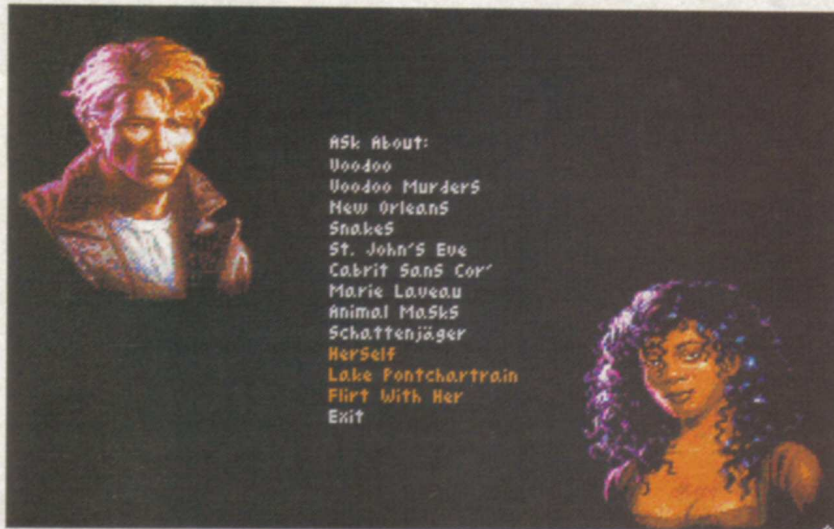


Gabriel Knight

by Bill Holmes

REVIEW



Designed by

Jane Jensen

Published by

Sierra

Systems

IBM PC 386 or higher,
MAC

Requirements

DOS 5.0 or higher,
VGA 640x480x256,
4MB RAM,
Windows CD-ROM,
CD-ROM or 3.5 floppy
disk available,
installation require-
ments range from a
minimum of 1MB to
33MB of hard disk
space depending
upon performance
criteria chosen

Graphics

VGA 256 color

Supports

VESA, Mouse,
Keyboard

Sound

Adlib, Soundblaster,
Roland MT-32,
PAS/PAS 16, General
MIDI, MS Sound
System

Players

One

This is the city, New Orleans, Louisiana. A city full of mystery and adventure, where fact and myth are a blur in the eye of a drunken tourist. I work here. I'm a cop. My name's Friday...

No! That's a lie. But my name is *Holmes*, so I do know a little bit about mysteries. Give me a well written book or movie that treats the audience fairly, and I'm a happy guy. Doyle, Hammett, the Grande Dame herself, Agatha Christie - all respected their readers' intelligence. The pieces of the puzzle were laid out, hints dropped, but never the eleventh hour "Perry Mason" screaming confessions out of the blue! In film, none were better than the Master, Hitchcock, who was smart enough to realize the value of suspense over shock. There's nothing worse than a shoddy plot that is so obvious from the opening credits that you gape at the screen (or page) in amazement at how dim-witted the characters truly are. Unfortunately, for every *Rear Window* there are a hundred films where the baby sitter, broken high heels and all, ventures into the darkened basement with a candle because she heard noises down there.

Hard to Please

I mention this because I'm not the typical adventure game player. Yes, I like some of them - the *Legend* games by the brilliant Meretzky and Bates, the underrated **Freddy Pharkas** (*under-rated?! Not here, Bill! Not by us!* - Eds.) from Al Lowe and Josh Mandel, but for the rest, I'm a tough sell. I have little interest in role-playing games, and don't have the time to commit to a lengthy adventure where I'm going to have to mix potions endlessly or remember the names of hundreds of mutant dwarves. Nothing against those who enjoy that (and from the success of the genre, there are plenty of you), but for someone who likes a

deeper, darker story - *film noir*, if you will - there hasn't been anything worthy. Until now.

