Adventure Lantern

Editorial

If you scroll down a few pages, you will find Nick's lengthy review of The Lost Crown. Nick offers a detailed analysis of the game, explaining why he was less than satisfied with the adventure. He describes how the protagonist was unlikable and the sequences where you interrogate the ghosts felt repetitive. He identifies several technical problems regarding the game's puzzles and navigation. However, reading through the review, I got the impression that Nick's dissatisfaction goes beyond the individual design flaws he eloquently explains. The fundamental problem is that for him, the game failed to create a strong atmosphere and an immersive experience. The game ultimately lacked the emotional impact that makes players care about the story and the characters.

The Lost Crown review got me thinking about my experience with a unique adventure game. When I decided to buy Sanitarium, I knew next to nothing about the game. I was mostly drawn to the intriguing cover art. When I got home, I immediately started playing. Within a few minutes, I knew I had come upon something truly exceptional. The game opened at an asylum. The main character, Max, had lost his memories. As you explored the decrepit building, you quickly became aware of imminent danger. Max had to find a way to escape the asylum. He also needed to discover clues about his identity. However, Sanitarium was no derivative amnesia story. There was something immediately compelling about the game's atmosphere. Sanitarium's world was unsettling, but not necessarily scary. It was dark, but still managed to be alluring. The strange characters and the otherworldly setting drew me in and drove me to unlock the game's mystery.

I was alone at my apartment that evening. I played the game for several hours. By the time I completed the first two chapters of the adventure, I knew Sanitarium would be a game I would remember for a long time. However, I had no idea what was about to happen next. I eventually reached a cutscene that was a flashback to the main character's childhood. I'll omit the details to avoid spoiling this tremendously powerful moment for anyone that may not have played the game. Suffice it to say that at the end of the cutscene, I was in tears. I sat back in my chair, shaken and amazed that a game could trigger such a response. No video game before or since Sanitarium has been able to elicit as strong an emotional reaction from me.

I was hardly the only person to be moved by the scene in question. In his Gamesutra postmortem article for Sanitarium, developer Chris Pasetto indicates that "when [Mike Nicholson, the game's art and design lead] read his proposal to the design team, three of them nearly cried." In fact, Mr. Pasetto notes that throughout the development of Sanitarium, the team was "determined to create a main plot line that held the game together and evoked strong emotions in the player." Sanitarium was deliberately designed to have a strong atmosphere and elicit a visceral reaction. As far as I am concerned, the team succeeded in spades.

Sanitarium is one of a handful of games I remember playing in elaborate detail. The adventure does have its share of flaws. Some of the game's puzzles are too easy for a seasoned gamer and the action sequences can turn off some players. However, at least for me, the game delivers where it most matters. Sanitarium casts you into a strange and intriguing world full of interesting characters. It tells a compelling story and it is brimming with atmosphere. Most importantly, it also manages to elicit genuine emotion. Very few titles can make the same claim. Fourteen years after its release, Sanitarium remains one of my favorite adventures.

It is titles like Sanitarium that made me love adventure games. They are the reason why I wanted to write game reviews and publish Adventure Lantern issues in the first place. They are great testaments to the power of the adventure genre. Much like The Lost Crown disappointed Nick, there will always be titles that do not meet our expectations. However, it is the possibility of finding gems like Sanitarium that keeps me playing. If you haven't already, here's hoping that you will find a game that will move you the same way Sanitarium moved me fourteen years ago.

Until next time,
Ugur Sener

Contents

News

This month has interesting news coming from every angle and for every taste. We have upcoming new IP from exciting mostly unknown developers, long absent pillars of the genre returning, and a few long time developers continuing to release games.

Previews/Interviews

The Journey Down is a classical point and click adventure game, full to the brim with puzzles, conspiracies, mystery and adventure! It is set in a fantastic fantasy world separated into two parts, the relatively normal section you live in and the mysterious land past the edge, where no one is allowed to go (except for some big corporations), rumoured to contain numerous fantastical creatures and phenomena.

Adventurer's Ravine

Nigel Danvers is on the run and has decided to lay low in the quaint town of Saxton. Upon his arrival, he starts hearing weird things about the town, and quickly sets his sights on a local legend, the lost crown. The majority of his time in this 25-30 hour experience is spent unraveling the town's off-beat secrets, and tracking down the legendary lost crown.

Using the time-honored art of claymation, every scene in constructed from clay and cardboard and animated with stop-motion photography. These claymation visuals add a certain quasi-tangible feel to the atmosphere, while the colorful, evocative designs compliment the whimsical dreamscape setting.

The story has a diverse group of survivors trying to find shelter and continue surviving. Episode one kicks things off with Lee Everett climbing out of a wrecked police car and escaping from a horde of zombies. He meets up with Clementine in a nearby neighborhood, and then discovers some other survivors who take him to Hershel's farm, before eventually bunkering down in a pharmacy.

Quite a lot of exciting things happening in the world of the point and click adventure lately. This month seems to be categorised by having interesting news come from every angle and for every taste. We have an upcoming PWYW indie adventure bundle, the creators of Space Quest announcing that they want to make a spiritual sequel of sorts, so many great games that are approaching their due dates that I cannot even come up with a single one I am most excited for, and a ton of Telltale releases as well as the latest game from Amanita Design (Botanicula) debuting with the Humble Indie Bundle.

- Jonathon Wisnoski
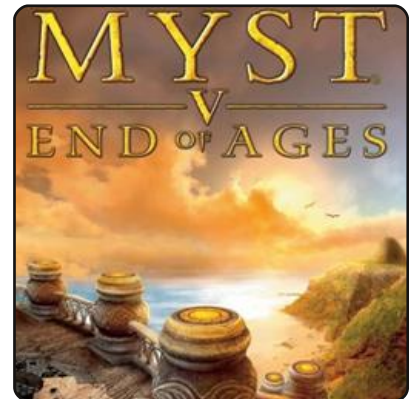
Analogue: A Hate Story

The sequel to Christine Love's Digital: A Love Story, the non-linear visual novel Analogue: A Hate Story, has finally made it to Steam (previous owners get given a key). The game is set thousands of years in the future and has you exploring the mystery of a long lost generational ship.

Myst V: End of Ages

The grand finale of the most famous, or infamous (depending on your personal opinion), adventure game series of all time has gotten itself a GOG release. It is pretty much more Myst, with the main difference being the environment; Which is rendered in full real-time 3D graphics and allows the player to freely navigate through the world or stick with the classical and use node based movement.

Bundle in a Box

The long hinted at PWYW video game bundle from Kyttaro Games has gotten a lot more details in the last month. In addition to getting a Spring release date it has also been announced that the bundle will feature seven DRM-free adventure games and one never before seen title.

To The Moon

The very well received indie Adventure RPG, To The Moon, is getting a Steam release in the imminent future. Good news for everyone who loves Steam and previous purchasers as they will be given a Steam key free of charge.

Lone Survivor Interview

RPS conducted a two part interview with the developer of Lone Survivor, check it out if you are interested in an in-depth talk about Love Survivor.

TO THE MOON

"... A story worth hearing." - Ars Technica
"Truly wonderful ..." - Rock Paper Shotgun
"I'm making a lasagna ..." - Flight of the Conchords

Announcments

## Space Quest Spiritual Sequel

Scott Murphy and Mark Crowe are back in action as Two Guys from Andromeda who have just announced their plans to make the new Space Quest styled adventure game, Spaceventure. Nothing specific has really be announced past that, but of course that information was enough to send the entire community aflutter.

Thunder in Donford

From the developers of Hector: Badge of Carnage comes Thunder in Donford. Said to be in some ways a spiritual successor to Hector, but at the same time completely unique. It is best described using the developers own words "An irreverent, boisterous, non-stop cross-country ricochet across Britain, slapped together with the meticulous delusions of paranoid conspiracy theorist truck driver on a road-trip that will probably scar your fragile mind for life."

