

# *The Computer Gamers' Gazette*

Issue #26

Summer 1998



## *Wing Commander III*

Also In This Issue:

Magic Words and Distant Lands

*StarCraft*

*The 11th Hour*

Game Reviews on the World Wide Web

Letters, We Get Letters

## Magic Words and Distant Lands

Bruce Smith

When I was a freshman in college back in 1980, my friend Roger had a Radio Shack TRS-80 (or "Trash 80," as it became known) in his dorm room. It had 32k of memory and a tape drive and we thought it was a big deal. Roger had a game called *Haunted House* which required 4k of memory. It was a text adventure where you typed in two-word verb-noun commands like "get knife" and "go door" to accomplish things. At the start of the game you found a magic word and when you said it, you were teleported into the haunted house. In one of the first rooms you entered there was a knife hovering in mid-air, and a note lay on the ground below it. If you took the note before you took the knife, the game would inform you that the knife had swooped down and killed you. Every spare moment I had I would go over to Roger's and try and solve the puzzles of *Haunted House*. When I solved that there was another game called *Pyramid 2000* which awaited me. I knew it would be tough because it used 16K of memory.

What I didn't know at the time was that *Pyramid 2000* was a remake of a game called *Colossal Cave* by Don Woods and Bill Crowther. *Colossal Cave* was the first text adventure game and set the stage for all that followed, including the original Zork series by Infocom, perhaps the most famous series of adventure games. The Zork series were considered impressive because they not only were well-told stories with rich descriptions of rooms and clever responses to your typed input, but they also had an excellent parser allowing the player to type in sentences instead of two-word commands. Infocom followed up the Zork series with mystery games, more fantasy adventures, science fiction tales, and various other works that were as much literature as they were games. The difference being, of course, that you were interacting with the world you were reading about and exploring it, rather than being led through it page by page.

While the original Zork series was in progress, a man by the name of Scott Adams was creating his own series of adventure games, the first of which was appropriately titled *Adventureland*. Scott Adams released 11 other games in the same format; simple text adventures requiring the standard two-word commands. He marketed the games well and for a short while they held a significant place in the fledgling computer game industry.

A lady by the name of Roberta Williams had played the Scott Adams adventures and longed for more. So she and her husband put together a game that had the missing element - graphics. The first graphics were crude simple line drawings such as those seen in Roberta's initial game, *Mystery House*. I remember spending hours playing it and jeopardizing my relationship with a college

girlfriend just because I wouldn't take any time to do anything else but solve that game. The puzzle that really had me stuck was one in which I needed to fill a bucket of water at a kitchen sink. It required one of those two word commands, and I tried "Turn Faucet," "Turn Water," "Fill Bucket," "Get Water," and even "Start Sink." Finally someone who had beaten the game told me that the command I needed was "Water On." It kind of made sense, but it certainly wasn't the typical verb-noun combination that the game usually asked for. This proved to be the problem with many text adventures; the parsers just weren't advanced enough and caused a lot of frustration for gamers. The sink puzzle is also, I might add, typical of Sierra, because they always seem to have at least one or two puzzles in each game that either don't make sense, are too difficult, or are simply unfair. It is as if Sierra is trying to insure the sale of their hint books as well. Regardless, the quality of the graphics in Sierra games, as well as in the computer market in general, improved. Sierra then made a major change in the format of their games. With the *King's Quest* series they incorporated animated characters into their games; characters you'd move around the scenes with a joystick or the keyboard just like a character in any old arcade game. To me, this was a mistake. It removed the player from the game by a step and took away the feeling of first person involvement that I always enjoyed in adventure games. Apparently, not everybody agreed with me on this, because the *King's Quest* games went on to be one of the greatest selling adventure series.

Graphics kept getting better and better. Infocom, for years, stubbornly refused to incorporate them into their games. They stated that the pictures created in the minds of the adventurers by text could never be surpassed by computer graphics. Eventually they gave in, but it was too late, as other companies had already taken the initiative and left Infocom in the dust. Infocom as a company was sold to Activision, but none of the original creators of the company remained. Some, such as Steve Meretzky and Bob Bates, left to form Legend Software, which is my favorite adventure game company. Legend's games not only have great visuals but also possess the two characteristics that Sierra Games often lacked: first person perspective and fair puzzles.

For awhile, the adventure game market was glutted, because there was a period of time when all it took was one or two persons to create a complete game, graphics and all. LucasArts released many games with animated characters similar to Sierra's *King's Quest*, *Space Quest*, and *Leisure Suit Larry* Series. Role-playing games took great leaps and with games such as SSI's *Eye of the Beholder*. New standards were constantly being set. Computer games were becoming increasingly advanced. They required more speed and more memory, and programming techniques grew in sophistication. Surprisingly, it wasn't business applications like databases and word processors that pushed the envelope, influencing and taking advantage of the power of computer systems, it was games. Soon games became huge, involved projects requiring teams of people, and the studio approach

was born. Adventure games were no longer interactive novels, they were interactive movies.

And then came *Myst*. Tired of hearing about it yet? Possibly. Among the things that made it impressive were its 3D rendered graphics. It was as if the creators had not only gone to a distant world and rather than describe what was there, they brought back slides. The atmosphere created by the game just sucked you in. You find a book, place your hand on it and suddenly you're on a mysterious island and you have to figure out what's going on -- couldn't be more intriguing.

Here's the parallel I found interesting in *Myst*. The "Ages" of *Myst* are worlds that men who had knowledge of a secret language create. They carefully think out and plan what the world is going to be like and then through their magical language they create the world, writing all the details of it in a book. Once it's complete, you can travel to that world simply by touching the book. It's a perfect parallel for what the adventure gamemakers do; They use the arcane language of something like C++, create a world, and simply by turning on your computer you can be teleported there to explore it at your will. Hmm.