Jane Jensen, author of **Gabriel Knight**, has delivered an adult drama that combines mystery, suspense, romance, fear and the quest for self identity. A fan of the genre, her work reflects her influences. Like Stephen King, she juxtaposes innocence and danger, but without the rock-and-roll lyrics shoehorned clumsily into every open space. Like Hitchcock, she realizes that there must be humor to cleanse the emotional palette of the reader, for you cannot shock a numbed mind. Like Christie, she knows that sometimes the hardest things to find have been right under our noses all along.

Our Hero

Gabriel, the protagonist, is a writer and owner of a bookstore in the French Quarter of New Orleans. It's a small specialty store, and we learn quickly that his dormant business

sense is matched by his lack of commercial success at his craft. In fact, were it not for Grace, his assistant/Girl Friday, there might not be a shop at all. We learn a bit about Gabriel by talking to Grace and asking her several questions in their initial meeting, as we in turn learn more about Grace as well. You soon discover that you'll be talking a *lot* in this game...

As Gabriel finds out about the central mystery, he also discovers facts about his own heritage. His nightmares become deeper, more focused, and display more pieces to confuse and guide him (and us). Who is the mysterious Malia Gedde, for instance, and why is he so affected by her presence? Which of the characters who are familiar with voodoo can he trust...and which must he beware? What are the symbols that haunt his dreams, and where do those dreams separate from reality?

Sierra's interface is easy to manipulate and will be familiar to any adventure game player. Mouse-driven, it uses icons for common commands (picking up or opening objects, moving to another location) and has a limitless inventory and a tape recorder. The recorder, which arrives for Gabriel in the opening scene, is a very handy tool. No longer did I have to rely on page upon page of incomprehensible chicken scratch after dozens of conversations with characters (although I did jot down key facts from habit); the recorder captures (in text) the conversations you have with the characters and stores them on cassette tapes - right down to the cheesy "j card" with the topics listed on them. Need to remember what the fortune teller said? Open your book, pick out her tape, and fast forward to the topic you need. Brilliant - automapping for the mind!

Blabber Deluxe

There are those who might complain that there is too much talk and not enough action in



the game, and I can't totally fault them. Speaking to or questioning a character usually produces a list of topics, some critical, most informative, that you can direct Gabriel to discuss. Most of the time the order is not important, although if a conversation path uncovers new subjects, a new thread is available to pursue (and a name or topic is added to the list). In some ways, this makes the game idiot-proof; by merely following every thread, you come across information by default. You are allowed to pursue topics repeatedly, until one of two things will happen - the character will either start to repeat answers, or will say something along the lines of "I've told you all I know." Similarly, sometimes Gabriel will change his follow-up questions to "tell me *more* about [whatever]," while other times he will ask "can you tell me about..." five and six questions deep. I wish this was more consistent; the first time a character started repeating itself I forged ahead through the entire cycle again, waiting for the "all I know" disclaimer - which wasn't there. It was also odd to occasionally end a forty-question session with a character by clicking on "oh nothing, never mind".

It's about Time, it's about Space...

Traveling from one area to another in the game is done by exiting to maps where icons are displayed for available locations. Some are accessible immediately, while others are only attainable by reaching set points in the story or by having a particular conversation. In the same way, characters may or may not be available at different times. Within reason, locations and characters may be visited in random order, although there are tasks that must be completed before some locations bear fruit. The structure of the game itself is broken into ten days; it is impossible to progress to the following day unless all business of the previous period has been completed. Although this method is not unique in adventure gaming, *thank you!* There's nothing that aggravates me more than having to wipe out a week's worth of gaming because I need a pencil in Day Twelve that I forgot to sharpen in Day Three!

No adventure game would be complete without puzzles, of course, and most of these are very clever. Sometimes it becomes readily apparent that you have to do something to an object, because the screen changes and pops the puzzle in front of you to solve. Other times it is a matter of connecting a series of events to get something accomplished. They are not easy or obvious, but they are fair. Even when I needed help solving one (one? HAH!), when I got the answer I was pleased to find that it was logical and well within my grasp.

