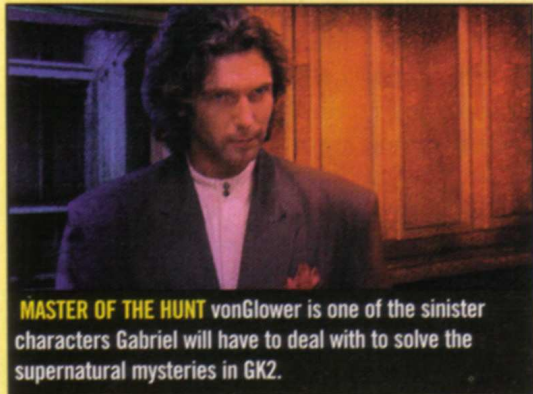


Hunting A Beast Within

*A Sneak Preview of
the Psychological
Suspense
And Old World
Horror In GABRIEL
KNIGHT 2: A BEAST
WITHIN*

by Johnny L. Wilson

Shouldn't those be torches?" asks Gabriel Knight when a crowd of German citizenry forms outside his door in the middle of the night, a scene reminiscent of both the original *Frankenstein* and the hugely popular send-up, *Young Frankenstein*. Yet, the crowd gathered outside Gabriel Knight's door is not there to wreak havoc on the author of *The Voodoo Murders* and amateur sleuth from New Orleans. They have come



MASTER OF THE HUNT vonGlower is one of the sinister characters Gabriel will have to deal with to solve the supernatural mysteries in GK2.

for help, help in the form of the *schattenjaeger* (supernatural hunter) who has allegedly inherited from a distant relative the gift and responsibility of facing the manifestations of the netherworld on the behalf of its victims.

"Are you the *schattenjaeger* or aren't you?" asks one of the leaders of the community in this opening scene to GABRIEL KNIGHT 2: A BEAST WITHIN (GK2). Naturally, such a question sets up the mystery that Gabriel must solve and draws the gamer with an "I dare you" into the game. This time, however, as opposed to the award-winning GABRIEL



TRANSYLVANIA 6-9000 The Bavarian villagers in GK2's opening film sequence aren't much happier than those in the classic movie *Frankenstein*.

KNIGHT: SINS OF THE FATHER which relied upon a graphic novel look to tell its story, video sequences form the narrative exposition between chapters and after important puzzles are solved. Whereas the original GABRIEL KNIGHT game used dark color palettes to convey the ominous nature of its sub-

ject matter and seduce lovers of the dark side into its rich story, the latest version uses a mixture of photographic realism, digitized video and impressive acting to pull gamers into the deep realms of suspended disbelief.

PAWS TO REFRESH

GK2 picks up the story a few months after the end of the original GK. The *Voodoo Murders*, the book Gabriel wrote based on the events of the first game, has been successful, and Gabriel has moved into the ancestral manse in Germany in order to concentrate on his writing. Of course, purchasers of the game readily know that they are not going to be manipulating Gabriel across the screen in a story dealing with writer's block. So, by the time the opening video with its monster movie crowd scene and set-up story about a large wolf is concluded, everyone knows that Gabriel is going to be investigating werewolf phenomena as

opposed to the voodoo cult in the first game. Also, everyone knows that Bavaria is an ideal locale for hunting werewolves, considering the fact that there are early 18th century accounts which attribute deaths there to such supernatural manifestations. Hence, the German locale.

GK2 is an ambitious project. Not only does it feel bigger than its predecessor in terms of size, but the story is conveyed via a slightly different use of a familiar technology. Unsatisfied with the look of games that merely videotape actors and actresses against blue screens (ChromaKey and Ultimatte) and fill in the backgrounds with virtual sets that were completely rendered on computers (THE 7TH GUEST, THE DAEDALUS ENCOUNTER, and PHANTASMAGORIA), designer Jane Jensen elected to do some location shooting. Since the story takes place in Germany, it would have been prohibitively expensive to involve live actors and a full production crew on an inter-

national location, even given a WING COMMANDER 4-sized budget. So, Jensen and a photographer friend visited Germany during the pre-production phase of the game in order to simultaneously scout authentic locations, research local history and legends, and take more than 1,000 photos to be used

as scenic backgrounds.

In general, the backgrounds are extremely effective. They are lush, photo-realistic sets which are embellished by computer artists to meet the special needs of the script. They function for the game like matte paintings do for film, enabling the video production to take place on a sound stage and at domestic locations while giving an other world (or in this case, Old World) ambiance. The actors are superimposed on the sets, and a minimum of 3-D rendering is imposed to provide depth. In the early version we saw, there were still some rough edges, since we occasionally observed the digitized Grace stepping on 2-D images of books or furniture in such an awkward way that it spoiled the scene. However, this was relatively rough footage and we doubt many of such lapses will escape the final blending of video, photo and game interface.

HUMANE INTERFACE

The game interface itself will be rather familiar



FRAMEWORK The interface for GK2 is fairly standard for most state-of-the-art graphic adventures.

to graphic adventure aficionados. The "rooms" or locations are presented on-screen in a picture frame. The arrow cursor is used to explore the location and essentially give stage directions to the player's on-screen character (either Gabriel or Grace). The cursor is transformed into Gabriel's ancestral dagger whenever it crosses a hot spot. Double-clicking on the hot spot will either open a door/passage or call up a close-up view of an active object (a letter to be read, a weapon to be examined, a sign to be read, etc.).