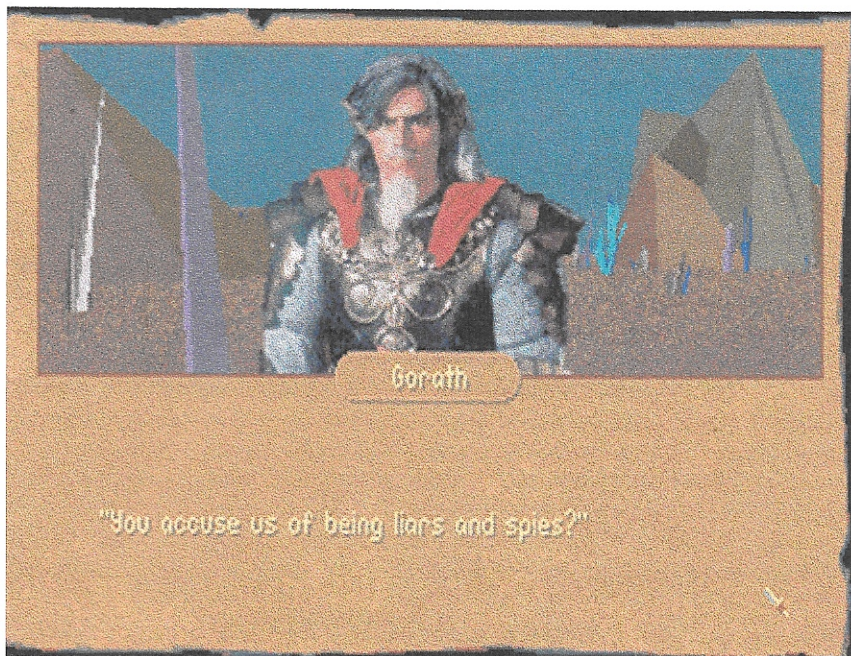
For all the hoopla though, *Myst* is still an adventure game with puzzles to solve in the tradition of the first *Colossal Cave*. It's 20 years later and there are many people playing *Myst*, and its sequel *Riven*, who don't know the heritage of these games and how it all started with text adventures that ran on mainframes only accessible to those who worked in government agencies and colleges. A while back, I read a review where the fully rendered *Zork Nemesis* was compared to *Myst*. It made me laugh. *Myst* came from *Zork*, not the other way around.

Still, this is only a waystation. The computers are getting faster, the technology smarter. The adventure game will continue advancing until the player is able to wander through vast worlds with the freedom of movement one finds in *Quake*, the graphic quality of a motion picture, and the clever puzzles of a *Legend* game, all in a virtual reality setting. The gamer won't be satisfied until he can make like Captain Picard and wander his own holodeck.

# The Computer Gamers' Gazette

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## Special Feature: Role-Playing Games

*Betrayal at Krondor (pictured above)*

*Might and Magic -- World of Xeen*

*Betrayal in Antara*

Also in This Issue:

*Darkseed*

An Introduction to 3-D

## Computer Gaming Classics

### *Might and Magic -- World of Xeen*

Bruce Smith

Want to see how good a game is? Go back and play it five years after it came out. If you get drawn into it, despite the fact that the graphics and technology aren't quite up to today's standards - it's a good game. Such is *Might & Magic - World of Xeen*.

*World of Xeen* is actually 2 games that can be played separately or played or played together as a whole: *Might & Magic IV - Clouds of Xeen* and *Might & Magic V - Darkside of Xeen*. Although you can play both *Clouds* and *Darkside* separately, I recommend that you play them together. Each game becomes easier if you can use the experience and skills you gained in the other. By doing this, you get to experience larger areas of each game more quickly without first having to build up levels. The people at New World spent a lot of time keeping game play balanced, but of the two lands, *Darkside* is decidedly more difficult.

You can teleport freely from *Clouds* to *Darkside* via small pyramids that are scattered around the countryside and located in various cities. You will, no doubt, discover other ways to do this on your own. Because they can be played as individual games, both *Clouds* and *Darkside* have their own ending sequences when you defeat the main bad guys that rule these lands. At the end of *Darkside* you get to see the final confrontation between Corak and Gheltem, thereby finishing the storyline that was begun back in *Might & Magic I*. And ultimately when you complete the quests that require you to go back and forth between the two lands and finish the *World of Xeen*, there is a third ending. New World Computing spent some time putting together their ending sequences so they're never anti-climatic like some other role-playing games (i.e. *Stonekeep* or the *Eye of the Beholder* series).

Although both *Clouds* and *Darkside* save your game after their ending sequences, so that you can go on and play the other half of the game and then complete the *World* quests, you still may want to save your games before the ending sequences. One reason for this is that your games get saved with all the damage your party took from their final battles. Another reason is that you may want to have the game saved at a point where you can go back and view the ending sequence several times. After all, it took you a lot of work to get there. OR, you may want to use the following cheat codes to view the endings anytime you feel like it. If

you have no willpower, skip the next couple sentences and go on to the next paragraph. What you can do if you want to view the final sequences of the game at any time is go up to one of the magic mirrors and when it asks you where you want to go type "showtime" to see the *Clouds* ending, type "showdown" to see the *Darkside* ending or type "genesis" to see the *World* ending. Save your game before you do it though, because at the finish of the ending sequence, you are returned to the opening menu.

Some people may resort to the cheat codes because they don't have enough time in their lives to finish the *World of Xeen*. The game is massive and one of the largest role-playing games there ever was. Set aside a couple work weeks at least to finish it. Game play is speeded up by a great auto-mapping feature and auto-note features that keep track of the quests you have yet to complete as well as the some of the more important locations in the game. Still, there is an incredible amount to keep track of and I found that I had to keep my own set of notes as well. The creators of *Ultima Underworld* had a great idea when they came up with an auto-map feature that allowed you to insert your own notes directly onto the maps. That feature would have helped in *World of Xeen*.

In the tradition of the previous *Might & Magics*, movement in the game is square-by-square, and combat is turn-based. I prefer this because it makes the game more strategy-oriented than reflex-oriented, but it is frowned on by many who like the more realistic feel of 3D movement and real-time combat used in most shoot-em-up games today. (*Might & Magic VI* gives you an either/or option, which is perfect).

*World of Xeen* is filled with combat, combat, and more combat. There's a lot of puzzles and exploration as well, but you have to fight your way to get to them. The game gives you an option of Adventurer mode versus Warrior mode. Warrior mode, of course, involves more combat, but I played in Adventurer mode and found enough combat to keep just about any player satisfied.

One of the most time consuming elements of *World of Xeen*, and what I found to be the only frustrating part of the game, was keeping track of your inventory. The inventory system is greatly advanced over the previous games in the series, but there just isn't enough room in your inventory to hold all the stuff you find. I often found myself halfway through a dungeon so overloaded that I was forced to give up newer items I had found. This meant another trip to town to sell weapons, armor and items, and then the arduous task of sorting through the weapons all my characters had, which weapons were the best, who could use what, and then distributing them appropriately. I know it's a basic element of role-playing games to make certain types of characters only able to use certain types of weapons, but it's a pain. You feel like your characters are standing in the street trading goods, saying - "Hey you want this sword?" "No, I don't have room in my pack for it."

