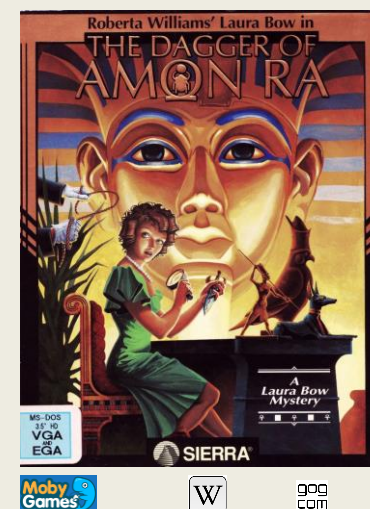


The Dagger Of Amon Ra

Studio: Sierra On-Line
Designer(s): Bruce J. Balfour / Roberta Williams
Part of series: Laura Bow Mysteries
Release: 1992; 1993 (CD version)
Main credits: Designers/Writers: Josh Mandel, Bruce J. Balfour, Andy Hoyos
 Programming: Brian K. Hughes
 Graphics: Cheryl Sweeney, Bob Gleason, Terrence C. Falls
 Music: Christopher Braymen
Useful links: Playthrough: [Complete Playlist Parts 1-10](#) (620 mins.)

Basic Overview

Up until 1992, all of Sierra's franchises had remained the exclusive brainchildren of their respective parents. Roberta Williams worked on *King's Quest*; Mark Crowe and Scott Murphy continued to humiliate *Space Quest*'s Roger Wilco in more ways than the galaxy ever thought possible; Al Lowe kept digging into the bottomless pit of dirty jokes for *Leisure Suit Larry*. Yet as the company continued to expand, making a bumpy, but ultimately successful transition into the age of point-and-click, the basic principle of «one person, one big idea» began to wane. With more and more people added to the staff, Sierra was able to simultaneously work on numerous projects — way more than the original veteran creators could handle — and this meant finally starting to detach franchises from their «auteurs» and view them rather as the collective property of the company. As was common in the Sierra family, any such new development had to be centered on the Holy Mother — Roberta Williams — and it was her who willingly sacrificed her youngest daughter, Laura Bow, for the greater good of the firm. Although credited as «creative consultant» for *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* — the second and last game in the *Laura Bow*



Mystery series — this was probably just a polite way of reminding us who had invented the character in the first place. I honestly have no idea what sort of «creative consultations» the game's designers would be running to get from their boss — 1920s hat fashions? (I don't think Roberta was ever into *that* angle).

Anyway, the two most important names in the creation of *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* were Bruce Balfour, a mystery and sci-fi writer and game designer with a bunch of poorly known strategy and adventure titles behind his belt; and Josh Mandel, who had already been with Sierra for a couple years, working various odd jobs from producing to voice acting to a little writing. Balfour was in overall charge of the project and supplied much of its «mystery» angle; however, most of the actual writing for the game came from Mandel, who was ultimately responsible for the main spirit of *The Dagger* — besides, Balfour did not last long at Sierra, whereas Mandel, having cut some serious new teeth on the game, would go on to become one of the most important people at Sierra for the rest of its duration. Thus, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* remains largely associated with Mandel, the guy to put his nose inside almost every pie baked for almost every Sierra franchise in the 1990s.

Somewhat predictably, since it would be difficult to find two game designers and writers with more differing approaches to their work than Roberta Williams and Josh Mandel, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* feels like it owes almost nothing to its direct predecessor, *The Colonel's Bequest*, other than the name of its protagonist — oh, and the fact that this is another murder mystery where the protagonist finds herself in an enclosed, inescapable space with murder victims dropping around her faster than the actual screen loading times. The biggest technical difference is that the game was finally a talkie (at least, in its final CD-ROM version from 1993; the original floppy disk version from 1992 carried only text messages) — and thus, a perfect playground for Josh Mandel to test out his own brand of witty humor. Where *The Colonel's Bequest* excelled mainly in terms of «sensual» atmosphere, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* would place a far stronger emphasis on the snarky, sarcastic, post-modern intellectual side of things — something about as far removed from Roberta Williams' proverbially «housewife» approach to game-making as possible. Admirably, Roberta herself endured and even encouraged this, almost as if she were sending away her farm-bred girl to Harvard University.

It is little wonder, though, that *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* managed to assemble itself quite a cult following over the years: even a cursory investigation of gaming forums, YouTube channels, etc., shows that memories of it are still going strong, and that far more people continue to have it on their minds than there are veteran fans of *The Colonel's Bequest*. Of course, to a large degree this is because the first game is older (in 1989, there were still a whole lot fewer gamers around than in 1992-93) and has no voice acting; but an equally significant reason is that Sierra's Mandel-style games typically appeal to the same kind of tongue-in-cheek, sarcasm-over-sentimentality college geeks who, over the years, have succeeded in making «LucasArts»

sound so much cooler than «Sierra». Ironically, the game still inherits a large number of flaws from its predecessor — to the point of still being more of a «multimedia experience» than a proper «game» — but the new-found slickness of its design and sharpness of its verbal humor masks these flaws much more successfully.

Content evaluation

Plotline

For Laura Bow's second adventure, Balfour and Mandel decided to bring the Southern lady a little closer to home; the Queens-born Josh Mandel probably did not feel too comfortable about setting the action back up in Louisiana, and thus it is that at the beginning of *The Dagger Of Amon Ra*, we see our heroine, having graduated from Tulane, board a train for New York, where, in an age of new-found emancipation for women, she is going to try and find herself a job with one of the city's prominent newspapers. Largely because of a bit of a pull that her father has on the editor,



she is hired for a brief probation period, during which she has to cover and help investigate the theft of a precious Egyptian dagger from the prestigious Leyendecker Museum (loosely based on the Museum of Natural History).

Like its predecessor, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* is structured into several «Acts», within each of which you have to complete a certain set of time-advancing actions in order to progress to the next stage (and if you procrastinate or get stuck, some of these events are going to take place even without you involved; the game constantly has the clock running). However, this time around the world surrounding you is a bit more of a sprawl — where *The Colonel's Bequest* immediately chained you to the Colonel's mansion and plantation, the entire first act of *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* lets you freely roam around several locations in New York City, using a cab to journey from one point to another, and it is not until the second act of the game that you become fully confined to just one locked-in environment (the Leyendecker).

Admittedly, the first act is not entirely disconnected from the rest of the game — you do get to meet several important characters who shall be a constant presence in the Museum as well, such as Detective Rian O'Riley, responsible for handling

the case of the missing dagger; «Ziggy», the ratty stool pigeon spending most of his time around the local speakeasies; and the handsome stevedore Steve Dorian (duh!) from the ship which had earlier transported the Egyptian cultural artifacts to the US. Through those guys and other encounters, you can gather some preliminary information on the case before the main course starts at the Museum. However, *in general*, I do believe, the chief purpose of the first act is to establish the motif of «Southern Girl Makes Good In The Big Apple» — and recreate the vibrant atmosphere of New York in the 1920s, ever so slightly warped with a touch of sarcastic humor and the inescapable post-modern attitude.

