

## Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Jane Jensen**

Part of series: **Gabriel Knight**

Release: December 17, 1993

Main credits: Producers: **Robert Holmes, John E. Grayson**  
 Programmers: **Tom DeSalvo**

Artists: **Terrence C. Falls, Darlou Gams, Gloria Garland**

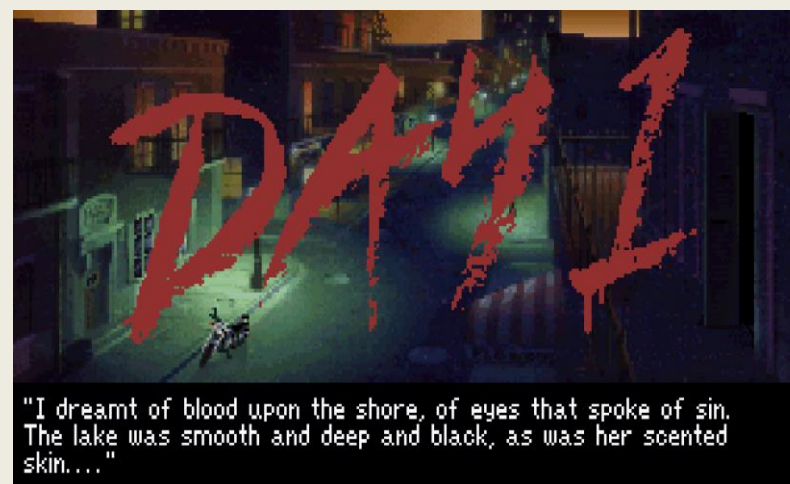
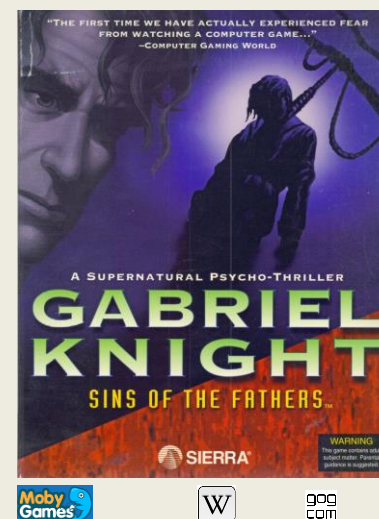
Music: **Robert Holmes**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (11 parts, 690 mins.)

### Basic Overview

*Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers* is, without question, the best adventure game ever made by Sierra On-Line. *With* some questions, it might actually be one of the best video games ever made by anyone, period. Of course, in terms of substance it suffers from exactly the same flaw as any other great (let alone *not* great) video game — namely, lack of conceptual and literary depth, a problem that has not been overcome by the genre even a quarter century later. But in terms of style, atmosphere, and general player involvement, I believe, *Gabriel Knight* has very few equals.

That this level of quality could have been achieved in 1993, a year in which plot-based video games were still essentially in their infancy, is largely due to the talents, energy, and efficiency of one single woman: Jane Jensen. Having already worked as assistant writer on some of Sierra's earlier games, and having cut some serious teeth as co-designer first for Gano Haines' *Eco Quest* and then, in a major function upscaling, on *King's Quest VI*, Jane eventually gained enough reputation to be given her own project. When she came up with *Gabriel Knight*, a supernatural mystery based around New Orleanian Voodoo, Ken Williams was allegedly not too enthusiastic about it — perhaps the story



sounded too dark for family-friendly Sierra, or perhaps he was jealous of Jensen coming out as a competitor in the mystery genre to Roberta Williams (who had previously been Sierra's leading «mystery expert», from the faraway beginnings of *Mystery House*, Sierra's first game, to the more recent games in the *Laura Bow* series). Regardless, being the human-like rather than machine-like business manager he was, willing to take risks whenever his gut feelings told him to take 'em, Ken gave Jensen the permission to assemble her own team for the project, and even provided her with a fairly substantial budget for the whole thing.

And it was well worth the investment, because there was one little element that Jane brought to the table which was hitherto lacking in Sierra games — *maturity*. Naturally, those games had fairly mixed audiences of all ages, and some of them were clearly oriented at a more adult slice of population than others (*Leisure Suit Larry*), but «adult» and «mature» are hardly synonyms. *Gabriel Knight* was the first Sierra game to (almost defiantly) grow out of a simplistic, pampered model of interaction with the player and explicitly target those who had been holding their breath, waiting for computer games to begin reaching *at least* the level of B-movies when it came to plot, characters, dialog, and suspension of disbelief. LucasArts may have been on the brink of doing that for comedy, but what about less laugh-oriented genres? Sure, there had always been interactive fiction of the Infocom variety — the true pride and glory of digitally oriented nerds all over the globe — but that's more or less as if the only «serious» cinema experience to be had in the 20th century were to be restricted to silent movies. You want Cinema as Art? Go watch some Murnau. You want Video Games as Art? Go play *Zork*.

*Gabriel Knight* may not have been the only, or even the first, game to change all that, but it was the first Sierra game to follow a truly new vision, and with Sierra still being a leader in plot-oriented videogaming at the time, it might be difficult to overestimate the influence it had on everything that followed. But it is not its influence that amazes me — rather, it is how well it still holds up after all these years, due to a large combination of factors: Jane's storytelling skills, her ability to create a roster of memorable characters (even minor ones!), the beautiful art of the game, the atmospheric quality of the music, and, of course, the terrific voice cast assembled for the project. Everything aligned to such near-perfection that when, 20 years later, it was announced that Jane was busy with a remake of the original game to bring it up to modern standards — a complete *remake*, not a remaster — I knew from the start that I would end up disappointed, and I did end up disappointed, just the way I would probably be disappointed if the Beatles all lived and gathered together 20, 30, or 40 years later to «remake» *Revolver* or *Sgt. Pepper*. Simply put, you do not mess with the classics.

As far as I can tell, the game was not a huge seller upon release; if Jane had any hopes of beating Sierra's *King's Quest* records, they were quickly quashed — after all, putting the focus on «maturity» was maybe not the best possible move from a purely

marketing point of view, and Sierra's fanbase, used to the relatively lightweight nature of the games, may well have been put off. (Then again, actual truth may be simpler — two years later, the *much* darker and *much* more inferior *Phantasmagoria* became a best-seller after a fairly aggressive marketing campaign by the Williamses, so I suspect that *Gabriel Knight* simply did not get enough promotion... after all, it wasn't a Roberta Williams game, was it?). But it was a major critical favorite from the start, and in 1994 it went on to share Computer Gaming World's top prize for Adventure Game of the Year with *Day Of The Tentacle* — possibly the single greatest double billing in gaming history.

A quarter century on down the line, the legend of *Gabriel Knight* has predictably become covered with museum dust, and modern gamers, unfortunately, are more likely to make their acquaintance with the game through the graphically enhanced, but substantially neutered 20th Anniversary remake. I might do a separate review of the remake later, as much as it pains me to do that, but for now, let us pretend that it never even happened, and just concentrate on the original classic.

