Adventure Lantern

Reviews:

- Darkstar
- Destination: Treasure Island
- Post Mortem
- Dr. Who: TARDIS
- Hotel
- The Legend of Crystal Valley

Editorial

During my first year working on the Adventure Lantern Web site, I would periodically go online and look for adventure games in development. I would try to find somewhat obscure titles that had not been extensively covered by larger Web sites. I thought providing preview articles for such unknown games would help carve a somewhat distinct niche for AL in the adventure-gaming community.

I stumbled upon Darkstar during such a search. The game immediately spiarked my interest. It promised an immersive science fiction setting, a compelling storyline, and an interesting protagonist. I wrote a short preview article and included it in Adventure Lantern's March issue.

Once the preview was published, I sent a link to Jeff Williams, who was the project leader for Darkstar. A few months later, Jeff kindly agreed to an interview and provided extensive information about the upcoming adventure game. At the time, Darkstar was slated for a December 2006 release. However, development took considerably longer than expected.

As the years passed, I started to think Darkstar would become just another highly promising adventure game that never got completed. Yet Jeff and his team never gave up on the project. Parallax finally released Darkstar at the beginning of 2011.

As the development team continued work on Darkstar, Adventure :Lantern had its own challenges. During the first two months of 2007, our monthly publishing schedule was thrown out the window. I no longer had time to edit articles and compile the PDF files on a regular basis.

During the next several years, there were long gaps in our publishing schedule. On several occasions, I was certain that we were back to releasing a new AL issue each month, but something always got in the way. Even in the fall of 2010, when I felt AL was almost fully back on track, my hectic schedule forced me to halt production.

As the summer of 2011 rolls around, I once again have enough time to dedicate to Adventure Lantern. Thanks to contributions from Rob, Dona, Jonathon, and Jennifer, we are back with the June 2011 edition of AL. It seems all too fitting to include a review of Darkstar in this comeback issue. The article harkens back to the earliest days of our Web site and brings back many pleasant memories.

Hopefully, we will be able to publish at least three or four issues before my classes resume and the magazine has to be put on hold yet again. But no matter how long I have to step away from AL and work on other things, the site is never forgotten. Months may pass between our issues, but AL is not quite ready to completely leave the adventure-gaming scene.

As I said in that March 2006 issue containing the Darkstar preview, "it is hard to say where Adventure Lantern will go in another six months, but the uncertain feels welcome. And the journey promises to be interesting."

Here is hoping you will find something to enjoy in our latest issue. Many thanks to our readers and staff for the continued support.

Until next time,
Ugur

Contents

Adventurer's Ravine

Bandit's Cove

Casual Sailing

Darkstar
review by Ugur Sener

You open your eyes to find yourself in a small cryogenic sleep chamber. A soft voice greets you as you slowly return to consciousness. The voice belongs to the main computer of the spaceship Westwick. You struggle to remember why you might be on board this particular spacecraft, but you have no memory of entering the ship or climbing into the sleep chamber.

The computer addresses you as Mr. O'Neil. That must be your name. The machine tells you that you are the captain of the Westwick. You have been in suspended animation for 312 years. The extended time you spent in the chamber has irreversibly erased your memories. You have retained some basic knowledge about running the spaceship, but all of your event-related memories are gone. Everything that made you Captain John O'Neil is lost.

You climb out of the chamber and look around the cabin. You know that you must have been assigned to this ship for a reason. Three centuries ago, you were asked to do something of great importance. You concentrate, but you cannot remember any details about your mission. There is only a single word that flickers in the back of your mind. A faint whisper from a past life. 'Darkstar...'

There are three other chambers next to yours. A beautiful woman is asleep in the first one. Her name is Paige Palmer. She is the Westwick's pilot. You feel strangely close to her. Perhaps she wasn't just another crew member. Perhaps three centuries ago, you meant something more to each other. The second chamber is empty. Looking out the window,

you can see that the spaceship is in orbit around a planet. The computer indicates that Ross Perryman has left the Westwick to explore the planet. The final chamber belongs to the ship's navigator Alan Burk. In horror, you discover that Alan is dead. Judging from the state of his corpse, he has been deceased for a long time.

You know that Alan was not supposed to die. You and Paige were not supposed to remain asleep for 300 years. Something must have gone horribly wrong with your mission. Unfortunately, Westwick's computer can offer no explanation. Log files have been purposely deleted by another crew member. Nobody is available to answer your questions, but there must be clues somewhere around this vast ship. You will have to explore the Westwick and discover the truth on your own. Darkstar beckons.

Developed by Parallax, Darkstar is an independent first-person FMV adventure. After a decade of development, Darkstar finally arrives offering an immersive sci-fi experience. It may suffer from a few technical issues, but with its engaging storyline, interesting locations, and compelling atmosphere, Darkstar is still a very strong adventure offering.

The game begins as Captain O'Neil wakes up in a sleeping chamber on board the Westwick. The cryogenic chambers are only safe to use for a period of fifty years. Having spent over 300 years in suspended animation, O'Neil has suffered irreversible brain damage and lost all of his memories. To make matters worse, the ship has been damaged, causing it to go into an emergency lockdown. Taking control of

the captain, you will have to explore Westwick and figure out what happened. If you can survive long enough, you might discover some answers and maybe even repair the ship to complete your mission.

Amnesia might be an all too familiar plot device in a video game, but it is used very effectively in Darkstar. With no recollection of the past, O'Neil has to slowly explore the ship and try to find clues about himself and the nature of the Westwick's mission. The video logs and notes you find along the way provide valuable clues, but you can never be certain which pieces of information are reliable. It is clear that someone has tampered with several important documents. The story you piece together from the crew member logs appears to be incomplete. Someone has gone into a great deal of trouble to make sure you hear a specific version of the truth. It'll be up to you to decide what to believe.