The scene is a little messy at first, in that the game does not quite understand if it wants to be a «loss of innocence» story (it certainly begins as one, with Laura getting mugged as soon as she gets off the train to New York), a straightforward detective story (which it reverts to as soon as you ask anybody a pertinent question), or just a collection of humorous remarks on the flaws and virtues of ordinary New Yorkers in the Jazz Age. Then again, why should it necessarily be only one out of three? Granted, the «loss of innocence» thing quickly dissipates, as Laura's personality becomes one-sidedly concentrated on the angle of «strong, stubborn girl making her way through a world of male chauvinists»; and the flaws and virtues of ordinary New Yorkers are left behind in the dust once we make the transition to Act II, after which Laura almost never gets the chance to revisit those ordinary New Yorkers again. (There's a little bit of socially conscious banter centered around Ernie Leach, the Museum's African-American caretaker and a veteran of World War I, but it's short and most people will miss it anyway because it's quite a pain in the ass to catch Ernie in a talkative state). Sooner or later, everything fades away, fizzles out, and makes way for the murder mystery.

Which is not too good, because, frankly, the murder mystery *sucks*. At the very least, in terms of plot twists, intrigue, and denouement it is in no way an improvement on the mystery of *The Colonel's Bequest*. There are just too many superfluous twists, too many plot holes, too many actions that do not make any sense — and I do realize that this is not so much a serious murder mystery as a parody on a murder mystery, but even parodies have to have their inner logic, and this particular one places way too much emphasis on «surprise» and «shock value» to have enough left for reason and logic. The plot is certainly more complex than last time around — for instance, the killer is ultimately revealed to have been motivated by more than one motive in his endless rampage — but this is one case where extra complexity only serves to ruin the mood.

We may at least be thankful to the writers for getting rid of the strangest plot circumstance of the first game — namely, that throughout the game Laura Bow is the only person to ever be aware that a series of murders is going on — but it's not as if they are doing a great job with it: this time, even when some of the other NPCs *do* learn that a murder has been committed, all they do is take notice, commend Laura for a job well done, then continue to roam around the Museum as if being locked up in a

confined space with a serial killer running around is just one of the many uncomfortable perks of life you're supposed to walk your way through. Yeah, sure, I'd love to get out of here and all, but... the front door is locked, and the service guy has lost the key, so pardon me while I just roam around all these corridors some more while the killer is taking their time to decide whom to bump off next and in which particularly gruesome way.

Unsurprisingly, while much of the dialog in the game — particularly in its first Act — is sharp, witty, and hilarious, this *only* concerns those lines which have the least of all to do with the mystery plot. By contrast, a typical detective-related dialog runs something like this:

The Countess: *What are YOU doing here?*

Laura: *I just happened to be hiding behind the tapestry.*

The Countess: *You're LYING!*

Laura: *How could you tell?*

The Countess: *Nobody just happens to HIDE behind a museum tapestry!*

Laura: *And nobody just walks around a museum late at night with paintings under their arms.*

The Countess: *Paintings? Oh, you mean THESE paintings? Ah...I just found them laying around on the FLOOR...and I picked them up so nobody would STEP on them!*

Laura: *I don't think so.*

The Countess: *You don't think so? Are you ACCUSING me of something, you SILLY girl?*

Laura: *What do you think?*

The Countess: *I think you're a RUDE girl who needs to learn some MANNERS. The nerve... going around ACCUSING people of stealing paintings!*

Laura: *Did I say anything about you stealing them?*

The Countess: *Well...of COURSE you did! Don't try to TRICK me, girl. I've got more tricks than you have BRAIN CELLS!*

I only hope it wasn't Josh Mandel who wrote this kind of tripe and forced the poor voice actors to record it, but nothing could really be excluded. I, for one, much prefer dialog like [Laura] "*What do you think of New York, Mr. Carter? Isn't it exciting?*" — [Dr. Pippin Carter] "*I hate it. It's crowded, it's noisy, and you Americans have no concept of how the class system is supposed to work. You go around treating each other like equals, which I find very distasteful.*" Or: [Dr. Olympia Miklos] "*You are wise to carry a magnifier, my dear. You miss so many of the good things if you don't look close enough. Imagine never seeing pores, or lice, or fungus spores!*" Sure, this has nothing to do with the plot as such, but really, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* is all about its characters, and it is *here*, certainly not in the ugly twisted contortions of the plot, where the game really stands head and shoulders above its comparatively bland predecessor.

Of course, all these characters are every bit as stereotypical and clichéd — I think Balfour and Mandel specifically made a point of them being clichéd, so as to keep strictly in line with the first game — but the difference is that now they talk funny, and sometimes they talk funny *and* smart at the same time. The new French sexy tart, Yvette Delacroix, gets ten times as many lines as did Fifi, the French maid, in *The Colonel's Bequest*, and you get to be both disgusted at her character *and* feel some actual pity for her plight as her story unfolds from its uncouth beginnings to its gruesome conclusion. The «aristocrats» are all comically snobby, yet even the above-mentioned Dr. Pippin Carter (obviously named after and loosely based upon Howard Carter, the discoverer of Tutankhamun's Tomb) occasionally gets the chance to deliver a snarky, insightful observation on life that's worth mulling over. The Museum's Security Chief, Wolf Heimlich, is perhaps the single most over-the-top parody of a classic Imperial German militarist ever designed for a video game — or, at least, should be somewhere in those ranks ("*NEFFER point a veapon at me, Fraulein Bow! My highly trained reflexes could kill you in three seconds if I wanted to! THREE SECONDS!*"). Only Laura's potential love interest, the stevedore Steve Dorian, is about as boring as a splash of paint on the wall — but I suppose that was at least partly intentional as well, as there was probably some deep meaning implied in the fact of Laura getting the hots for the single least explicitly «interesting» member of the party.

There is definitely a bit of a social angle to the game as well: much of the plot revolves around the idea of the Dagger of Amon Ra unscrupulously smuggled out of its native country (Egypt), and of certain individuals' brave anti-colonial struggle to retribute it. That angle is clearly handled with a bit too much humor, crudeness, and political insensitiveness to be acceptable for today's mainstream values — but in the game's defense, let it be said that Mandel and Co. apply pretty much the same parodic standards to each and every one of their characters, be it a snub-nosed, elitist British archaeologist with clear ideas on racial superiority, or a snub-nosed, elitist, European-educated Egyptian bourgeois with equally clear ideas on a different kind of racial superiority. The game lets you in on the eternal debate about the ruthlessness of British and American colonialism, but declines from taking sides — which is, perhaps, for the best. *The Dagger Of Amon Ra's* main purpose is for you to have fun, not raise your level of awareness; but if you *do* want to profit from the sensitive topics it lightly touches upon in order to raise that level, you are most certainly welcome to try.