The Sirrush Conundrum

An "epic" puzzler in the works by Straandlooper Animation, the company behind Hector: Badge of Carnage. Enter a dark espionage filled world and unravel a labyrinthine international plot intertwined with the occult.
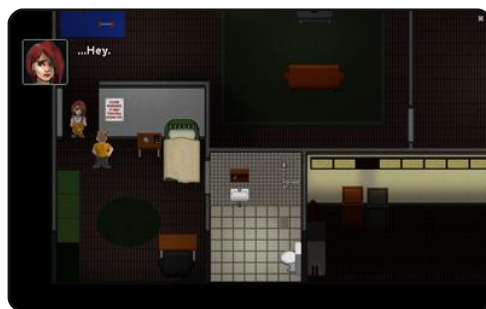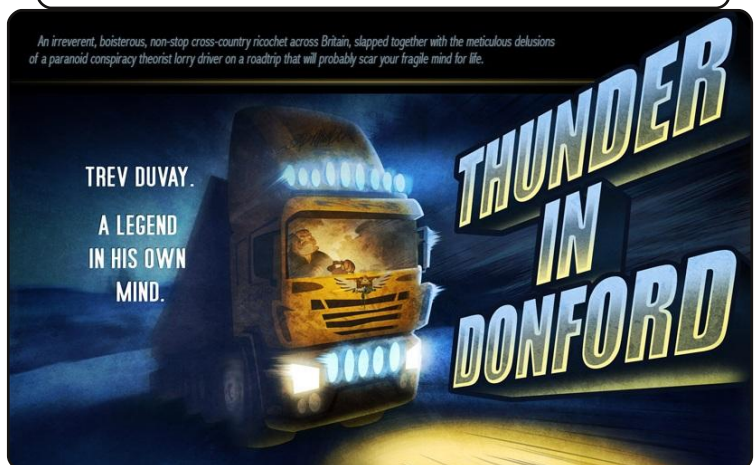
Richard & Alice

An upcoming indie adventure set in a world with weather gone wild. You play as Richard and Alice, inmates in a overcrowded prison, as you explore your current environment and Alice's past.

Jane Jensen's Pinkerton Road Studio

Jane Jensen of Gabriel Knight fame has founded an adventure game studio and is looking for funding, in what she is calling Community Supported Gaming. Uniquely, she does not want you to fund a game specifically, but fund the studio for one studio cycle. For $16 dollars you get your choice of game created during this period. They have announced that Moebius will be their first project, and if another gets published it will likely have to be from another funding source.

Upcoming Releases

Home

Home is a unique horror adventure set in a beautiful pixel art world and about a murder mystery. You awake in a strange dark house with a storm raging outside; As you play the game-world subtly changes to reflect your perspective. A pre-order is available with a June 1st release date.

Reset

Reset is a indie single player co-op first person puzzle game with a strong emphasis on story and atmosphere. The unique game mechanic in Reset is the ability to travel back in time to solve puzzles co-operatively, with yourself. It must be getting somewhat well along as it just got a in-game trailer.

The Dark Eye: Chains of Satinav

This upcoming Daedalic Entertainment game has a release date of June 22. Set is the European pen and paper RPG world of Aventuria, you play Geron, a young trapper who is prophesied to bring the end to Aventuria. So when a plague of crows star attacking he sets off on an adventure to clear his name and save the kingdom.

The Last Crown: Haunting of Hallowed Isle

The sequel to The Lost Crown: A Ghost-Hunting Adventure, Haunting of Hallowed Isle is due out later this year. Join young ghost-hunters Nigel Danvers and Lucy Reubans, as they begin a new 'Crown' mystery. Hallowed Isle lies just off the coast of Saxton, on England's windswept coast. It is a moody, melancholy place; haunted by those who lived, worked and died there.

Lucius

The puzzle adventure Lucius got an October 2012 release date. This unique title attracted my attention with its unusual premise, which is the protagonist being the son of Satan and you using him to murder an entire mansion of people.

The Thirty Nine Steps

The first in a series of adaptations of classical novels from The Story Mechanics. The Thirty Nine Steps was an 1915 spy thriller involving a innocent man who is wrongly accused of murder and gets caught up in international espionage around the start of WWI. With some voice overs, optional bonus scenes, and high res graphics, this is really looking like a game to watch out for. A pre-order is available with a release date of June-July 2012 set for PC, MAC, and iPad.

Haunted

Set to be released next month by Deck13 and Lace Mamba Global, Haunted is a comedic adventure about ghosts and the supernatural.

New Releases

Botanicula

The latest game from Amanita Design, Botanicula is a point and click exploration game with a similar style to their Samorost series. It is set in a world with fantasy little tree creatures and five main protagonists with different abilities.

Captain Morgane and the Golden Turtle

A spin-off adventure from the So Blonde series, Captain Morgane follows Morgane Castillo from childhood through to her rise as one of the most fearsome pirates of the Caribbean. The game was released awhile back for Wii and DS, but only got a PC and PS3 release a little over a month ago.

Sam and Max: Beyond Time and Space
Episode 4: Chariots of the Dogs

The fourth episode of the Sam and Max: Beyond Time and Space series is out on iOS. Bosco's vanished from the face of the Earth—literally! When Sam & Max manage to track him down, what they find is so mind boggling, you'll have to see it to believe it. Can the Freelance Police set things right, or will life as they know it fall victim to the capricious whims of T-H-E-M?

The Walking Dead

Telltale's latest series and the first video game adaptation of The Walking Dead comic has launched its first episode. It is a traditional adventure featuring quick time events, puzzles, and a narrative focusing on how people deal with facing a zombie apocalypse.

J.U.L.I.A. Untold HD

J.U.L.I.A. Untold is a spin-off to the successful PC sci-fi adventure game J.U.L.I.A. It expands upon the original story while remaining playable by itself. It is a challenging puzzle game featuring a collection of 50 puzzles, based on a the circuit assembly puzzle type from the original game.

The Cross Formula

A casual adventure with colorful hand-drawn 2D graphics. The plot sounds rather stereotypical, with you suffering from amnesia, being suspected of murder, and having to prove your innocence by finding out what happened.

Sam and Max: Beyond Time and Space
Episode 5: What's New, Beelzebub?

The fifth episode of the Sam and Max: Beyond Time and Space series is out on iOS and available on Apple iTunes. Judgment day is at hand, and it's time for a showdown with the guy downstairs to bargain for Bosco's soul. But in the corporate wasteland known as Hell, not even the Freelance Police are safe from eternal damnation. Can Sam & Max fight free from Satan's grasp, or have they reached the end of the line?

News from the Big Blue Cup

Pick of the Month - April: UNGA needs MUMBA
Play as a Stone Age hunter, who must hunt and kill a mammoth to provide his wife with a something delicious to eat.

New Look
The AGS website got updated with a new look last month. I cannot say that I have used it that much but what I have seen does look like a usability improvement if not necessarily a visual one.

Forge
It is not often that something as shocking and exciting as a Loom sequel happens, even an unofficial fan made one. Forge is set in the same world as Loom but from the perspective of a blacksmith guild member. For those unfamiliar with Loom, it's important to know that Forge is set in a world where mankind has segregated themselves into City-States according to the trade each individual has chosen or been born into.

Kinky Island
The love child of one the developers of Nelly Cootalot: Spoonbeaks Ahoy! and many other professionals. Kinky Island is an adult comedy adventure set on a tropical island with a dark mystery. It has recently gotten a crowd funding project trying to raise $2,00 for development; In this project you can pre-order the game for $10 (will be ~$14 at release).

Play These: The Best of Adventure Game Studio
RPS wrote an article on AGS games that they recommend last month. It is rather extensive and has a bunch of good picks, but obviously they barely scratched the surface.

AGS Awards 2011
The 2011 AGS awards are in full swing with the nominations in and voting possible.

Exploring The Studious World of AGS
RPS, in their recent burst of AGS lovin, posted a general article about the AGS engine and some of the developers who use it.

New Releases:

- **subAtomic** (Murray Lewis) - Created for Ludum Dare 23 in 72 hours, subAtomic is a short sci-fi comedy about a family who are shrunken.
- **Murder Most Grisly!!** (steptoe) - A Whodunit mystery starring Detective Harry Faversham who has a nose for smelling clues! A lord murdered with a machete, six suspects, many clues and mysteries to unravel.
- **QR Quest** (Icey games) - The sequel to the Pub Master Quest series which is inspired by Final Fantasy. In this title, Dave has all his memories back, however he is still trapped in his dreams.

subAtomic

Murder Most Grisly!!

QR Quest

The Journey Down: Chapter 1 HD

Preview by Jonathon Wisnoski

The Journey Down is a classical point and click adventure game, full to the brim with puzzles, conspiracies, mystery and adventure! It is set in a fantastic fantasy world separated into two parts, the relatively normal section you live in and the mysterious land past the edge, where no one is allowed to go (except for some big corporations), rumoured to contain numerous fantastical creatures and phenomena. Chapter one starts out with Bwana, the game's protagonist, in obvious financial need. Fortunately, he soon gets a client, Lina, willing to pay him loads of cash. While Bwana, and his sidekick Kito, are working for Lina he learns that she is researching a evil plot by the power company which apparently involves the Edge, and the world past it, an interest of Bwana's long absent father. Now in the HD remake you have:

The Journey Down: Chapter One HD is a remake of the 2010 critically acclaimed The Journey Down: Over the Edge AGS freeware adventure. Over the Edge is 2010's AGS game of the year, it swept the awards that year and is one of the best general adventure AGS games ever made. The HD remake is this original game with a fully voiced cast, HD art and animations, more locations and characters, more story and puzzles, and even more jazz. I have only played the preview beta version but that is enough to say that everything seems pretty good. There was still more then a little polishing left to do, but I am confident that it will be a significant improvement on the original while maintaining the same delightful style.