The majority of Darkstar takes place on the Westwick. The spacecraft makes for a very interesting setting for an adventure game. You get a chance to explore numerous rooms, discover hidden corridors, and play with hi-tech gadgets. It is clear that a great deal of care has gone into the design of the spaceship. There are many items of interest in each room. As you peel back each layer, you discover clues to help you repair the ship and fully understand your situation. Some of the information is redundant, but this seems to be a deliberate design choice. If you miss an important video log at one location, you might be able to find a document that gives you the same piece of information in another room. Along the way, you also come across two highly entertaining robots. The antics of these deranged machines add a welcome touch of humor to the game.

At the beginning of the adventure, most areas of the Westwick are inaccessible due to the emergency lockdown. As you investigate the ship, you come upon a number of special 'biolok' devices. These devices scan your hand and give you access to different regions of the spacecraft. In addition, unlocking the bioloks allows you to view videos that reveal the back story of the game. The videos explain what happened to Earth and why the Westwick's mission is critical to the survival of the human race. You also discover the nature of a mysterious black hole called Darkstar. Themes of war, betrayal, and time travel along with a desperate struggle for survival make for a very compelling backdrop for the adventure.
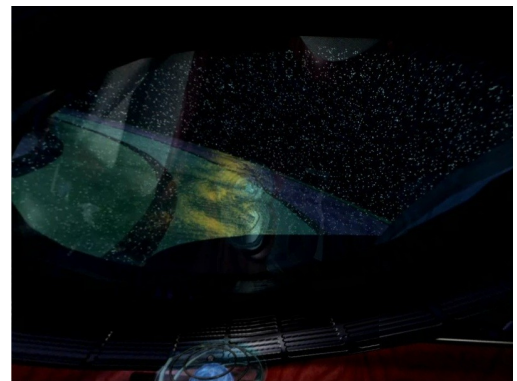
The videos in Darkstar feature real actors. Clive Robertson takes on the role of Captain John O'Neil. The game also features Peter Graves as the narrator, Beez McKeever as pilot Paige Palmer, Trace Beaulieu as Ross Perryman, and Frank Conniff as navigator Alan Burk along with the entire cast of Mystery Science Theater 3000. The background videos from the bioloks alone represent a significant amount of footage. There are also numerous videos that advance the plot as O'Neil explores the ship. It is evident that a significant amount of effort was put into writing the script and filming the videos. Darkstar is meant to be as much of a movie as it is a video game. For the most part, the performances are believable and compelling. The videos help create a highly engaging sci-fi atmosphere that is sustained throughout the game. However, a few of the movie sequences could have used some streamlining. In particular, some of the scenes that involve space battles drag on a little too long and do not add any real value to the game.

The gripping story and the strong atmosphere are great reasons to play Darkstar. The game does an excellent job of piquing your curiosity and keeping you interested in what is happening to O'Neil and the

rest of the crew throughout the adventure. The intensity gradually rises as you reach the later portions of the game and start exploring areas outside the spaceship. You become increasingly aware of a nemesis that is actively trying to foil your efforts to complete your mission. Darkstar throws in a number of plot twists before you ultimately reach the game's conclusion.

The interactive portions of Darkstar are played from a first-person perspective. The game is designed as a series of nodes that you can investigate. You can move the camera by holding down the left mouse button. The mouse icon turns into an arrow to indicate that you can walk in a particular direction or interact with a hotspot. If you come across an important item and click on it, O'Neil will put it in his 'asset inventory'. The items in your inventory can be viewed on the bottom left corner of the screen. You can scroll through the list of items and bring them up to take a closer look. If you are carrying a particular gadget that will help you solve a puzzle, O'Neil automatically uses it at the appropriate moment.

The puzzles in Darkstar generally involve gaining access to different areas of the ship, discovering clues, and trying to repair the Westwick. The simple interface allows for a relaxed gaming experience. There are no action sequences and no button-mashing is required. However, that doesn't mean the game is easy. The development team has done an excellent job of hiding things in plain sight. You will have to carefully examine each area to make sure you do not miss any clues. There are secret compartments and tunnels that can be easily missed if you are not paying attention. For me, the only problematic puzzle was a sequence that takes place inside a labyrinth. The maze felt needlessly large and overly challenging to traverse. Otherwise Darstar's puzzles seemed fair and manageable.

It is worth noting that Darkstar has a strong soundtrack. The relaxed background music you hear as you explore the ship nicely complements the sci-fi setting and enhances the mood. The rock themes played during the heated space battles likewise seem very fitting. In addition, the sound effects from the mechanical doors to the laser guns feel appropriate and expertly handled.

Between the massive spacecraft and the areas you get to explore outside the Westwick, Darkstar offers a significant amount of content. It can easily take over twenty hours to complete the game on your first attempt. Darkstar also features a number of different endings, giving you a reason to play through some parts of the game several times. Certain key events unfold differently based on your actions. If you do not have the right item in your inventory or if you step outside the Westwick before investigating a critical area, your adventure might conclude prematurely. There are also some optional areas in the game. You do not need to explore all of these locations to successfully complete Darkstar, but they provide more information about the characters and help you better understand the game's story. The optional content may even provide a couple of clues to help you survive a certain sequence.