The game does go somewhat over the top in its anachronistic depiction of Egyptian neo-paganism (today usually known as «[Kemetism](#)»), presenting all (both) of its Egyptian characters as comically over-the-top reconstructionists of the cult of Amon Ra at a time when genuine «Pharaohism» was typical of a small freakish minority, as opposed to the more generally Arabic- and Islamic-minded independence movement. It is clear that Mandel and Co. made quite a bit of research into Egyptian mythology and history while writing their dialog for the game, but much of that research seems to have been superficial — to

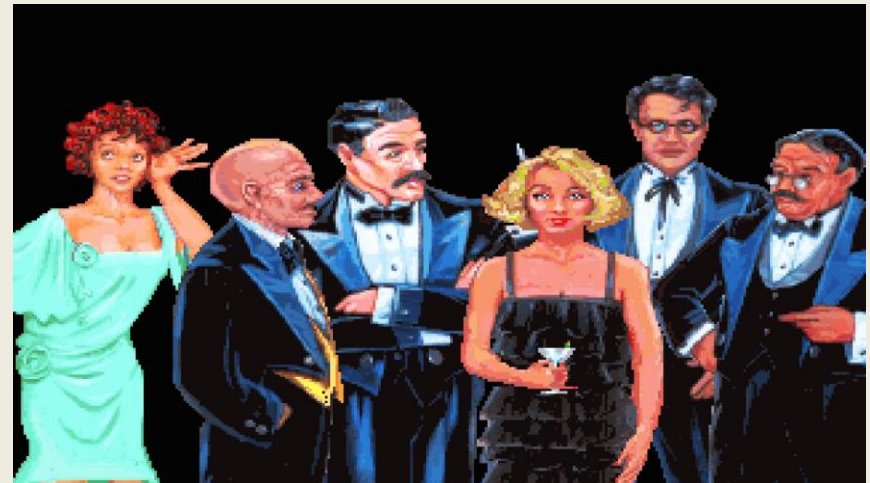
the extent that it is hard for me to tell, when one of the characters says stuff like "*I do not understand your meaning. Perhaps it is the English... it is such a curious language... not as clear as Egyptian*", if that line is supposed to be taken seriously or tongue-in-cheek, considering that «Dr. Ptasheptut Smith»'s native language could only have been Arabic, and that even if he *did* go to the trouble of learning to speak Ancient Egyptian, he would have had serious trouble perceiving it as «clear».

Then again, Mandel's writing style is always complex: over and over again, real and accurate information on the reality of Ancient Egypt is interspersed with intentional humorous nonsense and gibberish, mixing admiration for the culture with merciless lampooning, so I would rather honestly refrain from pronouncing any strong judgement on anything that might superficially feel «ignorant» or «offensive» in this game, and just relax and enjoy the comedy instead.

In any case, let us just mark the inescapable fact that the dialog — at least in those parts where it does not explicitly concern the main storyline of the game — is a huge improvement over *The Colonel's Bequest*; that the plot of the game, on the whole, makes even less sense than it used to; and that, once again, it really doesn't matter as long as you get your laughs, your atmosphere, and your «edutainment» value.

Puzzles

The puzzle system is where *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* shows the most continuity with its predecessor. Just like *The Colonel's Bequest*, it dumps Sierra's classic point system in favor of certain sets of actions you need to perform in order to unlock the «good» ending of the game (one in which Laura manages to stay alive, find the Dagger, and properly identify the murderer). These actions involve getting useful information from the surrounding NPCs, collecting a large bunch of potential evidence from crime scenes, and gathering various visual clues all over the museum. However, unlike *The Colonel's Bequest*, you do not get any actual «rankings» — what you have to do at the end is be able to correctly answer a number of questions and own a certain amount of corroborating evidence in your possession; failing this, Laura may meet a grim end, and the Dagger may never return to its rightful owners. (The «bad ending» of the game is still well worth getting, though — just about every single character meets a different fate due to Laura's blunders!).



As before, this means that you can essentially all but sleepwalk your way through the game, for instance, spending most of your playing hours just admiring the various exhibits in the museum while time slowly marches on and people get murdered one after another without Laura paying any attention whatsoever. A much larger part of the action this time is tied to specific time windows — by failing to be in the right place at the right time, you can miss some crucial events or some useful chances to extract information from people when catching them red-handed. This is, however, not a problem, since (a) most of the time, the blame is on the player for failing to properly analyze a clue or to explore each area as thoroughly as possible once the game moves into the next «Act»; (b) in this way, it adds to the replayability factor, as there almost inevitably will be interesting, and sometimes funny, things that you will have missed on your first playthrough. You do have to work quite hard to be on the very top of your game — and there is nothing wrong about not being pampered all the way through.

What is a problem is that the lack of a point system, just as it did in *The Colonel's Bequest*, does not properly allow you to track your progress. You can talk to almost every character on a number of subjects, and this time around, their answers will be more informative, more diverse, and/or more hilarious than they used to be — but you have no way of knowing which of the answers were «formally» useful to you and which ones were just decorative, and this is particularly frustrating given the inconvenience of the dialog interface: every time you have to ask somebody about something, you have to pull out your notebook, browse to the appropriate topic, click on it, read the character's answer, and then repeat the process, which is thus quite time-consuming compared to the more standard dialog trees to which we are used in modern adventure and RPG games. So, even if talking to people is typically more productive and entertaining this time around, it actually becomes even more of a chore than it used to be.

In terms of actual «puzzles», the game is a bit more challenging than *Bequest*, at least in its first «Act», where Laura has to come up with various strategies in order to achieve her objectives — the most difficult of these involving getting herself into her first speakeasy and finding an official dress for the reception at the Museum. They are not *too* difficult, though, as long as you remember to thoroughly explore your environments and regularly hop from one place to another, as people and objects sometimes change places after you have completed certain other actions. Personally, I don't remember getting stuck for a long period of time anywhere — I *do* remember missing stuff, though, and even today am not 100% sure that I have actually uncovered *every* secret conversation or *every* individual clue in the game (perhaps I'm just too lazy to read through the entire transcript of the game which is now, of course, easily available on the Web).

