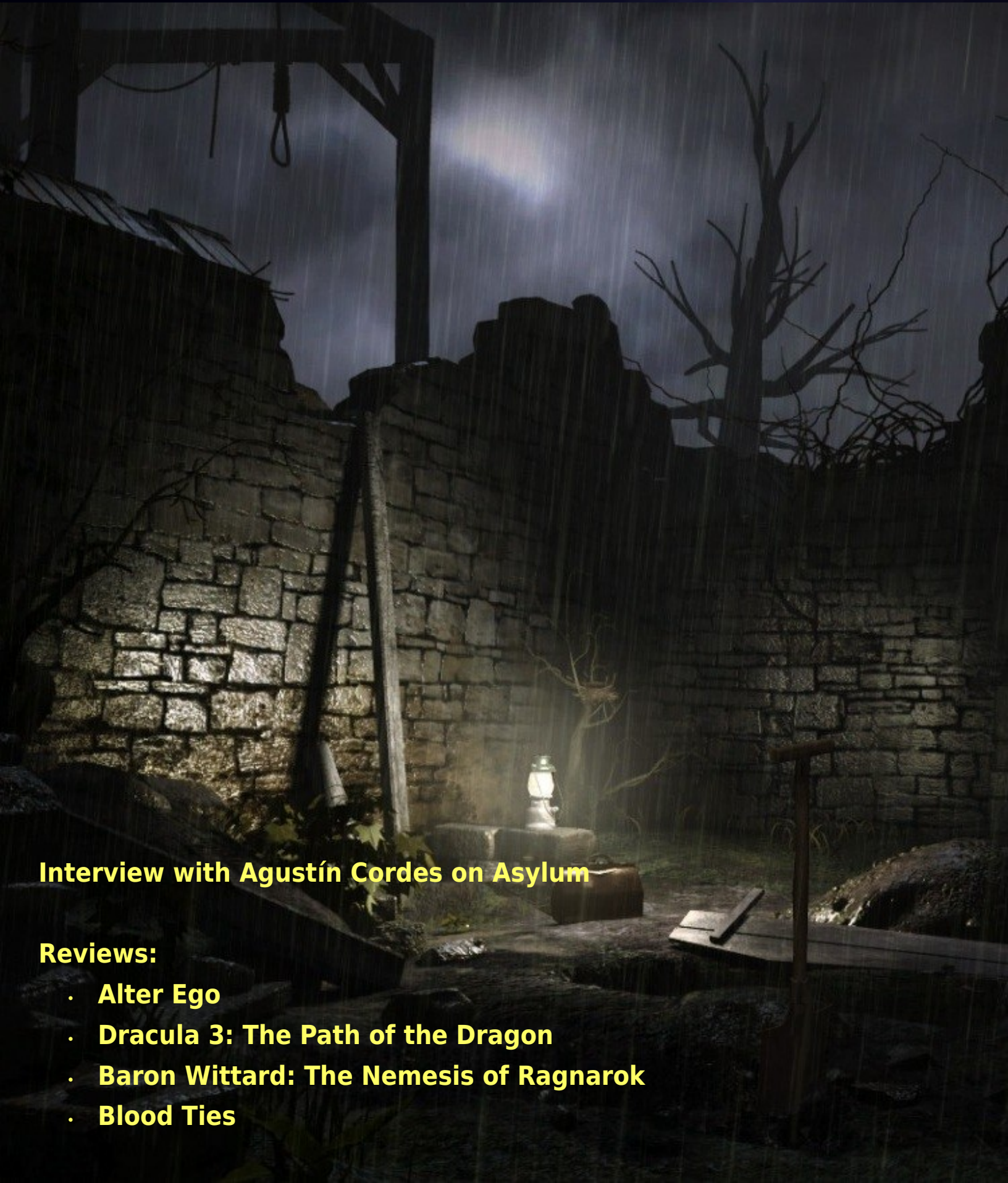


Adventure Lantern



Interview with Agustín Cordes on Asylum

Reviews:

- **Alter Ego**
- **Dracula 3: The Path of the Dragon**
- **Baron Wittard: The Nemesis of Ragnarok**
- **Blood Ties**

Editorial

During the first year of Adventure Lantern, we put together a special Halloween edition of the magazine that covered a variety of horror games. There were several reviews of adventure games that were new at the time, but the focus was on horror. We tried to survey how scary themes were explored in a variety of genres, including commercial adventures, freeware adventures, and survival horror games such as Silent Hill 3. In the end, the October 2006 issue became a 137-page monster. Five years after its release, the PDF remains one of my favorite editions of our magazine. I had a great time writing and editing each article.

In October 2007, Wendy Nellius put together another horror-themed issue of Adventure Lantern. Once again, we covered a diverse set of titles, including the third episode of the Delaware St. John series and Resident Evil 4. My contribution to the PDF was minimal, but thanks to the efforts of Wendy and our remaining team members, the October 2007 edition was a rather enjoyable read.

We intended the Halloween issues to become a tradition. They were supposed to be a staple of our Web site. However, things do not always go according to plan. We published very few Adventure Lantern issues between 2007 and 2011. None of them were released in October. With Wendy and I unable to dedicate adequate amounts of time to the magazine, the Halloween theme never had a chance to become a real tradition. Hopefully, that will begin to change starting this year.

It gives me great pleasure to present another Adventure Lantern issue with a Halloween theme.

What follows is a short PDF that once again focuses on horror as it is explored in various games. The highlight of the issue is our interview with Agustín Cordes from Senscape Interactive. The gifted designer behind Scratches talked to us at length about his upcoming horror adventure named Asylum.