It is also possible for O'Neil to meet an untimely demise by triggering one of the traps spread throughout the spaceship. Typically, these kinds of death sequences are a cause for complaint in an adventure game. However, the traps help enhance the atmosphere in Darkstar. Some of the death sequences are quite interesting and worth triggering just to see what happens. In addition, their presence adds a layer of depth to your unknown enemy. After all, what kind of person would allow O'Neil to climb out of the sleep chamber alive, but set elaborate traps so he is likely to die as he explores the ship? Most importantly, the death sequences are not so

numerous that they start detracting from the overall experience. If you remember to save frequently, you should not have any problems.

Despite all its strong elements, Darkstar suffers from a couple of technical issues that can be frustrating. For instance, even on a PC that exceeds the system requirements, you will occasionally notice a marked delay between when you click on the mouse and when O'Neil actually performs an action. The game appears to take too long to load the animation. While this issue does not seriously hurt the gaming experience, it can be annoying and should have been avoided. The game also crashed a number of times during my first playthrough on a Windows 7 system. Fortunately, this issue seemed to be resolved by switching to the Windows Vista compatibility mode and may not be a concern under other operating systems. Nevertheless, it would be a good idea to save regularly in order to avoid excessive irritation in the event of an unexpected trip to your desktop.

It is also frustrating that you cannot skip some of the movement animations. In certain areas, each time you instruct O'Neil to move from one part of the ship to another, you have to watch the movement animation. While this is certainly acceptable the first time you explore a particular area, it would have been nice to have the ability to skip the animation if you happen to return to the same location.

Finally, the game's interface could have been a little cleaner. Buttons are available along the top portion of the screen to handle features such as saving your game. There are also buttons along the bottom for viewing the videos revealed when you find and open a biolok. It is possible to keep these buttons hidden as you explore the ship and have them appear only when you bring the mouse icon to the top or bottom of the screen. However, the space allotted for the buttons still takes up a chunk of the screen and effectively reduces the size of the actual play area. It may have been a better idea to have the top and bottom menus appear when the player moves the mouse over to the appropriate portion of the screen and display a larger play window.

It may not be perfect, but Darkstar is still a solid adventure game with a compelling story and a strong atmosphere. Westwick and the locations outside the spaceship are fun to explore and represent a substantial amount of content for you to discover. The game is very effective at getting players to care about the story and urging them to reach the conclusion. If you are a fan of adventure games and science fiction, Darkstar is a very easy recommendation.

Darkstar   PC & MAC Adventure

Bright moments:
Gripping story and great sci-fi atmosphere. A great deal of entertaining FMV sequences.

Fumbles in the dark:
Stability issues hinder the experience. The interface could be cleaner.

Verdict:
It may have several issues, but Darkstar still manages to deliver a very compelling and memorable adventure-gaming experience.

★★★★☆

Developer: Parallax Studio
Publisher: Parallax Studio
Release Date: January 2011
System Requirements:
- Windows® 7/XP/Vista
- 2 GHz processor
- 2 GB RAM
- Video and sound card compatible with DirectX® 9.0
- 14 GB HD space

Destination: Treasure Island
review by Jonathon Wisnoski (originally published at <u>Jonathon's blog</u>)

Destination: Treasure Island is a 3D point and click adventure game by Kheops Studios. The game's story is written as a sequel to Robert Louis Stevenson's 1883 Treasure Island novel. As such, it is a tale filled with pirates, hidden treasure, adventure, danger, and romance. The presentation is very well done, with great graphics, engaging voice overs, and memorable music. And the gameplay is very enjoyable and provides a good challenge.

Four years have passed since Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver marooned the mutinous crew on Treasure Island. Since then they have parted ways and lost contact. The crew have escaped the island and are on a quest for revenge against Jim and Long John. The game starts with the crew attacking Jim's ship. As Jim escapes, he encounters Captain Flint, Long John's parrot. The parrot is delivering a message from his master. Evidently, Long John has died and left his substantial fortune to Jim. Captain Flint has the directions to Emerald Island and a series of riddles Jim must solve in order to obtain the treasure.

The gameplay of Destination: Treasure island is very entertaining and varied with a plethora of inventory and logic puzzles, as well as riddles and even a knot-tying mini-game. These puzzles are somewhat non-linear and even allow multiple solutions in some cases and slightly divergent paths. One interesting, if overall quite boring, puzzle type is the the knot mini-game which happens whenever the player attempts to use a rope in the game. And even if it was not enjoyable gameplay wise, it was nice to see the developers at least trying to incorporate some sailing aspects to the puzzles to juxtapose against the plot and setting.

The inventory puzzles, which are a staple of Kheops Studio, are complex and enjoyable. Inventory items are always used in logical ways and players are often required to combine or disassemble objects adding a whole new layer of complexity and interaction. However, the riddles are what really make this game stand out. From the very beginning you are given a series of riddles, called enigmas, that will guide you on your adventure and give you the needed hints to allow you to attempt to solve the puzzles in the game and reach the treasure at the end. So you are not just blindly solving puzzles and picking up objects simply because they are there. With the enigmas you have a guiding goal in mind to validate your actions and this extremely unique aspect of the game really makes it so much more enjoyable.

With above average puzzles, a surprisingly unique and very much enjoyable riddle system, good jungle visuals, and a interesting plot, Destination: Treasure Islands is the culmination of a great many well done features and if nothing else if a well made and enjoyable adventure game.

Destination: Treasure Island   PC & MAC Adventure
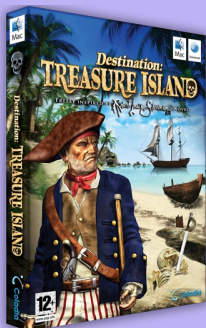
Bright moments:
The enigma system was very well-done and added uniqueness to the game.

