

The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Jane Jensen**

Part of series: **Gabriel Knight**

Release: December 1995

Main credits: Producer: **Sabine Duvall**

Lead programmer: **Jerry Shaw**

Artists: **Darlou Gams, Layne Gifford, John Shroades**

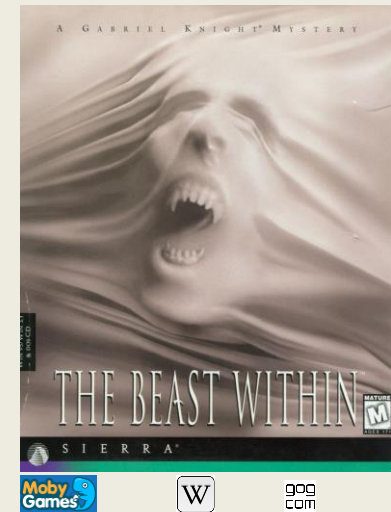
Music: **Robert Holmes**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (10 parts, 626 mins.)

Basic Overview

What do you do when you have just written and shipped the best adventure game of all time? If you are Jane Jensen, you set your sights on making the *second* best adventure game of all time — and if you are the year 1995, you make your best to ensure that it will look and feel nothing like it looked and felt back in the year 1993. It was a strange period, but, fortunately for us all, things changed quickly enough for artists to be able to offer surprising — if sometimes frustrating — new solutions before you even had the time to wear out your trusty PC.

Notably, by 1995 the gaming industry had entered a new phase — full-motion video, or FMV for short, when digital video and audio capacities had matured enough to allow for actual filmed footage, with real backdrops and live actors, to be used for videogaming purposes. For a few short years, FMV semi-successfully competed with the other leading trend, 3D imaging, managing to hold its own largely because early experiments with 3D looked so doggone awful. Once 3D graphics finally began to improve, FMV lost out and died a quick death due to all the numerous technical inconveniences accompanying filming and editing (let alone the fact that few, if any, genuinely good actors ever let themselves be seduced into joining that particular line of work). These days, even veteran players do not hold that many fond memories of FMV titles from the early-to-mid-1990s



(remember *Night Trap*? no? good!); but, as always, there are respectable exceptions to the rule. At the very least, there are no *theoretical* reasons for a FMV game not to be able to provide the required levels of believability, player immersion, and entertainment; for the most part, they failed for the same reason as so many early stages of other technological breakthroughs, with people too overawed by the very fact of something so cool made possible to take proper care of the handling and adaptation of said breakthrough.

Sierra's own pioneering experience with FMV was on *Phantasmagoria*, a Roberta Williams game (of course!) which was undeniably «special» and went on to become one of their best-selling titles, even if players today mostly remember it for a good laugh and chuckle (somewhat unjustly, but this is no place to delve into another game's flaws and merits). However, Jensen's project for a second Gabriel Knight game, to be also done in FMV, was most certainly greenlit before, not after *Phantasmagoria* hit the shelves, showing how much of a risk taker Ken Williams was to allow *two* seriously budget-draining processes run at the same time. In all honesty, I do not know just how excited Jane was at the idea that her next game was to be done with live actors rather than voice acting, but I guess if she weren't excited at all, she would be free to stick to the tried and true (like *Space Quest* or *King's Quest* did). The «realistic» FMV setting inevitably led to drastic changes in everything — script, dialog, puzzles, game mechanics — but Sierra On-Line was never not about change, after all.

Just as it happened with *Phantasmagoria*, *The Beast Within* bumped into numerous unpredictable issues, ran over schedules, ran out of budget, had to be mostly filmed in California instead of Germany, and ultimately featured far less content than Jane had originally planned. Still, completed it *was* before the end of 1995, just in time for the Christmas market, and although it sold quite poorly compared to the heavily advertised and «cheaper-thrilled» *Phantasmagoria*, it quickly earned a far more benevolent critical reputation than Roberta Williams' competing brainchild. Unlike the first *Gabriel Knight* game, there was no specific hoopla about bringing in a new era of interactive entertainment or anything like that — after *Phantasmagoria*, *The Beast Within* brought nothing specifically new to the table other than the talent, enthusiasm, and hard-working attitude of its creator, which seemingly made the title less «legendary» than *Sins Of The Fathers*. In some ways, however, Jensen's sequel ended up as an even more impactful and satisfying... if not «game», than at least «experience» than its predecessor.