While the games we chose to review are not exceptionally scary, they do feature various horror elements. Dracula 3 is inspired by the iconic vampire created by Bram Stoker. Alter Ego explores macabre themes while delivering a couple of excellent creepy moments. Barom Wittard has players exploring an abandoned city and trying to figure out exactly what happened to its denizens. Finally, Blood Ties is inspired the TV show of the same name, where a vampire teams up with a former police officer to investigate paranormal cases.

I hope you will find something to enjoy in our October 2011 issue. It is not 137 pages long. It does not cover nearly as broad a range of games as we explored in 2006 either. However, this issue does bring back a piece of the Adventure Lantern spirit from five years ago. This is also the first time in a long time that we published issues in five consecutive months. Be sure to stop by next month for a brand new PDF. Besides providing you a fresh batch of reviews, we will announce a couple of changes that will hopefully help our magazine remain active.

Until next time,
Ugur

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

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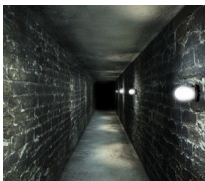
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 The Hellfire Club is responsible for guarding the shards of a talisman that prevents a powerful demon named Astaroth from entering the mortal realm. The members bring the shards together each year to strengthen the spell that is keeping Astaroth at bay. Unfortunately, the talisman shards have disappeared along with the Hellfire Club members. It is up to Vicki and Henry to locate the shards and prevent the demon from entering our world.

Interview with Agustín Cordes on Asylum

conducted by Ugur Sener

In 2006, under the leadership of Agustín Cordes, Nucleosys released a delightfully creepy adventure game called Scratches. The game had assume the role of novelist Michael Arthate and explore a gloomy Victorian mansion. Scratches was commendable for its expertly crafted dark atmosphere and intriguing story. It was the kind of game that could keep players thinking even after the end credits rolled. Five years later, Mr. Cordes is working with a different team on a brand new horror adventure called Asylum. This time, Mr. Cordes invites us to explore the decrepit halls of Hanwell Mental Institute and discover the facility's dark history. As development continues on Asylum, Mr. Cordes kindly agreed to answer some of our questions and give us details about the upcoming adventure game.



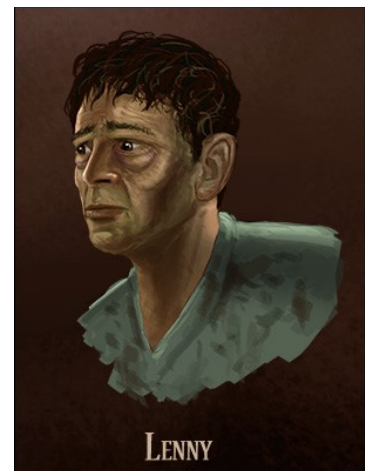
[Adventure Lantern]: You were responsible for designing Scratches, a highly successful horror adventure published five years ago. What can you tell us about the journey from Scratches to Asylum?

[Agustín Cordes]: It was a long journey, to say the least. I always intended to start working straight on another horror project after Scratches, but the comings and goings of life made things different. While still at Nucleosys, we had the opportunity to work on a very important project, also an adventure, although it was only released in Argentina. It was overall an engaging and valuable experience, although one I wouldn't repeat since we had to work for the government. Shortly after that, Nucleosys disbanded and I founded Senscape.

Asylum is looking great and I feel like we're well underway to fulfill our vision. Scratches was a first step and as such it had its share of problems and shortsighted decisions. I'm still very happy about how it turned out, and I would never ever change its design, but I feel like Asylum is going to be a much stronger game in every regard.

[AL]: How do you think the adventure gaming scene changed during this period?

[AC]: Interesting question. Adventures have always been a rather stable genre, which of course isn't necessarily a bad thing. I don't think they have changed for the most part during those years, except in the way we're consuming them: more specifically, the iPhone, iPad and potentially Android have become exciting new platforms to play adventures. I believe this trend will be more pronounced and the iPad may become the platform of excellence for the genre. Also, I've noticed that adventures are becoming more friendly and casual, although this also holds true for the vast majority of the industry.



[AL]: What can you tell us about your new company, Sensescape Interactive? How did the development team come together?

[AC]: As I told you briefly before, after the second project in which Nucleosys took part (an educational adventure, by the way) the company was shut down. The core team of this project was basically split in half: some went to work in another company and others stayed with me to work at Sensescape. We maintain the same values that were part of Nucleosys: to create compelling games that above all things provide a memorable experience that stays with you long after the credits fade, not just mere time killers. We care deeply about the story and the atmosphere of the game.

[AL]: When did you begin working on Asylum? Can you describe some of the early stages of the project?

[AC]: It was roughly three years ago. Even in the early beginnings, Asylum was already a well fleshed out story, so that was a tremendous help. The first thing I did is hand to all to the team a script of the story. It was nearly a short novel in length but I insisted they all read it completely before doing a single thing for the game. The next step was to create schematics of the asylum and build everything after photographs, old reports, actual blueprints and also a visit that we paid to a real mental institute. We're still putting the finishing touches to all the environments of the game, which should give you an idea about its size.



[AL]: You ran an extensive teaser campaign before you officially announced the project. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

[AC]: Yes, of course. The idea was to introduce the game with a bang. I believe that it's of utmost importance how you introduce your concept or story to the audience. You know what they say, the first impression is the one that counts. I always like to give people the impression that they're playing even before the game is actually released. Providing clues, hinting at details of the story, inviting them to connect the dots and reward their willing to observe when they finally get to play the game, I really enjoy all of that. In fact, I feel like I'm playing along with them. If you recall the second playable teaser from Scratches, it showed a portion of the story that was never included in the final game. It was basically someone that was carrying a body to a family crypt. Who or why was never stated at that point. That scene only made sense after you played the entire game, although it wasn't crucial to understand the plot. It's the same approach that we're using for Asylum: of course that the campaign is to promote the game, but also to invite players to become familiarized with the story.

[AL]: What can you tell us about the game's story? Who will players control during the adventure?