The biggest improvement in the remake is its graphics, and I normally am not a fan of HD remakes. These include, very nice, high resolution backgrounds; Grim Fandango reminiscent 3D character models; And simply superb cutscenes. The backgrounds are great but it is the cutscenes and character models that are of such a surprisingly high quality. The character models are so stylish and unique, and seem to be the best possible way to show off the rather brilliant African tribal masks. And then you have the cutscenes, they obviously took their time with these; They look beautiful, they match the style of the in-game art while extending it, the animation is fluid and realistic, and they add to the overall experience by excellently conveying the emotions of the scene. And I am told even more cutscenes will be in the finished version.

The second biggest thing added to the game is the voice cast, and similarly to the higher resolution graphics these can really go wrong if not done well. The remake is 100% completely voiced and while this is one of the areas that needed the most polish in my version it was still quite good overall. I would say definitely better than text already, but if it is to reach truly impressive levels it will need polishing, so we will have to wait for the finished version to see how that turns out.

The gameplay and world is the only area that has not been completely overhauled. It is basically the exact same game with a few small puzzles and areas added. This additional content fits almost completely in the original story with only a few really small changes being added to the story and a few very minor story additions.

All in all I think you should be excited about this upcoming commercial release of The Journey Down: Chapter One in mid May.

The Journey Down Interview

Conducted by Gnome

*SkyGoblin is much more than a brilliant name; it's a brilliantly named indie adventure-loving ensemble that has already given us one stunning freeware game, is frantically working on **The Journey Down** (HD), which has a mid May release date, and is apparently more than capable of coming up (and -importantly- masterfully realizing) unique ideas. Here's the interview with multi-tasking artist, developer and producer Theodor Waern:*

Let's start with the basics, shall we? Who are the people responsible for SkyGoblin? And why SkyGoblin?

We are two artists (me and Henrik), and two programmers, Mathias and Markus. We've been making games together as a group for over six years now. Me and Mathias have been fooling around with games together pretty much our entire life though. As a group we've built a bunch of different things. Our major project the past three years or so though has been our free-to-play mmo "nordgame". But we've also worked on a bunch of smaller advergames etc. to stay afloat commercially.

In the beginning of our time together as a group we were actually, for a short period, focused on making mobile games. Among them, we made (but never finished) an awesome little game called Baron's Gold. The premise was that a bunch of nasty sky-living Goblins had stolen the flying baron's loot, and you had to get it all back. This is from where the name SKYGOBLIN stems.

I take it you are adventure lovers that will be focused on adventures. Am I correct? Are there any non-adventuring projects waiting to be hatched?

We love games, but we also love stories. I think this is why we have a bias toward working on adventure games. They are simply a great mix of everything we love to work with. As for future projects though, I see no reason why we couldn't venture into all sorts of genres. We love gameplay design and have a lot of strange ideas we'd love to try out if we were given the opportunity.

On to The Journey Down then; the original, freeware release. How would you describe it?

I'd describe it as a good flowing adventure that leaves a warm feeling of friendlyness and a thick feeling of there being something bigger and more sinister going on under the surface.

What were you aiming for?

Well, I aimed on making a game that featured all of the good things from the "golden era of point 'n' click" and none of the bad. People often have rose tinted memories of their old favorite games from back in the day. Fact is, they weren't perfect. They had tons of flaws. To be frank, the genre was still not really thought-through. Unintuitive interactions and illogical solutions were everywhere to be found. I like to think I pretty much succeeded in weeding out those issues and instead focused on those core things that truly make the genre fun.

Also, one of my primary goals in making the game was making a game that I would love to produce. And boy did I love to produce TJD.

Did you expect its overwhelming critical success and all those awards?

After having done quite a lot of testing on a rather large bunch of people, I knew I had something good going that worked on people in general and seemed to strike the right chords. I had certainly hoped to win some of those awards, but hadn't deared wish for that many.

Why did you decide to go with an African aesthetic?

I was raised in a home full of African masks and musical instruments, it has been with me all my life and it is something I've always wanted to explore. Besides it looks cool and has for some reason not really been featured that much in games.

What are you the happiest with? Is it the lovely graphics? The plot? The music? The dialog? The puzzles?

To me the greatest experience a game can give you is its ambiance -the vibe you get from playing a game. I am very happy with the vibe of TJD. Needless to say, the vibe is a result of everything combined. As an artist I was never really happy seeing my art mashed-up and go low-res the way it did in the original. Also, me making nice art was not news to me, me making good puzzles and story, this was something new. Also me actually producing the whole thing is something I'm very happy with. I will never again under-estimate the title "producer". It's easy to think of this as the role of someone who doesn't do any of the real work. But fact is, the producer is the one who makes sure it actually gets done. Needless to say, that's pretty important.

And why did you decide to go with a commercial remake?

Lots of reasons. My primary reason though was that I realized I desperately needed to turn TJD into my day job if I was ever going to find the time to actually keep on working on it. In becoming a father, my free time for working on hobby projects has now dwindled down to a steady zero hours per day. Making chapter two commercial was a no-go, there's way too little following. I figured the only way to make this work was to revamp chapter one on a bigger scale. Make it more accessible and raise the appeal further. More platforms, speech and more puzzles all add up to a better game, reaching a bigger audience. Hopefully we can make chapter one work commercially, so I can continue doing chapter two as my day job. If not, I'm just going to have to keep it tiny, and work on it on my own, which clearly works, but will wind up being crummier, and take five more years instead of the rough half-year I expect it to take if being produced here, at SKYGOBLIN.

What's new in the, uhm, new The Journey Down?

Most importantly, speech. It adds a TON of ambiance and depth to the characters. I'm not against reading, but theres's no way text can portray emotion the way a real voice actor can. It makes a huge differece in bonding with the characters. Secondly I'd say story. We've added quite a lot of backstory and new characters, puzzles and locations to make the game a longer, fuller experience that really does make the game worth playing even if you've already played the original. On third place I'd say the HD art. I personally -having painted it all- love finally seeing my background art the way I intended it to be. Sure, the original 320 resolution is cute and retro-y and all, but it still doesn't really do the artwork justice. Finally you can see all the detail and effort that has actually gone into creating this world. On top of that we have re-animated all characters 100% which also makes a huge difference. The original animations were desperate at best and I never really felt they were on par with the rest of the production. Now they are.

It's still episodic isn't it? How many chapters should we expect?

Yeah, this is still only the first chapter of four. It starts and ends where the original does, but we've squeezed lots o' new stuff in between.

Impressively and besides the PC, you are (as mentioned) also releasing it for Mac, iOS and Android. A wise choice indeed, but how difficult is actually porting the game over?

Fortunately we made the decision quite early in the process to make an effort to get the game out on as many platforms as possible. Having this in mind, we built our engine, Gobby, around this very premise. This has (so far) made the effort relatively pain-free. Getting it running on Mac was pretty much a piece of cake. Our Mac build is currently as up to date as our PC build and frankly also seems a bit more stable, for some reason.

Our main challenges on handheld so far have actually rather been interaction-wise. Some handsets are TINY, which has forced us to re-design quite a lot of hotspots and puzzles, to ensure that the player will actually be able to perform the desired interactions. I don't doubt for a second though that we will hit all sorts of technical obstacles before we actually have the iOS and Android builds up and running 100%, but all in all it is looking very promising. One potentially scary thing is performance though. One would think that a 2d point 'n' click title would be relatively non-demanding but with TJD this isn't really the case. We have tons of frames, lots and lots and lots of frames of animation that all need to be loaded into memory, fast. Getting that flow smoothly on all devices will no doubts be a challenge.

Do you feel that mobile platforms are well-suited to adventures?

Certainly. But the games need to be built for it to suit the format. Honestly, with a well designed UI, I have a hard time imagining any format working better for point 'n' clicks than tablets.

And what about the general state of adventure gaming? There's a renaissance going on, isn't there?

It certainly seems like it. With the sudden boom of affordable tablets and other handheld gaming devices, point 'n' clicks and similar puzzlers are bound to start flourishing again. Also, Android Market and the App Store are ideal places for small studios to launch experimental, high-risk games without having to bother with publishers, which at least in theory should allow for more interesting and quirky titles to reach the masses. If they'll (we'll) manage to get anything sold though, is a different matter entirely.

Also, Double Fine certainly put pnc's back in the spotlight again with their Kickstarter campaign, proving that there are indeed tons of people out there who are craving these kind of games. How us noname developers tap into that market though is anyone's guess. Being seen is incredibly difficult.

Finally and to let you work on actually crafting games, what does the future hold for SkyGoblin?