At the very least, it is unquestionably the last truly great product released by the original Sierra On-Line before its shameful demise, *and* one of the best designed and most, should I say, soulfully crafted sequels in adventure game history, let alone the best FMV game ever created, and the one you definitely need to take a look at before pronouncing sentence over the genre.

Content evaluation

Plotline

Allow me to start out with a bang — I do sincerely and honestly believe that *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery* tells the single best story that I have ever had the fortune of encountering in a videogame. I have not played them all, so I am not insisting on objectivity; and I am also well aware that, technically, Jensen's plot is far from being consistent, has quite a few holes (some of which, as I shall try to show below, are downright annoying), and rests on a fair number of philosophical and artistic clichés that would be unforgivable, were this a work of literary fiction (which is why, by the way, I would not recommend you any of Jane's attempts to tell the story of Gabriel Knight in the actual form of printed novels — yes, I *did* try reading both *Sins Of The Fathers* and *The Beast Within*, and the reasons why both have been out of print for decades become quite obvious by the fifth or sixth page or so).



Absolutely none of it matters, though, when what you are really dealing with is a computer adventure game. What Jensen did here was take everything that made *Sins Of The Fathers* so good — the suspense, the mystery and intrigue, the masterful weaving of historical fact and modern fantasy — and made it even better by directly entangling the mystery into the life and fate of our protagonist. Unlike so many other fantasy tales, *The Beast Within* is not concerned about you saving the universe from imminent destruction; it is more concerned about saving *yourself* from the delicious jaws of temptation, as well as making one formerly lost soul, with which you might have quite a bit in common, find redemption. Avoiding black and white colors, confusing expectations at every turn, and providing you with quite a few free history lessons as a bonus (although you must be careful so as not to confuse true history with make-believe), the game almost gets away with becoming a complex morality tale at least on the level of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, even as its genre conventions do not properly allow it to aim at anywhere higher in the canon (and, of course, the language of Jensen's dialogue is quite far removed from the exquisite complexity of the Victorian Age). One can only imagine how good it would get without the limitations of an FMV production back in its day.

The story itself now takes place in Germany rather than New Orleans — incidentally, a somewhat more suitable setting for Jensen, who actually lived in the country for a while (conversely, she'd never been to New Orleans prior to writing *Sins*). Apparently,

after having solved the Voodoo Murders case and solved his financial problems by writing a bestselling novel about it, Gabriel Knight has relocated to his ancient family nest in the small Bavarian town of Rittersberg, where he would rather just soak up the atmosphere and prepare for his next bout of writing than to actually step into the ancestral shoes of the *Schattenjäger*, battling supernatural evil around the globe. However, as tragedy conveniently strikes on the outskirts of a nearby national park, Gabriel finds himself pulled into solving yet another murder mystery — involving unnaturally large wolves, a zoo superintendent with some weird philosophical views on life, an exclusive hunting lodge in the City of Munich, a bunch of rich and perverted aristocratic playboys, and, of course, Gabriel's family history.

Meanwhile, Gabriel's trusty assistant Grace Nakimura, sick and tired of being holed up at St. George's Books in New Orleans, packs up her suitcase and travels to rejoin Gabriel in Rittersberg — only to find out that he'd just left for Munich to assist in the investigation, and that nobody in Rittersberg is willing to tell her his exact location, presumably out of fear that if they do find each other, it will be hard for Jane Jensen to keep the player in control of just one character. Yes, the game actually lets you — *forces* you, that is — to play as both Gabriel *and* Grace, shifting action between one and the other in the form of discrete chapters, and at least as a plot device, this is certainly an improvement on the first game, where Grace was always in control of book research for Gabriel's tasks, but all of that took place firmly behind the screen. Now, for the first time ever, you actually *do* the book and museum research, as Grace, while Gabe takes care of more mundane stuff.