Fumbles in the dark:
The feather puzzle required a strict order of feathers, even though all the information you are provided points to the order not being important.

Verdict:
A solid polished adventure game.

⭐⭐⭐⭐☆

Developer: Kheops Studio
Publisher: Kheops Studio
Release Date: July 2007
System Requirements:
- Windows 98 SE
- 800 MHz CPU
- 512 MB RAM
- 64 MB video card compatible with DirectX® 9.0
- 1.2 GB hard disk space

Post Mortem

review by Dona

January 2003. I was fourteen years old, on what (at the time) seemed like my last winter break ever - I was to go to high school next semester and things would never be the same, or so I thought. My brother used to buy a local gaming magazine and I was going through it trying to find a game to take my mind off the painful reality of crunching for entrance exams. Something caught my eye: a three-page review of a game set in 1920s Paris, called Post Mortem. The story sounded interesting: Gus, a former private investigator, now fine painter, solving a gruesome murder after being contacted by the beautiful and mysterious Sophia Blake. The review promised mystery, wild plot twists, loads of interesting characters, locations modelled after what streets of Paris really looked like in 1920s and I knew: *I had to have this game*. Especially after I learned there are Templars involved.

I may be a friend of Hulot but I am also a private detective... in my spare time.

And so I got it a couple of months later and played it while being sick with cold (the kind of cold that always seems to show up during the exam period). It was one of my first adventure games and I was excited to discover there was more than one ending. It depended on the choices you made in one of the last segments of the game. Both endings could be easily viewed by reloading a savegame and selecting a different choice.

A couple of years later, I read something intriguing on a forum somewhere - there was a third ending! You had to be extremely careful to get it, though. It was necessary to collect all of the evidence items and present them to an officer in a very specific order. No wonder it was considered a 'rare' ending - I had to use a walkthrough to get it right.

Seven years later and I find myself at the crossroads again. Get a higher degree, get a job, juggle both? I don't re-play my games often, if ever, but I really wanted to plunge myself into the world of Post Mortem once again. I admit I was a bit scared. It was one of my favorite games for a long time, what if I didn't find it as good anymore? I was scared it would be like watching a movie I loved as a child, realizing it is not *that* funny, adventurous and captivating as it once had been.

Since 2003, one thing changed significantly: operating system compatibility. If you are on Windows 7 or Vista, the game will give you "Please insert CD1" error even if you have the disc in your CD drive. Make sure you install the patch. Additionally, you may need an unofficial No-CD patch to make the game run correctly. I am not sure if this affects the downloadable version available at Microids website, as it claims to support new operating systems. The game I played was from my old discs.

The opening cinematic - a view of a stormy night in Paris and some quick, but graphic shots of a murder scene - was as good as I remembered and it brought back a lot of memories. There is a number of beautiful pre-rendered cinematics scattered throughout the game, usually showing an exterior of a location you are about to visit for the first time. You can view them again later from the Options menu.

We get the first glimpse on our main character, Gustav "Gus" MacPherson, painting in his small studio apartment. He is rudely interrupted by a knock on the door - a beautiful woman named Sophia Blake comes looking for help, knowing that he used to be a private investigator in New York, before he chose to retire. The case is very delicate: her sister and brother-in-law, The Whytes, had been murdered in Hotel Orphee the night before. Their heads have been cut off and ancient coins have been found in their mouths, pointing to a ritual murder. Gus is the perfect person for the case because of his unique psychic ability to "see" certain events in flashback-like manner.

Even though the game is in first person, all conversations are presented in third person view, with dialogue options arranged in tabs on the bottom of the screen. It is here where two flaws of the game come through: first, the lips move out of synch. There is no excuse for this, other than lazy animating and the fact that the game is released in a couple of different languages. Blocky models can be forgiven, given the age of this game.

Second, some dialogue options simply disappear if you talk about your "main" objective first. There is, however, no indication of what is a main objective and what is not. Too bad if you want to know more about a piece of evidence - you will either have to reload and work your way through the dialogue again or live with the fact you cannot know *everything*. This is a minor flaw, as none of the major information can be omitted, but if you are like myself and like to dig into the game as much as possible, it becomes an annoyance.

As you talk to other characters, you can present yourself as a journalist or a private detective. This does not affect the story in a great way, the only thing that will happen is that certain locations will open up sooner than the others. There might be an additional dialogue or two, but nothing major. I even managed to tell people I am a journalist, then backpedal and say I'm a detective - it made no difference.

Environments and atmosphere bring this game to another level. The game is presented in free 360 degree view and everything, from floor to ceiling, is masterfully rendered. The entire story takes place at night, which is reflected in dimly lit corridors and sombre music track. Designers clearly put a lot of work into bringing the locations to life: all of them are highly detailed, packed with interesting things to examine. The only place where this looks bad is in Alambic Bistro, as all guests are simply painted on the background. Quite ironic, considering the sequel to this game is called Still Life.

Exploring the locations is pretty typical for a game of this genre: the cursor changes depending on the type

of interaction you can do (look, take, talk), When shoe icon appears it means you can walk to another area. To look around simply put your cursor to the edge of screen and it will automatically scroll.

On the bottom of the screen you will find Gus' leather bag that can fit anything in, from small coins and purple powder bottles, to mysterious puzzle pieces and lit candles. The one you'll be using the most is his Notebook, where all information about the case is stored, from telegraphs and character biographies to important clues and some of Gus' own observations. The inventory has an, in my opinion, interesting addition: the Sketchbook. It's with you from the very start and it's filled with Gus' drawings, mostly beautiful burlesque ladies (perhaps early concept works?). It adds more personality to the main character and the overall game. The Sketchbook will come in handy on two occasions, where it will help you solve puzzles.