In classic old school Sierra fashion, there are some dead ends in the game — all of which come to haunt you for its last «Act», when the game suddenly turns from a suspenseful, but rather leisurely and relaxed process of detective exploration into a

frenetic cat-and-mouse chase scene. In *The Colonel's Bequest*, the murderer always manifested oneself as an unseen, hidden presence, watching you from the shadows, liable to make an unexpected move every now and then but never ever stepping out into the open. In *The Dagger Of Amon Ra*, the last section of the game becomes an exercise in survival horror, where you have to take quick decisions concerning your own safety — and, unfortunately, *some* of these decisions depend on your possession or lack of objects that may have been collected earlier in the game; if they are not in your pockets by now, tough luck as you are going to die in one of the inventive half-dozen ways of dying. At least a couple of these are *very* absurd and moon-logical, most importantly the one bit where you have to offer your temporarily handicapped boyfriend one of your useful finds in order to prevent him from stepping on a nail and dying (!). Needless to say, some of those sequences could have been designed a little better. But I wouldn't call these decisions *too* catastrophic.

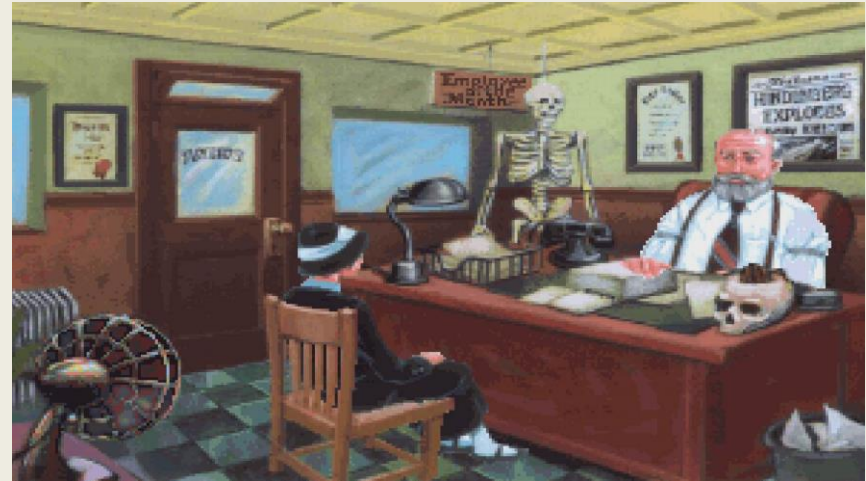
In fact, the game really only gets seriously *bad* — as opposed to «tolerable» — in its challenges at the very end, when you are supposed to identify all the murderers and match the corresponding motives from a large, and largely useless, menu of choices during the Coroner's inquest. The problem there, in addition to you never knowing which particular objects you have to be in possession of in order to corroborate your answers, is that the menu options are quite ambiguous, particularly in the «Match a motive» part, and even if you *have* managed to reconstruct the chain of events reasonably well in your mind, you may easily check the «wrong» box despite the answer being quite acceptable (e.g. the difference between «Fear», «Jealousy», «Thrill», or «Revenge» as a motive is not always clearly understood). The entire inquest just happens to be very poorly designed, and I think that Balfour and Mandel acknowledged as much in some later interviews on the game. From this point of view, the final scoring in *The Colonel's Bequest*, where the AI simply evaluated your performance on its own, was actually superior — at least you had no chance to fuck things up at the end due to poor designer work after doing everything right throughout the game.

In other words, the chief flaw of *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* is the one it shares with its predecessor, despite being designed by an entirely new crew: both Laura Bow games pretty much suck as «detective» games. You have to sweat the shirt off your back to discover every clue — only to learn at the end of the game that you didn't really need half of them and cannot put the other half to truly good use. You have no way of influencing the chain of events; and many of your conclusions will still be based on intuition rather than strict, logically flawless deduction. The back story that you uncover will be completely and utterly absurd, rife with plot holes and stupid senseless crimes committed by people who are supposed to be cunning criminals. In a way, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* feels even more like a parody on an actual detective story than Roberta Williams' take on the genre — hers was, at the very least, a fairly simple tale where the characters' motives were clearly defined. Here, the level of absurdity totally blows the roof off the house — and the only salvation is that, in all honesty, I have never ever in my mind really thought

of *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* as a «detective» game. Instead, all of its charm — maybe even all of its *genius* — lies in a completely different dimension.

Atmosphere

Both the first and the second Laura Bow games mainly get you through the «feels» — and this is where the difference between a Roberta Williams game and a Josh Mandel game really makes itself palpable. *The Colonel's Bequest*, as I wrote earlier, based its feels largely on a conflict between the light and the dark, the old and the new, the progressive present and the conservative past — the game loved its references to the Jazz Age not by themselves, but in contrast to the 19th century ghosts of the old plantation house. It was really all about chillin' to a Scott Joplin rag in the fancy billiard room of the house, then stepping out into the creepy darkness of the swamp and getting swallowed by an alligator, just to be reminded that Mother Nature does not think all that much of human progress in the industrial era.



The Dagger Of Amon Ra still has some of that «contrastive» spirit, but since the entire game takes part in the Big City, there is hardly any space here to go on with the mystical tug of anti-civilizational forces. There is enough space, though, to offer the player two different atmospheric environments — which do not enter into mutual conflict all that much, since they are essentially separated from each other by the chronological line between «Act I» and the rest of the game. In fact, emotion-wise it's almost as if you were offered two completely different games: «Southern Girl Arrives In New York City» and «Gee But The Museum Is A Creepy Place». There is a bit of continuity between the two, but ultimately it's rather hard and strenuous to imagine a smoothly running, logical plan that would derive the second one from the first. Which is not a tragedy — in a way, it's like you're getting two separate stories for the same amount of cash.

Of these two stories, my personal favorite is unquestionably the first one. I love New York, Josh Mandel loves New York, and I admire Josh Mandel's lightweight, satirical, but loving portrayal of New York in one of the most fascinating and exciting periods of its existence. We don't get to see too much of it, but we do get to explore several different locations — the docks, the police station, the Chinese laundry, the newspaper office, the speakeasy — each of which has a little spirit, reflected in the

beautiful art, the appropriate music, and in Mandel's snappy dialog. As you travel back and forth between these locations in the exact same grimy taxi cab, you are constantly reminded of the day and age you have been transported to (e.g. Rocco, the taxi driver: «*Be careful of the sticky spot on that seat! I'm always taking that 6-year old Asimov kid over to his parents' candy store in Brooklyn. He likes to read science fiction pulps and lick lollipops in the back seat. Intelligent kid, but kind of messy*» – amusingly, this is a fairly historically accurate depiction) – and overall, what with all the random NPCs walking about and the occasional short dialogs you can have with accidental bystanders, this version of New York City is about as alive as it could be in a 1992 adventure game.