Hopefully our near future holds a successfull launch of chapter one of TJD, followed by us immediately getting down and dirty with the actual implementation of chapter two. We actually have quite a lot of chapter two worked out, it just hasn't been... produced. Frankly I hope to pretty much be able to focus on TJD until we finally wrap the whole thing up, but odds are we will have to break off a little now and then and work on other projects to keep us afloat. Financially solely living off of TJD seems pretty unlikely. Don't get me wrong, I expect people who play the game to love it. That however doesn't mean we will be able to reach out and make enough sales to live off of it during the entire production. Such is the tough world of self publishing. So likely we will be doing all sorts of haphazard contract jobs in between, somehow patching our economy together, as we have the past five years or so. We are used to it by now. Zero security, but it allows us to work with what we love.

After TJD, who knows? We have a million ideas and would love to see them all realized. Which one we end up playing with is too early to speculate about at this stage. It's pretty safe to say though that it wont directly involve mask-clad rasta people.
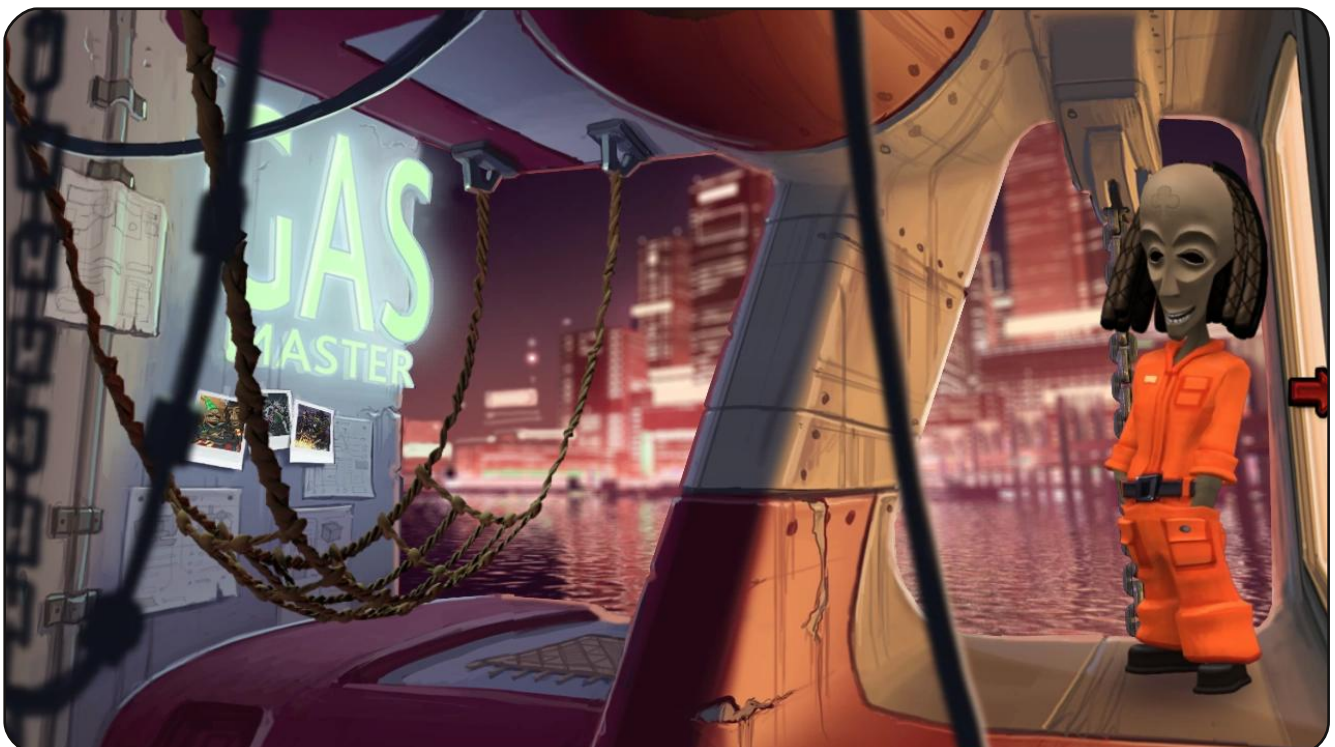
The Lost Crown: A Ghost-Hunting Adventure

Review by Nick Burgener

The Lost Crown: A Ghost-Hunting Adventure is an adventure game by Jonathan Boakes, best known for his previous work on the Dark Fall series (also previously reviewed by Adventure Lantern). Given Mr Boakes's reputation within adventure-gaming circles, as well as having read some really emphatic reviews of the game, I had high hopes and expectations for TLC.

But TLC proved utterly disappointing. The pacing is incredibly slow, the characters are completely flat and shallow with some of the worst voice acting I've ever heard, and the plot lacks all form of intrigue and compulsion. To top it all off, word of mouth claimed that this was a very suspenseful and sometimes scary game, but it's just not. There are a few shining moments within this sea of murky brown, but the whole package is mediocre, at best.

[The Premise]

TLC plays just like any traditional point-and-click adventure game. Scenes are constructed from third-person stills, and you click along the edges of the screen (usually along a visible pathway) to move to the next scene. Gameplay consists of going from scene to scene clicking on everything you can, hopefully in the correct order, until you get to a new area, with a couple of simple inventory-based puzzles along the way.

A decent portion of your time is spent hunting ghosts, using a typical array of ghost-hunting equipment including EMF meters, digital cameras, and EVP recorders. In some instances the game assumes a first-person perspective and has you moving through the environment by clicking to go forward and to turn left or right. These sequences are perhaps the most atmospheric of the entire game and can provide some chilling, memorable moments.

The main character, Nigel Danvers, is on the run and has decided to lay low in the quaint town of Saxton. Upon his arrival, he starts hearing weird things about the town, and quickly sets his sights on a local legend, the lost crown. In the process, he discovers that the town has a surprisingly large ghost population that he'll have to deal with them to make progress in his own quest. The majority of his time in this 25-30 hour experience is spent unraveling the town's off-beat secrets, and tracking down the legendary lost crown.

[The Narrative]

As the six-page mini-booklette in the box's cover flap informs us, Nigel stumbled upon some curious files on the Hadden Corporation website servers, and is now on the run. He's being pursued by two of Mr Hadden's lackeys, and he knows that Hadden will stop at nothing to secure the knowledge that Nigel has made off with. In order to dodge the heat, Nigel flees to Saxton.


Saxton is made out to be quiet and out of the way, ideal for his fugitive status. However, he begins to notice strange things, even before arriving at the town; notably, that the train he came in on doesn't even go the full track into Saxton, and that the station master wears a rather antiquated uniform. He asks him about his "period costume," but the station master doesn't understand what he means. Suspicions immediately arise.

Nigel then has to travel through "the fens," the marshy wetlands between the town and the train outpost – a mysterious region that the station master warns you to be careful around. Along the way he sees strange images, and most importantly, stumbles upon a few newspaper articles that hint at the legend of the Lost Crown, and I think something briefly about some townsfolk dying in ages past. Next, he meets an old woman on the beach who already knows his name and what his purpose in the town is.

Once he's finally in town, his first stop is The Bear, a local pub and inn, but the bartender refuses to tell him what year it is. He takes up residency in the local "Harbor Cottage," which the game immediately suggests to be haunted. From here, he spends the next few days meeting strange new people, exploring new areas, and uncovering evidence about the trail of the lost crown, all-the-while trying to piece together Saxton's mysterious history as he encounters one strange inconsistency after another.

The box would like us to believe that one character, Lucy Ruebans, plays an important role with Nigel. In truth, she doesn't get that much screen time – it's a little more than the other townsfolk, but she doesn't spend nearly enough time with Nigel to be considered a main character. Boakes tries to set up a Mulder/Scully duality between the two; Nigel is a Believer, and Lucy is a Skeptic. She wants to believe in the paranormal, but needs hard proof before she's willing to go out on a limb for Nigel.

She became trapped in the service tunnels.
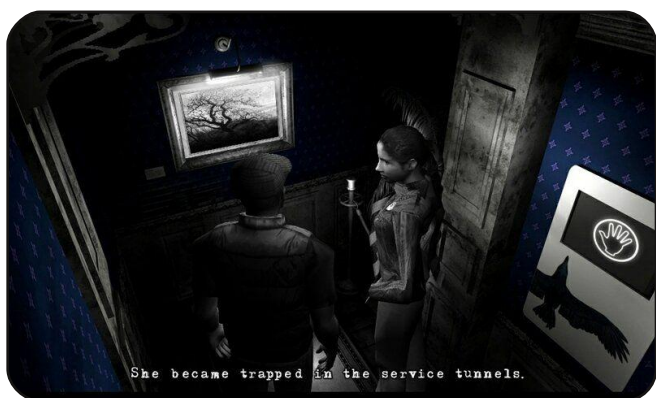
Their relationship isn't all that deep, and although the voice acting definitely makes it seem shallow, the true fault lies within the script. There's nothing unique about them that we haven't seen a hundred times in film, television, literature, or other video games. We don't learn anything about Lucy's past, origins, or even her personality or interests (in fact, neither do we about Nigel), so in practical terms she's just another stranger off of the street with a knack for showing up whenever Nigel needs another pair of hands.