Another thing about the Notebook: it carries a great weakness of the game. Every time you collect an evidence, a subtle animation plays in the bottom right corner of the screen. So subtle, you won't even notice it most of the time. What this animation does is alert you that new information has been added to the Notebook. You may find yourself confused when characters start talking about things that make no sense without reading the collected information first. This may even bring the gameplay to a complete halt, as reading the Notebook triggers important conversations or even opens new locations. Make sure you read it every once in a while, especially if you get stuck.

The scripting in this game gets so bad that characters talk about things that haven't even happened yet. Although Post Mortem is mostly linear, there are certain actions that can be performed in more than one order. Doing some things sooner will open up conversations you cannot otherwise access. This gives the game some replay value.
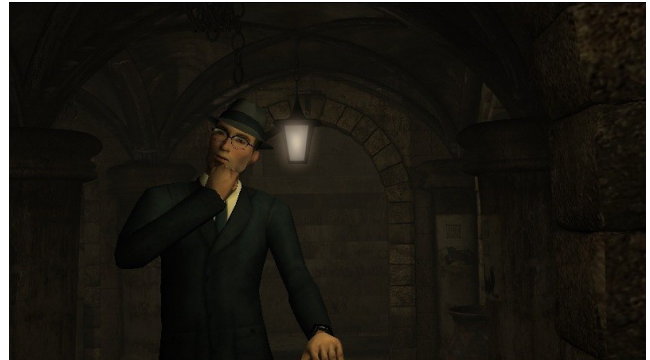
On your journey through the dark side of Paris you will meet many different people. Hotel receptionist, barmen, occult lady, a creepy psychiatrist, even a lady of the night. As mentioned before, the models are a bit blocky and lip movements aren't exactly the most pleasant sight. Animation is alright, if a little stiff. Most of the characters are there to help you with your investigation, so you won't get to know a lot about them as people. If you make it out of the mess that is the Notebook and disjointed conversations, you will find valuable information on who the characters really are. This adds another layer to the mystery when you realize people aren't what they present themselves to be and you find yourself not knowing who to trust.

Gus himself is a well-mannered person, although he lets a bad word slip here and there. Some people argue he's bland and boring. I think he comes across as passive-aggressive, often being very blunt and honest with people he meets. There is a certain charm and a dash of naivete that helps him get through the most improbable situations. The game makes it clear straight away that he has a troubled past, but you won't get much more than a vague mention or two throughout the game. This doesn't

make him any less interesting, however, and if you're keen on finding out more, please play Still Life.

Midway through, the game will put you in shoes of a different character, Jacques Helloin, a detective who had been framed for the murder of The Whytes. You will get to see his side of the story first-hand as he tells it to Gus. Designers paid special attention to details, so the map and icons change, and Gus' trusty suitcase transforms into Helloin's.

Adventure game wouldn't be an adventure without puzzles. In true Microids fashion, there are a number of inventory-based puzzles, as well as mechanical ones. Some of the hardest ones require careful observation and looking for clues on walls - this may become a problem due to the age of the game.

Screen resolution is very small and, when stretched over a big screen, some of the details become blurred and hard to see.

One puzzle made this game almost famous. I'm not going to say what exactly it is, but it is near the end of the game and involves the most tedious pixel-hunting puzzle ever created by man. No matter how many times I play the game, I always end up looking up a walkthrough to get it right. That aside, the variety of puzzles is quite good and will keep you entertained.
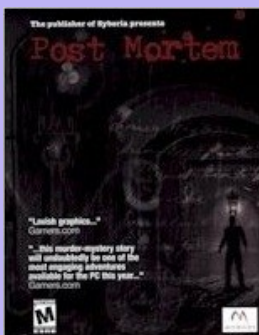
In conclusion, Post Mortem is a quality game with an intriguing storyline and beautiful, haunting atmosphere and a good prelude to the even more successful Still Life. Don't miss it!

Visit Dona's Web site to take a look at her artwork.

Post Mortem   PC Adventure

Bright moments:
Good story, interesting plot twists, multiple characters you can play with, capturing atmosphere, nice variety of puzzles.

Fumbles in the dark:
Bad scripting, wonky facial animation.

Verdict:
If you're looking for a good murder mystery set in authentic 1920s Paris, this is the game for you. Just remember to read the Notebook every now and then, especially if someone starts talking about something you apparently should know about, but you don't.

Developer: Microids
Publisher: The Adventure Company
Release Date: February 2003
System Requirements:
- Pentium III 350 MHz
- 16X CD-ROM device
- 64 MB RAM
- 16 MB video card compatible with DirectX® 8.1
- Direct Sound compatible sound card
- 500 MB HD space

★★★½☆

Doctor Who: TARDIS

review by Jennifer McMurray (originally published at The Adventuress)

The third episode of Doctor Who: The Adventure games is now available for free for those who live in the UK, and for a small fee to those who live outside of the UK and don't pay the licensing fee. The third episode falls into some of the same traps that kept the previous games from being as good as they could have been, but this episode does a lot of things right.

The episode takes place entirely in the TARDIS, the doctor's living transport unit which is permanently cloaked to look like a police box. The TARDIS is much larger on the inside than it is on the outside, and that is where the fun in this episode comes. The episode is very much fan-service, as it allows you to explore the TARDIS control area and the Doctor's reading room, which has been seen before on screen and contains artifacts the Doctor has picked up on his travels. The story sees the TARDIS stuck in a time vortex, with the Doctor and Amy having to find a way out. The duo's task becomes much harder once the episode's villain is revealed. I enjoyed the villain of this episode, since it was motivated by something other than hatred for the human race.