"How about this poison dagger then?" "Sorry, don't know how to use that!" - when they could be out adventuring.

As far as character types go, I recommend using the party that you begin the game with. They're a good lot, and they'll get you through the game just fine. I became rather fond of them and started talking to them while I played the game. At which point, my wife divorced me. (Just kidding). Anyway, if you really want to, you can go to an inn and create your own characters, but having a party with the same character classes as the default party is still a good idea. One cleric, one sorcerer and one robber are almost a must for each party. A cleric because the healing spells a cleric can cast are invaluable, as are the "Create Food" spell if you're going to be out of town for a long time and the "Walk on Water" spell which you'll need to get to some locations. Sorcerer spells that are extremely useful include "Lightning Bolt, Lloyd's Beacon, Sleep, Teleport and Wizard Eye." Check your manual; these spells will save you a lot of trouble. Eventually you'll get tired of having the things you open blow up on you or poison you or electrocute you or cause you some other form of harm. Having a robber will help you avoid some, although not all of this sort of trouble.

A couple more tips: Buy bows for your characters as early as you can in the game and use them. You can kill a lot of monsters from a distance using these weapons and still get experience points for doing it. Also, don't be too liberal with your gold pieces in this game. You'll need all the gold you can get. It's easy to get to the point where your characters have enough experience points to advance another level, but they just can't afford the training. And as always, save your game often.

Overall, *World of Xeen* was and is a great game. And if you can find it now, you can get it for real cheap, so you can get in a months worth of role-playing for just a few bucks. Remember to come up for air though, even if the real world isn't as interesting or as fun.



# *The Computer Gamers' Gazette*

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## *Return to Krondor*

Also In This Issue:

*Diablo*

*Baldur's Gate*

*The Might and Magic* series

Welcome, New Members!

Letters, We Get Letters

## Game Review: *Diablo*

Bruce Smith

The beauty of *Diablo* is that it has an incredibly simple interface that allows you to get involved in the game almost immediately. You begin by choosing a character, (rogue, warrior or sorcerer), and then you are started off in town. Here you can equip your character with weapons, armor, and magic items. If you want, you can walk around and talk to the various residents of the town who can provide you with some background information. Some of the characters you can ignore entirely and still complete the game with no problem. But you will probably want to head to the dungeon and get down to what the game is all about, fighting monsters. Combat in *Diablo* is straightforward. To attack a monster you click on it. If it doesn't die, click on it again. All of the rest of the controls are equally user-friendly.

When I first started playing *Diablo*, I expected there to be multiple towns and I anticipated that you would have to talk to several characters in a certain sequence to complete various quests, but what's great about *Diablo* is that you don't have to.

In some respects, *Diablo* is a modern day version of the arcade classic *Gauntlet*. Pick a character and go through different mazes killing monsters. Play along with a friend in multiplayer mode if you want, (More about that later). *Diablo* expands on *Gauntlet* though, in that it has role-playing elements, a goal, and of course, better graphics.

The only complaint that I have about *Diablo* is that it's grotesque, but when your goal is to kill the devil, what do you expect? Hell isn't filled with bunnies and flowers, it's filled with demons and impaled corpses. I would have personally chosen a different plotline and less graphic environment, but the feedback I got online was that a lot of people think the modern life is just too friendly and happy and they need to immerse themselves in a grim foreboding world.

*Diablo* only allows one save game per character. This was a bit of an adjustment for a save game freak like myself, but it works fine given the format of the game, especially when you take multiplayer gaming into consideration.

*Diablo* is genuinely replayable. At any point, even when you have beat the game, you can restart a new game with the same character stats and equipment that you had in the last. As a result, additional games don't give you the feeling that you're starting over with nothing, yet they remain challenging. A strategy that you might want to try is to play several levels with a new character and then start a new game with the same character. It might take longer to complete the game this way, but your character will have extra abilities and more funds on the higher levels where you'll greatly need them.

The quests, the layout of the levels, and selection of monsters change each time you play *Diablo*. These and the choice of characters all add to *Diablo*'s replayability. Playing *Diablo* with a rogue or sorcerer is different enough from playing with a warrior to make it worthwhile. The damage a rogue can inflict with a bow is surprising and the rogue character, which suffers from a lot of neglect in the role-playing genre, is a good choice in the *Diablo* realm.

*Diablo* is an excellent game played in single player mode. It takes on new life as a multiplayer game. For more details on that...read on!

## *Diablo* Online

I had beaten the single player version of *Diablo* when I decided I'd try playing it online. With no prior Internet gaming experience, I thought it would be best to play a game I knew online. This was at 10 in the morning. At 2 the next morning, I finally signed off; very addicted.

When you first log onto Battlenet, Blizzard's free of charge arena for *Warcraft*, *Starcraft* & *Diablo* games, you are given a statistic showing how many online games are in progress, (literally thousands), and then you find yourself in a chat room. Keep in mind that the demographic group that these games are marketed towards is primarily young males from the ages of 10 to 30, so don't expect the kind of chat/conversations you'd get at a Mensa gathering. For example, here's a brief excerpt from a conversation that took place while I was online:

Killer\_of\_beasts: I think I'll create a game and call it "Poop."

Doom\_slayer: Cool. Heh heh.

There are also people asking for tips, organizing games, having verbal wars and making Dragons and Dungeons style commentary to the room in general.

To the left of the chat room screen are three buttons: Channel, Join and Create. Channel will switch you to another chat room of your choice. Join allows you to enter a game that someone else already has in progress. Create allows you to start your own game.

I decided to create my own game, which is encouraged by the people at Blizzard. My warrior was a couple levels into the dungeon when a line of text appeared on the screen announcing that another player had joined the game. The player sent me a message to cast a town portal spell. I did, which allowed her rogue character to join me. There's something intrinsically cool about knowing that you're playing

alongside another human being that you can talk to. It adds a sense of urgency and a feeling of depth to the game. The rogue that joined me was fortunately pretty cool and allowed me to get a good feel of how to play alongside another players, sharing the battles as well as the spoils. We talked about how multiplayer *Diablo* compared to single player *Diablo* and she mentioned the fact that multiplayer *Diablo* only has 3 of the many quests found in the single player version. When the rogue left the game, she gave me some armor and a sword that were far better than any I had ever been able to purchase in single player games of *Diablo*. This was both a blessing, and I found out later, a problem. For the time being though, it enabled me to hack my way through the dungeon faster than I had ever been able to before and build up my character quickly.