As in *The Colonel's Bequest*, most of the people around you remain stereotypical; the difference is that Mandel provides them with individual personalities as well, successfully mixing tropes and clichés with sarcasm and wit. Some people today might cringe, for instance, at the allegedly «racist» depiction of Lo Fat, the owner of the Chinese laundry (starting with his very name, which I personally think is hilarious), but stick around his laundry long enough and you clearly get to understand that the funny-talkin' mock-Chinese NPC is actively selling his stereotypical Fu Manchu image to his loyal customers as part of a wickedly cunning commercial strategy. (Try to look at the «Chinese» characters behind Lo Fat's back and you get a brutally honest reply: «*They're not really Chinese characters. Lo Fat displays them to give himself an aura of authenticity... since he was actually born in Newark, New Jersey*»).

The New York around Laura is full of such characters – brimming with various aspects of life, from street wisdom to snarky humor. The kids outside Lo Fat's laundry, getting busy incinerating ants with a magnifying glass, represent the city's spirit of survival («*It's a nice day, isn't it?*» – «*I dunno...*» – «*Well, there's not a cloud in the sky and the sun is shining!*» – «*I guess. Makes the ants light quicker, that's for sure*»). The Irish sergeant at the police desk (who sometimes behaves as if he were really Scottish) is the classic «good-natured cop suffering from bureaucratic pressure». The lesbian flapper in the back room of the speakeasy (voiced by Sierra's creative genius Jane Jensen, no less) reminds us of the exciting «moral relaxation» of the decade. Seriousness, humor, sarcasm, and absurdity produce a mix that feels more influenced by the likes of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton than F. Scott Fitzgerald or Virginia Woolf, and provides us with one of the funniest *and* wittiest love letters to the old (but once very, very young) spirit of New York in a video game.

Skip ahead to «Act II», though, and all of that is largely gone. As Laura finds herself swallowed up by the vast expanse of the Leyendecker Museum, not to be released until the very end of the game, by which time she has lost all agency anyway, she becomes locked out of the semi-realistic, semi-parodic New York and enters a whole new dimension – one in which all of the surrounding characters suddenly become small and insignificant next to the sprawling and looming heritage of human and

natural history. The Leyendecker Museum hosts pretty much everything, from mammoth and dinosaur fossils to Renaissance paintings to medieval armour to enormous Ancient Egyptian exhibits — it's really like the Metropolitan and the AMNH all in one — and, as befits a classic horror story, it behaves as a huge, autonomous organism with a life all its own, so much so that it actually seems futile to look for the murderer, when it is clear that the entire series of murders has been orchestrated by the Museum itself. With dead bodies trapped inside sarcophagi, cast in plaster like ancient Greek statues, dismembered in order to look like exhibits in the Anthropological section, or implaed on Mastodon tusks for authentic reproduction, it is once again as if the ghosts of past history have rallied themselves against their foolish, greedy, and brainless descendants.

To me, though, this second part is a bit of a letdown, possibly because it is a bit *too* sprawling. Unlike the plantation house and environment in *The Colonel's Bequest*, the Leyendecker Museum is too large and disjointed. It is confusing and difficult to navigate; exhibits seem to be arranged completely randomly, with dinosaur fossils next to medieval tapestries and medieval tapestries two feet away from Egyptian mummies. Strangely, the game also places a huge emphasis on «mock-edutainment»: most of the exhibits are accompanied with detailed descriptions, some of which are quite accurate (e.g. information on all the 1st century Roman emperors when you look at their busts in the atrium) and others are there just for the joke (e.g. the silly stories about the Hottentot and «Poppentart» tribes in Dr. Carrington's office). I fully appreciate the idea — after all, everybody with a good IQ should be able to distinguish between truth and fiction in these depictions on their own — but, unfortunately, all the humor also serves to detract from the creepiness / spookiness of the murders. Perhaps that was the gist of it — not let the player be creeped out by all the seemingly random murders by making the whole situation overtly grotesque, like a set of *Mortal Kombat* fatalities — but this is not an ideal combination of humor and horror. (Something like *Gabriel Knight* would manage this mix a lot more successfully).

Where the first act of the game clearly stated I LOVE NYC, the rest of it hardly makes any clear statements at all. For sure, it's got some great jokes, some cool red herrings, and some impressive signs of dedication — like the medieval armour exhibit, where, for, like, *no* reason at all, you can just hang out for about thirty minutes, reading all the detailed descriptions of various helmets, cuirasses, and banners, trying to sort the historical facts from the pseudo-historical jokes. As a collection of all sorts of random jokes, witticisms, and unpredictable twists, the Museum sequence is great; but it is nowhere near as coherent and reasonable as Laura Bow's adventure in *The Colonel's Bequest*. You generally live here in anticipation of seeing what *other* crazy twist of fate awaits you behind your next door — it's more of an *Alice In Wonderland* vignette-style adventure than a Gothic-influenced murder mystery. The only thing missing, really, is a potion bottle that says DRINK ME and lets Laura Bow squeeze through the keyhole of her next locked door. (Those huge alcohol vats in the basement which even have entrapped

unicorns and King Graham itself stored there take us as close to that reality as possible, though — I know these things are really designed as Easter eggs, but they still fit in rather naturally with the surrealism of the environment).

When the final act comes along and the environment changes from potentially dangerous to a real active threat, the effect is not nearly as strong as it would eventually be in Roberta's *Phantasmagoria* — precisely because the game has been way too funny for most of its duration in order for us to begin truly fearing for our life at this point. Oh, some Grim Reaper clown with a mace just clubbed Laura to death in the hallway? Well, didn't we just read «*Death is a natural part of life, so when your time comes, it's best to accept it and go out gracefully*» on a bottle of snake oil? It's a little inconvenient, sure, that all these clubbings get in our way of beating the game before bedtime, but other than that, it still kinda feels like Monty Python. It doesn't help, either, that when you run into the sinister Cult of Amon Ra in your attempt to escape from the murderer, the cultists are heard to be chanting "RA RA AMON RA... RA RA SIS BOOM BAH...". You'll die of laughing before you get a chance to die of anything else.

This is not to say that the entire time spent inside the Leyendecker Museum is not enjoyable as such. It is simply skewed way too heavily on the humorous side for a game that is formally a suspenseful murder mystery — as opposed to something like *Freddy Pharkas*, for instance, which also had a bit of a detective plot, but its chief purpose was to be a video game equivalent of *Blazing Saddles* and the game never for one moment pretended that it was something different. Meanwhile, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* relates to *The Colonel's Bequest* a bit like *Dracula: Dead And Loving It* would relate to 1931's *Dracula*, especially if it were advertised as the «true sequel» to the 1931 movie. True, it totally annihilates the original game in terms of quantity, quality, and depth of its dialog and characters — but does so at the expense of completely mutating the original's game genre and atmosphere. And it is also not a very good thing that there is not a single moment, whenever I'm playing it, when I am *not* feeling a little sad about being taken out of the good old lovable New York City and stuck into this weird out-of-time place with no connection to reality whatsoever.

