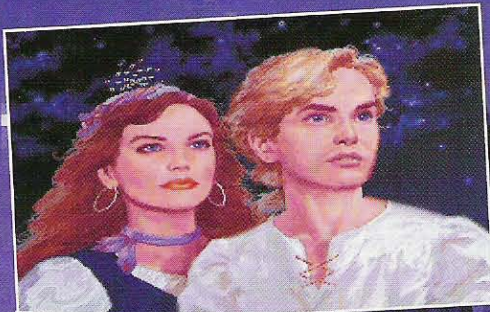


The Secret Of Monkey

Eliot Fish chats to Monkey Island creator Ron Gilbert about the importance of being Guybrush.



If there's one game that epitomises the golden age of PC adventure gaming that we so frequently love to get misty-eyed and nostalgic about, it would have to be *The Secret Of Monkey Island* (1990). Forever in games critics' top ten lists, *The Secret Of Monkey Island* is the point 'n' click adventure that probably best represents LucasArts' (then known as Lucasfilm Games) once domination of the graphic adventure genre, slotting romantically alongside *Maniac Mansion*, *Day Of The Tentacle*, *Sam And Max Hit The Road* and *Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis*. With incredible 2D artwork, insanely clever puzzles, catchy music, and the magical SCUMM (Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion) engine, *The Secret Of Monkey Island* had it all. So what really was its secret? Undoubtedly, it was the strength of its writing. It's hard to find a funnier game with more memorable characters or dialogue than the first *Monkey Island* (except perhaps for its sequel, *LeChuck's Revenge*).

"I don't think I could do anything that didn't have comedy at its core, and I knew that comedy was

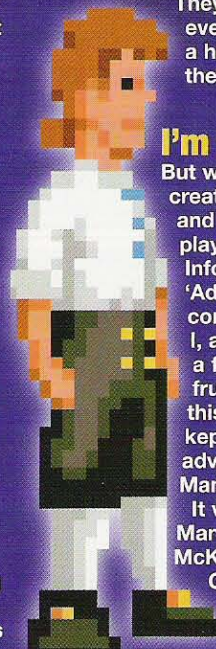
going to be the linchpin of the game," admits *Monkey Island* creator Ron Gilbert. "In the old days, most of the humour had to come out in the dialogue and other small little sight gags - there was not much more. I really lucked out with hiring Tim Schafer and Dave Grossman.

They are two of the best writers I have ever known and they took the comedy to a higher level. Most of the funny lines are theirs!"

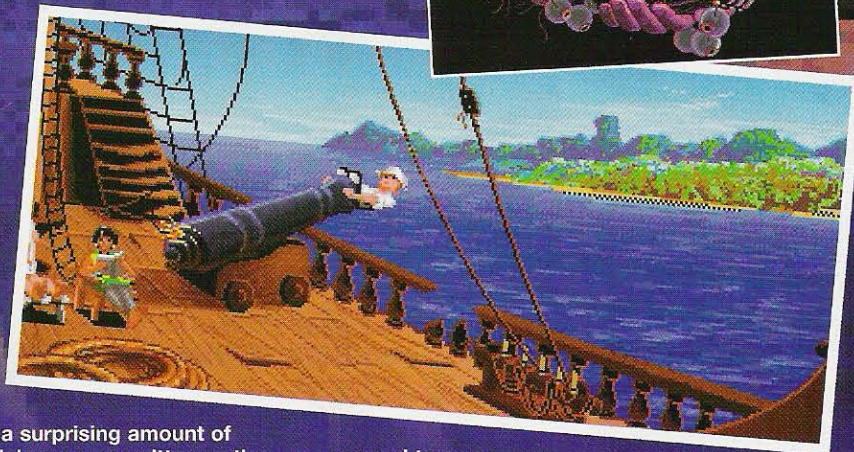
I'm Off To Seek My Fortune

But what was it that inspired Ron Gilbert to create the SCUMM engine in the first place and end up writing adventure games? "I played a lot of the text adventures from Infocom, and before that, the classic 'Adventure' that appeared on mainframe computers. One day I saw *Kings Quest I*, and it was an 'ah-ha!' moment. After a few minutes of playing it, I was totally frustrated by the silly parser. They made this huge leap from text to graphics, but kept the most frustrating part of text adventures. From that frustration, *Maniac Mansion* was born."