## Content evaluation

### Plotline

Jane Jensen's *Gabriel Knight*, whose very name screams out a burning desire to escape into a fantasy of medievalist values and chivalric virtues (and vices), comes from a long line of antiheroes and chosen ones, and while my rather miserable knowledge of the Gothic novel or of the bestselling American supernatural mystery fiction of the 1990s prevents me from identifying Jensen's main influences, it is probably safe to say that the basic plot of the game is not particularly original (in fact, in terms of sheer inventiveness it pales quite significantly next to the second game in the series, *The Beast Within*). Still, it is original enough for us not to be able to predict *every* twist and turn of Jensen's pretty convoluted story — you shall probably start putting together pieces of the puzzle as early as the very first day in the game, but the last ones will not fall into place properly until very close to the end.

Anyway, the plot in a nutshell: you play as Gabriel Knight, a financially struggling 33-year old pulp novelist and owner of a used book store ('St. George's Books'!) in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Not being able to hit the big time with his



writing at all, Gabriel eventually latches on to a series of brutal ritualistic murders in his home city, which may or may not have been perpetrated by a secret cult of dark Voodoo practitioners — at first, merely in hope of finding some inspiration for his next novel, but eventually realising that whatever is going on may actually have a strong connection to his own family past, as well as the recurrent nightmares from which he has been suffering in recent times. With the help of his trusty sidekick, the Japanese-American university graduate Grace Nakimura, and his somewhat bumbling childhood friend, Detective Franklin Mosely, Gabriel begins to slowly unravel the mystery of the murders — which does lead him to the cult in question, as well as a gorgeous and rich femme fatale by the name of Malia Gedde; a long-lost uncle with tall tales to tell; a mysterious medieval castle in the depths of Bavaria; a haunted archaeological dig in the Republic of Benin; and an entire array of colorful New Orleanian characters, each with his or her own skeletons in the closet or, at least, a closely guarded secret or two.

The story unwinds over the course of 10 in-game «days», rather slowly and leisurely at first, with each day holding multiple events that have to be passed in order for night to fall upon the city. Once Gabriel begins to understand what is *really* going on — an evil plot unfurling almost literally under his feet, putting most of the world's conspiracy theories to shame — time begins to speed up, with the last few days of the game spent in a frantic race to prevent the impending catastrophe; also, while the majority of the game (the first 6 and a half days and the last one) is spent in New Orleans, toward the end Gabriel has to leave the comfort (or, at that moment, the *discomfort*) of his home city, first for Germany and then for Africa, introducing a bit of an Indiana Jones flavor into a game already well-spiced with Hitchcockian motifs. Compared to the detailed, dragged-out New Orleanian sequences, this part definitely has a rushed feel to it — I think the designers either got tired or had to rush to meet the Christmas deadlines — but it is all made up for in the final climactic sequence, when Gabriel finally tackles the bad guys head-on.

If you have never played the game and all of this smells a bit funny — indeed, one of the chief accusations one could fling at Jane Jensen is that she must have spent *way* too much time watching movies from the first half of the 20th century for a game designer working at the tail end of the 20th century — anyway, if you think it all sounds like too much silly childish crap for a supposedly «mature» game, I might even grudgingly agree, but there are still two important counterarguments to be made.

First, what separates Jensen from a lot of game writers exploring similar historical topics (such as, for instance, Charles Cecil of the fun, but overrated *Broken Sword* series) is her relatively in-depth exploration of the subject. By no means is *Gabriel Knight* a genuine «edutainment» project (à la *Conquests* series by Sierra's own Christy Marx, for instance), but neither is its treatment of Voodoo primitively cartoonish. Certainly the idea of a «black Voodoo cult», with human sacrifices and shit, looks borrowed from antiquated horror movies like *White Zombie* more than anything else, but (a) use of black magic in Voodoo

practices is, after all, just as real as Satanism or similar dark practices in any religion and (b) the game explicitly places its evil plot within a much more general context of pagan practices, including an impressive amount of fully historical information on Louisiana Voodoo, its Haitian and ultimately African roots (which it calls *Voudoun* instead of the more commonly used *Vodou* or *Vodoun*, but let us not be too picky).

Jensen's main talent, however, is not simply in doing her history and anthropology lessons, but in skilfully interweaving that historical data into her own narrative — so much so that, unless you have been an exceptionally good student yourself, you might have a hard time distinguishing fact from fiction in her narrative, where perfectly historical characters like Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau and perfectly well attested events like the Haitian Revolution of 1791 are mixed with fictional heroes (such as the Gedde family) and fictional events (like the 1693 «Burning of Charleston»). A common trick Jensen uses in all of her *Gabriel Knight* games is coming up with a supernatural explanation of some of history's unresolved mysteries, and while I do believe that she hit her peak in this particular enterprise around the time of the second game, *Sins Of The Fathers* still does an excellent job at presenting its «alternate model of para-history» without actually disrupting or contradicting the historical narrative as we know it.

The second excellent aspect of the game's story are, of course, its characters. For the first time in a Sierra game and, perhaps, for the first time in *any* computer game, not only the title character, but also most of the NPCs surrounding him feel like living, breathing personalities rather than sketchy digital sprites — even the episodic shop owners, bartenders, grave keepers, and minor Voodooiennes who only appear in the game for an event or two have their own bits of back stories, dreams, aspirations, emotions, whatever. As is often the case with great story-based games (and not only games), it does not truly matter *what* kind of story is being told; what matters is *how* it is being told, and the detalization, complexity, and elegance of Jensen's dialog still remains a high point in the history of video game evolution.

Gabriel Knight himself is quite a fascinating character, unusually difficult to pigeonhole. Like most of Jane's characters, he lives in a bit of a time bubble (working at a typewriter as late as 1993, for instance, and staying blissfully ignorant of pretty much any modern trends — heck, even his own bookstore mostly carries "pulp novels from the 50's and 60's"), but manages to be an (allegedly successful) womanizer (though, luckily for us, we do not get to *see* any of his conquests). He can be tender and caring one moment and an unbearable, though still lovable, asshole the next. He may be ruthless in achieving his goals, but only because he believes in the ultimate Great Goodness of these goals. His motivation is sometimes egoistic, sometimes altruistic, and sometimes a bit of both at the same time. He can come across as a male chauvinist pig to quite a few players and even [reviewers](#), mainly due to his «sexist» remarks to his secretary, Grace ("well... if the Devil had great legs, perhaps... like

yours!"), yet it should not take long to realize that the «sexist talk» is nothing more than a humorous, and completely consensual, game played out between Gabe and Grace for their own and our amusement, since both characters clearly have the highest respect for each other. Even when he «officially» aligns himself with the Light, joining the ranks of the mythical Shadow Hunters, this does nothing to cure him from a generally sarcastic and mischievous attitude, behind which actually hides a genuine desire to do good... or is it really just a genuine desire to get that girl at all costs? Who really knows?

