

## BEST ADVENTURE GAME

## The Beast Within | SIERRA

**WINNER**

Sierra's *The Beast Within* has much higher production values than most full-motion video adventures, but it's the intriguing story and solid gameplay that made it the best adventure of the year.

Since most games marketed as "graphic adventures" in 1996 were really just abstract puzzle games padded out to multi-disc proportions with full-motion video, you might be tempted to think the winner in this category isn't anything special — but you'd be wrong. *The Beast Within*, Sierra's second game starring Gabriel Knight, is much more than just the best of a bad bunch; it's one of the best adventure games ever. This one has loads of video, but it also has plenty of good, old-fashioned adventure game puzzles and a truly complex and satisfying story.

In *The Beast Within*, Gabriel Knight has left the hustle and bustle of New Orleans for the serenity of his ancestral castle in Rittersburg, Germany. He hopes to write a follow-up to the best-selling novel he based on his experience with a voodoo cult back home, but — of course — fate has more interesting things in store for him. Called on to investigate a mysterious murder in a nearby Bavarian village, everyone's favorite *shattenjaeger* (German for "shadow hunter") soon finds himself caught up in a plot involving missing zoo wolves; a mysterious, exclusive hunt club; a lost opera written by Richard Wagner; and Bavaria's last king, the tortured and eccentric Ludwig II.

It's not giving away too much to say that *The Beast Within* is a werewolf story, but it's not your usual bark-at-the-moon tale. Jane Jensen, one of the best writers working in PC games, cre-

ated a script that breathes new life into the hoariest clichés; scenes shot in authentic locations (including Castle Neuschwanstein and the city of Munich) draw you into the story; and the acting is head-and-shoulders above the usual live-action video fare. If it had been just a movie, *The Beast Within* would easily beat 99 percent of what passes for horror on the big screen these days. But it's more than a movie — it's an honest-to-goodness *game*, and one of precious few recent Sierra adventures that actually lives up to the company's legacy.

If you believe the current glut of multi-disc video extravaganzas spells the death of traditional graphic adventures, you should give *The Beast Within* a try. It proves that flashy technology and solid, involving gameplay can co-exist in the same game, and it raises the bar for adventure game designers everywhere.



**RUNNER-UP** | With talented professional actors like Tanya Roberts, *The Pandora Directive* may have the best cast ever featured in a PC game.



**RUNNER-UP** | *Zork Nemesis'* link to a classic text adventure series from Infocom gave it a depth that most of today's 3D-rendered puzzle-fests can't claim.

Hot on Gabriel Knight's heels is Tex Murphy, another favorite graphic adventure hero who returned to the PC in Access' *The Pandora Directive*. The sequel to *Under a Killing Moon* tops its predecessor in every way — it has a better script, better puzzles, better acting, better video, better music, and a longer playing time. Veteran 1950s sci-fi actors Kevin McCarthy and John Agar, along with Barry Corbin of TV's "Northern Exposure" added professionalism and confidence to the game's ensemble cast, while director Adrian Carr (*The Man From Snowy River*) guided its engaging story of UFO paranoia and the Roswell Incident with a sure hand. The term "Interactive Movie" has been used and abused so frequently that it has lost most of its meaning, but if any game qualifies for that label, *The Pandora Directive* certainly does.

In some ways, Activision's *Zork Nemesis* comes closer to puzzle games like *Myst* than to traditional graphic adventures — there's very little interaction with other characters, and the puzzles do tend toward the abstract side. Still, this game has a charm and vitality that those other games lack, perhaps owing to its lineage as a descendant of Infocom's *Zork* series of text adventures. And it doesn't hurt that *Zork Nemesis* is graphically gorgeous — the 3D-rendered backgrounds are as pretty as any you'll find in an adventure game, and while the game's Z-Vision 360-degree scrolling is a bit gimmicky, it makes for some spectacular panoramas.

So 1996 wasn't such a bad year for adventure games after all. For some reason, a whole slew of new me-too game companies have latched onto adventure as their genre of choice, and the bad games outnumbered the good by a wider margin than ever in 1996, but our winner and runners-up show that some people are still interested in making great graphic adventures the way they used to be made.