It was after his experience making *Maniac Mansion* (and shortly after that, *Zac McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders*) that Gilbert began quietly working on his own ideas for a wild adventure game to use his SCUMM engine. "Much



Island



like today - and probably for the next thousand years - fantasy games were really hot, but I was not a huge fan of the genre. It seemed so overdone. I searched for a setting that was not Dungeons and Dragons, but still had the feel. Pirates were a natural. I had a good idea of the design - much of that was born out of an article I wrote on adventure game design. Monkey Island was a test of that thesis."

But why 'Monkey Island' exactly? Gilbert chuckles, "I had just started thinking about the design when Gary Winnick (the co-designer of Maniac Mansion) came into my office and blurted out, for no apparent reason: 'Welcome to Monkey Island, grab a chimp and grind your organ' (I think he wanted to go to lunch). For some reason, I found this very funny and named the game Monkey Island. I didn't tell the Lucasfilm marketing department where I got the name from, because then we would have had a silly marketing meeting."

Rather than starting out with a



complete script, a surprising amount of the game's dialogue was written as the game was being coded, as Gilbert explains, "Everything happened at once. The art, writing and programming all happened at the same time. It was very loose in those days. The writing process was very informal. We would sit around and write as we programmed the game. I knew all the dialogue we needed, and had a good idea of

how they needed to start and end, but that was about it. For example, I knew there was a scene with Stan (the game's wonderfully hyperactive businessman) and he had to act like a used car salesman. Tim, who was also doing the programming, would just write the dialogue as he coded." In fact, much of Monkey Island

seemed to come together in an inspired whirlwind, thanks to the creative environment that game designers enjoyed back in the days before the development process was controlled by marketing departments. "It was certainly a golden period for me," Gilbert wistfully recalls. "Some of my best memories of life come from those years. Everyone was so full of energy and passion. It was a magical place to work. We had a lot of support from management

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and had a very different mandate than they have now. Making money was still number one, but number two was building interesting trendsetting games." Of course not everything the team came up with was instant gold: "Creative work is 90% failure, 10% success," quips Gilbert.

Ron Gilbert has never received royalties for The Secret Of Monkey Island, as he was

purely an employee at the time ("LucasArts instigated a royalty plan after I left"), and the reality was that there was no way to tell if the game would be a success or not.

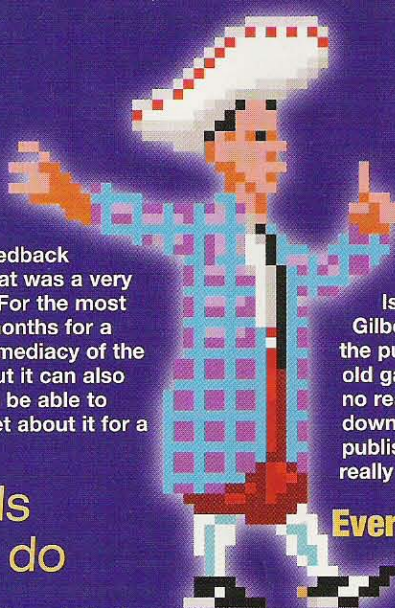
"I honestly don't know how well it did, but the fan reaction was great. When you're building something like this, you never know. You end up hating it at the end," admits Gilbert. "It's destroyed a good chunk of your life, and you've seen everything 100 times and nothing is funny anymore. You're just glad it's over."

when you're dealing with 60 pixels there isn't much concept art can do



"Back then, we had CompuServe, and that was about it for getting any kind of immediate feedback from people, and even that was a very small number of people. For the most part, we'd have to wait months for a magazine review. The immediacy of the internet today is great, but it can also be a curse. It was nice to be able to release a game and forget about it for a month or so."