Speaking of Grace, let us, perhaps, not forget that it is Jane Jensen's Grace Nakimura, rather than Lara Croft or any of those ridiculous JRPG anime dolls, who would be fully deserving of the title of «strong female character #1» in 20th century video games, if only all these endless best-of lists of video games did not tend to treat the adventure game genre much like best-of lists of popular music tend to treat progressive rock. Even if Sierra itself already had quite a roster of memorable female characters, from Princess Rosella to Laura Bow, Grace Nakimura is the first female character in Sierra history to actually think, talk, and act like a real living, breathing woman made of flesh and blood, and even if she is not directly playable in *Sins Of The Fathers* (Jane would eventually correct that with the second and third parts of the trilogy), she still feels like an inseparable part of the detective duo, complementing those parts of Gabriel's soul which might feel deficient ("Is Grace your wife?", our hero gets asked after namedropping her one too many times; "No, she just acts like it", he responds without batting an eye). At the end of the game, she does have to fulfill the function of damsel in distress — but not before explicitly pulling Gabriel's ass of the fire several days earlier; equality of sexes, definite check.

Pretty much *every* single character in the game, or, to be more accurate, every single character awarded with a close-up portrait and a set of dialog options, turns out to be more than one-dimensional. Grandma Knight, the sweet, lovely, and cuddly Southern belle, has a dark skeleton in her family closet. Dr. John, the intimidating owner of the Voodoo Museum, is extremely polite, well-spoken, and erudite. Madame Cazaunoux, the batty old Creole lady, hides a deep feeling of mournful nostalgia for the French community of New Orleans behind her ridiculous mannerisms. Gerde, the seemingly superficial and light-minded German servant at Schloss Ritter, is in fact torn apart by the love for her master. Good guys have their dark spots, and evil characters have a clear motivation for their evil nature — driven, perhaps, not so much by their general desire to burn down the world as by a very specific quest for vengeance.

Once again, none of this is any sort of great news when we are talking literature or even movies, but to see this kind of depth in a computer game around 1993 was deeply unusual — which is why, when watching old promotional videos for the game and hearing constant boastful talk about an allegedly new era of interactive fiction / movies promised to humanity by the likes of *Gabriel Knight*, these promises do not really come across as unsubstantiated hype; instead of feeling offended by the

hyperbole, I feel a little sad that even today, plot-based video games have not really advanced far beyond this level — largely because neither the public at large, nor the game designers and studios have succeeded in creating sufficient demand for it. But this is, of course, a topic for a separate discussion, one which would involve drawing a straight line from *Gabriel Knight* to, say, *The Witcher 3* and... okay, we're not here to get depressed, but to pay tribute to an amazing piece of video game art, so enough theory and onwards with the nitpicking.

### Puzzles

With all the hubbub about the imaginative story and the maturity of the writing, it is almost easy to forget that *Gabriel Knight* is first and foremost an interactive game, to advance in which you have to explore, find clues, and solve puzzles. Solid dialog and haunting atmosphere are nice and all, but most of your gameplay (without a hint book or walkthrough at hand) will be likely spent on wondering what the hell to do next rather than admiring the vistas or reveling in the idiosyncrasy of Tim Curry's performance. So, how does *Gabriel Knight* actually stack up as a *game*, as opposed to a visual novel?



Answer: it does... okay. Clearly, Jane Jensen is a better storyteller than puzzle designer — simply because the challenges you have to face in the game do not strike me as particularly brilliant, innovative, or even, well, challenging, certainly not next to just about any other aspect of the game. As a rule, your daily activities will be typical for those of any investigator: rummage around for clues and useful objects, talking to people for precious information, and putting two and two together. You are generally free to roam from place to place; all the action takes place over a set amount of days, and whenever you have accomplished all the required objectives for Day X, nighttime is triggered and you are automatically carried over to Day X+1. This is a nice way of marking progress, though it does result in some odd discrepancies (some days take an excruciatingly long time to complete, others pass by in a blink of an eye).

Rummaging around is, of course, an art that mostly comes in handy at crime scenes or suspicious undercover locations, and it inevitably involves some degree of pixel hunting. The most commonly voiced complaint, I believe, is about the scene at Lake Pontchartrain, where you have to find one specific tiny area in a clump of grass that has a "matted appearance", so that you

can pick up a piece of evidence which will later help you to tie the crime to a definitive suspect. The area itself is *almost* unidentifiable on the large screen, at least not until you scour over everything with the magnifying glass — yet I am not entirely sure whether this truly constitutes «bad design». You are, after all, at a crime scene which has only recently been investigated by a squad of police officers — would you expect them to leave around a piece of evidence easily detectable to the naked eye? It makes perfect sense that an extra investigative effort is required here, as long as you get a clear hint that you may be *supposed* to find something that your good friend Detective Mosely has missed — and with that hint at hand, I never had a serious problem with that puzzle.

Conversing with other characters is not simply encouraged, but is, in fact, obligatory: every now and then, talking to a certain person about a certain topic (e.g. "Voodoo") opens up another possible topic (e.g. "Black Voodoo") which is, in turn, necessary to butter up yet another person. The original list of topics in the dialog tree is relatively small, but as the game progresses, new and new options open up, so that by the end of the game the dialog options cover the center of the screen from top to bottom. If you are not Mr. Dialog Guy, this line of work might easily seem tedious to you; but the correct way to play *Gabriel Knight* is to play it for as much dialog as your eyes and ears can carry, so, to me, this is pretty much that particular chunk of the game that largely plays itself. (Do not forget that certain topics may, or even need, to be explored more than once with the same character — you should click on everything until the NPCs start repeating themselves).

The truly fuzzy areas of the game, of course, are those which require you to put away the tried and true algorithmic methods and begin thinking out-of-the-box. There is not a lot of them in the game, but there are perhaps 5–6 situations where you might seriously get stuck... in a discussion, that is, over who is more stupid, the incompetent player or the inane puzzle designer. For instance, the infamous «Drei Drachen» puzzle requires you to establish and confirm a connection between a line of poetry randomly found in one of the books in your used book store *and* the correct way to open up your grandfather's clock, dusting away in Grandma Knight's attic. (Even more annoyingly, unless you have a basic knowledge of German, you not only have to find the book itself, but also a nearby German-English dictionary to help you with the translation). Is this logical? Is this solvable? Is this acceptable? I honestly cannot tell, though I do confirm that it was quite solvable for me without any hintbooks. It does certainly conform to Jane's vision of Gabriel's character: in *The Beast Within*, Mrs. Smith, reading Grace's and Gabriel's Tarot, concludes that "your (*Grace's*) card is all logic and reasoning, while his is spiritual and intuitive". This probably means we shouldn't really pout about a few of these puzzles being based more on intuition and association than stone-cold logic.