That said, I do not want to complain *too* much, because even if Mandel's creative genius does seem a little misapplied in the game, it's still genius. Exploration in *The Colonel's Bequest* was merely okay — rather perfunctory and rarely rewarding, as the text was usually laconic and bland and the game's atmosphere was more due to sound and visuals than words. Exploration in *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* is tons of great fun, as pretty much every single object either reveals a juicy bit of historical trivia or a joke (as a rule, genuinely funny). Even if you are not scooping up a lot of murder-related clues, you are *still* getting actively rewarded for trying to look at or touch just about anything in plain sight — or trying to talk to various NPCs about stuff like charcoal, carbon paper, or an electric bulb in your possession. It's not particularly «atmospheric», but it keeps you on your

toes and never lets the game slip into boredom — particularly if you are playing the «talkie» CD version with voice acting, the perks of which we shall get around to discussing fairly soon.

Technical features

Graphics

On a purely visual level, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* reflects Sierra's general standards of quality, but I wouldn't call the game exceptionally stunning or unique. Naturally, the main interest here should be directed towards «Act I» and its depiction of New York — both the exteriors and interiors of which look credible, but not particularly rich in detail, almost as if the artists responsible were on a strictly regulated time basis. The hand-painted backgrounds are stylish, yet somewhat perfunctory, and you probably won't be spending too much time pausing your game just to take in the scenery.



Some interiors are just downright disappointing — like the speakeasy, for instance, which looks more like a quickly put together imitation for some high school theater play rather than a properly authentic recreation of a hustlin' and bustlin' environment. Overall, *Dagger's* New York looks just a little... frugal, perhaps, next to what we usually think about the Big Apple in the 1920s. Nice and colorful, but I think it's safe to say that it comes more alive in this game through text (and speech) than visual impressions.

The same, slightly Spartan, approach is chosen for most of the interiors in the Museum, but in this instance, the artistic approach works better — for one thing, the emphasis is on showing the Museum off as a generally cold, inhospitable place, not particularly welcome for its guests; for another, cluttering the Museum *too* much would have seriously inconvenienced the gameplay, much of which is focused on exploring every nook and cranny. On the other hand, the visual contrast between all of the Museum's different locations — the dinosaur exhibits, the Egyptian room, the Old Masters' gallery, the medieval armor hall — is presented quite sharply, emphasizing the somewhat surreal and thoroughly unpredictable nature of this weird place you're in, disjointed as it is from any sense of reality, even a museum-related one.

When it comes to people and animations, most of the character sprites reflect Sierra's typical early 1990s ugliness — and it

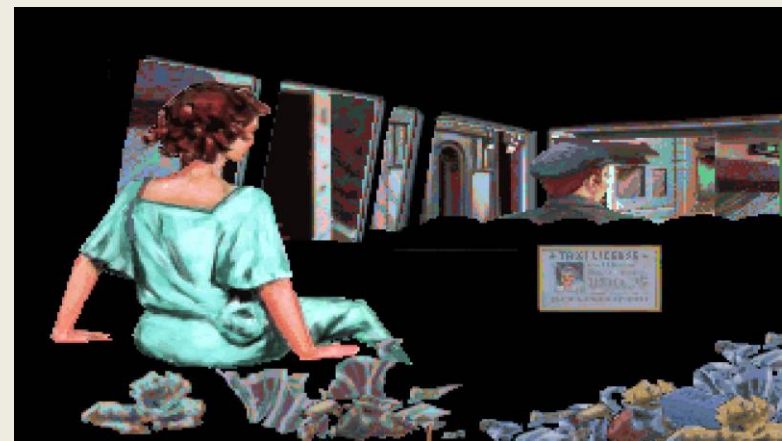
does not help that, in an attempt to make at least a slight approximation to 3D, sprites get progressively bigger or smaller depending on their proximity to the player; «bigger», in this particular case, just means «more pixelated». It's even worse because the sprites contrast in such an ugly manner with the close-up portraits of the characters, which, on the other hand, represent the highest level of Sierra art to that particular date — all the faces are realistically painted, skilfully animated, and let you know a whole lot more about the personalities behind them than the perfunctory sprites. Perhaps there is not quite enough continuity in Laura Bow's own image from the first game (where she had a fairly «downhome» aura) to the second (where she is portrayed a bit more like a stereotypical «Southern belle» type), but there's nothing to prevent us from thinking that she might have simply «upgraded» her class for the important visit to New York City.

Another area where the game certainly improves on the first one is the amount and quality of the close-ups — this time, for instance, you are able to see the «gruesome» murders up close, with each body arranged in its own uniquely macabre fashion and with clues available for visual inspection, not just appearing as results of blindly typing in «search the body» or the like. All these «fatalities», though certainly not of the *Mortal Kombat* variety (this is a family-friendly game, after all!), nicely support the game's dark humor theme and are sure to procure at least some players of the young adult variety a few delicious nightmares. (And they definitely succeed in making us understand the concept of «the Art of murder» with their chilling closeup of Yvette Delacroix's «arrangement»!).

On the whole, though, I think that pretty (or pretty gruesome) pictures will not be the first thing people are going to remember about this game — particularly if they have the full (CD-based) version of it, allowing to complement the visuals with a full voice acting cast... which is probably the most enticing *and* bizarre part of the game's technical aspects.

Sound

The original floppy disk version of the game from 1992, which I vaguely remember I played first, did not have any voice acting, thus having to rely exclusively on the music to set up the aural atmosphere; and, much like the visuals, the music was really quite good, but not particularly outstanding. Naturally, for the first «Act» principal composer Chris Braymen, a Sierra veteran from the days of *King's Quest V*, wrote several tracks reflecting the spirit of the times: some are distinctively New Orleanian ('Laura's Theme', playing during her



introduction and reprised as a piano rag at the beginning of each new «Act»), while others are decidedly more «urban» in nature, including the happy Charlestons and luscious waltzes playing down at the speakeasy. Chinese-style music is expectedly playing at Lo Fat's; a grumbly military march expects you at the police station; and a Scott Joplin-derived theme is chirping away in the office of Sam Augustini, Laura's newspaper boss. It's all lightweight, but fun; do not expect the full impact of something like *The Sting*, but do expect to get all the moods set up just right.

Similarly, at the Museum, when you are abruptly ushered out of your specific time-and-place window and into a totally surreal and unpredictable environment where entourages change almost a random, the music usually fits the setting — there is a «mystical» Mid-Eastern theme floating through the Egyptian exhibit room, for instance, while Laura's general travels through the museum corridors are accompanied with suspenseful incidental music, reminiscent of a 1950s or an early 1960s soundtrack to some thriller or noir. Individual NPCs are sometimes provided with their own appropriate themes (Yvette Delacroix, rather predictably, gets jazzy «strip club muzak» to represent her character); and the soundtrack gets appropriately sped up and frenzied during the mad chase scenes in the last «Act», though, due to limited budget and ambitions, the music still remains somewhat cartoonish as compared to, for instance, the nearly-movie-quality musical arrangements for *Phantasmagoria* several years later.

