end of the game. However, a few elements keep both the story and the setting from fully clicking.

For one thing, while the supporting cast is entertaining, the player characters are not all that likable. The 'partners that can't manage to get along' spiel feels a little cliched, with an outcome you can predict from the very first scene in the parking lot. Taken as individuals, the characters do not fare much

better. Dan is supposed to be the rugged macho guy that only cares about sports and attractive women. Without a doubt, some of his behavior is intentionally exaggerated and meant to be amusing. This works to a certain extent, but Dan doesn't quite have that James Bond or Indiana Jones-like style and charm that would make him endearing despite his flaws. You do not discover much about his background in the game either. His character never truly develops, making him seem a bit shallow and one-dimensional.

Take that story somewhere else. I need ideas.
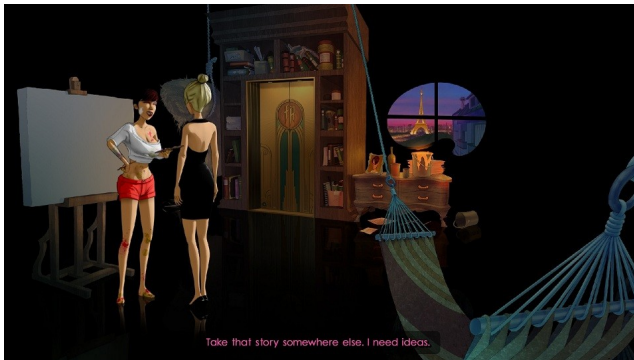
Liz is arguably a somewhat more interesting and likeable character. It helps that she is driven to get to the bottom of the case. More importantly, there is an entire section of the game that involves exploring her background. In addition to containing some of the best puzzles in the game, this section gives Liz considerably more depth. In low doses, the absolute nonsense she habitually mutters can also be amusing. However, at least for me, the attempts at humor during her sections of the game fell somewhat flat. Her overall zany behavior and nonsensical dialog options weren't all that hysterical. After all, there are

only so many times you can laugh at another character saying 'dis...concerting' in response to Liz's random commentary.

Another problem is with the presentation of the story. On a few occasions, the game does a poor job of transitioning from one portion of the adventure to the next, making it a little difficult to follow the story. While it is not a serious problem, this can be a little jarring and break the mood. More importantly, the mystery you are trying to solve is not all that interesting. The story lacks depth and the game fails to create a sense of urgency about what Liz and Dan are trying to accomplish. The problems are accentuated by the game's short length. I was able to finish TNBT in seven hours during my first playthrough. In my opinion, that is insufficient playtime for a commercial adventure game. TNBT would have certainly benefited from additional locations and puzzles.

In the end, The Next Big Thing is a short, but entertaining game. The excellent cartoon-like graphics, superb animation, interesting characters, and quirky puzzles add up to a fun adventure. Unfortunately, several problems keep the game from being a complete success. Some of the jokes fall flat and the main characters could be better developed. The hint system could use some reworking. The game would have also benefited from more content. However, none of the issues fundamentally disrupt the overall experience. If you are looking for a quirky adventure and a relaxed gaming experience, consider giving TNBT a try. If you liked Pendulo's past work, you will most likely enjoy playing through The Next Big Thing as well. It may not be an excellent game, but it still offers plenty of fun moments.

The Next Big Thing   PC & MAC Adventure

Bright moments:
Excellent graphics and animation. The unusual game world is fun to explore.

Fumbles in the dark:
Some of the humor misses the mark. Could use more content and character development.

Verdict:
A fun and quirky adventure that is over too soon.

★★★½☆

Developer: Pendulo Studios
Publisher: Focus Home Interactive
Release Date: April 2011
System Requirements:
- OS: Windows® 7/XP/Vista
- Processor: 2 GHz processor
- Memory: 1GB RAM (2 GB for Vista)
- Video Card: ATI Radeon X800/Intel GMA 3000/NVIDIA GeForce 6800 or higher
- Hard disk space: 8 GB

Tomb of Zojir
review by Ugur Sener

A small boat brings you to the shore. It is a dark and gloomy night. A sickly fog seems to be wrapped around the entire island. Ghostly sounds fill the air. A series of caverns lie ahead. You will need to walk through them to reach the main part of the island. As you slowly march into the caves, you see a movement in the shadows. Apparitions dart in and out of sight. Restless spirits haunt the caverns. You feel as though someone or something is watching your every move. You want to run away and forget about this horrible place, but a powerful force draws you deeper into the caves. You know that you did not arrive at this island by accident. You are here for a reason. If you can survive what lies ahead, you could be the one that finally puts an end to the darkness. A long and difficult night awaits. Welcome to the Isle of the Dead.