Many objects will automatically be added to the player's inventory and will be pictured at the bottom of the frame. Then, icons on the right side enable players to manipulate those objects in order to examine or use them. There are some new icons in this interface which enable you to record conversations and splice them together to form a new conversation and solve a puzzle. As in PHANTASMAGORIA, using objects or solving puzzles will conjure video

sequences as both transition, exposition and reward, but unlike PHANTASMAGORIA, Jane Jensen has no plans to add an on-line hint option. The puzzles flower out from simple in the beginning to complex at the end, and Jane has no intention of spoiling the fun for expert adventurers.

Players of GK1 will find the conversational interface familiar. Whenever Gabriel or Grace encounters a new character, a list of conversation



SPLITTING HAIRS Double-clicking on the proper object will evoke this scene of Gabriel uncovering a vital clue.

topics appears in the bottom section of the on-screen picture frame. Highlighting the desired topic and clicking will evoke a video scene of the character responding to Gabriel or Grace on the subject. Most of the dialogue is handled with video clips taken from a standard Number Two shot (named after the old #2 cameras which in traditional film work were almost always designated to film over the shoulder of the protagonist). Like GK1, the number of topics will expand based on new information received, but unlike GK1 the topics disappear after use, and there aren't quite as many topics overall. Why are there less topics when conversation was one of the great strengths of the award-winning program? Simply because video footage and sound files take up more room than the old text files. Yet there is plenty of conversation in GK2. It's just that much of it free-flows in the video without as much need for intervention on the gamer's part.

There is also a change in the way characters navigate from place to place. Since many of the background locations in GK2 are larger than real-life, gamers will no longer have to "walk" the digitized characters across every screen in order to get from one location to another. Rather, by raising the cursor to the top of the screen, moving it to the side of the screen where the character would eventually exit, and double-clicking, the scene shifts to the next street or the next room.

Fortunately, the designers have

not only kept the most friendly aspect to navigation from GK1, but enhanced it. Remember the RISE OF THE DRAGON-style street map of New Orleans in GK1 where new locations would arise as Gabriel uncovered clues? Superimposed over the map were cute little icons representing the active locations within the game, and players could move Gabriel from place to place with a quick point and click. In GK2 there is more than one such map. One is an actual city map of Munich (streamlined somewhat, but authentic nonetheless) where street names are highlighted as they become active. It is colorful and really gives the sense that one is trying to make one's way through a foreign city. The other is a map of Southern Bavaria which looks like an actual Michelin-quality map with picture postcard insets appearing to indicate actual locations.

THE PLOT AND THE HOUNDS

The writing in GK2 is as strong or better than that in GK1. Jane Jensen has that rare capacity to juxtapose fiction and reality, spiritual and profane, primitive and civilized, and male and female within characters and situations that we care about. GABRIEL KNIGHT 2: A BEAST WITHIN is ostensibly about a hunt for a werewolf or werewolves. Yet, GK2 is also a story of identity—a coming to grips with self and destiny that one finds in most of the best literature. It places Gabriel in great danger and, in the chapters where players control Gabriel, the pace is swift and danger is imminent. He must decide what kind of man he is. It also places Grace in a more leisurely, exploratory story. She faces identity and career crisis while attempting to solve the mystery and resolve jealousy on at least two fronts. She must determine whether she will accept who she is or transform herself in a

very different, but perhaps as painful, metamorphosis from that of the werewolves in the story.

Frankly, I was concerned about two things with GK2: Second novel syndrome, and the use of live actors. Second novel syndrome is what the late Lester Del Rey, perhaps the greatest acquisitions editor in fantasy and science fiction history, referred to when a talented newcomer started their second book. Essentially, one works on their first book all their lives. The first book has a uniqueness and a coherence all its own—in spite of having inevitable rough edges as the author hones his or her craft. Second books are composed in less time and often lose some of the coherence of that first book. I was afraid that GK2 would lack the focus of GK1. I was wrong.

I was also afraid that GK2 would lose something with live actors to replace our images of the characters. With Gabriel, my fears were allayed. Dean Erickson is marvelous as Gabriel. Watching him filming a scene from an alleged lost Wagnerian opera (a Francis Ford Coppola-esque juxtapo-



MASS TRANSEPT In some scenes, players will control Grace, such as this encounter with a priest at Rittersburg's St. George's Church.

sition of celebration/violence), I found myself amazed at his range of expression and emotion. He is better as Gabriel than Tim Curry was as the voice-over in the CD version of GK1. I could quibble about Grace's performance and a few of the character actors, but the reality is that Erickson's performance will overshadow them all.

GABRIEL KNIGHT 2: A BEAST WITHIN is the kind of sequel that all sequels should be. Its story is improved, its technology is improved, and its interface is improved. I've only seen a couple of chapters within the game and pacing, post-production, last-minute marketing concessions and the like could change things, but my initial impression is very positive. If you liked GK1, you won't be disappointed. If you like sophisticated stories, you won't be disappointed. If you want more challenging puzzles than standard adventure fare, you won't be disappointed. Here's hoping that initial impression holds up. 🐾



MEN WHO RUN WITH WOLVES If you want to hunt werewolves, you'll have to join the "experts" at this exclusive Hunt Club.