So far, so good — the regular murder mystery with the usual suspects. Where this show really strikes gold is closer to mid-game, when it slowly becomes clear that recent events may be tightly linked to century-old events that involve perfectly historical characters, namely, the Mad King Ludwig of Bavaria (1845–1886) and his good friend, Richard Wagner. Without getting all spoilerish in this matter, let me just reiterate that no other game I have played has ever succeeded in building up such a masterful mystification, intertwining stone cold historical facts with pure fantasy (and *just* a little bit of cheeky tweaking, such as substituting the real paintings at Neuschwanstein Castle with ones that are relevant to the story). Yet it is also a mystification that somehow makes perfect sense, showing a deep understanding of the complex personality of King Ludwig without cheapening it through the addition of a supernatural element to his life story. By the end of the game, you are all but ready to believe that things really happened the way Jensen made them happen — how come they keep all this fascinating stuff away from us in those boring history books?

Considering that the plot involves at least three distinct time layers — an 18th century werewolf incident, the 19th century Ludwig story, and the 20th century murder investigation in Munich — and that all three lines are tied together by a complex bunch of werewolf lore, some of it authentic and some added in by Jane for story purposes, it is almost a wonder that it does

not all fall apart at the end. The videogame format does allow the writer to easily get away with holes and inconsistencies: for instance, the game ultimately agrees with the lore piece which states that an «Alpha Werewolf» can only be killed by a «Beta Werewolf» and does exactly so at the end — yet this actually goes *against* the original plan which certainly did not include the element of the Beta killing the Alpha, despite both Grace and Gabriel having had the opportunity to read up on their werewolf lore multiple times. Or, for that matter, the ridiculously easy-to-find locations for all the acts of the Lost Wagner Opera (yes, that's a big thing in this game) which, of course, should have all been swept clean by the caretakers and repairmen at Neuschwanstein over the past 100 years. However, I shall chalk all these and other blunders up to the serious deficiency of resources on Jane's part — it is well known that a lot of content had to be cut from the final version of the game for lack of time and money, and so let us simply pretend that in an ideal world, where Ken Williams could get her another couple million dollars and reschedule the release for 1996, *The Beast Within* would be tighter than a submarine's hatch.

The one part of the plot that *maybe* does not work quite as well as it should have is the romantic line between Grace and Gabriel. In the first game, whatever tender feelings may have existed between the two principal characters were buried deep behind several layers of sarcasm and trash-talking (besides, Gabriel was too busy chasing *another* girl to pay much attention to his feelings for his assistant). In *The Beast Within*, due to the general plot construction, most of the trash-talking is relegated to letters which the two star-crossed smarty-pants exchange between each other on a regular basis (another plot blunder — apparently, mail moves at the speed of sound in the *Gabriel Knight* universe); otherwise, it is quite clear that Grace now has such strong feelings for Gabriel that they not only make her lose her cool all the time, but actually get her in big trouble with everybody who, according to her, is trying to keep her away from the big lout (particularly Gerde, his German housemaid and assistant, whom Grace suspects of unruly romance with her employer just because, well, she is a female employed by a male).

This might not be such a big problem for those who never played the first game, but it creates the impression of a rather huge and unwarranted personality change for those who have — and give Grace, who is more or less supposed to represent the pinnacle of female intelligence, an aura of extra bitchiness more befitting of some capricious pop diva. On the other hand, this sudden streak of renegade behavior is at least in agreement with Gabriel's own feelings toward his partner — a mix of suppressed admiration, deeply hidden longing, and open fear, if not terror, at her presence. All of this *could* have been handled better, particularly in the final act when the two finally meet, albeit under rather restrictive circumstances; but Jane Jensen is just so much better at writing detective and historical dialog than romantic one that perhaps it is a good thing that the two quasi-lovebirds are given so little time together.

Still, I would certainly take half a dozen romantic conversations between Grace and Gabriel over Jensen's totally superfluous introduction of Mr. and Mrs. Smith, a couple of «demonologists» from «Miramak, Pennsylvania» (apparently there is no such place, but if there were, I'm absolutely sure that it would be the best place in the world to grow up as a demonologist). With her obligatory deck of Tarot cards, fortune-telling clichés, and soap-opera American optimism, Mrs. Smith is barely half a step over the ridiculously cartoonish figure of Harriet from *Phantasmagoria*, so much that I've always suspected she was secretly written into the script by Roberta Williams. Apparently, her main function in the story is to somehow try and melt the ice congealed around poor Gracie's heart, tear down her wall of sarcasm, and make her acknowledge that the world is not always ruled by cold logic and reasoning — which is all fine and dandy, as long as she had been provided with dialog of at least *Golden Girls* quality, rather than *Santa Barbara*.