Tomb of Zojir is a first-person horror-adventure game from WRF Studios. Designed by William R. Fisher, Tomb of Zojir is the third installment in the Last Half of Darkness series. It may not avow you with flashy graphics or a cutting-edge 3D engine, but with its clever design, strong atmosphere, and engaging puzzles, Tomb of Zojir delivers an excellent adventure-gaming experience.

Even though Tomb of Zojir is the third chapter in the larger Last Half of Darkness saga, players are not required to be familiar with the previous adventures. Newcomers can expect to jump in and understand the game's self-contained story. However, once you beat Tomb of Zojir, you might find yourself wanting to go back and check out Mr. Fisher's earlier work.

The game ships in a DVD case with a short manual and a piece of paper that contains a poem and letters arranged in a circle. It is important to note that all of these items are used to solve puzzles you will encounter during the adventure. Even the artwork on the actual game DVD serves as a hint. In addition, the game's manual contains important background information about the island. It is highly recommended that you at least take a few minutes to skim through the manual while the game installs.

Looking through the manual, you will find a journal written by an explorer who tried to uncover the secrets of the island. According to the diary, Emperor Zojir's tomb can be found on the Isle of the Dead. The emperor is believed to be buried with an incredible treasure. Elaborate mechanical locks prevent access to the tomb and the emperor's treasure room. According to local legends, the tomb also used to be protected by powerful dark magic. Centuries ago, a wizard named Tamerac created seven artifacts called bloodstones and placed them in a circle around Zojir's coffin. The bloodstones were used to summon spirits to guard the treasure.

In the years after Tamerac crafted the bloodstones, many thieves tried to gain access to the tomb and claim Zojir's treasure. None of them were successful. Unfortunately, over time, people forgot the nature of the magic that protected Zojir's grave. The guardian spirits became little more than a myth. One day, after failing to gain access to the treasure room, a foolish band of thieves decided to steal the bloodstones instead. They recklessly disrupted the protective

circle, unleashing vengeful spirits and turning the once beautiful island into a dark twisted place. It will be up to you to find a way to contain the spirits and bring peace to the Isle of the Dead.

The actual game begins as you dock your boat at the entrance of the caverns. Your first task is to find a way through the caves and reach the main part of the island. Along the way, you will encounter several apparitions and the first of many mechanical locks spread throughout the island. After leaving the caves, you will have a chance to explore several other locations and start finding out more information about the troubled history of the island.

Tomb of Zojir is played from a first-person perspective, using a very simple and intuitive interface. The game is designed as a series of screens presented like a slideshow. Each screen contains one or more exits, allowing you to continue exploring in a specific direction. The mouse icon changes when you hover over an item of interest on the current screen. For instance, the red arrow indicates that you can perform an action or pick up an inventory item. The eye icon is used to examine items. The inventory is accessible at the bottom of the screen.

Among the strongest features of the game is the atmosphere. Mr. Fisher has done an excellent job of creating a creepy and mysterious setting for the Tomb of Zojir. From the old mansion to the swamps and the underground tunnels, each part of the island feels appropriately dark and gloomy. The overwhelmingly thick fog sometimes obscures your vision. It feels as if the air itself is trying to hinder your progress. Ghosts appear at key moments to remind you that you are not alone. You will not be attacked by hordes of zombies or bloodthirsty vampires. However, Tomb of Zojir still manages to create a feeling of imminent

danger and urgency. The game compels you to push forward and unlock the island's mysteries.