[AC]: Except for very few details and brief excerpts, as I told you before, I rather prefer players to know as little as possible about the story before diving into the game... But I also understand they have know what to expect. So this is the quick rundown: you are an ex-patient returning to the asylum many years after it was shut down under strange circumstances. Life was good for you, or rather acceptable after such a harrowing experience, but recently you started having hallucinations or flashbacks of some sort and are no longer at peace. These bursts of past experiences point towards something unspeakable that happened to you during your stay in the asylum, and you will have to understand what that is over the course of one night...

[AL]: I thoroughly enjoyed the creepy and unsettling atmosphere in Scratches. How would you describe the setting and tone of Asylum?

[AC]: It's utter dread and decay. While Asylum is similar in spirit to Scratches, the truth is that it's far more disturbing and dark. Scratches had this sadness that permeated through the story, and overall your surroundings were in good shape. Asylum is a journey through decaying and dirty environments, and you can never know what to expect around that corner. It should be considerably more creepy and unsettling than Scratches.



[AL]: What can you tell us about the Hanwell Mental Institute? What kinds of environments can players expect to explore in the game?

[AC]: It's huge. I think I've mentioned that several times before. We devised Hanwell as an actually functioning asylum, that is, we made sure that all the necessary rooms were present if it was a real asylum. So you have offices, a laundry, kitchen, hospitals, laboratories... and of course, dark and cold cells. In addition, you have more special rooms such as a morgue, library, a museum, workshops, and a few more things underground. During our visit to the real mental institute, we confirmed that all the places that we are using are common.

[AL]: While Scratches was primarily a game of solitary exploration, phone conversations played an important role in the game. Can we expect similar dynamics in Asylum? What kind of a role will character interaction play in the game?

[AC]: Yes, Asylum is primarily a game of solitary exploration. You do have some interactions with characters, for example with Lenny who is rather well known by now, but they are secondary to the gameplay in the same way that phone calls were secondary in Scratches. That said, interaction with the characters is still more important this time as they are crucial to the story. Lenny in particular will be key to solve a few mysteries of the asylum. I've always said that the story in Scratches worked in two levels: the past and the present. In a way, learning and

doing. Michael's actions never had too much impact in the storyline, he was more like an observer. This time your actions have clear consequences during the present in Asylum, but learning the past is still extremely important.

[AL]: One of my favorite things about Scratches was that the puzzles were nicely blended into the environment. Many of them felt like natural extensions of the player's exploration effort. How would you describe the challenges in Asylum?

[AC]: I'm happy to say that we're using the same approach in Asylum. The puzzles in Scratches were generally well received but with reservations. It's true that they were well integrated (to a point that many complained there were NO puzzles whatsoever!) but the player was often at a loss about what to do next. We are making things a bit friendlier this time while retaining the challenge. Puzzles will never feel out of place and be there strictly to move forward the story. One of the earlier problems, for example, is a madman on the loose who is wreaking havoc in the cafeteria. You can get rid of him by pure observation and deduction, just like many of the challenges in Scratches.



[AL]: Can you describe the game's interface? How will players interact with the environment?

[AC]: If you are familiar with Scratches, you can expect just that: a very simple interface that never gets in the way. I share the philosophy that there should be minimal GUI elements in order to maintain a high level of immersion. You know, the more "game-y" stuff you see, the more it detracts you from the experience. So here it basically feels like it's you and the asylum. There is an inventory screen like Scratches and you will be able to use items in a good old fashioned way, but the core gameplay is about exploration and investigation.

[AL]: How do you think Asylum compares to some of the other recent adventures?

[AC]: This one is difficult. I haven't been playing much recent adventures (although I'm trying to fix that) but, as I said before, the trend seems to be casual and accessible. In a way we are addressing those concerns, but don't get me wrong, we want to make Asylum a very lasting experience. It's been a long time since I played a game that really feels mature and serious, and that goes for bestselling console titles as well. Yes, they are more violent and gory, but those aren't the ingredients for true horror but rather pure shock value. Asylum will have its share of shocking moments alright, but for the most part it's a very mature and complex storyline. Now I should make clear that I love lighthearted adventures as much as the next guy, I just feel like there are too many of them at the moment.

[AL]: What were some of the challenges you encountered while working on the project?

[AC]: The situation in Argentina is already difficult by itself: all is becoming more and more expensive and there is a generalized sense of uncertainty. The biggest challenge, however, seems to be time. It just doesn't feel like there's enough time anymore. Weeks fly by and we've come to the realization that we must hurry things up. I probably need a larger team but unfortunately that isn't possible right now.

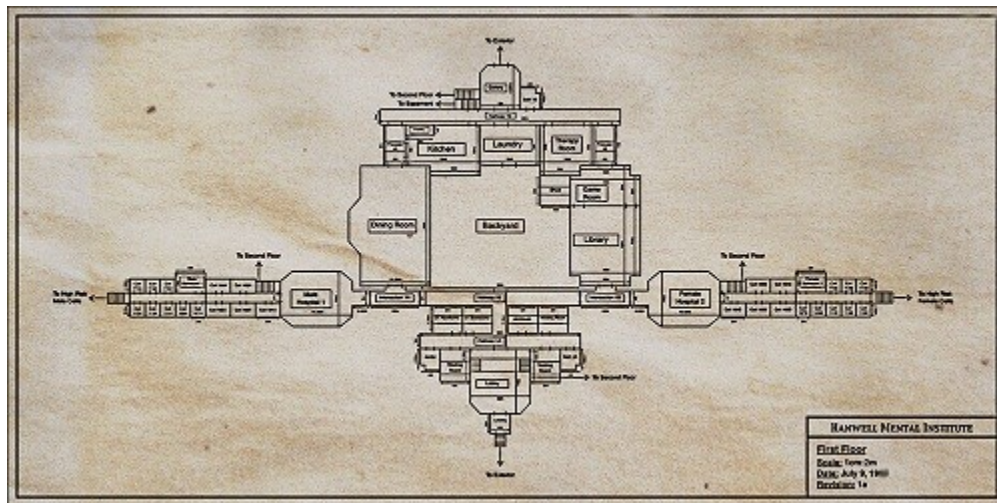


[AL]: How would you describe a typical work day, if there is such a thing for you?

