



# Between Dark And Daylight

## *Gabriel Knight* Explores The Shades of Gray

by Johnny L. Wilson

Life is full of contrasts: light and darkness, good and evil, pleasure and pain, sorrow and joy, life and death. Though most of us would prefer to focus on the positive side of these poles, the positive aspects would not be as attractive without the negative to cast them in relief. Sierra's *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Father* takes seriously the juxtaposition of these contrasting elements. Everything about the game emphasizes the struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, love and betrayal. From color palette to soundtrack, background story to puzzle clues, this game emphasizes personal struggle within the context of this dialectic.

In other words, *Gabriel Knight* is that rarity in computer games, a work that is artistic enough to convey a message and present realistic characters so that the player really cares. It is more of a vicarious experience than it is intellectual exercise. The puzzles are integrated into the story line so effectively that the gamer genuinely feels like he or she is discovering more of the story, rather than jumping through a series of mental hoops to get to the next chapter. The conversation branches feature so much variety and so much characterization that one feels that there are authentic characters rather than game constructs in the story. The dream sequences that advance the story are psychologically consistent with the way our minds symbolize the problems with which our subconscious wrestles in sleep.

### For Mature Audiences Especially

It is the kind of dream that causes stomach muscles to contract, pulling one into a sitting position from out of a restful sleep. The bon-

fire boils menacingly in the mind's eye. The leopard costume of the priestess blends the human and creature together, evoking the primitive, the dangerous and the sensual. Perspiration and grimaces accent the native drumbeat, beating subtly in sync with the dreamer's heart. The snake, that curious symbolic blend of evil and wisdom, death and regeneration, wraps around a neck. Suddenly, it is personal. The snake undergoes a metamorphosis into a hangman's noose tethered about the dreamer's neck.

Such is the dream sequence that opens Sierra's *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Father*. It was the first time I've actually experienced fear when viewing a computer game and that's because the designer understands where real horror exists—within the human mind. Jane Jensen, co-designer of *King's Quest VI* and the designer of *Gabriel Knight*, understands horror. Shirley Jackson, Anne Rice and Stephen King are her inspiration. These novelists should be proud of their admirer's creation. It is a study in contrasts, a fascinating and, at times, frightening tale. Indeed, there is a possible cameo in which an Anne Rice character may appear at Napoleon House (a location based on an actual restaurant in New Orleans).

As Gabriel explores the immediate problem, the ritualistic voodoo murders in New Orleans, he discovers that his entire family has had a checkered past. Images of slavery, prejudice, superstition and hypocrisy blend together in the background story, a tale where betrayal conquers love. Fortunately, in the midst

of the psychological horror implicit in the game, Gabriel has the opportunity to reverse the deeds of the past.

*Gabriel Knight* is an exceptional blend of art, game and understanding. It is for mature audiences for all the right reasons. It does not use frivolous nudity, gratuitous violence or abrasive language to garner this reputation. Rather, it offers an adult and refreshing perspective on the characters and situations within the game. Take, for example, the character of Gabriel himself. Gabriel is a bibliophile who wants to write a detective novel. As such, he unfolds as the kind of person who is willing to "use" people. Conversations reveal that he is not beyond considering women as



*Sneak Previews offer early coverage of games still under development.*

objects; one definitely gets the feeling that he doesn't mind being inconsiderate in the tasks to which he puts his lovely assistant, and he doesn't even consider the risks he takes with Detective Moseley's career (the supporting cast member who supplies him with official police information). As the realistic characters confront very difficult choices, one realizes the mature nature of the story. Before the game is over, the character may be well on his



way to a new career with new understanding, and the mature gamer may have more sophisticated perceptions of what love and sacrifice mean. The less mature will simply not get it.

The graphics underscore the entire theme of the game because the artists have used dark palettes for most of the backgrounds, enabling the use of numerous styles of light sources to illuminate the scenes. These run the gamut from bonfires and torches through street lamps and refracted light. The theme is also visually enhanced by icon systems (the snake, the dragon, the medallion) which recur in unexpected places and implicitly remind the gamer of the quest itself. Further, the graphic artists on the game are aficionados of graphic novels, so they advance some of the story with transition screens resembling pages found in higher quality works of this nature. This, along with the talking profiles during the conversations and animated sequences (dreams and other free-running events),



breaks away from the familiar Sierra look and offers a nice change of pace.

The music is also thoughtfully integrated into the game. Bob Holmes is the primary composer and has a theory concerning scene-specific compositions. Each room in the game will have a specific theme, as will each of the free-running animated sequences. For example, Holmes will use piano instrumentation to catch the light side of New Orleans, but strings and pipe organ instrumentation in a requiem style for the scenes that emphasize darkness. In the dream sequences, there are lots of percussion, particularly timpani. Holmes gets tremendous assistance in the sound category from professional R&B percussionist, Orpheus, who not only orchestrates the percussion and rhythm aspects of many of the pieces, but is a master of sound effects, as well. The floppy disk version of the game will be fairly rich in sound effects, but the CD version may well be the most sound effect-intense game product yet.

Finally, the care in which the chrome of the game is integrated with the substance can be illustrated by considering the casting of voice talent for the CD version of *Gabriel Knight*. Tim Curry of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* fame will play the part of Gabriel. Michael Doran of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* will play Dr. John. Long-time television star Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. will play Wolfgang, Mark Hamill will play Gabriel's friend, Detective Moseley, and Rocky Carroll of the television series *Roc* will play Willie Walker.

The interface is rather typical for the Sierra icon-based system, though it does offer some new features to enhance the conversational aspect of the game and a graphic look consistent with the old New Orleans setting. There isn't any revolutionary new technology in the game, just a smooth integration of existing tools around a remarkably well-rounded design. The game itself is divided into various days with a series of Must Do's which have to be completed before the game will advance. This keeps the pacing taut and the frustration level down.

### There Is Nothing Like A Jane

The most refreshing aspect of the game, however, must be the marvelous perspective which Jane Jensen brings to it. As a female writing about a male protagonist, she injects a fair share of humorous needles into any male player's ego, but she brings the strength of a people-oriented way of looking at problems. Much of the game emphasizes conversations. Jensen says that the strength of this tool is the fact that gamers can glean as much or as little as



they want from the detailed background and subplots of the story in interactive conversation mode. These are not simply conversation trees built off key words that exist simply to advance the story. The conversations are real attempts to enrich the concept of character in a computer game. For example, one can insult Moseley and flirt with Malia (the femme fatale, lady of mystery), as well as ask questions. As Jensen observes, the interactive approach to storytelling is ideal because one can fit in a lot of material that would have to be trimmed from a more linear approach because of pacing. Now, the gamer decides how much of the exposition will be unveiled at a given time.

As in the best fiction writing, the characters came to have a life of their own during the development of the game. There was a time when the plot required Gabriel's friend Moseley to be killed. Yet, as the conversations were written and Gabriel's relationship with Moseley became more integral to the story, Jensen elected to keep him alive. One of the characters was so real that she used the same name as a real voodoo priestess in New Orleans. Jane had to quickly change the name of the character after seeing the real-life namesake on television.

We like that. Art that imitates life is art that is relevant for those who enjoy living. *Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Father* stands a chance to be the kind of story we'll never forget. It certainly may prove a point as to whether gamers merely want new technology or whether they want an in-depth setting/story to explore. *Gabriel Knight* certainly exceeds the standard in the latter. **CGW**