The game has also been designed to continually give players a sense of accomplishment and real progress. Once you get past the set of caverns from the opening sequence of the game, you gain access to a small pier, a mansion, and a graveyard. The path to the next part of the island is sealed by a series of elegant locks. As it turns out, these mechanisms were constructed because of the thieves constantly trying to raid Zojir's tomb. The islanders tried to protect things and places they held dear, just as mage Tamerac tried to guard Zojir's grave. As you explore the mansion and the pier, you gradually uncover clues and find objects that allow you to unlock each gate. Along the way, you also discover background information about the island's denizens. The locks cease to be meaningless obstacles once you understand their significance. Instead, they serve as an integral part of the story. In addition, slowly peeling back each layer of the island feels like a real achievement and creates a sense of fulfillment.

Between mechanical locks and inventory-based puzzles, Tomb of Zojir offers a significant number of challenges. There are several logic puzzles that are fairly novel and should be interesting to solve for even the more seasoned adventurers. For the most part, the inventory-based puzzles are straightforward and have logical solutions. Items are typically used in intuitive ways. There are no absurd combinations that require tremendous leaps of logic. If you carefully examine each screen, you should be able to get past the game's challenges without much trouble.

In addition to offering an interesting setting and entertaining puzzles, Tomb of Zojir is very satisfying in terms of its length. Beyond the caves and the mansion you will discover during the early portions of

the game, Tomb of Zojir contains several other areas for you to explore. Each location has a number of screens to examine and a variety of puzzles to solve. The 20+ hours of game time promised on the box is not overly exaggerated. There is also a pleasant bonus that gets unlocked when you finish the adventure.

Despite its numerous strong elements, Tomb of Zojir does have a couple of flaws. For instance, on certain screens, it is easy to miss an exit that allows you to enter a different room or walk down a different path. This can cause you to miss inventory items or important clues, resulting in needless backtracking. Fortunately, this is only a minor problem and does not significantly hurt the overall experience. On most screens it is clear where you need to click to continue your exploration.

If you are looking for an adventure game with modern graphics, the visuals of Tomb of Zojir may be another

problem. The slideshow presentation can feel a little dated and may not appeal to players that enjoy fully exploring a 3D environment. The character models can also seem a little stiff. However, at least for me, the richly detailed screens negated any need for full 360-degree exploration. More importantly, in my opinion, the game's strong atmosphere and entertaining puzzles more than make up for any possible shortcomings with the visuals.

In the end, Tomb of Zojir is a thoroughly enjoyable horror-adventure. The Isle of the Dead is a delight to explore. The game features numerous well-crafted puzzles and a wide variety of locations. The atmosphere is spot-on and the background story is very intriguing. It is remarkable that a single person is responsible for designing this game. If you have not played any of the other Last Half of Darkness games, this chapter makes for an excellent jumping on point. Tomb of Zojir is a very easy recommendation to fans of horror-adventures.

Tomb of Zojir   PC Adventure

Bright moments:
Excellent atmosphere. Numerous entertaining puzzles. Cleverly designed environments.

Fumbles in the dark:
The visuals can seem a bit dated. A few of the exits are easy to miss.

Verdict:
An excellent game recommended to all horror-adventure fans.

Developer: WRF Studios
Publisher: Iceberg Interactive
Release Date: December 2010
System Requirements:
• Windows® 7/XP/Vista
• 128 MB RAM
• 32 MB Video Card
• DVD ROM Drive
• Direct X Compatible Soundcard

★★★★½

The Fall Trilogy: Chapter 1 - Separation
review by Jonathon Wisnoski (originally published at Jonathon's blog)

This first chapter of The Fall Trilogy, Separation, mixes the genres of puzzle, hidden object, and adventure. It is a recent release of Kheops Studios and is primarily a puzzle game, with some hidden object hunts mixed in, and a small amount of story and inventory puzzles making up the adventure portion. It is an easy game, and even when players get stuck, there are many options available to help solve the current problem. As such, it is great game for any newcomers to the adventure or puzzle genres, but still potentially holds a lot of entertainment for even the most hardcore fans.