A couple of the puzzles are actually «puzzle-ish» in nature: for instance, in order to learn the location of a crucially important



Voodoo ceremony and be able to track its participants Gabriel needs to (a) decipher a secret Voodoo code off Marie Laveau's tombstone and (b) use a book on Rada drum codes to understand the relay drummer's message. Still later on in the game, he will actually have to compose a Rada drum message himself (sidenote: the whole Rada drum thing is another example of Jensen's wicked weaving of fact and fiction — ceremonial drums are a natural staple of the Haitian tradition, but the existence of a special drum code for transmitting specific information seems to be her own invention). The first two parts of the puzzle are fairly easy on the player; the third one, again, requires a bit of the old out-of-the-box thinking and a bit of that intuitive / associative reasoning to pull off perfectly... but hell, I got it right on my own first try. Maybe I was just born to be a *Schattenjäger*, who knows. (Actually, the only time I found myself really stumbling in the game was that damned tile puzzle in the African hounfour, where, believe it or not, you are once again required to remind yourself of the Three Dragons line — the good thing is, you can at least solve it by sheer trial and error over a permissible amount of time).

As in all Sierra games, some actions in the game remain optional and are only required to get a perfect score; the good thing is, *most* of them are fairly logical, and you'd be dumb not to try them out (like exploring all the locked rooms in the New Orleans hounfour, for example, or searching the dropped veil of a certain snake owner for extra evidence). Even better, Jensen had clearly looked at enough LucasArts games to design the game in such a way that it never puts you in an unwinnable state — any important object you have missed can be picked up at any time, and if it can be picked up only at a specific time, the day will never end until you have picked it up. At least one puzzle (getting into your friend Mosely's office after he's been evicted from it) may be failed by not getting the timing right — but the good game will offer you a cop-out anyway (the desk officer will simply fall asleep), although you might not get the perfect score as a result.

Despite the darkness and danger lurking everywhere, *Gabriel Knight* does distinguish itself from the majority of Sierra games by featuring very few death situations — in fact, no matter where he pokes his nose into, Gabriel officially cannot die until Day 6 of the game (when you *do* die, it comes off as quite a shocker!), and it is not until the very last day, during his infiltration of the Voodoo coven, that death traps become common: the final climactic scene, in particular, requires lightning-fast thinking in order to avoid being pummeled by your arch-nemesis, the evil spirit Tetelo. (My main beef with that scene is that you never have enough time to read and listen to the various descriptions of the scene's elements by the Narrator — all you gotta do is act, act, act, and act quickly!). I do not actually disagree with that philosophy — it ties in fairly well with the idea that the meat'n'potatoes of any good thriller is the suspense and tension, while the final release has to come on quick, relentless, hard, and brutal. And, apparently, neither does Jane, considering that the exact same ratio of death to life was strictly observed in the next two *Gabriel Knight* games as well.

All in all, the challenge provided by *Sins Of The Fathers* is nowhere near the level of difficulty of its prime competitor, *Day Of The Tentacle*, but there is still enough challenge to feel yourself, every now and then, in the shoes of a real investigator of a murder mystery, if not necessarily in those of a supernaturally endowed Servant of the Light (and I *am* grateful to Jensen that she refrained from turning Gabriel Knight into a wielder of magic wands or a drinker of alchemical potions: these games operate on a whole other level than *Harry Potter* or *The Witcher* when it comes to distinguishing between the mundane and the supernatural).

### Atmosphere

*Gabriel Knight* would not be *Gabriel Knight*, that is, one of the best games of all time, without its unique atmosphere — however, despite most of the game formally taking place in New Orleans, it must be admitted that the atmosphere in question is not particularly New Orleanian. Fascinated as she was with some aspects of Creole culture, not to mention both the popular and the historical perceptions of Voodoo, Jane Jensen had never been to New Orleans herself (which is sort of amusing, because for her next games she *did* visit both Munich and Rennes-le-Château), and although the game does feature some of the city's notorious landmarks, such as

Jackson Square, St. Louis Cathedral, and the St. Louis Cemetery #1, most of the action takes place indoors, in settings that could be New Orleanian, or generally Southern, or just about anything. Jackson Square, where you will run into musicians dutifully performing 'When The Saints Go Marching In', artists, jugglers, and pesky mimes, is probably the most authentically atmospheric depiction of the place, but Gabriel hardly ever comes there to mingle — it's mostly all detective business.

In any case, the game is not about New Orleans as a wholesome cultural experience; it is all about that elusive «darkness on the edge of town», slowly and subtly constructing an atmosphere of impending doom around the title character — and, through him, around you, Mr. Player. The scene is already set by the opening sequence, as a sickly-looking morning sun rises over the deserted Bourbon Street and the huge title "DAY 1", written in blood letters, is strewn across the screen, accompanied by the first line of Gabriel's future poem ("I dreamt of blood upon the shore, of eyes that spoke of sin..."). Of course, the very next sequence is that of Grace sitting in her nice cozy chair at her nice cozy desk, inside Gabriel's nice cozy store, comfortably



chatting away on the phone with one of Gabriel's sweethearts ("I'm sorry, but Gabriel is a lout, oh, I mean, he's out"), while the shop owner (you) clumsily stumbles out of his bedroom to grab a cup of coffee. But this total normality of the situation does not in the least feel normal after that opening sequence — and if there is anything that Grace and Gabriel's opening conversation really brings to mind, it is the barbed exchanges between Johnny and Midge at the beginning of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, one of several classic movies that *must* have been a big influence on Jensen in her creative process.

This juggling between coziness and faint whiff of impending danger is the main element creating the game's atmosphere. For the first — and longest — three days of the game, the most disturbing moments in Gabriel's life take place at night, with a recurrent dream involving people burned alive, people changing into leopards, snakes, knives, and somebody who looks disturbingly like Gabriel himself hanging from a tree. By daytime, Gabriel is mostly safe — *mostly*, because you never know when to expect a small jump scare (like, from a random street performer) or a mini-nightmare (like, while falling asleep at a boring lecture on Voudoun at Tulane University). Still, these moments are very rare, especially when compared to the amounts of perfectly normal conversations with the city's denizens. Intrigue is mostly accumulated by gradually understanding that *something* is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Knight? — and, most importantly, you do not know whether this *truly* has to do with some supernatural evil at work, or if it is some unspoken evil in the hearts of plain ordinary men that we find ourselves fighting against.