[AC]: I must warn you: there's nothing exciting or glamorous about it. I simply sit down at my computer and either code the engine or write dialogs or story. I probably send about a dozen mails a day, check out websites, make sure everything is up and running at the Sensescape site and my blog... Then I chat with the team, see how things are going, and then it's back to coding/writing. It sounds boring like that but the truth is that each day presents a different challenge. There are way too many things that have to be done in a game, too many areas to take care of, and therefore it's hard to get bored.

[AL]: When can we expect the game to be released?

[AC]: Ah, the golden question. Our initial plans were to release the game by the end of 2011 but I'm afraid we won't make it. We aren't ready to announce a solid date yet, so for now it's sometime in between 2012. We are preparing a few things to release before that to appease the wait, though. Every single minute invested in the game will be worth it, that's for sure, and we're convinced it will provide you with chilling nightmares for months to come.



Adventure Lantern thanks Agustín Cordes for taking the time to answer our questions about Sensescape's upcoming adventure game *Asylum*. Judging from Mr. Cordes's responses, *Asylum* is shaping up to be an impressive horror-adventure offering. The prospect of returning to a rundown mental institution as a former psychiatric patient is certainly intriguing. It should be interesting to explore the old building and see what kinds of sinister puzzles Mr. Cordes and the rest of the Sensescape team have in store for us. *Asylum* could prove to be a worthy successor to *Scratches* and an excellent adventure game in its own right. Be sure to check out the game's [official Web site](#) for more information and watch the game's trailer.

Alter Ego

review by Ugur Sener

Petty thief Timothy Moor sits on the deck waiting for the boat to arrive at Plymouth. He was caught as a stowaway on the ship. Handcuffed, half-naked, and starving, the young man knows he will be handed off to the police once the ship reaches the shore. There is no telling how many days he will spend in jail. Hours pass as Timothy questions the wisdom of traveling to Plymouth. This was supposed to be an easy trip. He was supposed to meet his friend Brian and gather enough money to buy passage to America. As the boat docks, Timothy is not even sure he will ever see Brian again.

A sailor shoves Timothy off the ship. An officer from the port patrol is waiting on the shore. There will be no sympathy for the stowaway. He will be sent straight to jail. Timothy looks at the police officer and back at the water. He cannot bear the thought of going to prison. In a desperate attempt to get away from the police, he dives into the water. As a bullet zips past him, Timothy notices a sewer entrance. He quickly swims into the tunnel, knowing that the port authority is not likely to follow. Now, he has to find a place to hide and get rid of the handcuffs. Perhaps someone in the city will take pity on the thief.



As Timothy struggles to survive, another man arrives at Plymouth. After serving as a police officer out in the country for three years, Briscoll has finally landed a job as a detective in the big city. Excited to begin his new job, Briscoll reports to the police station. The detective is eager to make a good impression on his supervisor, but things don't exactly go according to plan. Within moments of his arrival, Briscoll is robbed. He loses the documents that identify him as a police

officer. He is too embarrassed to seek help from any of the other officers on duty. He will have to find a way to recover his belongings on his own. With some luck, he will hopefully put the shameful incident behind him and start active duty as a detective.

Alter Ego is a point-and-click adventure game that chronicles the story of Timothy Moor and Detective Sergeant Briscoll as the two men become entangled in a murder investigation. Alternating between the two characters, players get a chance to experience 19th century England from two very distinct perspectives. With its excellent gloomy atmosphere, interesting protagonists, and beautifully designed locations, Alter Ego has a great deal of appeal. However, a few issues keep the game from being a complete success.



The game begins as Timothy arrives at Plymouth and escapes from the police. You take control of the thief inside the sewers. Handcuffed and stripped down to his underwear, Timothy's situation looks rather desperate. However, as it turns out, the young thief can be quite persuasive and resourceful. The initial scene at the sewers does a great job of introducing Timothy and generating some excitement about the game. He might be a criminal, but it is hard not to root for the rugged thief that is simply trying to stay alive.

As you begin to explore the city and interact with a few other characters, you will start to find out more about Timothy's personality. From the beginning, it is clear that Timothy is a scoundrel. As revealed through his internal monologues, Timothy can be very manipulative and deceptive. He knows how to turn

just about any situation to his advantage. He is not afraid to steal what he needs either. However, he is far from a one-dimensional crook. Despite his uncaring attitude, he is capable of compassion. At times, he can also be quite courageous.

In sharp contrast to Timothy, Detective Sergeant Briscoll is a highly disciplined police officer. Briscoll takes his job very seriously and has a great sense of duty. He is also a little arrogant. He clearly sees himself as superior to the other police officers. He is loathe to take their advice and expects his orders to be followed to the letter. He is not fond of getting his hands dirty either. Briscoll demands that the lower-ranking officers handle the grunt work. Menial labor is simply beneath the detective. However, as evidenced by the mishap with his documents, the detective's inexperience frequently gets in his way. Perhaps Briscoll is not exactly cut out for the challenges of a complex murder investigation.



It is great to see that the developers took the time to flesh out the personalities of the two main characters. Timothy and Briscoll's attitudes really come through as you interact with other characters and solve puzzles. They expand beyond being just a thief and a policeman. Their distinct personalities make both characters fairly interesting and fun to control.