In fact, none of Saxton's inhabitants (living or deceased) are as fleshed out as they ought to be. Very little about the characters is revealed beyond your own first impression. They're instantly forgettable, and almost none of them serve any purpose in the actual story. As you explore, you usually uncover one fact about each character that connects them to the town, to the legend, or to one another, but these revelations have no implications on anything in the actual story and come off as a weak attempt to add significance to everything.
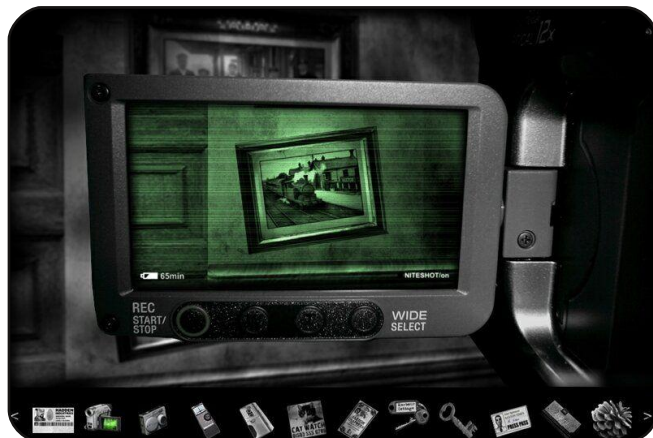
Your investigations aren't very compelling, either. What makes a suspenseful, riveting story, is putting the audience in situations where they don't know what's going to happen next, as the hero comes to the edge of solving a problem or answering a question, which will inevitably lead to another problem. The stakes rise with each hurdle, until it becomes life or death, success or failure at the climax. It's about pacing. It's about simultaneously asking questions and answering others. Giving the player feedback that provides a sense of accomplishment and progression.

TLC doesn't do any of this. The story amounts to Nigel wandering around town doing odd jobs for the townsfolk, and stumbling upon clues about the local history, which never answer any of the questions that have been amassing in your mental log. The effect is that you spend hours and hours doing random things wondering "What's the point of all of this? Is it all going to come together in the end?"

And it never does. The whole time I was hoping for a twist ending, where Nigel turned out to be the ghost, or that the whole town was a ghost town. While a fan could probably theorize endlessly about what the game means, there's no evidence to support any claim, because the ending answers absolutely zero questions. Who is this Mr Hadden? What were those files that Nigel found? What does Nigel actually do for a living? Why are so many ghosts clinging to this town? Why won't anyone tell me what year it is? What's with these newspaper articles that seem to be from the future? How did the townsfolk know who I was before I even got there?

Ultimately, the story is just too spread out to be enjoyable or even comprehensible. The game drags on far too long, and would have been more interesting if there had been fewer characters, fewer ghosts, and a more linear plot progression concentrated on a more compact and concrete premise.

[The Atmosphere]

The front of the box proudly quotes a review from JustAdventure, right under the title, saying that TLC may "go down in history as the best horror adventure game ever written." While this is an accurate quote from the Just Adventure review, I found the statement to be quite inaccurate and misleading. Not only does the script feel like something written by a 14 year-old fan fiction author, but absolutely nothing about the game can be classified as "horror." The genre label on the side of the box says "Suspense," which is a little more accurate, but as I described earlier, the pacing is slow and wanders around so aimlessly, with zero consequences for anything you do, that there's zero suspense to be had.

Horror games are supposed to inspire some feeling of dread and vulnerability, but nothing in TLC's gameplay mechanics do anything to convey those emotions. You get occasional flashes and suggestions of murder, death, and suicide, but it's about as horrific, as, for example, watching an episode of a television crime drama. The few moments when you're dealing directly with the paranormal are about as close to horror or suspense as the game actually gets. By their own merits, these sections have passably spooky or eerie atmospheres, but they're still not all that scary or suspenseful.

Meanwhile, Nigel Danvers is just an annoying character to have to put up with. He constantly makes captain obvious comments (telling me exactly what I've already deduced by looking at an item) and asking utterly stupid, moronic questions that make me want to smack him. I feel insulted that I have to be paired with this guy. Other times he just refuses to do what you tell him, which establishes a disconnect between the player and the main character, which made me distance and dissociate myself from the main hero, and by extension, the whole game. I really don't care about the lost crown, but I'd be happy and willing to play along if Nigel were a better character.

I also don't understand Nigel's motivation. I get that he's on the run, but if I were laying low, I wouldn't be going around introducing myself by full, real name to everyone I meet, poking my nose into treasure myths and spreading a reputation about myself and my whereabouts. We go through the whole game on a treasure hunt just because Nigel's greedy. There's no reason or incentive to find the lost crown (in fact, there are even hints along the way that you should stay AWAY from it at all costs). You know like how Indiana Jones has to find artifacts in order to keep them out of the wrong hands thus preventing some catastrophe? He has a reason, and we root for him because of that. Nigel's just some guy fresh off a train with a sweet tooth for treasure.

In short, Nigel kills the atmosphere.

The scenes are all constructed from real life photography. Set a camera, take a snapshot, and that's a scene. The photos are then doctored up to make them look like they were created for the game, so that characters and other 3D models don't clash with the imagery. Then, to top it off, almost the entire game is grayscaled to black and white. Many scenes have flashes of color in them to emphasize items (like the red phone booth, the pink flowers, or at the end, the blue sky), and a couple of simple animations in the foreground or background.

The visuals can look pretty nice, but so little happens on screen that it's easy to zone out because you're staring at a photograph for so long. The shots themselves, though, look good and can be pretty memorable, and the black and white kind of adds to the atmosphere. However, because everything is 2D and the gray tends to blend together in your field of vision, it's sometimes difficult to tell what parts of the environment are new to the scene or are unique items that you're supposed to use.

This ambiguity is especially problematic when they put multiple activation zones for items right next to one another. At one point I was in a graveyard, and the entire field of the gravestones could be clicked for Nigel to say something about life and death, but one individual grave could be examined at closer detail for a necessary puzzle item. I had already clicked on four or five different spots in the graveyard and heard the same line over and over again that I just assumed the whole field was the same. This same thing happened several other times with piles of boxes, the ocean, the sky, blank papers scattered across a desk, etc.

Dialogue is atrocious, and Nigel is the worst culprit. In every single line of dialogue, Nigel adds unnecessary pauses to the flow of a sentence or stresses the wrong words. "The clock, has stopped, at nine o'clock." "HOW, do you KNOW, my NAME?" "Did you see, anybody else, board the train, at London?" You know how people always write in their reviews that voice actors are noticeably reading lines out of context? Here, it's like the individual words are out of context, as if words and phrases were cut out of different lines and assembled together into one sentence, like an anonymous message written from magazine cut-outs.

The other characters aren't as bad, but while Nigel tries too hard to add dramatic emphasis and feeling to his lines, the others do just the opposite. Lucy, in particular, speaks in complete monotone and sounds like a robot (both in terms of emotion and timbre). There are maybe only two or three voices that are actually good, and a decent portion are adequate, but so many are completely devoid of life and emotion. It's especially tragic because an adventure game like this should rely on its characters to breathe life into the game; instead they make what is already a questionable atmosphere even worse.

It's enervating when these conversations drone on and on and, frequently, when the characters don't actually say anything of value. Almost all of the conversations involve characters telling you things you already know, dodging the question and giving you an unsatisfying answer, or saying something that just has no real effect on the plot. It's all too easy to tune out, and it's frustrating that you can't skip lines of dialogue if you hate the voice acting or just want to read the subtitles faster than they can talk. And if you accidentally hit the wrong option you get stuck listening to the entire conversation all over again.

A lot of lines are repeated ad nauseum, in multiple different places. Whenever you meet a ghost, for example, you cycle through the exact same five lines of dialogue, each time. Whenever you collect paranormal evidence, Nigel says the exact same "There's definitely something" and "There! Definitely paranormal activity." He says "Nothing ventured" every time you walk into a dark area, "Home sweet home, for now anyway" every time you enter the harbor cottage, "Symbolic images, or ancient graffiti" every time you click on a mystical carving. It just gets so annoying.

The rest of the audio is pretty decent. There's not a lot of music, I suppose since this is supposed to be as realistic as possible, so you only hear music in shops and homes where the characters are actually listening to music. And at least half of the music in these scenes sound suspiciously similar to Greensleeves and Scarborough Fair, which bothered me to no end. The ambient sound effects, though sparse and minimalistic, get the job done and fit the scenes pretty well.

Character models are pretty bad for 2008 standards, but since this is an independently developed game I can't knock it too much. The animations, however, are just bad. Nigel doesn't really walk; his feet slide across the floor faster than he actually lifts and plants his feet. When he turns, he keeps his upper torso pointed to wherever he was originally looking until the last second, quickly spinning his shoulders around once his feet are pointing the right way. Whenever you click on something, he stands around for two or three seconds and then slowly tilts his body up or down as if he's the Batman and can't move his neck. When he knocks on doors it looks like a robot trying to stick a dollar into a vending machine.