In all honesty, I would say that once Gabriel does achieve clarity and confronts the century-old Voodoo curse head-on, this is precisely where the game begins to lose ground in terms of atmosphere. It still works, but its straightforward transition into the world of magical mumbo-jumbo seems half-assed and slurred, compared to the meticulously constructed intrigue of Gabriel's and Grace's five-day investigation. As a historian turned storyteller, Jensen gets top grade marks, but as a mystic, she does not really advance past the level of the aforementioned *White Zombie* — in particular, the climactic scenes of the Voodoo rituals at the Bayou and then, later, in the hounfour suffer from too many clichés and too many corny lines of dialog ("oh great Badagris, take this sacrifice!" and the like). A part of me actually wishes that she could have eliminated the para-normal elements of the story altogether — with a little extra effort, the game might have been turned into a dazzlingly original tale of age-old treachery and revenge — but, on the other hand, para-normal works just fine as an allegory for real world problems in the Gothic novel (Stoker's *Dracula* is a classic example), so the issue is not that Gabriel eventually discovers that evil spirits are real, it is that these evil spirits look humiliatingly caricaturesque against the far more colorful portraits of their flesh-and-blood contemporaries. The big baddie, Tetelo, is basically just a bag of recycled tropes — even against the portrait of her living descendant, Malia Gedde, as long as she is not possessed by the old cliché-spouting hag.

Still, the good news is that 90% of the game is spent waiting for shit to hit the fan, and that's the really, really awesome part. Some might protest that any work of art in which the exposition is more enjoyable than the resolution is deeply flawed — but then, there are situations in which foreplay turns out to be more memorable than the orgasm, too. For what it's worth, this may arguably be a thing that Jane's work does share with at least *some* of Hitchcock's movies — in many of which the wait for the culmination really provides more emotional payoff than the culmination itself (which is delivered swiftly, bluntly, and with a rapid transition to final credits). At least Jensen, unlike Hitch, allows you to choose one of two endings for your hero — the path of mutually destructive vengeance, or the path of mercy, forgiveness, and redemption (of course, only one of the two counts as «canon», since a dead Gabriel Knight could hardly qualify for protagonist of the second Gabriel Knight game).

And, on a side note, let us not bypass the humor, either. *Gabriel Knight* is anything but a comedy, yet there is enough funniness in it to sometimes forget the dread and danger. In between Gabriel and Grace's incessant dart-flinging game ("I saw a great documentary last night on pyramid excavations" — "You mean small, dark places that haven't been touched in centuries? Sounds right up your alley" — "Well, it did help me gain a better understanding of your mind"); Desk Officer Frick's constantly being torn between devotion to duty and to donuts ("muffuletta sandwiches, yum!"); Gabriel's interactions with the wishing stump in the Voodoo museum ("I wish Malia Gedde were permanently grafted to my thighs..."); his hilarious trolling of the poor priest in the St. Louis Cathedral ("I've had impure thoughts about a woman I met..." — "You mean thoughts of extreme sexual relations?" — "Well, not involving *animals* or anything..."); and even a set of erroneous phone calls that he can make at random from his home office ("Hello, St. Genevieve's Wedding Chapel, how may I help you?" — "Boy, do I have the wrong number!") — in between all that, we gain even more intimacy with the characters, as they, just like us, alleviate their fears and tensions with humor's saving grace. And speaking of saving Grace, there is even time for Gabe to punch a few jokes right before the final fight to the death — in a fairly casual manner at that, not like a James Bond one-liner or anything. Of course, it does matter that these jokes are voiced by Tim Curry, which may be an added bonus for some and an annoying impediment for others — so, on that note, let us proceed to discussing the more mechanical aspects of the game.

## Technical features

### Graphics

Although visual art (somewhat predictably, and purely for reasons of technological progress) is pretty much the only aspect in which the 20th Anniversary remake of *Gabriel Knight* could improve on the original, I would still claim that the original graphics, as pixelated as they are on modern screens, still hold up well. As I already said, the New Orleans of Jane Jensen is

represented mainly by interiors — Gabriel cannot be seen walking from place to place, other than a brief animation of him getting on his bike — but the common strategy is to pack these interiors with STUFF from top to bottom, as if hinting at a special obsession that every self-respecting New Orleanian must have with quaint and shiny objects of material culture. Starting with Gabe's own bookstore, jam-packed with books and all other sorts of stuff all over the place (including a gargoyle and a morbid painting by his late father), then going on through the cozy living room of Grandma



Knight, jam-packed with knick-knacks and home plants, then through the Voodoo shop with all of its candles, dolls, and jars of unimaginable stuff, then through the Voodoo museum with its dozens of exhibits... well, you get the drift.

It was a good thing that at least the Windows version of the game supported higher graphical resolution (640x480 SVGA) — not a huge deal by modern standards, but enough to sharpen up all those little objects like the tiny tweezers and magnifying glass on Gabriel's table, almost indistinguishable in the DOS version. In any case, the basic art backdrops for the game put a huge emphasis on detailization, and the results pay off — all through the game, you get the feeling of walking through a huge antique store. Apparently, one thing that Jane Jensen shares in common with the abovementioned Charles Cecil of the *Broken Sword* fame is a (perhaps subconsciously) deep-running hatred of all things *modern* — *Gabriel Knight* is officially set to take place in 1993, but you wouldn't really guess that based on the surroundings (almost perversely and ironically so, the single most modern-looking space in the game is actually found in the underground Voodoo hounfour at the end of the game!). Quaint little barrooms with guys playing chess; old-fashioned cash registers, typewriters, and chandeliers at Gabriel's store; 18th century mansions in the Garden District; Creole stylistics in the house of Madame Cazaunoux — and, of course, the thoroughly medieval atmosphere of Gabriel's old family manor, Schloss Ritter, upon his arrival in Bavaria... all of this is lovingly portrayed by the art team in such a way as to suggest that you might enjoy this game the best if you forget the 20th century ever existed.

That said, things are still handled with enough care to avoid truly absurd anachronisms à la *Broken Sword* (where, for

instance, the French police walking around the streets of a 1990s Paris could easily look like stereotypical gendarmes from the era of Napoleon III). Many of the characters you meet in New Orleans are simply *old* — Grandma Knight, Madame Cazaunoux, the grave watcher at St. Louis Cemetery #1 — obviously representing the classic, withering and dying spirit of the city; others, like Dr. John at the Voodoo Museum or Magentia Moonbeam at the Voodoo Parlour, clearly position themselves as traditionalist Keepers of the Spirit; and Gabriel's passion, Malia Gedde, simply has enough money to allow herself to cling to the past. In other words, if you do not hear that much jazz music in the New Orleans of *Gabriel Knight*, it is because the design and art teams want to actually place you in the New Orleans that *predates* jazz music, even as the Times Picayune on your desk reminds you each day that you do, in fact, find yourself straight in the middle of the summer of 1993.

That said, the artists clearly realized that in order to achieve the required degree of immersion, the standard backdrops were not enough: they could give you a nice panorama of the St. Louis Cathedral or a monumental view of the imposing Schloss Ritter, but they did little to deepen your impression of the game's characters and their emotional trajectories. Therefore, in an innovative departure from all past Sierra practices, *Gabriel Knight* makes a special use of close-ups. First, for most of the dialog in the game the overall backdrop is faded out and replaced by large, detailed, and nicely animated profiles of the characters — providing each of them with a memorable visual personality (Gabriel's hair in particular is quite legendary, but there is also Grace's piercing stare, Grandma Knight's permanently smiling wrinkled face, cemetery watchman Toussaint Gervais' magnificent white beard... way too much to mention). Large-scale facial animations had already become common in Sierra games by 1993, but with *Gabriel Knight* they reached an entirely new level of realism.