During the early stages of the game, Timothy and Briscoll follow separate storylines. Timothy tries to stay away from the police and find his friend Brian. In the meantime, Detective Briscoll settles into his new job and starts investigating what is initially thought to be a small disturbance at a local graveyard. As you move from one chapter to the next, newspaper clippings inform you that a local aristocrat named Sir William is dead. Evidently, William was associated with a series of murders, but nothing was proven. As expected, these three seemingly unrelated plot threads gradually converge, forming a fairly intricate

murder mystery.

The game does a nice job of tying Timothy and Briscoll's storylines together. The convergence feels fairly fluid and natural. It definitely helps that Timothy and Briscoll have such distinct perspectives. Alternating between the thief that is merely struggling to survive and the pompous detective that is trying to nail his first major case adds a welcome level of depth to the story.



The characters also undergo some changes during the course of the game. They are not oblivious to the things happening around them. As events escalate, Timothy begins to mature and gains a sense of responsibility. In the meantime, Briscoll becomes increasingly paranoid and somewhat desperate. These changes help make both characters more interesting. You may find yourself pushing forward just to discover what will eventually happen to the duo.

Besides the intriguing protagonists, *Alter Ego* offers an excellent atmosphere. Plymouth feels appropriately dark and gloomy. There is a sense of sadness and desperation in just about every location you explore. It feels as if the entire city feels the weight of the murders that happen throughout the story. While *Alter Ego* is not a horror game, there are also a few creepy moments that nicely augment the atmosphere. It is difficult to describe these without completely spoiling the plot, but the best one was a delightfully spooky segment where the screen goes completely black. It is a nice throwback to one of the major clues you discover earlier in the game and does a good job of creating a sense of danger.

Despite the overall somber tone, the game is not so depressing that it becomes difficult to play. The developers were careful to interject a bit of levity into some of the conversations. There are also amusing

touches such as Detective Brisco looking directly toward the player and shaking his head 'no' when you try to perform certain actions. The game manages to strike a good balance where the attempts at humor feel welcome and do not detract from the overall moody atmosphere.

Along similar lines, the 19th century setting feels very authentic. From architectural details on the buildings to the lamp posts, everything seems to be carefully designed to accurately capture the look and feel of 19th century England. Each location is also richly detailed. From the graveyard to the police station, the backgrounds are beautifully designed and pleasant to explore.

Since *Alter Ego* includes many conversations, it is worth noting that the voice-acting also seems appropriate for the time period. The accents are believable and the voices fit the characters nicely. More importantly, it feels as though the development team took the time to really explain each scene to the voice actors. In general, the lines are delivered with the correct intonations and the conversations feel natural. I did not notice any exaggerated exclamations or listless dialog that failed to deliver any sort of meaning.

The game is played from a third-person perspective and uses a mouse-driven interface. A single left click sends Timothy or Brisco to the desired spot on the screen. The mouse icon changes from the default yellow arrow to a red arrow when you hover over a hotspot. You can interact with the hotspot using the left mouse button or examine it using the right mouse button. The inventory is accessible from the bottom portion of the screen. Here you can combine inventory items or select an item to be used on a hotspot.

Alter Ego also has a few player-friendly features. For starters, pressing the 'F1' key reveals all the hotspots on the current screen. It is also possible to press the 'E' key to see all the available exits. Since the game does have a few relatively small hotspots, these features can help avoid tiresome pixel-hunting. In addition, *Alter Ego* has a feature that helps players focus on the important hotspots. On each screen, there are some items that are interesting to examine, but not required for solving any of the game's puzzles. When you click on such objects once with the left mouse button and once with the right mouse button, they cease to be hotspots. Thus, if you are

stuck, you do not have to waste time trying to use inventory items on objects that are not relevant to the current puzzle. This feature can be especially helpful to players that are new to adventure gaming. It nearly eliminates any frustration you might get from trying to use every single inventory item on every single hotspot.

In fact, the overall design of *Alter Ego* seems to be geared toward novice adventurers. In most sections of the game, you are restricted to a small number of screens. While you can use a map to travel from one part of the city to another, you only have access to two or three locations at any given point. All of these locations have a relatively small number of hotspots to investigate and inventory items to gather. Even if you get stuck for a few minutes, being confined to a small number of locations means that there is a very limited number of inventory item and hotspot combinations you can try. One of these combinations invariably work, allowing you to make progress without much difficulty.



The puzzles in *Alter Ego* are inventory-based. In many cases, you do not even need to combine inventory items. You just have to use the right item on the right hotspot. In general, the puzzles are straightforward and do not require tremendous leaps of logic or out-of-the-box thinking. In fact, since you are restricted to a small area at any given point, the challenges may seem especially easy. Taking the player-friendly features such as the 'F1' key into account, even those new to the adventure genre should be able to overcome the puzzles fairly easily. Unfortunately, these same features that make the game so accessible to newcomers may also make it frustrating for experienced gamers. Seasoned adventurers may just breeze through the game and feel dissatisfied with the difficulty level.

However, the easiness of the puzzles is a minor

problem compared to the plot development and pacing issues encountered during the game's final chapter. Alter Ego does a very good job of introducing the main characters and developing the story during the early portions of the game. The suspense level nicely increases as Timothy and Brisco's stories begin to merge. I was genuinely excited to see where the story was going as I started what turned out to be the final act of the game. Unfortunately, things fell apart during the last half hour of the adventure. The game tried to do too many things too fast, making the conclusion of the adventure feel abrupt and awkward.



The problem begins with the two characters that get introduced during the last chapter. These individuals play a major role in the conclusion, but they are introduced so late in the game that it is hard to care about them. They feel shoehorned into the story just to deliver the obligatory plot twist you expect from a murder mystery. In addition, a couple of major events get communicated via conversations. You do not get to witness exactly what happens, which somewhat hurts the atmosphere.