So much for the bad stuff — but on the positive side, the game script is filled with colorful characters, from Grace's cheerful German helpers (a music student dreaming of becoming the next Furtwängler and a romantic historian obsessed with decoding the enigma of King Ludwig) to Gabriel's snobby aristocratic partners at the hunt club, made to look as nasty and disgusting as possible, but each in his special way. And, of course, top care is taken to make the primary antagonist, Baron Friedrich von Glower, as thoroughly sympathetic as a fictional villain can get. The homoerotic undertones between Gabriel and the Baron are written out subtly, and although they are definitely present (which, of course, led to inevitable criticism on grounds of associations between homosexuality and evil), the game concentrates far more on issues of loneliness and companionship than it does on carnal aspects — again, not a particularly new topic in the post-Anne Rice era of literary fiction, but quite a fresh one in the era of computer gaming. Jensen's von Glower is the single most complex (and likable) villain in video games up to 1995, and I am actually not sure that a *more* complex villain has truly appeared in the medium since then.

The story offered by Jensen is completely straightforward, without any branching paths or even minor choices to make along the way, which is a bit of a pity — especially since at the end of the game, Gabriel is explicitly offered an important choice, yet it is not really ours to make, and with so much of the game luring and tempting you to join the dark side, not being able to take that step (even if it leads you to an officially «bad» ending) feels disappointing; that said, it would have taken *a lot* of extra courage for Jane to throw in such a path, and I hardly have the right to judge her for railroading us into a happy ending. (Or maybe she thought that it would be excruciatingly humiliating, after all, to have a mighty Shadow Hunter end his career as a werewolf — and a lowly *Beta* werewolf at that).

For sure, a million small and not so small things could have been done to tighten up the plot, introduce even more depth and

nuance, sharpen up the humor, deepen the dread, and make the game even more realistic and immersive. (At the peak of my passion for the game, I remember fighting insomnia by thinking of all the things I would have done differently for both *Sins Of The Fathers* and *The Beast Within*). But even the fact that Jane Jensen was able to pull the whole thing off, warts and all, exactly the way it is, is an astounding, groundbreaking achievement in merging together new technologies, mass market appeal, and some good old-fashioned scholarship and literary etiquette.

Puzzles

Perhaps the single worst impact that FMV games had on the adventure genre was in the sphere of said genre's main attribute — puzzle design. In the good old days of the point-and-click universe, you typically solved puzzles by putting things on top of other things, er, I mean, clicking stuff on top of other stuff. Pick up everything that is not nailed down, combine it with everything else, and sooner or later you will get your solution — that is, after you have explored multiple incorrect pathways. With FMV, each of these incorrect pathways would require separate filming — it is one thing to simply program in an option in which you are doing something wrong, but quite another to require actors before a blue screen to act it out. (Could you imagine a filmed *Day Of The Tentacle* in which each of the three leading actors would be required to sprinkle invisible ink over every other actor?)



Subsequently, it is hardly surprising that most of the FMV-style adventure games rank among the easiest adventure games ever — *The Beast Within* hardly being an exception. Unless you are intentionally being a complete oaf, missing easily detectable hotspots right and left and forgetting your map layout as soon as you move from one location to another, beating the game is barely a challenge at all. Most of the actions you have to take are fairly simple and logical, solved in one or two steps, and clearly hinted at by the game itself. I recall only one specific puzzle that could have anybody stumped — at one point in the game, you have to fool a not particularly bright doorman by imitating the sound of a door knock with the help of a concealed cuckoo clock, which *really* requires thinking out of the box (more annoyingly, it requires noticing that a formerly closed clock shop is now open without any evident difference in appearance). But at least it is a somewhat elegant and non-trivial solution, as compared to the triviality of most other actions.

To compensate at least somewhat for this simplicity, Jane adopted several controversial decisions. First, the game requires

you to do your research — a *lot* of research, particularly when you are playing as Grace. At one point, you have to visit two of Ludwig's castles, Neuschwanstein and Herrenchiemsee («Here-at-chemistry», as Gabriel calls it), and action simply will not move forward until you have taken a close look at just about *every* single exhibit — after which, as a reward, you will be offered one more trip to the Wagner museum in Bayreuth, where, guess what? yes, you guessed right.