Second, some of the key events in the game were introduced with a special comic-book style of cut scenes, in which the scene was gradually filled with sequentially generated images from one corner to another (this became less efficient, I think, when faster CPUs began automatically speeding up the process), sometimes also including minor pieces of animation, like changes of facial expression or dripping blood. I wouldn't call the panels «great art» by themselves, but they did serve a serious purpose — for instance, simply using the overall panorama during Gabriel's first meeting with Malia Gedde at Lake Pontchartrain would never allow to capture the «love at first sight» moment, whereas the cut-panel approach does precisely that. If I recall correctly, no other Sierra game would repeat this technique, and I am not sure if anybody else at the time used it. It can actually be a little confusing upon first sight, but that's what replays are for.

The bad news, of course, is that the beautiful close-ups and the inventive cut scenes make the regular sprites of the characters look particularly grotesque — and that is not even the fault of modern monitors, but rather the demands of contemporary animation algorithms, which were unable to handle serious detalisation, meaning that a coffee-making machine or a

typewriter sitting next to Gabriel will look more recognizable as man-made artefacts than Gabriel will look recognizable as a human being. This is where something like *Day Of The Tentacle* clearly wins even in its non-remastered state, as the intentionally cartoon-oriented style of that game, paradoxically, allowed for more realism than the diluted sprites of *Gabriel Knight*. This is the element that has always bugged me the most about the game's style, and probably the one that ultimately triggered the need for the 20th Anniversary remake — ah, if only they could have replaced those sprites while keeping in everything else... but what do we know, demanding perfection from a video game and all.

## Sound

Without love, there is nothing; without sound, there is no *Gabriel Knight*. And who knows whether there would have been a sound truly deserving of *Gabriel Knight* if not for Robert Holmes, a former LA-based session musician who went to work for Sierra in the early 1990s and, as it happened, teamed up with Jane Jensen in what became the single strongest Sierra bond after Ken and Roberta Williams. Not only did Holmes compose and perform all the music for the game, but he was also officially credited as its producer. Three years later he and Jane got married, and he predictably went on to make the scores for *all* of her games, both during and after Sierra On-Line. In fact, amusingly, Robert Holmes is not known for much of anything else other than writing music for his wife's games — literally living off her creative genius!

That's okay, though, because of all the soundtracks written for all the Sierra games I've played (and I *have* played them all), Holmes' are the only ones that truly stand out in memory. He would arguably hit his peak with the second game, but there is no denying that a major reason why *Sins Of The Fathers* holds you in its grip from the very opening seconds (right after Sierra's fanfare) is the musical opening. Even in its fully electronic, MIDI form, that shrill rising synth-violin leading into the ominous church bell toll immediately communicates the message that you are into something a bit more serious than saving Princess Cassima from her tower or guiding Roger Wilco on a garbage-towing mission. Echoes of Bach and Wagner can be heard in the melodic structure and layering of the main theme track, and when the rock percussion joins in, the effect is a bit



similar to the one produced by 'Live And Let Die', though, admittedly, a single guy producing an epic track on a MIDI synth can only get to a certain distance away from Paul McCartney and George Martin working on an epic track at the EMI Studios. Not only is the theme catchy as heck — it actually has depth to it, something still very rarely heard from Western games at the time (as opposed to Japan, where people like Nobuo Uematsu had already been making waves since the late Eighties).

The importance of the music for the game's atmosphere was clearly felt by the team, so much so that I usually have to slightly lower the default volume at the start of the game — otherwise, it can be hard to actually hear the characters talk over it. Other than the main theme, heard only in the intro and, later on, at the climactic ending of the game, the soundtrack is humble enough to recognize itself as a soundtrack — consisting of generally inobtrusive, not highly dynamic looping passages — but each track almost perfectly conveys and emphasizes the atmosphere of each location. The St. George's Books theme, for instance, is a variation on the main theme, but played in a different, milder and lighter tonality to indicate the location's status as a more or less «safe space» from the impending doom and gloom. Grandma Knight gets a relaxing, cozily romantic theme to show that her little house is *the* place to just "take a load off" as she keeps suggesting to her favorite Grandson ("your ONLY grandson, but nice try, Gran!"). The Voodoo Museum theme, driven by frantic tribal percussion, is all mystical, foggy, and wobbly, with an undercurrent of danger which you cannot, however, adequately decipher as either a harmless shadow of the past or an ominous portent of the future. The Police Station theme is based on a slightly stuttering martial theme that is more comical than threatening, quite well in line with Officer Frick's donut belly — and so on.

It is Holmes, probably, who bears chief responsibility for not making the game all too New Orleanian in nature, because practically none of the tracks bear any resemblance to the New Orleanian traditions of jazz and R&B — other than the obligatory looping bars of 'Saints' quietly resonating around Jackson Square. But this is, in a way, inevitable, since most of our stereotypical ideas of New Orleanian music revolve around *partying* and *entertainment*, while *Gabriel Knight* is not a game about either. Grandma Knight might have had her childhood around the early Louis Armstrong years, but having her blast 'Heebie Jeebies' around the house would have produced the wrong feeling for the scene. And a little 18th century Baroque-inspired theme for Madame Cazaunoux's residence is certainly more appropriate for her stiff and stern demeanour than, say, anything in the style of Professor Longhair. (I do have serious doubts, though, that even such a poshly named bar in the French Quarter as the "Napoleon House" could attract a lot of clients by continuously blasting the melody of Vivaldi's "Lute Concert In D" from its speakers — not that there's anything wrong with that).

Still, as fine as the music is, I repeat that it may well be necessary to tune it down a bit because, believe me, you just do not want to miss the game's single greatest attraction — the voice cast. Apparently, like most other Sierra products at the time, the



game was released both on CD-ROM *and* on floppy discs, without voice support, but I sincerely pity those who could not afford a CD drive in those days and had to dish out money for the floppy disc version. For all of Ken Williams' documented original mistrust towards Jensen, he did help her get the budget for Sierra's first-ever all-star cast: the game was not the studio's first one to hire professional artists, but certainly the first one to have artists of the level of Tim Curry and Mark Hamill star in chief roles. The first and *last* one, to be more precise: future games, both Sierra's and non-Sierra's, would typically restrict themselves to voice actors *par excellence*, people like Dave Fennoy or Jennifer Hale who are on much handier terms with the microphone than the camera. But at the time when the first *Gabriel Knight* was produced, there was some genuine excitement about interactive video games merging with actual cinema and perhaps even replacing it (you can see that excitement with your own eyes if you watch the accompanying *Making of Gabriel Knight* video, with Jensen, Curry, and Hamill all hinting at the gorgeous future to come... which never really came, of course) — which is why, I think, all these people at that particular moment in time were so quick to agree to Sierra's terms, even if I cannot imagine them making a lot of money from it.