The final offender is the manner in which the adventure is concluded. I do not really have a problem with the actual events that transpire during the ending movie. Not every story needs a perfect happy ending. The darker tones actually fit the rest of the game very well. However, the conclusion is so abrupt that it feels anticlimactic and dissatisfying. It is not a problem to leave a couple of things open for a potential sequel, but cramming major developments into an extremely brief video and unceremoniously sending players back to the main menu is hardly acceptable. It is a shame if financial reasons kept the developers from delivering the conclusion that was initially intended. Timothy and Brisco's adventure deserved a more complete ending. Here's hoping we will get a sequel to tie up the loose ends.

Taken as a whole, Alter Ego is an enjoyable game with a number of very positive elements. Both Timothy and Brisco make for great characters to control. Their individual storylines and the game's overall plot are interesting and encourage players to keep pushing toward the end. The 19th century setting is realized beautifully and the game has a very fitting gloomy atmosphere. However, a couple of issues hurt the overall experience. While the game is extremely beginner-friendly, the simple puzzles may be frustrating for veteran adventurers. More importantly, the final chapter of the game feels rushed, providing a dissatisfying conclusion to an otherwise entertaining adventure. Fortunately, at least in my opinion, the positive aspects of Alter Ego manage to outweigh the negatives. If you are in the mood for a macabre story and like the idea of controlling two characters with unique perspectives, do not miss Alter Ego. It may not be an amazing game, but it is certainly entertaining.

Alter Ego

PC Adventure



Bright moments:

Compelling storyline and protagonists. Great moody atmosphere and 19th century setting.

Fumbles in the dark:

Simple puzzles and disappointing ending.

Verdict:

An imperfect, but still highly enjoyable adventure.



Developer: Future Games

Publisher: Iceberg Interactive
Viva Media

Release Date: August 2010

System Requirements:

- Windows® 7/Vista/XP
- 1.5 GHz processor
- 512 MB RAM
- 64 MB DirectX® 9.0 Compatible Video Card
- 4 GB Disk Space

Dracula 3: The Path of the Dragon

review by Jonathon Wisnoski

You are Father Arno Moriani and it is September during the year of 1920. You have been sent by the Vatican to investigate a recently deceased potential candidate for sainthood, Martha Calugarul, who tirelessly administered to the wounded during the Great War. She resided in a small town, still recovering from the devastation of WWI, in Transylvania. And just outside of this town is Vlad The Impaler's (Dracula's) Castle. The game starts with you arriving in this town, recently having received your instructions.



The investigation takes an unexpected (or I guess expected given the locale) turn when the body of the saint is found to have the "Mark of Dracula" on it. But the church has already decided that vampires do not exist and are just a peasant superstition. What follows is Father Arno's investigation into strange blood disorders, vampire myths, and the strange happening surrounding the death of the potential saint, as he struggles with his belief that vampires do not exist.

Dracula 3: The Path of the Dragon is the the third title in the series also comprised of Dracula Resurrection and Dracula 2: The Last Sanctuary. It does not appear to have any connection to its predecessors in terms of the story. It is not even produced by the same developers. But like its predecessors it is a first person, 3D, free looking, node-based graphical adventure.

Throughout the game the theme of vampires rises in intensity, slowly building from an eery atmosphere to imminent threats, from myths to real dangers. And the game plays this wonderfully. The plot, gameplay, puzzles, locale, and music all perfectly flow with the atmosphere. Particularly, I think the puzzles are a perfect example of this. They start off rather mundane, like you would expect from a Kheops title, but soon expand into the mystical and even violent.

These puzzles are for the most part quite interesting and set very well within the world. In particular I found a few of the puzzles extremely memorable, and while they might not have been the most entertaining on a pure gameplay level they fit and exemplified the atmosphere and plot so well that it did not matter.

However, it is often the polish and little details that make or break a game, and in Dracula 3 there is no deficiency of either of these. True to Kheopian form, the graphics are great and realistic and the inventory and note keeping system is exceptional, with a very detailed objective system among other things.



But over and above all of this, they have even included a hint system that is expertly worked into the setting of the game. This system utilized a fully readable and unabridged version of the bible included in the game and directs you to an actual passage that will give you a hint about your current predicament. Considering that you play as a priest, I cannot think of

a better way this could have been pulled off. But they did not stop there, the original novel Dracula written by Bram Stoker is also available, after you acquire it, and fully readable if you so desire.

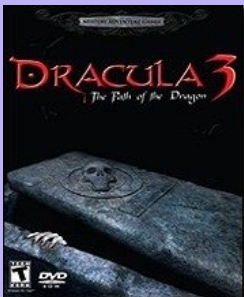
The Path of the Dragon is a fantastic atmospheric adventure, and quite possibly has one the of best and

most unique horror plots I have ever encountered. It is simply not like anything I have experienced before and I particularly liked the scientific and rational way Father Arno goes about his investigation. And while the puzzles can get rather boring in some cases, they fit so well into the plot and atmosphere that I have trouble holding this against them.



Dracula 3: The Path of the Dragon

PC Adventure



Bright moments:

The unique and interesting plot.

Fumbles in the dark:

Some of the puzzles could have been more interesting and less tedious.

Verdict:

A fantastic vampiric experience.



Developer: Kheops Studio

Publisher: Microïds
Encore Games

Release Date: August 2008

System Requirements:

- OS: Windows 2000 or newer
- CPU: 800 Mhz
- RAM: 128 MB
- Video: 64 MB, DirectX 9.0c
- Hard Drive: 3.3 GB

Baron Wittard: Nemesis of Ragnarok

review by Jonathon Wisnoski

Baron Wittard: Nemesis of Ragnarok is a puzzle adventure created by the indie developers over at Wax Lyrical and published by Iceberg Interactive. This is the very first completed project by Wax Lyrical, which has one of the better names for any development company I have ever seen.