Have you seen any of those old, cheesy horror movies, where everything looks so fake that you laugh at the characters and the supposedly scary moments? Playing TLC is like that, because a lot of stuff just looks and sounds so bad that you can't take it seriously.

[The Gameplay]

Gameplay is your standard adventure affair. You control the entire game with the mouse and use it to move around the scenes and to interact with people and items. There aren't any action sequences that require fast reflexes or good hand-eye coordination, it's all pretty relaxed adventuring. There aren't very many hardcore puzzle sequences, either – most of what you need to do to progress is simple detective work: collecting evidence and talking to people.

So gameplay generally involves walking into a new scene, clicking on anything and everything possible, and then progressing to the next screen. The game structures your access to various places by blocking areas off with convenient blockades until you're ready to go there, and once you're in an area, Nigel will refuse to leave until you've done everything. The system works well in guiding you along and making sure that you do things in the right order, but it also hinders the feeling of exploration.

It makes me wonder why they didn't just make the game more linear in the first place, instead of giving you the illusion of complicated maps. You can't go places at your own pace and are frequently trumped by Nigel's own incompetence. You'll often find a new path, click on it, and Nigel will refuse to go that way and tell you "I don't know where this leads .... IF it leads anywhere at all." My reaction is always "Well go find out you stupid idiot!" There's one section in particular where you need to find a church, and to do so, you need to arrange a series of rotating statues in the woods in the right way to get a lens looking through a particular sight-line at the church. When you leave the woods, Nigel finally goes down that path that you've been clicking on all this time, and the church is two screens away. Why we had to go through that whole process and couldn't just, oh, go there, is beyond me.

For that matter, the final crypt in which you ultimately find the lost crown has absolutely NO roadblocks to pass through. Literally, you walk by it two or three times in the course of the game and there's nothing blocking your access to it. The only reason you can't go there? Because the cursor wouldn't highlight over the entrance to let you in until the end of the game. There is NO reason you couldn't have just wandered in there and found the thing right off the bat, other than the game being kind of a jerk to you.

The item collecting and detective work can be frustrating as well. Sometimes the game requires you to interact with certain items in a certain order, so you can easily go through an entire region of the map looking at things, and then get to the roadblock and have to backtrack because you looked at some things before triggering some sort of special sequence. It's then easy to overlook many of the items because you don't remember what they were supposed to be for, and if you're like me, you're reluctant to click on things and get stuck watching Nigel glide over to them, turn in place, look up or down, and then bombard you with his stupid inner monologue over and over again (it was bad enough the first time).

That said, you're not pixel-hunting like in many adventure games. In fact, most items have a pretty wide activation area, which generally makes it a simple matter of sweeping the cursor across the screen and finding all of the activation zones. It's nice because it makes most items easy enough to find, but you sometimes confuse activation areas assuming they cover an entire region when there are actually multiples right next to one another. Inventory-based puzzles are also fairly few, and most of the times when you need to use an inventory item on the environment, it's simple and logical. You still wind up with literally dozens of items in your inventory, though, most of

which you can't use or dispose of.

This is also an adventure game in which you cannot die. There are a bunch of places where your life is put at risk but there's absolutely no consequence, since you can't die or suffer any sort of penalties. It completely breaks the immersion when there's an evil darkness swarming in on you and you have to navigate through a maze to escape, but it's designed to easily allow you to escape by never blocking your path and never actually closing in on you. There's no sense of danger, which therefore never puts you on edge and never ups the suspense.

Interacting with ghosts is fairly straightforward. You have five different tools at your disposal: an EMF meter that picks up fluctuations in the area's electromagnetism (usually an indication of a ghostly presence, though electrical devices can interfere, even though they never actually do in the game); an EVP recorder that allows you to pick up spectral voices on tape recordings that can't be heard by the human ear; a digital camera with motion-censor to capture images; a digital cam corder with night vision to see in the dark and record video; and a surveillance system set up in your cottage, which combines all of the above.

There aren't a whole lot of things in the environment that you can use your inventory items on, so when that wrench-like icon appears on screen it's usually a safe bet that you have to use your ghost-hunting gadgets on it. In my opinion, this defeats the point because the game explicitly tells you when and where to use your gadgetry, so there's no actual hunting involved, and half the time, Nigel will tell you that you can't use certain gadgets on it. In this regard, the ghost-hunting is literally the exact same gameplay mechanic as talking to someone on the street and then cycling through dialogue options.

Whenever you find an actual ghost, you go through a process of asking the same questions: Is there anybody there, can you see me, can you hear me, etc. It's literally the same questions each time, so you'll probably get sick of it after a while (and you'll get irritated by Nigel repeatedly asking "Can you hear me?" after the ghost has already responded to all of his other stupid questions), but this leads up to the climax when the ghost usually reveals itself and actually carries a conversation with you. Again, this part functions exactly like talking to an NPC, the only exception being that the ghost interaction has weird special effects on screen, and they talk in whispery, spectral voices.

In a few areas, you use the nightvision camera to navigate through dark places, and if the entire game had been like this, it would've been so much better. In these areas you assume a first-person perspective looking through the green tint of the camera. You click on the edges of the screen to walk forward and to turn around, and it's easily the most atmospheric aspect of the game. It's still in 2D and there usually isn't a lot of animation, but it emulates the feeling of being there and walking through the environment as if you were in the moment. But, alas, these moments are fleeting and we're quickly back to third-person stillshots and weak animations.

And, unfortunately, most of the evidence that you collect through your ghost-hunting is utterly useless. There's a table in your cottage where you stash photographs and audio recordings but there's never any need to review or cross-reference anything. Pretty much you snap the photograph, you record the audio and then you're done with it for good. It's the exact same mechanic as pressing a switch to open a door, as in, it's not that involved or satisfying. The game is scripted in such a manner that is does everything for you, and all you have to do is click the buttons to make it go.

It's a long game, but it's worse off because it's so long – everything drags on, and on. The whole thing will take you easily over 20 hours to complete (25-30 if you're adamant about not using a walkthrough), but you'll spend a significant chunk of that time listening to Nigel repeat his horrible lines over and over again, and watching all of his horrible animations. A lot of time is wasted on these little things, and it builds up a lot over time. And in general, most of what you do is a waste of time because it accomplishes nothing.

[**The Conclusion**]

I trudged through The Lost Crown for two reasons: to get my money's worth (I don't feel like I did), and to be able to write a review with some credibility. It's really quite a pretentious game with all of the boasting and hype on the box, the six-page mini booklette laid into the front panel (which actually gives more insight to some of the characters than the actual game), and all of Jonathan Boakes' shameless self promotion within the game. These facts alone should have told me this wasn't a premium quality experience.

The whole product feels amateurish, and indeed it is, given that it's an independent game developed largely by one man. It's an astonishing accomplishment that one man was able to piece together a game of this length mostly by himself, but I can't make exceptions because of this fact. Ultimately, it is a good game .... for something made by one person. But in the grand scheme of things, it's a flawed experience. I'll grant that it's a memorable experience, but more in a bad way than in a good way.

TLC has decent adventure gameplay mechanics, but it's thrown together with a very loose script that doesn't tie anything together or make sense of anything. Sometimes the less you know, the more mysterious something can be, but The Lost Crown doesn't even make the audience ask the right questions to make it a curious, riveting experience. Even though several gameplay aspects could have been altered to improve the experience, the root of the problem lies with a bad script that really should have been thought out better before going into production.

The Lost Crown: A Ghost-Hunting Adventure   **PC Adventure**
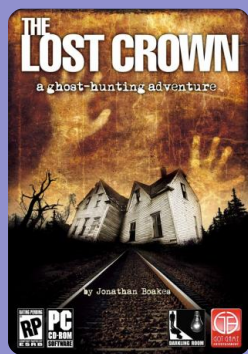
Bright moments:
The black and white graphics look nice, with a generally rich atmosphere.

Fumbles in the dark:
Terrible voice acting, bad characters, slow pacing, and inconsequential gameplay.

Verdict:
Utterly tedious and unbearable, and not worth the time commitment to play.

★☆☆☆☆

Developer: Darkling Room
Publisher: Got Game, Mamba Games, Akella
Release Date: March 6, 2008

System Requirements:
- OS: Windows XP or newer
- CPU: Pentium 2, P3 rec.
- RAM: 512MB, 1GB rec.
- Video: 128MB, DX9
- HDD: 1.2GB

The Dream Machine: Chapters 1-3

Review by Nick Burgener

The most notable aspect of Cockroach Inc's The Dream Machine -- an episodic point-and-click adventure game -- is its animation style. Using the time-honored art of claymation, every scene in constructed from clay and cardboard and animated with stop-motion photography. It looks fantastic. With just a cursory glance, you can already tell that The Dream Machine stands out from the crowd, since so few games have ever used claymation. As great as the visual design is, however, that's not the game's biggest selling point -- it's the quality of the gameplay.