A word about the characters - well done, Jane! Even the peripheral players who are present only to move one scene along have depth (if you choose to have Gabriel pursue the conversations). Having personalities attached to these smaller parts keeps the mood of the piece intact. The richness of the New Orleans area is also well represented here, where tourists converge on Bourbon Street not far from where diverse pockets of locals are encamped like so many little countries. The dark, cluttered shops and offices are like a page from Dickens. I only wish I were so well traveled that I could

vouch for Germany...

For those who like to savor every corner of a scene, you are in for a treat. Clicking around the locations uncovers a world of information, and quite a few humorous interjections. Even the peripheral activities are enjoyable; I found myself hesitant to leave one of the park quadrants because I was enjoying the blues band so much! And Jensen has thrown in some great dialogue as well. I knew that Gabriel was supposed to ask to see a character called Malia Gedde when her butler answered her door, yet I could not resist following the thread pretending to be a door-to-door salesman! This side

There were also strange bugs, like not being able to maneuver through a scene, and only being able to move to a different location by saving the game in progress and immediately restoring it. Fortunately, *Sierra* received enough information about this and other inaccuracies and issued a patch in January correcting these flaws. If you are having problems and have the 1.0 release of the game, make sure you install this. (*Ed note: (busy today, aren't I?) - Sierra, along with some other companies, has recently had to come to grips with a DOS Extender now almost universally used in the industry, called DOS4GW and*



activity did not prevent me from completing my task at the scene, but did have me laughing out loud. I even tried calling *Sierra Customer Service* from Gabriel's studio phone - hey, you never know - but that was not one of the hidden treats. There are many, many hours of gameplay here for you to enjoy.

Engrossed as I was in the story, I never really felt like I was Gabriel Knight, but I don't think that was the intent. Gabriel is certainly the central character, and it is through his eyes, in a sense, that we experience the occurrences, but despite that he's more of a third party (with hair like his, I'm not sure that's a bad thing...). Perhaps it has to do with the size and texture of the characters, which look less realistic in the various scenes than during any of the one-on-one conversations. More likely, however, is the method of presenting Gabriel and the occurrences in his life. With the exception of the nightmare/dream sequences or the close up puzzle segments (clock, thermostat), everything else is from a third-person observer's perspective. We watch two people talk, often from half a room away. It is Gabriel whom they face while speaking, and he faces them, so we are eavesdroppers, not participants, in the action. Not a problem, just a fact about the design.

Hardware Glare

Some technical notes - I played the DOS version, and had problem after problem with lockups and sound board glitches. When I reconfigured the system to change the sound card, I found that the saved games were also configuration-specific. My previous saved games were useless, and if I wanted to try the Windows version, I'd be out of luck again.

designed by Rational Systems, Inc. Versions 1.92-1.93 of this Extender created lots of problems, but the latest versions, version 1.94 and 1.95, look clean as a whistle by comparison. If you are finding lots of problems in a recently purchased game, looked closely and see if you get a "DOS4GW" message flying by right before the game starts. If you notice a version number lower than 1.94, it's time to look for an update to your new game. Most companies have by now discovered this source of many of the problems in their recent releases.

The End

Sierra will also be issuing the game in CD-ROM, featuring the voices of Tim Curry (how perfect!), Mark Hamill (of *Luke Skywalker* fame), Efram Zimbalist Jr., Michael Dorn (Whorf, from *ST:TTNG*) and others. I can't wait to hear it, although I had no problem imagining my own range of voices for these characters. The sound effects in the game are very good, and initially I wished there was some sort of speech pack accessory for the game, but with all this dialogue, you truly will need a CD.

This is an adult game, and there are language and visual sequences that may not be appropriate for younger players. But although violence is represented, this is not a gory hack-fest like *Mortal Kombat*. There's a huge difference between *Psycho* and *Friday The Thirteenth Part 999*, and the same principle applies here. Room must be made for intelligent, literate games that dare to be original. In an era where so many games are little more than eye candy, what a pleasure it is to feed the brain as well. □