One notable feature of Separation is the amount of hand-holding the game does. The game takes the practice of giving hints to an extreme I have never before seen. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing, as in general the hints are only offered and not pushed onto the player. Some aspects of this hand-holding are built right into the gameplay, mainly the map system and the in-game commentary. The map system can be helpful as first it acts as a map, telling you where you have been and where you are, and secondly it notes what puzzles you have solved and which ones you have not. This mapping system even goes outside of the map screen into the game area, where the game will note the name of the rooms you hover your mouse over if you have already been there, or a statement about not having explored that location, if you have not yet been there. All of this serves to make sure the user is never lost and always knows where he has to go. Additionally, Like most adventure games, Separation has a few lines of dialogue whenever the user uses an item or clicks an interactive area on the screen. In Separation, this commentary is often used to give subtle tips to the user when an incorrect solution is tried. These tips of course are given without the user asking for them, but they are subtle enough that they did not bother me.

The other aspects of the hand-holding are more conventional. One of these is built into the objectives menu. At any time, the user can ask for a tip for any specified objective, but after the tip is used a short time is needed for the tip system to recharged before it can be used again. This same technique is mirrored in the hint system for the hidden object puzzles. Instead of using a hint system, logic puzzles simply have a skip function that charges in the same fashion. In addition to skipping the puzzles, stuck users have a few other options. One of them is the instruction system, that allows users to look-up how the current puzzle works. Since puzzles are often slightly ambiguous, this does come in handy from time to time. However, most of the puzzles are quite conventional and most players will have encountered all of them in one form or another many times before. And if this is not enough, the player can even reduce the difficulty of any puzzle he encounters, by simply resetting the puzzle and choosing the easy difficulty.
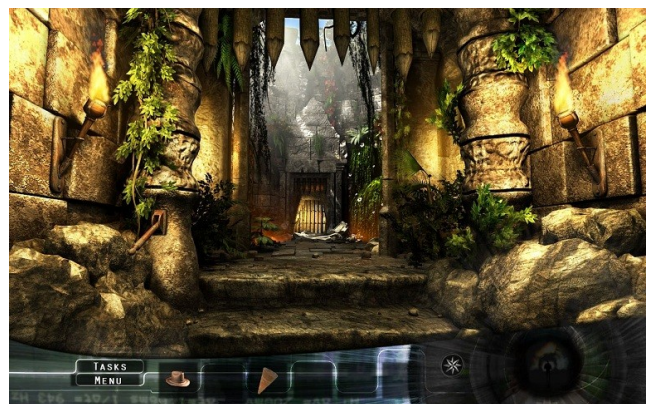
The story is rather vague in this first chapter. The game starts with the main character falling into some pit. He wakes up inside of an abandoned Asian ruin, with no memory of where he is or even who he is. He

must then work his way out of the ruin solving puzzles at the many devices blocking his path. Along the way, he occasionally has flashbacks of his prior life as he slowly regains his memory. It is pretty generic and does not really add anything to the experience as a whole, but presumably we will be getting into the story more in the subsequent games.

What makes up the bulk of Separation are the puzzles which as previously mentioned are a mixture of hidden object and logic. They are mostly easy, even without using the hint systems, and very conventional. They are solid, but none of them really rise above the others as being particularly interesting. That said, one nice feature of the game is that the user will almost always have multiple puzzles to pick from at any time, giving the user some choice in his direction, even if the game is ultimately linear.


Probably the most refined feature of the game is the presentation. The environment is good looking and detailed, containing many small animations that really bring it to life. But even with all of this going for it, the environment still manages to look bland. There is just something about it that makes it boring. Additionally, the interface is nice looking and very functional.

One of the most notable aspects of the game is the soundtrack. The soundtrack is very upbeat and relaxing and also just very enjoyable music to listen to. In addition, the sound effects and voice overs are very well done and only add to the experience. One notable option in the game is the "360 Degree Free View"; This option enables or disables the free viewing of the rooms. When disabled all the rooms are separated into screens, when enabled the user is able to look around freely. There is no reason for this option to ever be turned off in my opinion, and it would significantly take away from the experience if it was.

Overall the game is enjoyable, but it is also somewhat bland. The Asian ruins are beautiful, but also dull and lifeless. It never really looks like a place that could exist, and as such, does not draw you into the experience. The puzzles are also very conventional, every single one of them has been done before by other adventure games and done better.