One of the main differences between playing in single player mode and multiplayer mode is that in multiplayer mode your game is constantly being saved for you. There's no going back to a previous position that you liked better. You're stuck with the choices you make. If monsters kill you in a dungeon, your character falls to the floor and drops all his belongings, so that anybody nearby can either swipe your stuff or resurrect you via a spell. If there's nobody around or nobody who wants to help you, you can restart in town. When you restart in town you have little life, little magic and just a small amount of gold, but you don't lose your experience or attributes. If you're a strong character, you may be able to return to the dungeon and reclaim the items you lost.

Not only can monsters kill you, but you can be wiped out by another player as well. The *Diablo* manual mentions the fact that there are player killers out there. This is common in many online environments. Player killers are people who are either bored or just obnoxious and go around attacking other players. The designers of *Diablo* were aware of this and so they made it that if another player kills your character, all they get is half of your gold and an ear with your character's name on it. The "ear" part of it is kind of sick and I think encourages player killers, but at least you don't lose all your equipment. Sneaky player killers however, will wait until you are surrounded by monsters, then weaken you and let the monsters finish you off. This way they get your possessions.

I've had several player killers enter my games and attack me or someone else. One guy killed me and as my character laid there on the ground, I typed, "Resurrect for the ear?" The guy resurrected me and then gave me a whole bunch of nifty potions, scrolls, pendants and rings for being cool with him. We played alongside each other for awhile after that and he told me about the player killer clan he had joined and about how he was thinking of quitting. I found that a virtual death doesn't hurt much and sometimes it's a good way to make friends.

I had a sorcerer kill my character once because he thought I was cheating. I wasn't cheating *per se*, I just seemed a lot stronger than I should have because I was using

the advanced armor I had been given by the rogue player I had met in my first game online.

I met an interesting warrior in another game, who was able to produce potions and weapons upon command and cast any spell there is with no loss of mana. He could cast spells in town where you shouldn't be able to. Clearly he was a hacker, (Not someone who breaks into banks via the Internet, just someone who has enough programming skill to devise elaborate game cheats).

The hacker's abilities prompted me to leave Battlenet for awhile and explore the Internet to find out how he could do what he did. I was able to find hundreds of sites dedicated to playing *Diablo*. They covered all types of subjects: Anti-player killer clans. Player killer clans. Cheats in the form of character editors, or "trainers," that allow you to give your character any characteristics or equipment you want. Tips on how to duplicate items you found in the game without using character editors. Discussions on when it's ethical to kill other players and when it's ethical to cheat. Ideas on how to make the game more challenging, by seeing how far you could go through the dungeon without armor. Pictures of hackers and their dogs and links to the sites of their favorite rock bands, in case you forgot that the people you were playing with were human. And my personal favorite was a rumor about a secret cow level that is supposedly found within the game. This supposed level contains a field full of cows like the ones found near the mausoleum entrance.

Trainers and cheats have been around since *Wizardry* first came out on the PC years ago, but when applied to multiplayer gaming along with all the different personalities that are out there, the gaming experience gets much more dynamic and complex. As a result, I still play games that are open to the public or join other people's games just for the interaction and to see what I'll run across next.

You do have the option of creating private games. Just type in a password whenever you create your own game and nobody can join in the game without knowing the password. When I want to play with just my friends then I'll set up a game like this and let them know when I'll be playing. It's also a good way to experiment online by yourself.

Either way, the experience of *Diablo* is greatly enhanced by its multiplayer option. I recommend it for any one who doesn't need sleep, spare time, or much contact with the real world. ♦♦

**P. S. Bruce is starting a *Diablo* "ring" and is looking for players. If you are interested, contact him directly at [Basdude@aol.com](mailto:Basdude@aol.com).**



## *Sanitarium*

Also In This Issue:

*Amerzone*

*Roller Coaster Tycoon*

USB, Laptops and *The Need for Speed*

A Video Game Machine from Microsoft?

Your FIRST Computer

Letters, We Get Letters

## Game Review: *Amerzone*

Bruce Smith

It's hard to find a good adventure game these days. You're lucky to find one tucked in between all the strategy and 3D action games out there and if it's a good game, you're especially lucky. Fortunately I did it for you and *Amerzone* is not only a good adventure game, it's an excellent adventure game. It is in fact, the best graphic adventure I've played since *Riven*. I was apprehensive at first when I saw that it was made by a team of French people, probably because I had recently finished *Reah* which was also done by a French team. Where the designers of *Amerzone* were creating a fine quality product, the designers of *Reah* were clearly using dangerous narcotics and actively seeking a way to inflict mental damage upon game players everywhere. *Reah* stunk. But we're not here to talk about *Reah*; we're here to talk about *Amerzone*.

*Amerzone* starts off slow, but it picks up pace, and you become more and more impressed with the game and the amount of work that its designers put into it. It doesn't bash you over the head with its impressiveness right at the start; it builds up to it, with a wonderful kind of subtlety that is quite often forgotten these days. You spend quite a bit of the game in a transport device that at first looks kind of lame. But the more time you spend in it, (many puzzles revolve around how you use it), the more impressed you are. By the time you've flown across the ocean in it, you want one of your own.

Because *Amerzone* is an adventure game, you'll be solving puzzles. The important part is that the puzzles are fair, which is quite often what makes the difference between a good adventure game and a bad one. Some of the puzzles are frustrating, sure, and some of the puzzles are of the "find the hot spot" variety where you have to make sure you have to do a lot of pixel searching to make sure you've found everything you need, but they are always logical. The journal that you find in the start of the game has some important clues, so "Don't leave France without it," as they say.

There's only one problem with a game that has fair puzzles and that is, if you're logical and persistent, you'll be able to solve the game quickly. That's the tradeoff you make, though. It's either get stumped and waste your time trying to solve the irrational guessing game or, enjoy yourself and not spend as much time doing it.

The box says that *Amerzone* offers about 35 hours of game play, but if you're an experienced adventure-gamer, you might be able to zip through all 4 CD's of the game in about 10 hours.

You'll also find that the puzzles are integrated into the story line very well. At no time did I feel that the puzzles I was doing were extraneous to the plot. This

definitely helps to pull you into the game and care more about the story. Speaking of which, the plot is kind of bizarre, and as far as I was concerned it was my least favorite part of the game. You play a journalist who gets the assignment of returning a big white egg to the volcanoes of the Amerzone jungle so that the white birds can live once again. (Just go with it).