Tim Curry as Gabriel Knight was, and continues to be a divisive choice. For the role, he expectedly takes on what he tries to pass for a genuine New Orleanian accent, a bit of a task for someone raised in Plymouth, and even more of a task if one tries to infuse it with «manly charm», sleaziness, cynicism, and hip snobbery and still come across as a likeable character with whom the player might want to identify. With the rise of modern sensitivity, it becomes even easier today to write him off as «gross», «creepy» or whatever, but fuck modern sensitivity — as far as I'm concerned, Curry did a great job with his performance. His Gabriel Knight is rarely, if ever, directly offensive or rude: he does have a knack for pranking his pal, Mosely (more because Mosely is a pompous ass than because of his general personality disorder), but he is excessively polite around people more knowledgeable than himself (like Dr. John at the Voodoo Museum or Prof. Hartridge at Tulane University), kind and loving around Grandma Knight, and romantically clichéd, but hardly «creepy» around his sudden love interest, Malia Gedde. He is most certainly a guy of the I-take-what-I-want variety, joking and provoking around boundaries — but never really overstepping them. (Which is precisely why I am far more ambivalent about Curry's reprisal of the role in *Gabriel Knight 3*, where, I believe, he *did* overstep certain things, as well as overplayed certain others — but let us not get too far ahead).

The other great lead performance is by Leah Remini as Grace, who, unfortunately, got to be played by three different actors in three different games; Remini comes first in my book, though (closely followed by Charity James in *Gabriel Knight 3* and distantly by Joanne Takahashi in 2). She is the perfect female counterpoint for Gabriel's manliness, as she fully matches him in sarcasm and cynicism where necessary, but can show just as much sympathy and compassion — in fact, *more* sympathy and

compassion, as she constantly rebukes Gabriel for his pranks — when need arises. Remini creates here the perfect image of a loyal, intelligent, too-wise-for-her-age sidekick whose only reason for being a sidekick is a male-oriented market for video games (and even that was going to change by the time of the second game). In fact, she had been my ideal representative of womanly intelligence in videogames for so long that I was all but horrified to discover her ties with Scientology many years later (admittedly, though, she had been indoctrinated by her family since childhood, and she did leave the organisation willingly in 2013, subsequently dedicating a lot of effort to dismantle its web of lies and corruption — good for her).

The third and often unsung hero of *Gabriel Knight's* voice acting is... no, not Hamill (though his bumbling Detective Mosely will be a total blast for anybody who only knows Mark as Luke Skywalker), and not even Michael Dorn (whose Dr. John is so Worf-like in nature that it is quite impossible to dislike the guy even when he proceeds to tear your heart out), but rather the Narrator — a role which went to the then 68-year old black lady Virginia Capers, a veteran of Broadway and TV shows who was presumably asked to develop some sort of moody, creepy, Voodoo-flavored Caribbean accent for the job. This she does, delivering all of her lines in a slurry, often barely understandable drawl (non-native English speakers will *have* to turn on the subtitles, and probably at least some native speakers as well) — typically sounding like a 100-year old witchdoctor dictating her last will and testament from her dying bed; but believe you me, no Narrator ever has managed to utter lines like "The windows are sealed shut with old paint" or "The bookrack doesn't open" with more style and flair. Regardless of whether that accent is in any way «authentic» or not, Capers is perhaps the one person *most* responsible for setting the surreal and imposing atmosphere of the game.

Honestly, though, I cannot think of even a single example of downright bad acting here. Minor acting gems include the gruffness-and-toughness of Jim Cummings as Officer Frick (still a long way away from his most notable roles in BioWare games); the mystery-and-elegance of Leilani Jones' performance as Malia Gedde (it is amusing that she would later go on to voice the much more cartoonish, but every bit as efficient Voodoo Lady in the *Monkey Island* series); and the perfect realization of the «insufferably haughty academic» stereotype by Monte Markham as Prof. Hartridge (one of Markham's very few appearances in video games). "...And I am heterosexual [*looking at Gabriel rather warily*] — when I practice sex at all [*with a nasal and rather condescending flair*], which isn't very often [*quickly and with a small tinge of embarrassment*]" — classic, classic stuff.

Given the sheer hugeness of the overall volume of dialog, special kudos should go to Stuart M. Rosen, all of whose previous experience was with TV animation, for directing the cast — most likely, not an easy job with so much B-level talent in the studio. The effort paid off dazzlingly well; and even if the voiceovers in the original game predictably suffer from

overcompression and general imperfections of voice-capturing technologies circa 1993, the soundtrack still remains reason #1 why the 20th Anniversary remake does not stand a ghost of a chance next to the original game, sounding like a bored high school recital in comparison. And while voice acting in video games has since then become a steady and respectable profession, with many memorable performances and multiple stars accumulated over the past 30 years, I can safely say that while some of the best games of recent decades certainly match the level of emotion and classy theatricality of *Sins Of The Fathers*, it is hard to think of a game that would undeniably surpass it.

## Interface

Being an unusual and barrier-breaking game in so many respects, it would have been weird if *Gabriel Knight* did not introduce a few notable changes to Sierra's gameplay mechanics and graphic interface, as well. The latter typically remains hidden during gameplay, with black empty space left at the top of the screen to host it and similarly empty space left at the bottom to host the subtitles (thus creating the impression of a widescreen movie experience on a square TV screen); activating it with the mouse reveals a stylish, stone-colored menu with a whoppin' *eight* icons to turn your mouse in — Walk, Look, Talk, Question, Take, Open, Use, and Move (for the record, a typical Sierra point-and-click game at the time had about 4 obligatory actions, plus, at most, 1 or 2 optional funny ones, like *Space Quest's* Smell and Lick, or *Larry's* legendary Unzip).

From a pragmatic standpoint, some of these are superfluous: for instance, you can open just about any door by Using it rather than Opening it, and I can't really remember a single instance of the Move icon to have been uniquely relevant in any useful way. (Talk and Question, however, do serve different functions, since Talk is mostly about chit-chatting on minor subjects, while Question opens up the Important Dialog screen with character close-ups). But from a world-building perspective, they all make sense because Jensen, as she did in *King's Quest VI*, went to the trouble of writing up various, often funny, reactions to Gabriel trying out various actions on different objects and people. (E.g.: *move Grace* — "Move THAT wall of ice? Good luck!", *open Grace* — "I don't even want to think about what you mean", etc.). Given how jam-packed most of the locations are



with different hotspots for different objects, you can spend quite a bit of time randomly poking around stuff in different ways — and while 90% of these actions will not lead to any significant results, it may be well worth it just to hear Virginia Capers make even more fun of you in her mildly condescending Voodoo voice.