The Fall Trilogy: Chapter 1 - Separation   PC Adventure
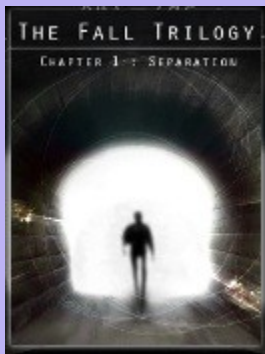
Bright moments:
The plethora of good interesting puzzles.

Fumbles in the dark:
The lack of any real unique puzzles.

Verdict:
A solid puzzle game, but also a bland puzzle game.

Developer: Kheops Studio
Publisher: Kheops Studio
**Release Date:**   January 2010
System Requirements:
- OS: Windows XP or newer
- CPU: 800 MHz
- RAM: 1024 MB
- Video: 64 MB, DX 9.0
- Hard Drive: 133 MB

Digital: A Love Story

review by Jonathon Wisnoski (originally published at [Jonathon's blog](#))

Digital is first and foremost a love story, but I do not think that the game is as simple as that description might imply or as one might deduce from reading a plot synopsis. I think that this game is one of the few pieces of art that I actually understand and appreciate in an artistic sense. To me yes, it is a love story in the traditional sense of boy meets girl, but it is also a love story in the sense of boy meets computer and the Internet, and that is a love story that I can relate to. Digital has also been accused of being a visual novel. While I admit that the only real thing you do in the entire game is type in phone numbers and click a few buttons occasionally when told to, to me, the game did not feel at all like a visual novel and actually felt like a very open and realistic world while I was playing it. And while I have to admit there is not very much interaction and 'visual novel' is an accurate description, it is still a description that is devoid of the essence of the game. To me, Digital felt more like a open, non-linear adventure.
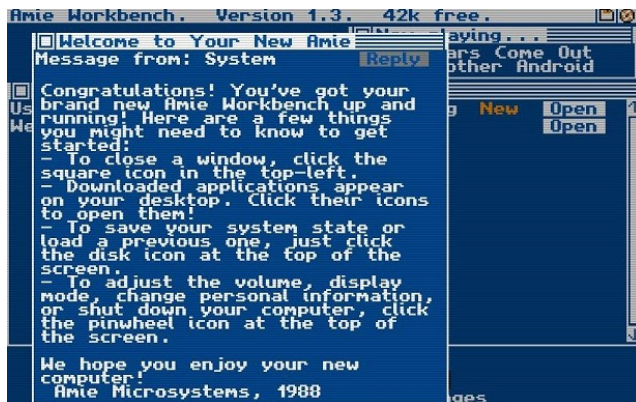
It is a huge testament to the power of the writing that such a limited amount of interaction could draw the player into the story far more then should be possible. There is just something to the game that surpasses all sandbox games in existence or any game designed to immerse the player in the role of the protagonist. With respect to the open-worldness of Digital, this is partly achieved by imposing absolutely no artificial boundaries. While a normal sandbox game might try to create the illusion of openness by giving you a huge world, eventually we all at some point come to an invisible wall or door that you simply cannot open. But in Digital this simply does not happen. You can go anywhere and do anything that you can conceive of.

Two main, revolutionary features play a key role in creating the feeling of immersion. The first feature I am going to talk about is total control, such that for the most part, the protagonist in the game does not even really exist. You never press a button to have him eat or another one to have him walk forwards. Instead, you directly interact with the computer interface that serves as the game's setting. You move your mouse to have the in-game mouse move. You type in a word or number to have it appear in game. The only thing in game you don't specifically do is write messages. The distancing effect these massages would have is almost completely mitigated by the second feature I want to talk about. And that is the fact that you never see your messages. You respond and send messages to people by pressing the reply button. While you can mostly deduce the general content of any one of your messages by the replies, not seeing the actual content of your own messages immensely helps to immerse you in the game.