The main character you meet at the start of the game is an old man, who tells you about the egg and who had originally taken it from the Amerzone when he was a young explorer. You also meet a priest who had traveled to the Amerzone with him; and the current dictator/ruler of Amerzone, who started out as a young idealist that had also traveled to the Amerzone with the explorer and the priest. I'm not normally one to give away plot secrets, but they all die.

That's not the ending of the game, which is mildly anti-climatic, but not intensely anti-climatic like that damn *Reah* game. Frankly, I won't be happy until each game has a climax that fills up a whole entire CD with video, but that's just me. Regardless, you should enjoy getting to the ending of this well-designed and fun-to-play adventure. ❖❖

## USB, Laptops, and *The Need For Speed*

Steve Kennedy

It never stops. We get sort of comfortable with the computer hardware, and They have to change it ... uhhh, improve it.

I recently decided to upgrade my laptop, a Pentium 133 (non-MMX) Toshiba Tecra CDT510, 48 MB RAM and a medium size active matrix (bright hi-res) screen. (In laptop talk, "upgrade" means "buy a new one.") It was the top of the line a few years back, but system requirements have continued their inexorable march upward. One graphics program I use has a minimum requirement of Pentium II 300 MHz.

And for games, forget it. Laptops have no game port for a joystick, much less a 3D accelerator, now commonly required to even run some games. These are bizness machines, son.

Enter the Toshiba Tecra 8100, announced just before Christmas. The basic specs include Pentium III (mobile) 450 MHz (and up), 100 MHz bus, 64+ MB RAM, 6 GB+ hard disk, CD-ROM or DVD, large active matrix screen at 1068x760. Oh, and all the usual ports plus a USB and a composite video out port (television/VCR



# *The Computer Gamers' Gazette*

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## The Sims! The Sims!!

Also In This Issue:

*Quake: the Offering*

It's a Video Game, Certainly, but Is It Art?

The NEW SIG Web site

Letters, We Get Letters

# Game Review: The Sims

Manufacturer: Maxis, a division of Electronic Arts

Author: Will Wright

Bruce Smith

Imagine someone has asked you to create a game where you simulate people's lives. You couldn't include every aspect of life in the game, so you would have some tough choices to make. What would you leave in and what would you leave out? Say you get to control different people in this game. How would you define their personalities? How would you have them interact? And lastly, but most importantly, how would you combine all these factors into a game that is FUN? It's a daunting task, but Will Wright and the team at Maxis took it on. I expected the result to be either really good or really lame. Fortunately, it is not just really good; it is excellent.

As in other Will Wright games such as *Sim City*, there is no winning or losing in *The Sims*. The game lets you set your own objectives. If you want, you can neglect your characters and let them suffer whatever fate comes their way. But to fully enjoy it and see what it has to offer, you'll want assist your Sims in the multiple tasks of improving their moods, making friends, becoming prosperous, climbing up the career ladder and building a huge mansion. Then you can save your game and really have fun messing with their lives.

You can start off *The Sims* by playing with the tutorial family, which I recommend. Your other options are to start with a pre-made family or create one of your own. If you create your own, you get to determine each of your Sim's personalities. There are a number of personality factors – neat, outgoing, active, playful, and nice. If you don't assign many points to some of these factors, then your character ends up being the opposite of those characteristics. This means that if you don't give your player "nice" points, they are grouchy. They will be more liable to insult or even slap the other characters in the game. They will get upset more easily, and they will have the option of kicking the pink flamingos that sit on the lawn of their house (really, they will). If you don't give your character any neat points, then that character will be a slob and won't wash his hands after he or she goes to the bathroom.

Character creation in *The Sims* reminded me of character creation in the gazillions of role-playing games I've gone through, with one difference: these traits dramatically affect gameplay and dramatically affect how your characters interact with each other. Finally, somebody took character stats and put them to good use. Who would have figured that the game that did this would not involve slaying an

evil wizard?

The character creation screen also enables you to name your Sim, change their appearance, and provide a description of them if you wish. Keep in mind, the description and personality of your character can never be changed once you save them.

Once you have your family (from one to eight people) you can move them into the neighborhood. There are 10 spots of land in *The Sims* neighborhood. Some of them are vacant lots, and the rest have pre-built houses. A couple of the houses will be unaffordable to you if you have just begun the game. This gives you an incentive to make your family prosper. Before you move your family in, you might want to inform friends, families and employers (in the real world) that you will be unavailable for the next few days.

You'll find that when playing *The Sims*, much of the game becomes an exercise in time management. For Sims, like for us, time is a precious resource that is hard to come by. The Sims need time to meet the six needs that they have. You monitor those needs via several bars at the lower right of the screen. The needs are hunger, comfort, hygiene, bladder, energy, fun, social and room. If you don't keep these at the proper levels, your Sims won't always do what you want them to do and they won't excel in the other areas of the game. To satisfy their needs, you will be guiding the Sims through everyday tasks such as doing the dishes or taking a shower (nudity is handled with pixellation, just like on the news).

I found myself wondering why it was that watching simulated people do mundane tasks was more interesting than taking part in those tasks in real life. How could it be so fascinating and addictive? There are several reasons. The first reason is that it's just amazing, when you think about it, that so much of what we do in our lives could be simulated in a computer game. To watch human-like behaviors and interactions with not just one, but many characters, is intriguing. It's like watching an ant farm, but the ants seem to have the additional dimensions of personality and intelligence AND you get to interact with them.

Gameplay in *The Sims* is addictive because like in any good role-playing game, there is always something new to do or that you are right on the verge of accomplishing. Maybe if you make a few more dollars you can buy your Sims that new TV that will up their "fun" score more rapidly. Maybe you can add on to their house. Could be that you're just about to up their mechanical skill so that they can repair the dishwasher without having to call the repairman. It could also be that you are just about to make a new friend that will help your Sim up the career ladder. There is so much to accomplish for your newfound Sim friends that you forget you have a thing or two to do in that other reality they call the "real world" which is now only a dim and hazy memory.

There is a vast array of behaviors and interactions that your Sims can be involved in. They can fall in love. They can get jealous. They can die of starvation (although you have to neglect them for a long time for them to do so). They eat, dance and swim. They can get married. They can play basketball. They'll sniff their armpits if their hygiene level gets too low. According to the strategy guide, the Sims can even spontaneously combust (although there is a very low chance that this will happen). A lot of thought and programming went into this game resulting in a lot of fun and interesting details.