Another unique option of the interface is the Tape Recorder icon, by using which you can actually relisten to all of the Important Dialog previously had with different characters. This is useful if you want to refresh your memory, especially on all the tons of historical and cultural information dropped on you by Dr. John, Prof. Hartridge, or Magentia Moonbeam; but I sort of feel that it was mostly thrown in just because Jane and Co. were so enthralled with the quality of their writing and performing, they wanted to give you, the Player, the generous option of relistening to all that great work whenever you felt like it, which, according to the authors, would be all the time. I never really had to use it, but it's still nice to lug that Tape Recorder around as a souvenir (and it sort of became a staple of the Gabriel Knight games from then on).

Even moving around had become a little different. In most Sierra games up to that time, you simply moved around from one screen to another, perhaps fast-forwarding from one location to another if you took a train or a plane; this often resulted in a lot of time-wasting backtracking, or in getting lost if the map was too large and unwieldy. In order to move through Gabriel Knight's New Orleans, you simply leave your current location and are taken to a map, where you pick your destination at will (new destinations gradually open up as the game progresses). This, as I have already mentioned, pretty much eliminates the chance at generating a proper «New Orleans atmosphere» by having your character walk the bustling streets, but it does get you very quickly to where you are going. (In *Gabriel Knight 2*, Jensen would adopt a compromise where the basic principle was still the same, but you could at least walk around the center of Munich, sucking in bits and pieces of German life). The French Quarter map is, in its turn, integrated with the map of the larger New Orleans area, and from there, if you so desire and when the time comes, you can take the airplane to Munich.

(Offbeat sidenote: one of the plot's most egregious slip-ups is the idea that, apparently, you can get from New Orleans to Munich in less than one day and still have time left for activities, *even if you are actually flying eastward*. I cannot imagine that Jane Jensen could be so blatantly ignorant of the structure of the space-time continuum, so I am just going to have to assume that it was decided to keep things that way to keep the number of overall days in the game to a nice roundish 10. We also do not bother all that much with such boring issues as passports and visas — okay, maybe an American in 1993 did not need a visa to fly to Germany, but surely he must have needed one to fly to Benin).

Most of the gameplay is centered around the good old walk-talk-use mechanics, though there are also the aforementioned puzzles with Voodoo codes and Rada drums which require a slightly different approach (quite an intuitive one, though, no need to pull out your manual or anything). As things begin to get tense and dangerous, the game introduces situations which require quick reaction if you want to escape almost certain death — as in many other Sierra games from that time, these situations would later create a lot of trouble on faster-operating machines (for instance, players found it nearly impossible to escape the animated mummies in the African hounfour), but today playing the game in DOSBox with lowered cycles niftily solves all the difficulties for you. Fortunately, Jane Jensen has always been firmly in the camp of «no action sequences in adventure games, period», so you won't have to worry about getting your Gabriel Knight to jump his way out of or shoot it through Voodoo ambushes.

In the promotional video for the game, Mark Hamill describes how he was amazed and befuddled by the choice-based nature of the story, pointing out how difficult it is for a voice actor to adapt to this type of Schrödinger's Cat approach. This is actually curious, since, compared to the typical RPG or even to the mode of adventure game later popularized by TellTale, *Gabriel Knight* does not offer much by way of choice: every once in a while, Gabriel is capable of giving out different answers to proposals from other characters, but this happens fairly rarely, and most of the game is very straightforward. Each puzzle typically has just one correct solution; you can solve them in different order, or you can fail and try again, but ultimately Jensen railroads you into taking the one and only correct path. You do not have a choice about whether you want to fall in love with Malia Gedde (you do), about whether you want to become a Shadowhunter (you are not sure, but you will anyway), or about whether you want to fool a harmless old lady by impersonating a priest (you do, because, to paraphrase *Day Of The Tentacle*, "if you want to save the world, you have to relieve some old ladies of their family jewels"). You *do* have a choice of whether you want to return the police badge that you stole from your old pal Mosely to impress your potential love interest of your own free will, or be forcefully relieved of it by an enraged Mosely on the next day — *that* much choice you do have. And then there is the endgame, of course, where you can choose to try to make peace with your arch-enemy (and survive) or to exact vengeance on it (and die along) — but would you *really* want to leave Grace standing on the balcony of St. George's Books in the company of Detective Mosely, in a Gabriel Knight-less world?.. Anyway, all I wanted to say is that the game mechanics is not really designed for multiple choice options, and that's fine by me; it doesn't make the experience any less perfect.

**Verdict:** *A major high point in the history of gaming whose sensory impact may have been equalled, but hardly ever beaten.*

In some ways, *Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers* marked the highest point of the Silver Age of Adventure Games, as I call it — that point when some people were ready to believe that video games were about to become something much bigger than just video games, just as some people believed around the age of Woodstock that popular music was about to become something much bigger than just popular music. Both parties turned out to be wrong, of course, but even if dreaming big almost inevitably leads you to eventual

disillusionment and depression, it also often results in masterpieces which, even decades after, still have I AM SO COOL BECAUSE THE PEOPLE WHO MADE ME DREAMT BIG written all over it in the largest of letters. The 21st century would, of course, still see plenty of ambitious videogame projects blowing people's minds, from *Half-Life 2* to *Mass Effect* to *The Witcher 3* etc. etc., but it can be argued that there was really no such time as that brief time window in the early 1990s, when technical improvements in digital video and audio led people to think of their work in videogaming as potentially going beyond simply «filling a niche» on the market. Talking specifically about *Sins Of The Fathers*, there is just something about that game which elevates it well above the status of «market-oriented product» and puts it into the category of «trying to create an entirely new type of art», and, might I add, not entirely failing in its task.

That the future so subtly promised by the game, and so unsubtly raved about in its promotional video, never really came to pass is lamentable and most probably inevitable: neither Jane Jensen nor anybody else in the business could find it in themselves to make the rivers flow inwards, that is, to draw videogaming out of its niche and make it replace TV or literature (even pulpy one) in the public conscience. This is why, while subsequent generations of plot-based games kept improving in technical terms — graphics, music, animations, gameplay, special effects, overall length and size, etc. — few, if any, ever managed or even set out to surpass the likes of *Gabriel Knight* in terms of character depth, plot complexity, or literary quality of dialog: by all accounts, this would have been a waste of time, since what was already there was quite enough for 95% of consumers on the market — after all, nobody plays video games to find the next *War And Peace*, right?



Not that I am comparing *Gabriel Knight* to *War And Peace* — far from it; for its time, it was simply a very right step in a very right direction which *could* have, one fine day, resulted in the universe of plot-based videogames producing its own *War And Peace*. Instead, public disinterest and marketing strategies pretty much halted that development, for which nobody can really be blamed. But while many other games totally on the level with *Sins Of The Fathers* have been produced since in many sub-genres, from pure adventure to action-adventure to RPG, I still return to this one every once in a while just to experience that rather singular jolt, to share the bottled excitement of a group of people who felt they were working on something really, really special that might, perhaps, one day change the world. It never did, but then again, neither did *War And Peace*, and you certainly can't blame Tolstoy for not trying.