I have already mentioned the open realistic world and how much I liked playing in it, so now I will try to describe it. It is 1988 and your father has just purchased one of the earlier GUI PCs for you. You start off with a simple dialer, a program to connect to other computers, called BBSes, over the phone lines by dialing their number. These BBSes acted like the

web-pages of today, but were very simple and for the most part were used for users to exchange messages and files. In Digital, this is the world that you are thrown into and while you start off with a single number to a local BBS, you soon discover more BBSes and programs online. If you are interested and want to learn more about BBSes I recommend watching this absolutely amazing documentary.

Another great aspect of the game is the fantastic and natural characters that inhabit its world. These characters do things and talk just like people you have probably already interacted with on the Internet and simply seem very realistic and believable. There are helpful and knowledgeable people in many technical fields who help you improve your knowledge of computers and BBSes and provide patches and programs. There is also the occasional funnily outrageous troll as well as other general interesting characters.

The gameplay of Digital, while always unique, is not particularly varied. However, you will be doing a few interesting things. Other then typing in phone numbers and replying to messages you will be hacking private BBSes, updating software, and installing and building programs. And while technically all of these things are done very similarly, the level of immersion makes them seem completely unique and enjoyable.

All in all, I completely loved every single aspect of Digital. It brings uniqueness to a whole new level, which is one of its strengths but also the reason that it will not be some people's cup of tea. I have never seen a world so well realized. So if you liked this review or even if you didn't, you should probably go download and play Digital: A Love Story for PC, Mac, or Linux absolutely free!
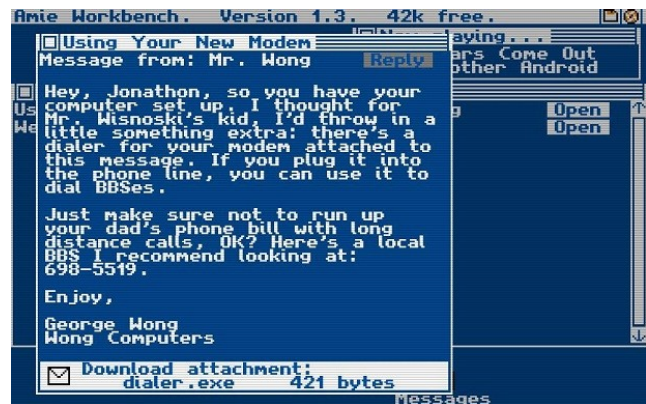
Digital: A Love Story   PC, MAC, and Linux Adventure

Bright moments:
The total immersion into the game world and the role of protagonist.

Fumbles in the dark:
The low level of interaction could potentially put off some people.

Verdict:
An incredibly unique, and wonderfully enjoyable, adventure.

★★★★★

Developer: Christine Love
Publisher: Christine Love
Release Date: February 2010
System Requirements:
• OS: Windows, Mac, or Linux
• No other special requirements
• Digital will work on quite low spec systems.

The Marionette
review by Rob Hamilton

Sometimes, we learn things about ourselves much too late to change them. Our actions ripple outward, touching other people, changing their lives forever; and we remain blissfully unaware of the consequences. It could be a careless word spoken in anger, or a thoughtless action, or even an inability to recognize or understand the emotional needs of another person. And it leads to unanswerable questions.

What does it take to unknowingly initiate a cycle of events that gathers momentum and becomes unmanageable? How random is life? Do we control our own destiny, our own lives? And who really pulls the strings in our day-to-day existence? The Marionette, a freeware adventure from Team Effigy, boldly attempts to answer all of these questions by taking us on an atmospheric journey through one man's life, past and present.

In this first-person point-and-click adventure, you take on the role of Martin, a failing sculptor. We quickly discover that his difficulty is building and maintaining relationships. He has no friends and cannot find models to work with him. One evening while he is working in his studio, an envelope arrives. It contains a disturbing photograph of ropes hanging in a bloodied room. Scribbled on the back of the envelope is the number 1011.

Without warning, Martin falls unconscious and wakes up outside a ramshackle old house he does not recognize. He enters the house and meets Giuseppe, an enigmatic toymaker, who may, or may not, be able to guide Martin through the nightmare scenario that is about to unfold. After sidestepping several of Martin's questions, Giuseppe reveals that a little girl once lived in the house with her parents, a girl called Alice. And she has brought Martin to this place because she wants him to understand something – and she will not let him go until he does.