Part of the brilliance behind Will Wright's design is its open-endedness and flexibility. You want options; you got options. Will just gives you the tools. Ready for another list? Here are some of the things you can do with the game: You can re-create your own home, and populate it with characters named after people you know. (Maybe this is your chance to have someone do what you asked them to do, but even in *The Sims*, they have to be in a good mood first.) You can create a Sim (male or female) who has his or her own harem. If you want, you can turn the harem into one big jealous slap-fest. You can create a haunted graveyard outside your Sim home and ghosts from it will wander into the house at night. You can create a giant hedge maze and force your Sims to wander through it looking for the refrigerator.

If you get bored with those options, feel free to use the photo album feature to take pictures of your Sim household, caption the pictures and tell a story. With the press of a button you can turn your photo album and families into Web pages that can be uploaded to the Sims Web site and shared with others. While you're there, download more items that your Sims can use, like a slot machine or a moose head. Download entire households to add to your neighborhood. Go to your favorite music Web site, download MP3 files, and have the radio in your Sims house play your favorite songs.

There is so much to *The Sims* that it is difficult to cover it all without writing a novel. There are probably some bad things to say about *The Sims*, but I'll let somebody else do that. (You can find negative commentary about *The Sims* on the BBS portion of the Sims Web site. Clearly most of the complaints were written by whiny crybabies who don't know a great game when they see one.)

When you've been playing *The Sims* for awhile, it becomes tempting to wax philosophical and make parallels between their lives and your own life. It was a temptation I could not resist. *The Sims*, like life itself, is a game you can never completely win. Do you find yourself scrambling to find time to do everything you need to do? It's the same for your Sims as it is for you. How well does this illustrate the way we live our lives? You'll notice as well, that the Sims are stuck in consumer mode. In *The Sims*, getting more stuff equals being happier equals being able to get more stuff. It's very American. Seeing the Sims go through their

daily lives and realizing that all that is driving them is a series of programmed equations and programmed needs, makes you wonder what it is that drives us as humans. How much of what we do is the result of freely made choices? How many of our actions are determined by genetics (our programming) and our responses to our own inherent needs? The microcosm of *The Sims* will get you thinking about your little world.

Overall, I would have to say that *The Sims* sucks. It is the worst game I have ever played. Ha! Just kidding. *The Sims* is a landmark computer game. Game designers will be striving to emulate it, sociologists will be writing papers about it, and I will be playing it until two o'clock in the morning. ❖❖

## Tips and Tricks for *The Sims*

Bruce Smith

Below are some strategy tips that will tell you a little more about the game and help you out at the same time:

- You can only work in one household at a time in *The Sims* but, believe me, that's enough. You save your game by household as well; however, there are some links between households that you should be aware of. If someone from another family visits the Sim family you are currently working on, and you save your game, whatever changes made to the relationship between your family and the visitor are also saved in the visitor's household. This allows you to work on a friendship from either household. You can also move members of a family from one house to another, which takes some doing.
- Whenever you create a family, that family is given a net worth of \$20,000 dollars, never more. Instead of creating families as a group, create them as individuals, place them on different lots, and take the time to move them into your household one by one. The effort is worth the extra income each person adds.
- Adding a child to your family in *The Sims* is a great benefit. Having a child cuts down the amount of your taxes and therefore your bills are less. Children in the household help to keep your social points up. They can help with chores and can help you gain more family friends (necessary

to progress in the game). A child can make friends with neighborhood kids and when their parents come to pick them up, the adults in your family have a chance to make more acquaintances as well.

- If your family adopts or has a baby, try to avoid playing with it during the baby's three-day infancy period. Whenever the baby is awake, alternate the "feed" and "sing" commands, starting with "feed" until the baby goes back to sleep. If you don't play with the infant, he or she goes back to sleep faster and sleeps longer. Even with this tip, raising a baby in *The Sims* is a grueling three-day period. I had one character finish putting the baby to sleep and then collapse from exhaustion right there on the floor. (How real is that?)
- You'll want to experiment with all kinds of personalities in *The Sims* to make the game interesting, but if you want some characters that are easy to manage and that make friends easy, max out their "nice" points and their "outgoing" points. Making friends is vital to your success in the Sim world and takes a lot of time. Characters with high "nice" and "outgoing" attributes will help you in this task.
- Calling the pizza guy is generally a bad investment. Pizzas are just too expensive. The maid and the gardener, on the other hand, are excellent investments. I would recommend the maid for any family with an income over \$200.00. She will save you a ton of time. If you have flowers in your yard, the gardener is a good investment for the same reason, and leaves you one less thing to manage.
- Other good investments include: the burglar alarm (buy one right away and put it near the front door), fire alarms (put it near the oven or microwave), the food processor (makes meals that satisfy your Sims' "hunger" need quicker, just for a measly 220 bucks) and my favorite, the \$1200 Flush Force 5XLT toilet. (The Flush Force 5XLT quickly takes care of your Sims' bladder needs. As the game says, "Don't ask why, don't ask how...")

Using the above tips should give you an advantage in the complex world of *The Sims*. ❖❖

# *The Computer Gamers' Gazette*

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## MYST III: EXILE

Also In This Issue:

*Microsoft Train Simulator*

The Definition of a "Game"

*PC Magazine's Top 25 Games*

*Black & White*

## Cover Story:

# MYST III: EXILE

Bruce A. Smith

If I could buy an airplane ticket every couple of weeks and fly off to some country where I've never been, explore it, learn its history and take pictures, I would. Unfortunately, it's not in my budget. However, I can squeeze out enough money for the next best thing: an adventure game. Adventure games transport you to other places, many times to places where you could not go in this reality, and, if they're good, you can get lost in them. If there was ever a game that captured that feeling of mystery and discovery, of travel to a different world, it was *Myst*.

*Myst* redefined the adventure game. Some say it killed the adventure game because few, if any, of the many *Myst*-like games that came out after it, could live up to the standard it set. Of course, its sequel, *Riven*, managed to do so. *Riven* was such a subtle game. I remember exploring the islands of *Riven*, not knowing what we were trying to accomplish and then all of a sudden being hit by one of the biggest "Aha!" moments I have ever felt while playing a game. Cool.

So I was eagerly awaiting the arrival of *Myst III: Exile* and knew that when it was released I would basically be on vacation, because all of the other projects I was working on would get dropped until the game was beaten. It was probably about a 30 hour vacation total.