The voice actors seem to be showing more emotion in their performances. There were a few flat lines, but they occurred much less than in previous episodes. The times when the Doctor and Amy were in danger were conveyed with the proper mix of excitement and fear, as they would be in the television series, which really helped to keep you engrossed in the storyline. The music and sound effects are once again great, as they sound like they would in an episode from the series. The aural portion of these episodes were always top-notch, with the exception of the vocal performances, but now the voices are nearing the same level.

The puzzles in this episode are, for the most part, fun and original. They have been improved a lot since the previous episodes. I particularly enjoyed one where the collectible facts are used as part of the puzzle. I enjoyed it when the collectibles were used as part of the game in the later episodes of Telltale's Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People, and I'm glad to see Sumo Digital taking the same route here. The middle portion of the game was hampered, however, by the same snag that hurt the previous episodes. Puzzles are repeated, both from previous episodes, and within the same game. The puzzle that I found the weakest so far, the maze from the first episode, is once again used here. And, just like the first episode, the puzzle is repeated (though it's only used two times this episode, as opposed to three in the first). Another puzzle also returns from a previous episode, but it is used well within the context of the game, and only happens once. It's really a shame that puzzles were repeated here, as it was really unnecessary to do so.

TARDIS is a step in the right direction. The episode is fun, the challenges are mostly enjoyable, the voice acting has improved a lot, and the music and sound effects are as good as ever. The repeated puzzles bring the overall enjoyment of the game down a bit, but this is still the best episode of Doctor Who: The Adventure games so far.

Doctor Who: TARDIS   PC Adventure

Bright moments:
Significant improvement in voice acting over the past episodes.

Fumbles in the dark:
Repetitive puzzles hurt the pace.

Verdict:
TARDIS has some of the same issues as the previous episodes, but the series is headed in the right direction.

★★★★☆

Developer: Sumo Digital
Publisher: BBC Multimedia
Release Date: August 2010
System Requirements:
- Windows XP/Vista/7
- Intel Pentium IV at 1.6 GHz
- 128 MB video card
- 512 MB RAM / 1 GB for Vista & Win 7
- 3 GB of free Hard Drive space
- DirectX 9.0 compatible sound card

Hotel
review by Rob Hamilton

Picture the scene. A secluded room at the H.Q. of Cateia Games in Croatia, tables strewn with empty coke cans and half-eaten donuts. A group of hollow-eyed writers gather to brainstorm ideas for a new casual adventure game. "What's it about?" asks one of them.

"Egyptian mysticism, magical artifacts, the afterlife," replies the lead writer, "that sort of thing. Come on, guys, let's hear your thoughts."

And the diverse ideas tumble onto the table; Knights Templar, Holy Grail, King Arthur, Avalon, Excalibur, Egyptian Mummies, tomb artefacts, Antony and Cleopatra, immortality and, of course, death; in one form or another. "Ah, but which of these subjects shall we use?" is the question posed by one of the group.

"All of 'em," answers the lead writer.

And that's exactly what they do; everything bar the kitchen sink goes into the mix, which, surprisingly, results in a very playable 3rd person point-and-click game entitled Hotel.

The hotel in question is the exclusive Bellevue, situated in a converted medieval castle in France. Despite the grandeur and elegance of the surroundings there is a problem; a crime has been committed. A thief has stolen a valuable necklace and left the victim in a coma. Most of the guests, spooked by the robbery, have checked out, leaving

the place deserted. The hotel's moody resident detective, Jean Matisse, investigates the crime, but makes little headway.

He would never admit it, but he needs help.

And help arrives in the shapely form of Bridget 'Biggi' Brightstone, NYPD detective and FBI dropout, who has been seconded to the hotel to investigate the robbery. Bridget was on vacation, sunning herself on a French beach after a successful conclusion to her last case, when her boss called. After some gentle persuasion, she now finds herself standing outside the impressive gates of the Bellevue. And that's her first problem; how does she actually get into the hotel?

Ingenuity and positive thinking always helps. This is 2010, utilize the technology, there's plenty of it in this game. Once inside the hotel, and having spoken to the butler, Bridget quickly realizes a couple of things. Firstly, resident detective Jean Matisse is doing his best to impede Bridget's investigation; he has marked off the crime scene denying her access, and he is also holding back vital information. And secondly, there seems to be much more involved here than just a simple robbery.

Much more.

During the first day Bridget will check into her own room, explore the castle courtyard and fountain, the

crime scene, the intimidating corridors and, if she can find the key, she will also attempt to discover the secrets that lurk down in the basement. There is also a fax machine to repair, emails to send, axes, wrenches and forklifts to utilize, not to mention a secret passage to uncover. Bridget will also meet with Mister Greenleaf, the hotel owner, who may, or may not, tell her the truth. And at the end of the day, not even sleep is a comfort; Bridget dreams of ghosts and glowing-eyed statutes.

But where do dreams end? Where does reality begin?

Day two finds Bridget following the clues through a cellar and an office where she has to solve a series of puzzles, which in turn lead her to Egyptian artifacts and the statue with the glowing eyes. Slowly, but surely, the secrets of the Bellevue hotel are being uncovered – and not everybody is happy.

Day three and the clues lead to the hotel restaurant, where Bridget meets the mysterious Mrs Atia Greenleaf, who is not what she appears to be. There is also a library, a boiler room and another secret passage to explore. All these puzzles and clues contained in the various locations lead inexorably in one direction - the discovery of an Egyptian mummy. Why is such an artifact here, in this place? What purpose will it serve?