However, before Lucasfilm got Monkey Island to market, Gilbert was already working on new ideas for the sequel. "I knew I was going to be doing Monkey Island 2, and when the first was done, we immediately started on it. I'm not sure how I convinced Lucasfilm to build the sequel without seeing how the original did. Those were simpler days." Indeed. These days, getting your hands on a copy of the first Monkey Island seems to be an almost impossible task. Whilst the game can be purchased in a bundle from

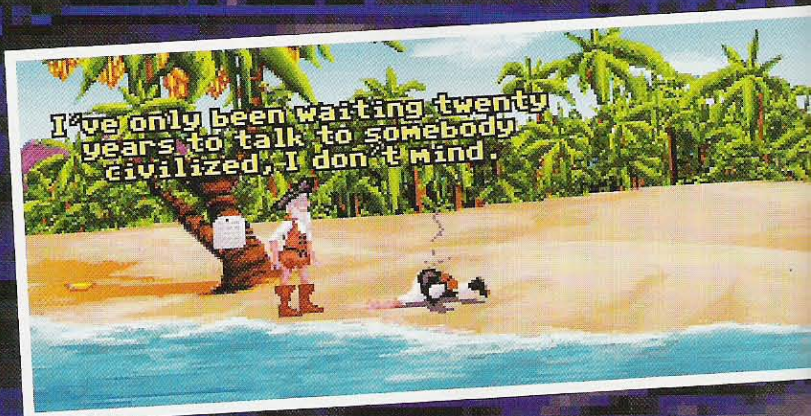


Everything You Say To Me Is Stupid

Monkey Island's protagonist, the adorably naïve Guybrush

Threepwood, was famously

named such because artist Steve Purcell (creator of Sam and Max) kept saving his files with the name 'guybrush.lbm' - the lead character at that time only being known as 'the guy' and an object in DPaint was known as a brush. There's no doubt just how much influence the artists on the game had on the eventual overall tone and style of the game. "Back in the Monkey Island days, we didn't do a lot of concept art, we just let the artists go crazy," says Gilbert. "When you're dealing with characters that are 60 pixels tall, there isn't much concept art can do for you. LeChuck and Elaine were part of the original story - they both are integral parts of the plot - but Herman, Toothrot and Stan were born



more out of the puzzle creation process.” But did seeing the characters animated for the first time inspire their unique personalities? “Seeing them animated helped a lot. I had a pretty good idea of the characters before, but when you see them animated it can add a lot. Sometimes I would have a character one way, and then I’d see what the animator came up with and it would be different and better, so we’d go with that.” Does he have a favourite? “Stan is my favorite. I loved the parody of the used car salesman and the dialogue you enter into with him is wonderfully confusing.”

Aside from the witty interaction with its characters (who can forget the infamous ‘insult swordfighting’ dialogue trees?), one of the most enjoyable aspects was how clever the game was in response to wily player experimentation. It seemed the game had an answer for everything, with some of the funniest responses so obscure that players would only stumble across them by accident. One memorable moment is when

Guybrush can be walked to the edge of a cliff which promptly crumbles under his feet, sending him over the edge to his apparent death. The game pops up with a box stating “Oh no! You’ve really screwed up this time! Guess you’ll have to start over! Hope you saved the game!” - complete with restore, restart and quit options. Of course, it was just a joke at the expense of old Sierra adventures that would sometimes kill your character in seemingly arbitrary ways. Moments later, Guybrush would be thrown back up onto the cliff, happily explaining, “Rubber tree!”