Actually, although I have seen many people complain about that necessity, I have no problem with it. Jane Jensen games always come with educational value, and if you do not want to be educated, go play *Super Mario Bros.* or whatever, you lowly pleb. The *real* Grace Nakimura would certainly not have missed any of that info, so why should you be allowed to slack off? What bothers me more is that diligent exploration, in such situations, comes across as a *substitute* for actual puzzles rather than being complementary. In the end, the most complicated intellectual tasks offered to poor Grace are to pick a bunch of flowers to make peace with her nemesis Gerde, and to think of a way to carry a pigeon inside Neuschwanstein (for which purpose you shall actually need a whoppin' *two* different objects).

The other decision is to include a couple of «special» brain teasers, one of which is somewhat similar to the Rada drum challenge in the first game — you shall have to splice different tape recordings of the voice of the zoo's administrator in order to compose a message to his subordinate. This you will find either very fun or very tedious, but at least there are some vague hints that Gabriel can give out to help you work out the basic syntax of this message. Another unusual challenge comes at the very end of the game, when you have to chase the bad guy into a specific position inside the large basement of the opera theater by sniffing him out and closing doors in specific order before you run out of time and the bad guy escapes. Again, this is not too difficult, and will hardly require more than 2–3 tries even from a geometrically challenged player like myself, but the challenge is somewhat unexpected and anticlimactic, coming right after the mind-blowing, super-tense opera scene. In a game like *Broken Sword*, which is all about solving those sorts of puzzles, it would have looked natural; in a *Gabriel Knight* game, you will most likely feel relief rather than proud satisfaction upon completing it.

In any case, the one impression of *The Beast Within* you most certainly won't be walking away with is that of a «puzzler». Most of the actual detective and deductive work will be done by the game *for* you; all you actually have to do is just bump around, gathering evidence. From this point of view, what we have here is even far less of an actual «game» than *Sins Of The Fathers*, more like an immersive multimedia experience with occasional chokepoints at which you are expected to commit some minimal brain work. But that's just the typical FMV experience for you, and who knows how it would have turned out otherwise? *Gabriel Knight 3*, for instance, has unquestionably stronger puzzles, yet that emphasis on solving the mysteries on your own comes at the expense of a truly great plot — apparently, there is just no way you can have that cake and eat it too.

Atmosphere

I shall try to keep this section relatively short, because Sierra's FMV adventure games tend to produce most of their impact during cutscenes — the actual «movie» parts of the game where the player's impact is completely non-existent, and all the thrills are to be gotten through acting and sound. In between the cutscenes, however, you are extremely limited in your actions and even in your feelings: this, I am afraid to say, is one bit where *The Beast Within* loses out to *Phantasmagoria*, which, for all its flaws, at least made you feel nervous and stay on your toes all the time while exploring the mansion.



The main problem is that the game, whenever it is actually functioning in «game mode», is extremely static. It is impossible to freely move Gabriel or Grace around the screen; you can only push them right or left in pre-designated directions, or induce them to examine a hotspot. Promenading through the streets of Rittersberg, or across the squares of Munich, or over the dense forests of Bavaria, is a bit like marching in circles inside a prison courtyard. You do get a tiny bit of entertainment every once in a while — some animated figures near Munich's Town Hall sit around a fountain playing "When The Saints Go Marching In" (an ironic nod from *Sins Of The Fathers*), and the guards at Neuschwanstein keep changing positions at regular intervals, but on the whole, the action going on around you is minimal. (One can only guess just how populated the game might have been, were it released in the age of *The Witcher 3*!).

Still, the atmosphere does change, and change it does, when shit hits the fan properly and the game moves into the danger zone. As in the first installment, Jane takes her sweet time to build up the sense of danger — throughout the first four chapters of the game, Gabriel and Grace both experience uncomfortable premonitions, but ultimately manage to stay in the safe zone. However, by the end of the fifth chapter the beautiful and peaceful forest in which our hero is merely supposed to do a bit of hunting becomes a death trap at night — and it is at this moment that the game completely shifts its tone, as the mystery-solving quest becomes a quest for your own survival and sanity. All I can say is that this is a *much* harsher atmospheric twist than the one in *Sins Of The Fathers*, where the tone of the game also changed at about the same point, but the feeling of danger was never as sharply pronounced. After all, in *Sins Of The Fathers* the worst that could happen to our protagonist was mere death; in *The Beast Within*, death is less scary than damnation, and it is difficult for even the most jaded and least

impressionable person in the world to not feel anything about poor Gabriel's fate.