Many questions – few answers.

And as the investigation becomes more convoluted Bridget must use the available digital technology in order to make progress. She must examine everything, interpret the clues, as nothing is as it

seems. With dogged determination, she slowly begins to uncover the various clandestine plots hidden within the walls of the Bellevue hotel and in the adjoining village. She also realizes that this is no longer about solving a jewel robbery; it is much deeper, much more involved. It is now a matter of life and death, unraveling an ancient conspiracy and restoring the balance of time.

She can solve this mystery, but she will need the help of some very strange characters who require careful handling, King Arthur of Camelot and Cleopatra among them. And there is also something else. Wisdom, truth and love; three things she has to discover by traveling through time portals located in the village. Who said life was easy for a NYPD detective?

The photo-realistic backgrounds and the excellent animation of Bridget, as she sashays around the various locations, enhance the drama immensely. Graphics should complement the narrative and drive it forward, and in this particular game the subtle nuances of light and shade work well within the confines of the hotel, showing every nook and cranny with perfect clarity. At one point, Bridget uses a torch in the darkness and the cursor follows the light source around the screen, adding to the realism and sense of being involved in the storyline.

Outside the hotel, the scenes in the village and various other outdoor locations use direct sunlight and shadows to great effect. Some of the puzzles in the later part of the game rely solely on the use of light and shade, moving beams of light across symbols to create moveable objects. There is also a grainy effect used in the cut scenes and headers

which older gamers will remember from the Sierra On-Line adventures of the eighties and nineties.

Unlike earlier adventure games, the music used today is far more accomplished and certainly more entertaining. The music underlying most of the scenes in Hotel matches the action perfectly, stretching the tension when necessary or adding a calming influence when needed. At no time did I feel the music becoming intrusive. The use of ambient sounds includes footsteps, doors creaking, panels opening and a realistic burst of thunder and lightning. My one complaint is the lack of voice acting; reading extensive lines of dialogue on screen can become very tiring and repetitive and it is possible to miss vital clues.


It is also possible to miss clues in the abundance of sliding block puzzles which incorporate maps, symbols and graphics; there is even an Egyptian water lock puzzle, something I've never seen before. Unfortunately, in order to make progress you must manipulate the different combination of puzzles in a specific order, and they have to be completed, which can lead to a certain amount of frustration. There are no easy solutions here, as most of the puzzles require a trial and error approach.

Apart from the sliding blocks, everything else is inventory-based. Collect and use any items you find, sometimes in conjunction with other items. Thankfully, this is not a pixel hunt as every item fits logically into a location and makes perfect sense within the game world. One thing that does not make sense is the use of multiple objects. At one point, a set of screws need removing, and that requires four visits to the inventory, once for each screw, which is not logical.

And, at times, a suspension of disbelief is required, especially when Bridget slips a full-length ladder into the back pocket of her skin-tight jeans, bearing in mind that there wasn't much room in there anyway because she'd just acquired a full-size forklift truck, which also went into her back pocket.

Some jeans. Some gal.

The interface is elegant but uncomplicated, with most functions controlled by the mouse. Left click controls actions; right click calls up the inventory. Pressing the spacebar moves Bridget at running pace, which seems somewhat redundant when you can simply double click on any exit and instantly transport her to the next location. Clicking on an object brings up either a magnify glass to view the item, or a hand to move it to the inventory.
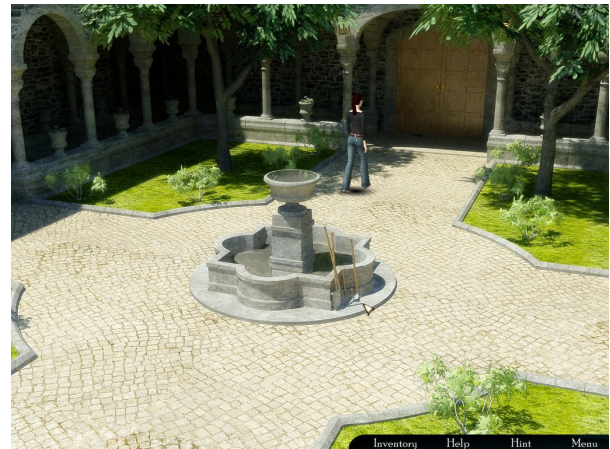
There is also a Hint icon at the bottom of the screen which is useful in some situations without being overly informative and ruining the game. The Collector's Edition of Hotel contains a strategy guide which certainly is intrusive as it makes it so easy to give up on a complicated scenario and seek out the answers. Despite what you may have read elsewhere, this is by no means an easy game to solve and it does stretch the imagination. There are two very good walkthroughs available at the moment, which I suspect some gamers may wish to peek at when stuck in an unforgiving basement or cellar.

The writing in this game is crisp and concise which is probably just as well because there are some lengthy tracts of dialogue to get through. Having said that, at no time did the exchange between the various characters become boring or stilted, which takes a

deft hand to achieve when the narrative is as complicated as this one. And that did lead to one problem. I felt the writers' tried to pack in too much detail and thus left the story feeling slightly underdeveloped. It certainly wasn't a disaster and the game did reach an obvious and logical conclusion, but the ending felt rushed and could have concluded at a much more sedate pace, bringing together all the elements of the plot which would have created a more satisfactory ending.

Hotel is a very good game and one that is easy to recommend. More than fifty detailed locations, a raft of logical puzzles, a cast list of historical figures and a very good story line will keep most gamers intrigued and involved for the four or five hours it takes to

complete this game. There is also a Collector's Edition of Hotel which contains the Strategy Guide, character's biographies, some artwork used in the game, a selection of wallpapers and six music tracks. All in all, a good add-on to the original game.