Martin's life is in danger... and there is no turning back.

He must now move forward, exploring each room in order to find an escape back to the real world. But these are not ordinary rooms. Each of the rooms becomes more than just four walls; they become small parts of a jigsaw that highlights the unhappy memories of the mysterious Alice.

As Martin progresses through the various locations – a pretentious art gallery containing some of Martin's own pieces, a seedy apartment and an artist's studio – he realizes it is not just Alice's life unraveling before his eyes; his own life is being dissected, too, and he doesn't like it. He begins to understand that he is too self-absorbed, too selfish, to appreciate the emotional pain he inflicts on others. But what can he do about it?

Despite his best efforts, Martin slowly loses control of events and he realizes he is becoming the Marionette; he is the one who dances to the piper's tune. It also becomes clear that it is not just Alice pulling the strings – somebody else lurks in the shadows, a person connected to Martin's past; a person hell-bent on revenge. If he behaves correctly and atones for his previous actions, Martin may survive. If not, he will have to face the consequences in an increasingly bizarre and surreal world.

It is the cleverly constructed graphics within The Marionette that make such a bizarre and surreal world possible. As the narrative becomes darker, so do the background graphics; the early scenes depicted in muted pastels, the later scenes dissolving into gray charcoal, evocative of death and despair. The softened comic book graphics are perfectly suited to the story, the slightly hazy and smudged effects compounding the intensity of emotions that surround Martin on all sides.

Unfortunately, there are no ambient sounds within the game; nothing creaks or groans and none of the characters have a voice. And that leads to my first, and only, criticism of this game. While the music is moody, evocative and beautifully written, it is also very repetitive. The tinkling refrain that accompanies every scene eventually becomes an irritant, especially if you are trying to unravel a complex puzzle.

And there are some very difficult puzzles in this game, although every single one of them has a logical resolution. Bear in mind that the originator of these puzzles is Alice, a child; can you think like a ten-year-old? At one point, she offers Martin a game of hangman and a numbers game, both of which provide an insight into her troubled mind. Although, I have to say that nothing is as it appears to be in this game; discount the obvious, and what remains is probably the truth.

One of the most intriguing puzzles concerns a small wooden mannequin which sits unobtrusively on a shelf. It has the most ingenious solution I have ever seen in any game. Solve this without a walkthrough and then pat yourself on the back; it may not be entirely logical, but the solution is blindingly obvious – if you have the vision to see it.

Most gamers will be pleased to know that there are no hotspots in this game, which means no pixel hunting. Everything you see in a room can be examined, which adds to the realistic feel of the game. And there are no red herrings; if you can pick it up, you can use it. The right mouse button cycles through the various icons situated in a bar across the top of the screen; an eye examines objects, a hand picks up things and a question mark allows

conversation with anybody you can see. Be very careful when examining things, Martin will sometimes make comments that may prove to be important.

The writing in the game is excellent and exceeds anything expected from a freeware project. It has everything. Snappy dialogue, a foreshadowing of events, an intriguing storyline, a divisive subplot and strong characterization, all mixed with a small measure of verbal irony. For heaven's sake, it even dabbles with symbolism – showing one thing, meaning another. When did you last see anything like that in an AGS freeware game?

And, of course, like all good drama The Marionette raises more questions than it answers. Who is Giuseppe? How is he involved with Alice? Does the model house he's building have any relevance to the storyline? And why, in response to Martin asking who he is, does he respond with, 'I'm known by many names. But you can call me Giuseppe.' What other names?

And finally, who is the marionette? Alice or Martin? Find out the answers for yourself. [Download the game](#).

The Marionette   PC Adventure

Bright moments:
Discovering who Alice really is.

Fumbles in the dark:
Repetitive music could be irritating.

Verdict:
One of the best adventure games ever produced with the AGS engine.

★★★★½

Developer: Team Effigy
Publisher: Team Effigy
Release Date: November 2009
System Requirements:
- OS: Windows XP/Vista
- CPU: 500 MHz
- Video card that supports 16 bit 640x480 resolution
- The WINSETUP.exe file allows adjustment of sound and graphics.