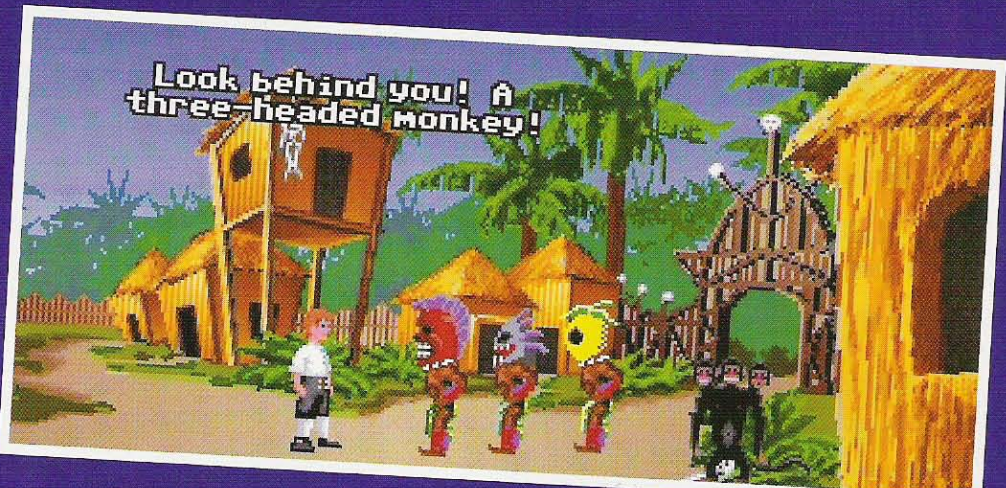
“I think they’ve all been found by now,” smiles Gilbert. “Much of that depth came from playing the game, clicking on something and thinking ‘that should do something’. Much of the philosophy behind the game was that everything should work. I hated parsers and the ‘second-guess the parser’ games you went through with most adventure games. So, in Monkey Island, if something looked interesting, it needed a response. One of the benefits of working on simpler games like the old adventures is that most items just invoked a simple text response. It was easy to add a line here and there if you’d think of it. Today, with expensive audio recording sessions and everyone expecting animation, it’s costly to add anything late in the process.”

SCUMM Bag

The SCUMM engine was created primarily out of a need Gilbert saw to better handle the interaction between characters and objects in an adventure game’s graphical environment. “It was too hard to code the whole game in 6502. I knew I needed some way to program the creative aspects of the game faster. Chip Morningstar, who went on to build Habitat, suggested I create a language with a parser. I started out designing the language after the LISP language that is in eMacs, but quickly abandoned that in favour of a more C like language. Chip wrote the first pass of the SCUMM compiler and I was off. I still remember the first time that a SCUMM command was executed by the interpreter...”



Look behind you! A three-headed monkey!



Surely that made testing an adventure game as unpredictable as Monkey Island a game developer’s nightmare? “We had a team of testers that just pounded away at the game for months. Test plans were written that outlined all the screens, objects, dialogue, and the testers would try them all. They also had to spend a lot of time just beating the game up. I still have the final bug report for ‘XXXX’ bugs. The first one entered was ‘XXXXXX’.”

Without a doubt, Monkey Island also stands as one of the most artistic 2D games of its time. “That came from the background artist, Mark Ferrari,” notes Gilbert. “He had never done computer art before and he didn’t know anything about the rules that needed to be followed. He did a lot of dithering and gradients that other games were not doing at that time.

Remember, this was back in the days of 16 fixed colours. His art was so striking that we custom built compression schemes to handle it.” It’s hard to not lament the passing of this 2D style – let alone the entire adventure game genre, seemingly thrown out with both the baby and the dishwater as 3D technology has gripped the market. Is 2D gaming outdated technology or a viable game design choice that has been overlooked? “Everyone wants 3D,” shrugs Gilbert. “I think there are a lot of developers that would like to work in 2D because it has

some huge advantages in being able to depict an environment in an unlimited number of art styles. 3D is still immature and all anyone is doing is chasing realism. Hopefully they will catch it someday soon, and then we can start to explore other styles. In the game I am pitching right now, I showed some publishers some very interesting 3D styles, and was told ‘that doesn’t sell’. It’s a huge uphill battle.”

Is it really no wonder then that the point ‘n’ click adventure is as dead as the Ghost Pirate LeChuck himself? With the recent cancellation of Sam and Max: Freelance Police (“I was not surprised”, sighs Gilbert), you’d have to admit that the future for the genre is pretty bleak. Gilbert, however, looks at the situation more positively. “Adventure games need to be brought into the 21st century, and I don’t just mean 3D graphics. They need a complete design overhaul,” he says. “They might not even be recognisable as adventure games, but they will feed the desire that the current fans have.”

So what would be the golden rule for a hypothetical fifth Monkey Island sequel? “I need to make it. Period.” Amen to that.