The developers didn't get everything right, but perfect games are few and far between and Cateia Games have certainly created a niche for themselves in the casual game market, and well deserved, too. Hotel will never be a classic addition to the adventure genre, but it's certainly worth playing.

Visit Rob's personal site for more of his writing and to find out more information about his novels.

Hotel

PC Casual Adventure

Bright moments:
Exploring the village and meeting historical figures.

Fumbles in the dark:
Underdeveloped storyline. A less hurried ending would have improved the overall playability.

Verdict:
A worthy entry in the casual games market.

★★★★☆

Developer: Cateia Games
Publisher: Cateia Games
Release Date: 2010
System Requirements:
- Windows® XP/Vista/7
- 1.0 GHz CPU
- 256 MB RAM
- 32 MB 3D video card compatible with DirectX® 9
- 350 MB hard disk space

The Legend of Crystal Valley
review by Jonathon Wisnoski

The Legend of Crystal Valley is a third person 3D fantasy adventure game by Cateia Games. It is a very hit and miss title, sometimes just nailing it, other times being decent, but many other times completely falling flat.

The first noticeable thing about the game is its graphics, which really exemplify the hit and miss nature of The Legend of Crystal Valley to me. The very first thing you see is the main character Eve, who, in my opinion, is one of the worst graphical parts of the game. Then a cutscene starts, which looks pretty good and raises expectations. Yet as the scene ends, Eve is in an area with a fence that is drawn with a single solid color (gray) and looks absolutely horrible. Fortunately, the graphics, in general, improve after that, and steadily getting better throughout the entire game, eventually getting to near gorgeous visuals that greatly enhance the already interesting locations and enviroments.

The story is undoubtedly the best and most ambitious aspect of the game. It is a truly epic and unique fantasy adventure with traces of science fiction. Once you get into the story, it is very engrossing. Unfortunately it is presented horribly and does not even end satisfactorily.

The biggest issue that prevents the story from really shining is the dialogue. The dialogue in this game is by far the worst I have ever encountered. The characters routinely contradicting themselves and saying things that just make no sense based on the situation. Even when the dialogue makes sense it is not very believable and never contains any emotion; The protagonist (someone you are supposed to like) will lie to someones face or help them out for no reason, all without showing a hint of emotion.

This protagonist is named Eve, who has drifted away from her father after the death of her mother. At the beginning of the game, he has sent her a note asking Eve to come see him one last time. So Eve goes to her old family home, but her father is nowhere to be found. She soon stumbles upon a portal to another world, and journeys there in search of her father. What follows is an adventure across many worlds, where the outcome has the potential to save or condemn the entire universe. Unfortunately, before this promised satisfying conclusion can occur, the game simply ends. Eve gets to a point where a cutscene could conceivably tie up all the loose ends, but such a scene never shows up.

The biggest overarching problems with the game are the irregularities. These mainly show up in the dialogue and the restrictive gameplay. For example, in her journey Eve comes across cages containing bones of creatures who starved to death. She then encounters a cage with a creature that is still alive. Eve does not try to free the creature or offer it water even though she has some in her inventory. She just chatters inanely about how she is sorry about the

creature, but it is going to starve to death. At another point, even though she is on a quest for beer, Eve repeatedly declines the barkeep who is readily offering her a drink. These are just two examples, but similar scenarios play out over and over again throughout the entire game.

Similarly, the gameplay is not anything special. It is a combination of inventory puzzles, uninspired dialogue puzzles, and simple logic puzzles. In my opinion, none of the inventory based puzzles were particularly engaging. The logic puzzles are very easy and should not cause anyone any trouble at all. But I also wonder if I just got extremely lucky many times in a row. Many of the logic puzzles actually look very complicated. Even when you figure them out it seems like it should take a whole lot of thought to get through them, but I always seemed to get them after a small amount of random guessing that often solved the puzzle before I

even figure out what I was supposed to be doing

All is not bad however. For instance, the game does have a magic system that is quite interesting. Over the course of the adventure Eve is taught several spells. She can then use these spells at any time on any object or person. This magic system is well-executed and very entertaining, with the only downside of it being that it is not used more often.

Overall, The Legend of Crystal Valley is very reminiscent of The Longest Journey. It is an epic fantasy adventure filled with magic, giants, angles, and dragons. It even succeeds in some points in recreating the wonderful experience that The Longest Journey delivered. But in my opinion The Legend of Crystal Valley ultimately fails due to a lack of polish.

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The Legend of Crystal Valley   PC Casual Adventure
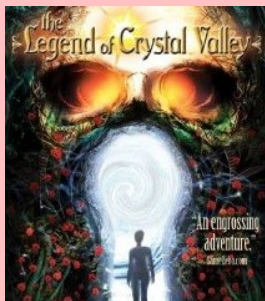
Bright moments:
The story is very engaging and unique.

Fumbles in the dark:
The presentation needs polish. Dialog is badly written and full of contradictions. Gameplay is very restrictive, often preventing you from doing obvious things.

Verdict:
The Legend of Crystal Valley has an interesting story and many interesting places to explore. But in the end, the vast number of problems drag it down.

⭐⭐⭐☆☆

Developer: Cateia Games
Publisher: Cateia Games
Release Date: March 2009
System Requirements:
- Windows® 7/XP/Vista
- 1 GHz CPU
- 256 MB RAM
- 32 MB video card compatible with DirectX® 9.0
- 350 MB HD space