As a point-and-click adventure, the gameplay revolves around solving puzzles to progress through a prominent story. The puzzles in TDM are all very clever and feel rewarding to solve, often because they're well-implemented in the environment and contribute to the pacing of the narrative. Nothing feels obtuse; everything's there for a specific (and convincing) purpose. The puzzles offer a satisfying challenge while always being completely fair to the diligent observer, and the story develops at a consistent pace, hooking you from the very beginning with a sense of mystery before hooking you with another plot element at the climax of each chapter.

You play as Victor Neff moving into a new apartment with your wife, Alicia. At first things are relatively mundane, with your main tasks basically being to accommodate to life in a new apartment. You talk with Alicia about how well each of you slept last night, you meet some of your new neighbors, you set-up a rudimentary dining table from an up-turned cardboard box, you search for the phone and the telephone jack so you can call the realty company, you pick up the spare key from the landlord, the elevator doors get jammed so you try to fix them, and so on. These aren't particularly exciting tasks, but they're surprisingly effective at setting the stage and keeping you invested in the scenario.

For a game titled "The Dream Machine," which will therefore obviously be dealing with the fantastic subject matter of dreams, grounding the gameplay in reality is a crucial first step. Reality, in this case, is very convincing and resonates with a special kind of chemistry. Your conversations with Alicia, using the slightly branching dialogue options, are both witty and charming, thanks to some clever and poignant writing. We only need a few minutes with these two characters to get a feeling for the unique quality of their

relationship. They're instantly likable and feel very plausible in this setting, which makes you care about what's going on.

Even though your initial objectives are fairly banal, there's an air of mystery and intrigue right from the very beginning. The game preludes the dream theme with you playing your own quick dream sequence before waking up. Alicia then describes the landlord's bizarre appearance in her own dreams last night, and explains how uncomfortable she now feels around him. One of your neighbors has known the landlord since he was a kid and warns you to be a little wary of him. Looking around your living room, you find a burned-up note from the previous tenant, in which he warns you of some strange device under the bedroom floorboards and how he just had to get out of that apartment.

After solving some puzzles, you discover a hidden camera pointed directly at your bed. Chapter 1 (which you can play for free online in your browser) ends with Alicia calling the police and you making a mad dash to prevent the landlord from escaping the building. From here, you stumble into his office and start uncovering the mystery of what he's been up to, which, as the title suggests, pertains to a dream machine. Thus, you spend the bulk of Chapters 2 and 3 exploring the dreamworld to solve a conflict which, by now, you've become heavily invested in as a player, due to the characterization and atmosphere.

Each chapter follows a pattern that begins with some kind of concrete goal or objective that quickly becomes complicated with some kind of mystery. You solve puzzles and progress until you reach a climax near the end that resolves the events of the chapter while setting up a dramatic event to be continued in the next chapter. The pacing here is very well-done, as it establishes a pretty satisfying feedback loop which makes it engaging to play all the way through.

As far as the puzzles are concerned, they're all well-implemented in the environment; everything makes sense and feels like it should belong where it is. Very few puzzles come off feeling forced, and they all manage to contribute to the pacing of the game in a positive way. Whereas some games throw a puzzle out just to block your path in some obligatory way, and you wonder why it's even there, you sometimes don't even realize you're solving a "puzzle" in TDM because of how clever they are (or if you do realize, you're perfectly content to play along with it because of how plausible they feel).

One of the most remarkable aspects of the puzzles is how many inventory items and things in the environment get used for different puzzles. At one point I had collected a hammer, an anvil, and a stirrup before encountering a talking stone head that couldn't hear. With a little bit of lateral logic, I ended up using those three items as metaphors to recreate the statue's inner ear. Later on, another stone head had a problem with one of his "vocal chords." Thinking that the most straighforward solution would be to bang the metal rod back into shape with the hammer and anvil, I returned to the other stone head and was pleasantly elated that I could take them out and use them again.

Chapter 3 represents the peak of the puzzles to this point, with the entire chapter playing out in a relatively small space that's just crammed with interwoven puzzles. You receive the overarching "quest" of solving the mystery of a recently-disappeared NPC, which

ends up being comprised of several "sub-quests" along the way. The great thing is that usually to solve one of these puzzles, you need some item or information that you obtain in another puzzle. It's just great to see how they all relate to and affect one another, because it makes the scenario feel that much more believable -- instead of just solving one fleeting puzzle and moving to the next screen, you're working with complex patterns in a dynamic, recurring environment.

The puzzles offer a satisfying level of challenge, with some of them being simpler and more straightforward tasks, while others are a little more abstract or complicated. The smaller puzzles aren't that involved, but they provide a nice rhythm for progressing through the game, reinforcing your actions by making you feel like you're accomplishing important things. Some of the puzzles can be a little more devious, however, and this is where the real fun starts. Several had me completely stumped for a while, unsure what to do and struggling to make any progress, which made the final "eureka moment" deeply rewarding once I figured out the solution.

The puzzles always offer sufficient hints that clue you into the solution if you pay enough attention. For the most part, the puzzles I got stuck on were only because I overlooked something in the environment or wasn't connecting the dots like I should've been. The two times I had to look up a solution were greeted with an immediate facepalm when I realized I missed the obvious answer. Only one puzzle had me justifiably frustrated. I was supposed to be creating a Bloody Mary cocktail drink, and after mixing all of the proper ingredients, the bartender told me "it tastes good, but lacks in presentation." That was basically what he said about the martini I made earlier, which was all I had to do to complete the earlier puzzle, so I wasn't sure what I was missing in this case.

Eventually, out on a limb I realized I had to mix a parasol with the Bloody Mary in my inventory before the bartender would accept it. This had never even occurred to me because the parasol I had picked up was a full-sized, six-foot tall umbrella that would never fit in a cocktail glass. I was a little indignant over this misstep at first, but after some consideration I realized the game had specifically foreshadowed this solution in the first chapter, and that since I'm in a dream world where all kinds of weird things are happening, and since I'm playing an adventure game where it's customary to fit things like parasols and anvils in your pocket, maybe it's not too far out of place for that to have been the solution.

The claymation visuals add a certain quasi-tangible feel to the atmosphere, while the colorful, evocative designs compliment the whimsical dreamscape setting. A game set in a dreamland is not entirely original these days, but the claymation makes it feel more unique and special, and it helps that the construction and animation quality are both very well done. The soundtrack, meanwhile, is downtempo, subdued, and atmospheric -- not the kind of thing that stands out tremendously, but it's enjoyable enough and adds an extra layer to the deep immersion you can experience.

The only prominent complaint I have regards the episodic nature of chapter releases. It can be a little disheartening to play through a chapter in 90 minutes and then be stuck waiting six months (or more) for the next chapter to be released, but hopefully the wait will be worth it. I'm also not very fond of the game only being available online and in a browser, because that

tends to limit how or where you can play the game. Other than that, the constant loading screens between each and every scene might be a bother for people with slower internet speeds. Even with a fast connection, the loads screens disrupt the soundtrack, which detracted from my immersion in at least one critical climax.

All-in-all, The Dream Machine is extremely well-crafted (in this case, literally) and is an absolute treat to play. I enjoyed it so much that I played all three available chapters in a single sitting and can't wait for Chapter 4 to be released. You can play the first chapter for free in your browser, or buy the entire five-chapter bundle for €13.75 on the official site (www.thedreammachine.se), gaining immediate access to Chapters 4 and 5 when they're released.

The Dream Machine: Chapters 1-3   Flash Adventure

Bright moments:
Charming atmosphere and story with very clever puzzles.

Fumbles in the dark:
Only playable online, with frequent loading screens.

Verdict:
A fine work of art that's fun and engaging to play.

★★★★⯨

Developer: Cockroach Inc.
Publisher: Cockroach Inc.

Release Date: December 14, 2010

System Requirements:
• Broswer support for Flash player 8 or later.
• Strongly discourage use of Internet Explorer.

The Walking Dead: Episode 1

Review by Nick Burgener

The Walking Dead has quickly become a media icon among zombie fiction. The comic series is one of very few comics ever to appear on the New York Times Best Sellers list, and the television series has been setting records left and right. Having read the first 48 issues of the comics and watched each episode as it premiered on TV, I have to confess that, even though The Walking Dead really doesn't do anything all that unique within the world of zombies, there's an unmistakable appeal in its presentation. And now, with its rampant success and popularity, Robert Kirkman's creation has once again expanded into a new medium with Telltale's The Walking Dead video game series.