At some points, you'll probably want to turn the music off, because the design is not always perfect — the lengthy second «Act», for instance, which you mostly spend hanging out in the huge Museum lobby, chatting up and eavesdropping on the guests, is accompanied throughout by the same 'Museum Waltz'; by the time you're through with the action, you'll probably have it ringing in your ears on a permanent basis something worse than *do you believe in life after love*. For some reason, nobody came up with such obvious ideas as varying the soundtrack for a single environment, or using the theme only as an introduction, or at least setting up lengthy pauses in between the reiterations (as they would do in a *Shadow Of The Templars* or a *Baldur's Gate* game later).

For the 1993 CD release of the game, the music did not change much — but, following in the footsteps of *King's Quest V*, the developers threw in a «mini-song» performed at the speakeasy, a bit of novelty vaudeville entitled '[I Want To Marry An Archaeologist](#)' which is quite hilarious but, unfortunately, not quite original, being strongly based, both musically and lyrically, on Erika Eigen's '[I Want To Marry A Lighthouse Keeper](#)', well known to every fan of *A Clockwork Orange*. It is not totally out of left field, though — the song *does* remind players of the walk-like-an-Egyptian «Tutmania» ruling over the Western world ever since Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's Tomb in 1922, and its reflection in all sides of life including popular song and dance. And it's certainly better that they used 'Lighthouse Keeper' as a base reference point, with

its already persistent 1920s atmosphere, than, say, trying to make a meta-spoof on Steve Martin's 'King Tut' or something equally obvious (though, as we have already established, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* can be quite friendly to anachronisms, what with the *RA RA SIS BOOM BAH* thing and everything).

Much more odd than the music, however, was the voice cast assembled for bringing the world of Laura Bow as close to life as possible. In 1992, Sierra was as of yet unaccustomed to getting professional actors to voice their games, other than maybe an occasional guest star or two (like inviting Gary Owens as general narrator for *Space Quest IV*); and whatever budget the studio *may* have had at the time was all targeted towards Roberta Williams' main project, *King's Quest VI*. Thus, pretty much everything had to be voiced by the Sierra staff itself, like they did for previous games starting with *King's Quest V* in 1990 — the exception being that this time, the amount of dialog to be recorded was simply enormous, the cast of characters so large that multiple NPCs had to be voiced by the same «actors», and most of these characters were supposed to be so clichéd and stereotypical that the «actors» were pushed hard to «over-act», sometimes with hilarious and sometimes with embarrassing results. In the end, you may like the acting or you may hate it, but you'll probably never forget it.

First, the good news: Leslie Wilson. A lowly staff member at Sierra (either the receptionist or a proofreader and text editor, I honestly forget which), she was drafted along with everybody else to do some voice work, and after she managed to fake a properly sexy French accent for Yvette Delacroix, Balfour offered her to take on the roles of both Laura (which required a Southern accent, of course) and the game narrator, which required... the ability to entertain and charm the player by reading aloud a lot of boring or humorous text, ranging from «*you see a street lamp*» to «*death is a natural part of life*». Apparently, Leslie Wilson emerged out of this game as Leslie Balfour, and I can see, uh, *hear* why — as the Narrator, she has an almost nightingale-ish purity to her voice, with a slightly educational and moralistic tinge as would befit, say, a recent graduate of some Finishing School for Young Ladies. As Laura, her Southern accent is clearly fake, but she wiggles her way out of it by portraying Laura Bow as, you know, a provincial type trying to adapt to a more New York type of speech — with a nice degree of naïve innocence, inborn intelligence, and independent, proto-feminist stubbornness. Sometimes she falls prey to overacting (particularly in her romantic dialog with Steve Dorian), but usually she is spot on, and pretty much *the* main reason why you should give a try to the voiced version of the game.

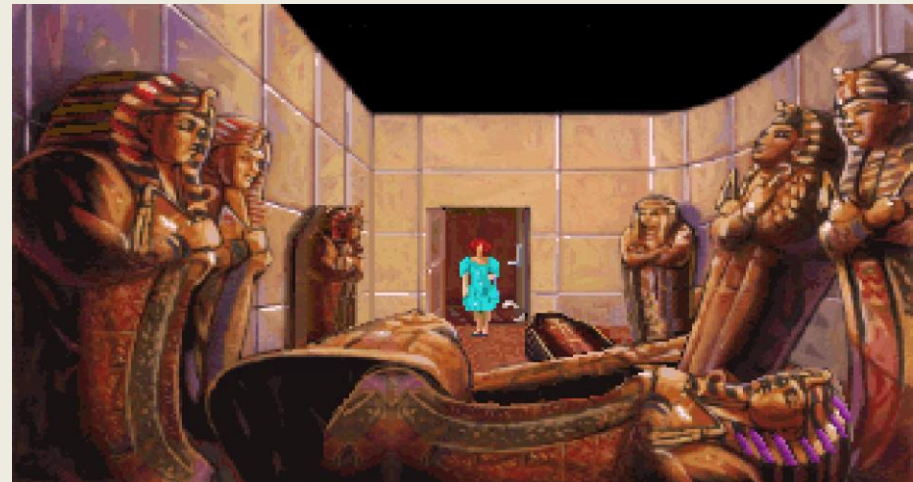
As for the rest of the cast... well, probably the best I can say is that it's much easier to tolerate if you take the entire game for a spoof, which it more or less is. Balfour and Mandel themselves take the lead, with Balfour alone having to generate the snotty aristocratic Englishness of Dr. Pippin Carter, the proverbial Teutonic militarism of Wolf Heimlich, and the New York street rat nature of Ziggy the stool pigeon — pretty impressive how he pulls off all three, but it's really all about pure parody. Mean-

while, Mandel totally misses the boat with Laura's beau Steve Dorian, whose voice, for some reason, was imagined as a deep, rumbling bass, despite being *totally* incompatible with his sweet tenor appearance. Considering that bass is not Mandel's natural tone of voice, the result is doubly grotesque; throw in Leslie's rather clumsy handling of her love lines, and the entire romance angle is blown to bits. John Smoot gives us an equally unconvincing Detective O'Riley, who sounds more like a whiny banking clerk than an intimidating police chief; and programmer Cynthia Swafford makes a completely cartoonish, poofy Countess Waldorf-Carlton who sounds like she's on a constant dose of helium. Only Kelli Spurgeon as Dr. Olympia Myklos, the Greek lady with a penchant for all things macabre, does a proper job, I believe.