*Exile* lives up to the standards set by its predecessors with one exception, which I'll talk about first. This is my one and only complaint about the game. *Exile* uses Presto Studios 360 degree 3D technology, which allows you to look all around you in each place you stand, like in *The Journeyman Project 3*. The problem with this viewing mode is that the graphics come out a bit fuzzy, and sometimes chunky. The previous two *Myst* games had slide show type scenes, but each and every one of them was crisp and pristine. Graphic quality was sacrificed in *Exile* for the 3D view. The scenery itself was excellent, but it seemed a shame to blur it just so you could look around a bit more. Actors still look blue-screened against the backgrounds, but I haven't seen any game pull that off effectively. One other noticeable graphic flaw was that the water in some scenes looked more like undulating plastic than water. Somebody Saran-Wrapped the ocean, I'm not sure why. I looked for other things to complain about, but didn't find them. All of the other elements of *Exile* are superb.



The story ties in perfectly with the other two *Myst* games and the three books that have been released as well. You don't need to know the history of *Myst* to enjoy this game, but those who do will enjoy the little tidbits they find which tie in to the games growing mythology. (Or is it a mystology? Sorry...) Atrus, the main character of the *Myst* saga, had two sons, SIRRUS and Achenar, who were the source of all the problems that were faced in the first game. *Exile* revolves around a man they had wronged and his plan for revenge against Atrus and his family. The madman is unaware of the fate SIRRUS and Achenar met at the end of *Myst*.

An incredibly clever aspect of *Exile* is that this madman, Saavedro, has been exiled in a group of Ages that Atrus had set up as training grounds for his sons. This gives a logical explanation for all the puzzles you must face. They were once puzzles that Atrus had given his sons to solve so that they could learn various lessons. Saavedro has sabotaged many of these puzzles, so that they remain intact, but to solve them you'll have to do things the hard way. The partial sabotaging of puzzles is worked in beautifully. "Darn that Saavedro," I found myself saying, "Why'd he have to go and mess this one up too?"

True to the *Myst* and *Riven* tradition, you'll find plenty of mechanical puzzles, cool transportation devices, great island environments and some interesting creatures.

The collectors edition of *Exile* contains the soundtrack to the game and a strategy guide. I bought it for the soundtrack, which I listen to in the car now. Jack Wall has taken Robyn Miller's original ambient synthesizer music, expanded on it, and intertwined new themes with old to create a masterful composition. A full orchestra and choir make the soundtrack more striking than that of the previous games.

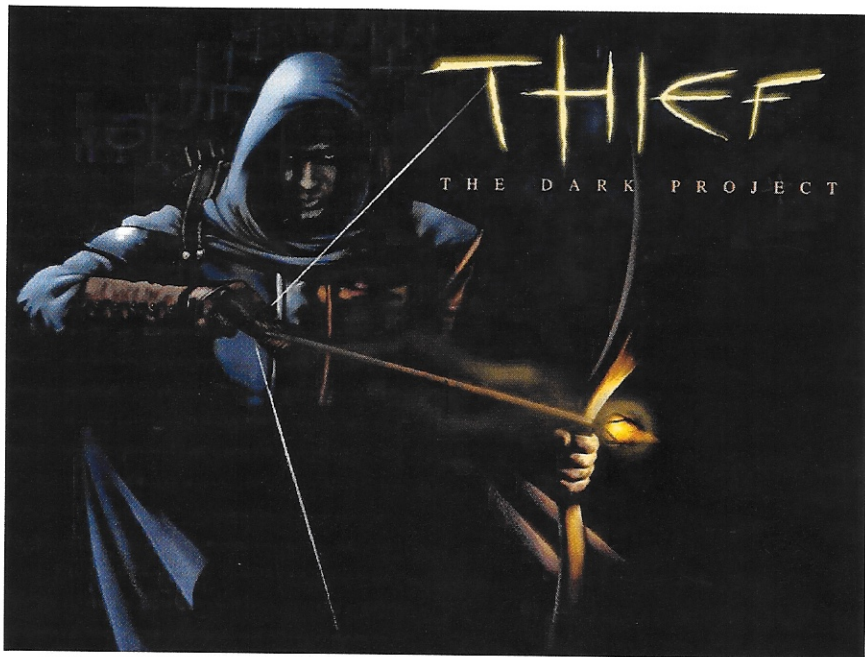
The puzzles in *Exile* are tough, but if you read the journals and take notes and take notice of the visual and aural clues around you, you can get through the game without the strategy guide. Most likely, you will have to wander around and experiment before you can experience that moment of realization when the solution becomes clear, but the puzzles are fair, and in this game, it's worth taking the time. Once you've finished the game however, then you **will** want to go back and take a look at the strategy guide if you bought it. It will show you some of the logic behind those puzzles that you completed using good old-fashioned trial and error. It will point out clues you may have missed and give you some interesting background information as well.

If you like adventure games in general, and especially if you liked the previous *Myst* games, *Exile* is a must have. It's an enjoyable trip to fantastic worlds, and you don't need a passport or suitcase, just a penchant for puzzle solving and a Pentium 233. ❖❖

# *The Computer Gamers' Gazette*

Issue #40

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## Also In This Issue:

Games That Go Bump in the Night

*Civilization III*

Game Consoles

Let's *Myst* Again!

*Startopia*

Special Feature: "A Fine Example"

## A Fine Example

Bruce A. Smith

I have a wife who understands. She understands that if we go to the mall with the express purpose of purchasing clothes, I will inevitably stop to look at computer games. Even if it is just for a minute. Even if I did it the day before. My wife understands that there is no such thing as "too many" computer games. Four full shelves of games at home is in no way related to the fact that more are going to be purchased. There is no rule that says, "you must finish the game you are playing before you buy another one."

My wife understands, because I have explained it to her, that the shelf-life of a computer game is not like that of a book or a Twinkie. A game will come on the market and weeks later disappear into the netherworld, never to be seen again. Some of us have been assigned the task of saving and preserving these games. We will, I promise you, pull them out of a closet, some rainy day in our twilight years, and defeat a poorly pixellated bad guy with the same glee as if he were the most modern of cyber creatures.

I say all this, because the other day I was at the store and I heard some guy's significant other whine, "we already have enough games..." What a poor miserable bastard he must be.

You see, games are one of our great joys in life. They help us to stay young. We know that there is no movie or book that can involve and immerse us as intensely as a good computer game. Each one we open is like a mini-Christmas in the midst of our demanding lives.