Baron Wittard is a hard game to review because it has a lot of bad or at least controversial features, but it also has a lot of great features with new and unique gameplay. I would liken it to some of the legendary text adventures, such as Zork, in many ways. If you do not use any online hints or walkthroughs, you could easily take months to finish the game and end up with notepads full of notes and diagrams. And similarly, at times the puzzles can be ridiculously complicated and ambiguous.



It simply does not have the same polish to the UI, in the form of help for the player, as one expects in this day and age. Who writes things down outside of games anymore, other than maybe something like a few character passwords you read on a wall somewhere in the game world? But in Baron Wittard, even single page documents cannot be picked up as inventory items, scanned, or otherwise remembered by the game. Additionally, some puzzles seem to have no hints at all to explain what you are supposed to do with them. Pixel hunting is quite prolific, but at

least moderately unique. More often than not, puzzles are easy to identify and see and there are no (technically very little) inventory items to pick up. But there is a single puzzle in the game that requires dozens of "clues" to be found all over the game world and these are often in places you would not search and really do not even look all that unique and distinctive to begin with.

To save a significant amount of effort and time, I routinely consulted a walkthrough in a few circumstances. First off, I did not want to spend time copying down all the hints that are spread out around the game world, so when I spotted a puzzle that I remembered encountering a hint for (but not the specific details of the hint) I would just read the intro to the puzzle in a walkthrough which would contain all the necessary details to attempt the solution. Additionally, some puzzles simply require a almost savant level of mathematical intuition, or simply a mind boggling amount of math or trial and error, so I did not feel bad about reading the beginning of the solution for any puzzle where I was making absolutely no progress at.



But if you absolutely must not use a walkthrough or really want to reduce their use, then carefully inspect every single node and take note of all special symbols and obvious puzzle hints that you find. This

should provide you all the hints you can get to help solve all the puzzles, but you will still be stuck with a few ambiguous ones. The overall goal for all of these puzzles seems to be as obvious as possible. For example, you may need to move the special piece to the direct opposite side or through all puzzle nodes once. But even assuming you can understand how every puzzle works, you still have to solve those puzzles and that can be a problem in its own right.

The puzzles that should cause you the most problems are the ones that simply have thousands and thousands of possible ways to go about trying to complete them. There are also most likely have many many ways to successfully complete them. For these, I suggest looking for a repeatable pattern that you can do over and over again. A random looking solution will almost certainly not work.



The puzzles of Baron Wittard are the focal point of the entire game, and it is clear that a lot of time and effort has been put into them. There are a lot of puzzles in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. One nice feature of the game's puzzles is the non-linearity of them, in-so-much as after you get past the beginning tutorial section, you are thrown into the entire rest of the game and you can go pretty much anywhere. Only a few small areas require a local "puzzle" to be solved to progress into them.

In Baron Wittard, you for the most part do not use any items, but there are a few exceptions to this. You do start the game with a camcorder which is used once in one of the most ambiguous puzzles in the entire game. You also eventually pick up a usable map (usable as in it will instantly transport you to the selected location). And, central to the games plot, you do collect a series of rune stones and a single amulet,

but it is quite easy to figure out when and where these should be used. And then, you will also encounter a moderate amount of pixel hunting, most of it centered around a single logic puzzle.

But enough about these auxiliary puzzles, the logic puzzles are what should interest you. The real difference here from normal logic puzzles is that Baron Wittard contains puzzles that require huge amounts of steps to complete. I can think of one example that requires over 60, and a lot of them are complicated to such an extent that I do not see many people wanting to spend the time required to work them out by hand.

The story of Baron Wittard: Nemesis of Ragnarok is undoubtedly put forth as a horror tale and takes place completely in The Utopia, which while under-construction was envisioned as a city under a single roof; containing a thousand apartments, a shopping mall, and hundreds of offices. But now it is a run-down, abandoned building. The building is silent, people have gone missing, and electromagnetic disturbances are increasing. You must travel into the heart of Baron Wittard's Utopia to uncover its mysteries and explore its gloomy halls.



Overall, I really was not drawn into this plot or the location. Of course, you do not get to explore thousands of rooms, but something could have been done to hint at these locations and make the world seem bigger than the navigable sections. And while the game seemed to have all the required horror elements, but I cannot say that I ever felt anything other than boredom, even when it was obvious that the scene was supposed to be very suspenseful.

Also, the presentation could have been better. The graphic style seems realistic, but something is

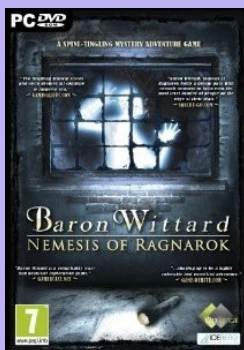
missing. It's good, but not great. The animation is very limited, and in fact only occurs in a small percentage of the cutscenes. And in an obvious attempt to replace the animation, (a failed attempt I might add) they replace scenes of opening doors and walking down corridors with just the sound of performing these actions. Unfortunately, the sound effects did not seem all that accurate to me. They were annoyingly long and repetitive. And really, just a bad idea no matter how well executed it was as far as I am concerned.

Viewed as a whole, I think the game is both great and horrible. If I could give it both a 4.5/5 and 1.5/5, I would. It is an acquired taste, some people will be used to the puzzle-heavy, extremely challenging, antics of Baron Wittard and enjoy the game a lot. Others will simply be unable to play and enjoy it. Personally, I found a lot of stuff wrong with it but still liked the game a lot overall.



Baron Wittard: The Nemesis of Ragnarok

PC Adventure



Bright moments:

The huge amount of interesting and never before seen puzzles.

Fumbles in the dark:

The complete lack of any kind of viewed document history making you either take a ludicrous number of screenshots or notes.

Verdict:

A puzzle adventure featuring extremely unique, varied, and challenging logic puzzles.