Unfortunately, even the idiosyncratic success of Leslie Wilson was not enough to turn her into a voice acting star for future games — and the dubious «talents» of the other «actors» showed Sierra, once and for all, that in the future they would have to spend more money on some *proper* talent if they did not want to end up as the laughing stock of a new era of video gaming. Above all, this was realized by Jane Jensen (who is also here, by the way, voicing the rebellious lesbian flapper in the changing room of the speakeasy — in her usual nasal, sneery tone), who, fortunately, would insist on a real Hollywood cast for her own *Gabriel Knight* next year (could you imagine the horror of having Bruce Balfour or Josh Mandel voicing Gabriel Knight instead of Tim Curry?). But, like I said, the overall eccentric and comical nature of *Dagger* at least partially redeems all the negative consequences of having such a limited budget.

Interface

The general gameplay of *Dagger* follows the standard patterns of Sierra's point-and-click interface of the early 1990s. Due to Laura's special ability to question the NPCs on various subjects, this was, I think, the first game to split the traditional «Talk» option into two varieties — the exclamation mark (!) takes care of «regular» conversations, usually consisting of very minor dialog exchange, while the question mark (?) leads to actual questioning (with a rather cumbersome notebook-based menu of options whose logistic inconveniences I have already mentioned earlier); the same principle would later be borrowed by Jane Jensen for *Gabriel Knight* and used in a few other games as well.



Just like it was in *The Colonel's Bequest*, Laura can die in half a million different ways — some of which are quite honestly predictable, like when trying to cross a busy street, or spending way too much time near the intoxicating alcohol vats in the Museum's basement; others are fairly mean (for instance, recklessly opening the trunk in Dr. Myklos' laboratory without knowing beforehand (!) what specific sort of danger lurks inside) and require you to save your game before attempting to perform any action that could be even *vaguely* risky. But that's Sierra for you — when they write up a small death vignette, they simply want to make sure you don't miss it («*death is a natural part of life*», remember?). Worse is the presence of several dead ends, all of them near the end of the game — if you have a save file right before Laura's investigation of the last murder, this won't be too much of a problem, but if not, tough luck.

In terms of overall gameplay, an interesting innovation, carried over from *The Colonel's Bequest* but seriously expanded, is to have the NPCs strut all over the Museum, rarely sticking in one spot but more frequently moving from one hall to another, as if having nothing better to do. Ironically, even though this was probably done for the purposes of adding extra realism, the result is rather goofy — the characters spend the entire night pointlessly roaming around with no apparent purpose, waiting to be killed off by the murderer. If *you* happened to be locked up inside a large museum for an entire night, your most realistic purpose would probably be to find yourself a cozy corner to catch some sleep... not for *those* guys, though. It also makes it fairly inconvenient to catch any one of them for some questioning — sometimes they have a habit of disappearing completely, only to re-emerge after you have given up and switched to some other purpose. Admittedly, it's still engineered a little better than Revolution Software's Virtual Theatre games, in which interacting with moving characters was a true logistic nightmare, but even so, still serves as a classic example of that road to hell, paved with good intentions.

The only other thing worth mentioning is the copy protection system — only used for the floppy version (the CD edition, like *King's Quest V* and other early games from the CD era, did not have one, since back in 1992 developers were still naïvely thinking that CDs could not be copied), it regularly required you to prove your «knowledge of Egyptology» by matching the image of an Ancient Egyptian deity with one of its common attributes, only possible either if you had the manual or already were a big fan of Egyptian mythology and visual arts. The move was stylish and ingenuous, but it *was* a little annoying to have to repeat it at the beginning of each «Act»... also, it really wasn't much of a copy protection, as I distinctly remember rather quickly guessing all the right answers while playing my own pirated copy, without the slightest hint of a manual.

Overall, the interface and gameplay of *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* may be said to respect the legacy of *The Colonel's Bequest*: make things just a bit aesthetically different from the «regular breed» of games to make the experience a little more stylish and exquisite. The actual results, however, are less satisfactory, both for reasons of convenience (the unnecessarily time-

consuming and clumsy notebook system of questioning) and taste (even the clock, appearing in a corner of the screen to mark out time after you have completed some significant goal, looks primitive and perfunctory compared to the nicely ornamented wooden frame in *The Colonel's Bequest*). Despite suffering from being made three years earlier, *The Colonel's Bequest* is, on the whole, *more* stylish in its general mechanics — although this is, really, a very minor point.

Verdict: *A mixed bag of good intentions, subpar realisations, sarcastic genius, and dreadful voice acting.*

Although I am probably alone in preferring, on the whole, the first Laura Bow game to the second one, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* still has plenty of redeeming qualities to count as an overall enjoyable success. Its major problem, I think, is the lack of internal consistency — it tries to be as much of a «Roberta Williams-type» mystery game as a «Josh Mandel-type» lovingly comic spoof, and the two sides frequently contradict each other; the result is something like *The*



Colonel's Bequest meets *Freddy Pharkas*, and it is hardly a surprise that I rate both of those higher than *The Dagger Of Amon Ra*, which, due to this conflict of interests, is neither as suspenseful or as funny as it would hope to be. The New York part of the game is almost magnificent — the vistas, the puzzles, the dialogs, the humor all come together in a stylish atmospheric experience; but with the lengthy Museum sequences, the game becomes a completely different entity that leaves me frustrated almost as often as it gets me excited.

Still, there is no denying that in the Leyendecker Museum, with all of its surrealist diversity and dark, creepy secrets, Balfour and Mandel had created a fairly unique environment; and especially Mandel's manner of mixing in true historical and cultural facts with elements of pure parody was a pretty fresh touch (later on, Sierra would explicitly adapt the principle to its educational *Pepper's Adventures In Time* project, where kids could conduct actual checks on which parts of the game were historically true and which ones were intentionally anachronistic — *this*, however, is an adult-oriented game, and you are supposed to weed out the chaff on your own). Throw in the uniquely wonderful presence of Leslie Wilson, the likes of whom would never again be seen in an adventure game, and all of this ultimately redeems the game's many flaws.

As of today, judging by their relative presence on the Web, the cult of *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* is unquestionably much stronger than that of *The Colonel's Bequest* — after all, the game is larger, has voice acting, a ton of irreverent humor, and better graphics (at least technically), so this is perfectly understandable. It even managed to make an actual personality out of Laura Bow herself, which Roberta Williams was unable to achieve on her own. What it did *not* manage to make was a game that could creep you out with the same effect as its predecessor, or a game that could make you so easily forgive and forget the clichéd representations of its characters or the corniness of its mystery-related dialog. For everything that's snappy, snazzy, and awesome about the game, there is something silly, illogical, and badly worded; *The Colonel's Bequest* feels «wholesome» in comparison to this somewhat messy, disjointed experience. And even so, I still like it a lot. If anything, messy, disjointed experiences usually give you a whole lot of points to think about...