When my birthday comes, my wife doesn't flinch if I ask for an add-on pack to a game I never installed. When I come to bed at three in the morning, she sleepily asks, "did you win?" She sympathizes if I did not and shares in my exhausted accomplishment if I did. I hold her up as a role model for those who would be partnered with a gamer, and wish you the same bliss that I have found.



We do not stop playing because we grow old, we  
grow old because we stop playing!

-- Benjamin Franklin

# The Computer Gamers' Gazette

Issue #45

Spring Equinox 2003



## MORROWIND

Also In This Issue:

*The Longest Journey*

*Spider Solitaire*

As the Console Turns

## PC Game Review: *The Longest Journey*

Bruce A. Smith

You can still find *The Longest Journey* in some computer stores, which is exceptional for an adventure game that has been out for a couple of years. The reasons for its success are excellent graphics, good music, and intriguing puzzles. But its biggest selling feature is April, the game's likable heroine, and not just because she's cute. I found myself wanting to see what was going to happen to her next and how she was going to deal with it. With all these things going in its favor, *The Longest Journey* is definitely a game that you might want to consider buying. But wait! There are a few problems with the game, to which the rest of this review is dedicated.

The game is from those wacky folks in Norway, not that there's anything wrong with Norwegians, it's just that, from my experience, they're wacky. I've only had two experiences with Norwegians, and technically they weren't with actual Norwegians, they were with things created by Norwegians. One of them was this game. The other one is a ride at Disney's Epcot Center in Florida dedicated to Norway. On the ride, you sail along in a little boat and you come up to some trolls who chant something at you and send the boat backwards towards a waterfall. Then the boat turns around, the ride ends, and they show you a movie about Norwegian Cruise Lines. You leave thinking, "What the hell just happened?" That's how I felt with *The Longest Journey*.

Part of the reason for this is that there is just no consistency of tone in the game. It leaps from a depressing futuristic city to a light-hearted fantasy world, from the possible destruction of the universe to an encounter with talking stick men, from a conversation with a sea captain to a conversation with a computer hacker who spews enough obscenities to melt your monitor.

"What the hell just happened?" is right.

At the start of the game, the main character, April, claims to be a skeptic and of course, as the game progresses she comes to believe in all kinds of fantastic and magical things. This overused device has got to go. In games, movies, and books, where we all know something magical is going to happen, it is tiring to listen to a character convince themselves that these things are real. It doesn't add realism, nor does it successfully make any point about what **actually** is, or isn't, real because the world in which it is happening is fictional. I find myself saying,

“Believe it already.” For once I want to see a character go, “Oh, a flying dog just entered the room and spoke to me of the mysteries of the universe; cool.”

The game was written by a guy named Ragnar Tornquist. Ragnar apparently loves dialogue. He can't get enough dialogue. He must spend hours every day writing dialogue. *The Longest Journey* could easily be called *The Longest Dang Conversations You Ever Heard in a Computer Game That go on and on and on Even More so Than This Paragraph About How Long the Conversations in the Game are*. It's out of control! Yes, Ragnar has crafted an elaborate fantasy world, but must we have to sit through hours and hours of background story just so we can get on to some real puzzle-solving? Apparently so. Unfortunately, if you don't go through all the conversations in the game, you may miss a vital clue or prevent yourself from being able to progress any further. Big tip (this will double the rate at which you can complete the game, as well as double your enjoyment of the game): Turn on captions. Read through all of the conversations, and hit the escape button to pass through the spoken dialogue. Otherwise, you may never make it through this game. One of the puzzles later on in the game involves going around to different villagers, hearing their stories, and answering questions about their stories. At times, Ragnar is obviously taking some kind of twisted delight in making you suffer through long drawn out conversations. He even parodies his own tendency to do so. Fortunately for everyone, there are some genuinely funny moments in the dialogue. However, *The Longest Journey* could have been twice the game it is, and would take up half the disk space, if some thoughtful editing had been done.

One puzzle in the game involves going into a library and asking an old man to get you books about certain topics. You wait for him to walk across the room, drag the book off a shelf, put the book on a pedestal and then slowly shuffle back to where he was originally standing. Again, the escape key speeds this process up, but sometimes it feels like you're stuck behind a slow car in the fast lane when you're late for work.

The game interface is pretty straightforward and the puzzles, for the most part, are challenging but fair. An adventure game without this characteristic fails. There are only a few instances in *The Longest Journey* where your progress is stopped, not so much by a tough puzzle, but rather by a counterintuitive implementation of the interface. Usually you can interact with another person or creature by clicking on them. There was one point where I did this repeatedly to no avail and found that I just had to walk up to the character to get them to talk. In another instance a character would not talk unless an unexpected inventory item was given to them. There were also a couple occasions where April's sidekick “Crow”

didn't respond to conversational prompting, but would do something if I picked him up and clicked on some part of the scenery. These inconsistent means of interaction with other characters unnecessarily hampered progress in several sections of the game.

There are thirteen chapters in the game, but most of your time will be spent in the earlier ones. The chapters get shorter and the pace picks up as you near the end. Don't expect a lot from the ending of the game; it is anti-climatic. There is a lot of separate stories that are told throughout *The Longest Journey* and an ending sequence offering final resolution to these stories would have been welcome.

Despite these complaints, I am still glad that I played *The Longest Journey*. It has a lot to offer as an adventure game. It takes you to a wide variety of locales and you feel as if you have traveled to several worlds. In your travels you visit the future, meet the ground-burrowing people of a forest, defeat a wizard in a castle, sail the ocean and get caught in an ocean storm, visit an undersea city and a volcanic island, and even venture into outer space. The game lives up to its name, in more ways than one. **Overall grade:** C+. 🎮🎮

## Proverbs for the Computer Age

1. Anywhere you hang your @ is home.
2. The e-mail of the species is faster than the mail.
3. A journey of a thousand sites begins with a single click.
4. You can't teach a new mouse old clicks.
5. Great groups from little icons grow.
6. C:\ is the root of all directories.
7. Too many clicks spoil the browse.
8. The geek shall inherit the earth.
9. A chat has nine lives.
10. Don't byte off more than you can view.
11. Fax is stranger than fiction.
12. What boots up must come down.
13. Windows will never cease.
14. Virtual reality is its own reward.
15. A user and his leisure time are soon parted.
16. Speed thrills.
17. Give a man (or woman) a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to use the Net, and he won't bother you for weeks. 🎮🎮