Developer:

Wax Lyrical

Publisher:

Iceberg Interactive

Release Date:

February 2011

System Requirements:

- OS: Windows 2000 or newer
- CPU: 1 GHz
- RAM: 1 GB
- Video: 128 MB with Shader Model 2.0, DirectX 9.0c
- Hard Drive: 1.5 GB

Blood Ties

review by Ugur Sener

Blood Books is a series of novels written by Tanya Huff. The books chronicle the adventures of private investigator Vicki Nelson and her partner Henry Fitzroy. Vicki is a former police officer who quits the force when she is diagnosed with a degenerative eye disease. Henry is a 450 year-old vampire and the son of Henry VIII. Vicki and Henry work together to investigate paranormal cases. In 2007, Ms. Huff's novels were adapted for a short-lived TV series called Blood Ties. The show aired 22 episodes on Lifetime between March and December 2007. In 2008, the TV series served as the inspiration for a hidden object game with the same title. Unfortunately, the game fails to make good use of the source material, delivering a very shallow and forgettable experience.



In the game, Vicki and Henry are investigating the disappearance of fourteen individuals who are members of an ancient organization called the Hellfire Club. The organization is responsible for guarding the shards of a talisman that prevents a powerful demon named Astaroth from entering the mortal realm. The members bring the shards together each year to strengthen the spell that is keeping Astaroth at bay. Unfortunately, the talisman shards have disappeared along with the Hellfire Club members. It is up to Vicki and Henry to locate the shards and prevent the demon from entering our world.

Blood Ties consists of fourteen separate cases where you try to find the pieces of the talisman. At the

beginning of each case, you are presented with some information about a Hellfire Club member. Then, you visit locations that are supposed to contain clues that will lead you to a shard. In theory, this is a great setup for a casual adventure. Fourteen unique cases can provide a good framework for visiting familiar locations from the show, interacting with the two detectives, and piecing together clues in a logical manner. Sadly, the actual experience boils down to a tedious and disjointed series of object hunts that has little to do with the underlying storyline.

The game features fifteen different locations, including Vicki's office, Henry's apartment, a pharmacy, a museum, and a castle. During each case, you are asked to visit two or more of these places. At each location, you are asked to find fifteen items. A list on the left side of the screen tells you the items you need to locate. In general, the development team has done a good job of hiding the items in plain sight. Your task is to examine the screen and find the items in your list. Once you locate fifteen objects at each location associated with the current case, you are automatically awarded a piece of the talisman. However, the game makes no effort to explain how the 'clues' you found helped locate the artifact. Players are not asked to solve puzzles or piece together the evidence. There isn't even a cutscene showing Vicki and Henry finding the talisman fragment. As a result, there is a significant disconnect between player actions and the storyline.

The very nature of the items you are supposed to find further disrupts the atmosphere. The objects on your list range from exotic daggers and masks to mundane items like a pair of scissors or a balloon. Many of these items do not fit into mystical tone the storyline tries to create. Given the absence of puzzles where some of the objects could be used, it becomes hard to envision exactly how a toy car, a butterfly, or the picture of a giraffe help locate an ancient artifact.

The repetitive nature of the cases also hurts the overall experience. As you proceed through the cases, you visit each of the fifteen locations multiple times. On each visit, you are asked to find a somewhat different set of objects. However, over the

course of fourteen cases, many items appear on your list multiple times. After a while, it becomes tiring to find the exact same bowls, vases, or dice over and over again. Even the cleverly hidden items that were initially fun to locate become a chore to find.

Blood Ties suffers from some presentation issues as well. At certain locations, the background looks somewhat pixelated. In addition, some of the items look very artificially laid over the background, failing to create the illusion of a 3D image. The music is fitting for the tone of the game, but it can get a little repetitive as you work through the fourteen cases.



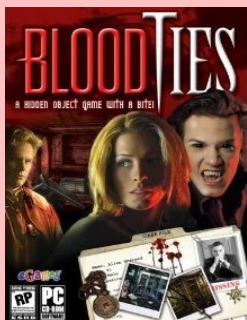
The game also features a timer that can be a source of irritation. As you start each case, a clock is

displayed on the left side of the screen. The timer counts down as you examine each location and try to find the requested items. If you rapidly click on the left mouse button, you get a penalty and additional time gets deducted from the clock. If the timer reaches zero before you find all the required items, you have to retry the case. Fortunately, the time limit is fairly generous and most players can expect to complete the cases without trouble. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether or not the timer adds any value to the game.

There is no inherent problem with a casual adventure that focuses on object hunts. Every game does not need a detailed plot or intricate puzzles. It is not so much the focus on item finding, but the overall execution that ultimately hurts Blood Ties. Without a clear connection between the locations you visit and the talisman pieces, the game becomes little more than a tedious quest to find random objects. It is simply not entertaining to stare at the same fifteen screens and locate the same items multiple times. A little effort to establish some logical link between the 'clues' and the talisman pieces would have gone a long way to improve the experience. Blood Ties does not make good use of the source material either. Adding some scenes from the show or the voices of the cast members could have substantially enhanced the game's atmosphere. As it stands, Blood Ties is highly disappointing and a very difficult game to recommend. Only consider purchasing if you can find a copy at a deep discount.

Blood Ties

PC Casual Adventure



Bright moments:

Some of the items are cleverly hidden. The soundtrack is fitting for the game's tone.

Fumbles in the dark:

Repetitive puzzles. No connection between the object hunts and the game's story.

Verdict:

A disappointing and tedious game that makes poor use of the source material.



Developer: eGames

Publisher: Lifetime Entertainment Services

Release Date: January 2008

System Requirements:

- Windows Vista/XP/2000
- 1 GHz Pentium 3 or equivalent
- 512 MB RAM
- DirectX 8.0