After fumbling the ball quite pathetically with Jurassic Park's deplorable quick-time events, Telltale seem to have gotten their head back on their shoulders and created an enjoyable experience with The Walking Dead. You play as Lee Everett, a convicted murderer being escorted to a life sentence in prison. When the police car strikes a zombie, you find yourself swarmed by a horde of the walking dead, left to escape on foot. Rescued by a young girl, Clementine, you two strike a bond as you meet a considerable cast of other characters attempting to survive in the zombie apocalypse.

There are still some minor missteps here and there, but it strikes a nice balance between interactive cutscenes and more conventional point and click adventure gameplay. The story it tells is fairly typical zombie canon, but the characters are all fairly interesting thanks to some good writing and voice acting. More importantly, your interactions with other characters feel meaningful; you're presented with a lot of dialogue options and have to make tough decisions, and characters remember these things down the road. Your actions shape the nature of the story as it develops.

The gameplay is divided roughly into even parts: interactive cutscenes, and traditional point and click adventure. The interactive cutscenes are used for the more visually intense moments of the game, like when you're trying to barricade a door from a horde of zombies or trying to kick one in the face as you crawl away from it. These sequences ultimately rely on quasi quick-time events, but unlike in Jurassic Park, they don't feel so artificial and contrived. For the most part, you're clicking plausible spaces on the screen to interact with the environment, or using your movement

keys to actually move at a one-to-one ratio.

During your first zombie encounter, for example, the camera assumes a first-person perspective with you lying on your back. To escape from the zombie, you press "s" on the keyboard (or down on your control stick) to move backwards. Then, you use the mouse to pan the camera searching for a weapon. You click on a shotgun shell to pick it up, then you click on a shotgun to load it, then you point the thing at the zombie's face and click to kill it. Even though you're ultimately just clicking to advance the cutscene, and this kind of gameplay therefore isn't as fun as it could be otherwise, your actions feel tangibly connected to the environment and the gameplay, which is admirable, so it's difficult for me to complain.

During the calmer, slower-paced moments, the game shifts into the point and click adventure style, where you move around the screen with your directional keys and click on the environment to interact with characters and objects. Mostly, you talk to other characters and collect items which will be used to solve minor puzzles to advance the plot. These sections are all pretty standard; they get the job done and give you a nice chance to feel a little more in control of your character. Unfortunately, there's not always much satisfaction to be had from solving the "puzzles," because they're mostly just a matter of "find the item, pick it up, use it on environment in the most obvious way to trigger a cutscene."

The most complicated puzzle you encounter is to repair a radio, which just requires you to scrounge the local pharmacy for batteries and then put them in correctly. There's another moment when you need to grab a brick to cause a distraction, and the thing is lying mere inches on the other side of a gate, perfectly within arm's reach, but the game forces you not to use the two most obvious (and safest) options to get it. The one puzzle that's actually rather satisfying is when you're trying to sneak around the parking lot of a motel, looking for ways to kill zombies silently and make your way to your destination. This section requires a fair bit of thought and creative logic to get through, which is more than I can say about the others.

The real draw of the gameplay, however, is the dialogue system. At multiple points in a conversation, you get three or four response options to choose from, each with their own different connotations. Characters react differently based on what you say, and the nature of later events can change depending on what other characters think of you. They remember what you say, so offending someone or not siding with them in an argument can backfire on you later. Most of the time, these dialogue options come with a time limit, which not only helps to keep the conversations flowing timely, but also puts you into some very tense moments when you don't have time to think and just have to act on instinct, and then live with the consequences.

So far in episode one, there haven't been any major consequences for your dialogue actions; the story seems to progress the same general way regardless of what you choose. There are slight variations here and there, but the main thing they seem to affect is character development, both in terms of how you want to role-play Lee Everett, and how other character behave around you. It's fairly easy to see, however, that what you say will likely have a significant impact down the road. At the end of the episode, they did a teaser for "next time on The Walking Dead," where I saw characters specifically reference things I said or did in episode one, so it will be interesting to see what develops in episode two.

There is a distinct issue, however, with some of the dialogue options being a little too ambiguous. In one of the game's heated conflicts, a lot of options are unclear whom a pronoun is supposed to be referring to, or when one dialogue option yields the completely opposite result of what you expected. There's one moment, for example, when one of your buddies is in an argument with a real big guy, and one of the response options is to "reason with him," which you'd pick to help save your buddy, but then you actually lose favor with him. It's really easy to make unintentional choices in these kinds of situations -- and it's not just

because you made a mistake in judgment, it's because the game's prompts were misleading.

At other key moments, you have to make tough decisions about what to do, such as whether to venture out with Clementine before or after dark, or choosing whom to save when two people are being attacked by zombies. These have far more immediate effects on the story, with you seeing completely different scenes and with certain characters being killed off completely, depending on which you choose. As radical as these decisions are, however, the impact of your actions is sometimes undermined when you replay the game and choose different options, only to find that they produce the same result in the end, just in slightly different ways.

The story, as I said earlier, is nothing special in terms of zombie narratives; it's a diverse group of survivors trying to find shelter and continue surviving. Episode one kicks things off with you (as Lee Everett) climbing out of a wrecked police car and escaping from a horde of zombies. You meet up with Clementine in a nearby neighborhood, and then meet some characters who take you to Hershel's farm (yes, the same guy from the comics and television series), before eventually bunkering down in a pharmacy with other survivors.

The characters are the driving force of this narrative. They all fall into some kind of archetypal role (Doug is the geeky technology expert, Larry is the hothead with a temper, Carley is good with a pistol, etc), but I easily found myself making emotional connections with these people. Clementine is a real sweetheart -- I instantly bonded with her -- and all of my subsequent decisions were based on an intrinsic desire to keep her safe. I liked Kenny's attitude and his commitment to his family, so I felt myself wanting to support him as much as possible, and I quickly grew to dislike Larry for being such a jerk. It's not really the story that made me want to continue, it's that I cared about these characters and wanted to see them through to the end.

At the same time, however, there are elements of the story that I found a little difficult to swallow. There's one character, for example, who can't get a radio to work because she doesn't seem to understand the concept of batteries at all. It's so unbelievable to me that it completely ruined the immersion in that moment. Then there's that whole issue with the brick that I can't get with the two easiest and safest options, so I have to break it off with a fire axe, which ordinarily would cause a lot of noise and attract a ton of zombies (which it somehow doesn't). At one point I lied about being Clementine's babysitter, and then when another character asked me how I knew her, I couldn't propagate that lie. These aren't major issues, but they do stand out as blemished holes the writing.

As a Walking Dead fan, there are a couple of nice canonical references to the source material. The story of the game runs in parallel with the comics and TV show, just as news of the outbreak is hitting Atlanta, and you actually spend a good portion of the game with Hershel and Glenn. Glenn is one of the best characters from the show, as far as I'm concerned, so it was a real treat to see him in the game. It was nice to see Hershel before Rick Grimes and company meet up with him, but I wasn't sold on his character in the game. The events that transpire on his farm seem to contradict some of the things said in the comics, as well as other aspects about his farm, and I don't think this new portrayal of his character really syncs up with his attitude by the time we meet him later on.

The pacing of the game is pretty good, sort of providing a roller coaster of ups and downs as you move from tense action sequences to character development sequences. The game never bogged down, unlike the TV show did in its second season, and was enjoyable to play all the way through. I did feel, however, that the first half of episode one may have moved just a little too quickly. You start out in a cop car, then you're escaping the woods, then you're in Clementine's neighborhood, and then you're on Hershel's farm, all in a relatively short amount of time, so I didn't get much of a chance to feel grounded in the game's setting until we'd landed at the pharmacy.

I also ran into a couple of noticeable glitches, one of which was pretty serious. It was in one of those "save person A or person B" decisions; I saved person A and then watched the subsequent cutscenes as they escaped, and then suddenly the game cut to person A's death scene -- the thing that would've played had I saved person B. And then the game said "You have died" and I had to restart from the auto-save. It was so bizarre and random. I should also mention how bizarre it is that, playing on a PC, I click the "controls" menu in the options, and all the game does is show me a picture of an Xbox controller.

All-in-all, Telltale's The Walking Dead is a very good game that has some noticeable flaws. It's not perfect, but the problems were not enough to detract from the experience, and I found myself surprisingly engrossed in its world. It's an easy game to recommend if you're a fan of The Walking Dead or if you're just looking for a fun adventure game.

The Walking Dead: Episode 1   Flash Adventure

Bright moments:
The dialogue is really engaging, and the branching consequences of your actions is nice.

Fumbles in the dark:
Puzzles are a little too straightforward, and some dialogue options are misleading.

Verdict:
Competently designed and enjoyable to play; a treat for fans of The Walking Dead.

Developer: Telltale Games
Publisher: Telltale Games

Release Date: April 24, 2012

System Requirements:
- OS: Windows XP or later
- CPU: 2.0GHz P4, Win7 rec.
- RAM: 3GB
- 512MB, 1GB rec.
- HDD: 2GB