On the other hand, humor is not such a well integrated feature here as it was in *Sins* — which is partly due to the lack of Tim Curry (who would probably have a thing or two to improve about the script), and partly to the fact that Jane clearly wanted to come up with something deeper and darker than she did first time around. *Sins* were populated from top to bottom with characters acting as comic relief, from Officer Frick to colorful patrons of the Napoleon House to good old Detective Mosely himself; *Beast* has no comic characters at all (unless you count the Smiths, which you shouldn't), and even if Gabriel has not *completely* lost his sense of humor, he is no longer operating on the top tier level of the sarcastic son-of-a-bitch he was in *Sins* (it would be up to Tim Curry to restore him back to that position in the third game in the series). Some might find this a good thing, others might be disappointed; I know I was one of the others when I first played the game, missing the light touch of *Sins* and all the personality changes in both Grace and Gabriel — eventually, though, I got used to that, and even justified it by the obvious trauma that the characters went through at the end of *Sins* (I mean, Gabriel *did* lose the love of his life at the end of it; even the most sarcastic son of a bitch could want to cut down a bit on the puns and innuendos after that).

Technical features

Graphics

It is tricky to discuss the technical aspects of FMV games separately from each other — considering, for instance, that they are built upon actual acting by real people, which means that visuals and sound are integrated far more tightly than usually. Consequently, here and elsewhere in reviews of Sierra's FMV titles I am going to expand the traditional «Graphics» section to cover acting in general, while the «Sound» section will be reserved exclusively for the musical soundtrack (which, in the case of *The Beast Within*, most certainly deserves its own section).



All of the action in *The Beast Within* takes place in two modes: (a) cutscenes, in which actors are filmed properly, either talking to each other or carrying out various actions, against actual backdrops or, far more commonly, against green screen backgrounds later substituted by still backdrops; (b) interactive scenes, in which you can direct your character across the screen, usually against a still photo as a backdrop. Since all the video files for the game had to be gruesomely compressed in

order to fit into one package (it still took about 6 CDs to get it together), quality of images in cutscenes is predictably much lower than in interactive scenes — admiring the beauty of the game is really only possible with still images, not moving pictures.

The still images *are* beautiful, though, especially considering that this time around, the game crew actually took a trip to Germany in order to film the necessary locations — such as the Marienplatz in Munich, or the Neuschwanstein Castle of King Ludwig. It goes without saying that if you are unable to be there in person, you are much better off with high resolution images than stock footage from a 25-year old videogame, but that, of course, is not the point, not even any more so than the alleged «cheesiness» of Neuschwanstein (Ludwig's «fairy tale» castle, so sweet and rococo-ish that even Disney appropriated it for *Sleeping Beauty*). The point is that the locations *do* add a serious touch of authenticity to the experience — so serious, in fact, that *The Beast Within* ends up being one of the very, very few FMV games that really makes you lament the quick, decisive, and irreversible demise of the genre.

It is also impressive just how well the fictional elements are integrated into the real images, reflecting the same delicate interweaving of reality and imagination in Jensen's writing. I have already mentioned the fictional «wolf panels» at Neuschwanstein, replacing the original paintings, but it is also fun how the fictional locations in Munich — the office of Gabriel's lawyer and the hunt club, in particular — are smoothly inserted to the left and to the right of the Town Hall building (so smoothly, in fact, that when I actually visited Munich, I half-expected to see the hunt club after turning the corner). And something tells me that not a few fans of the game who visited Neuschwanstein afterwards probably spent a bit of time poking around pre-designated corners, trying to find out whether those secret caches for the three acts of the lost Wagner opera really existed...

Still, unless you are a super-serious sucker for German historicism of the late 19th century, you shall probably spend more of your time on the various cutscenes than on admiring the still scenery. Thus, it is time to talk about the cast — for which, unfortunately, it was impossible to assemble such a strong list of B-tier players as it was for *Sins Of The Fathers*, either due to limited budget or because good actors tended to be very wary about lending not only their voices, but also their appearances to this strange new format. Apparently, there *was* some talk about Tim Curry possibly reprising his role, but Jensen vetoed this herself, claiming that Tim's looks are not quite what she had in mind for Gabriel Knight. (On which I respectfully disagree, because, after all, the voice is hardly just randomly tied to the face, but whatever).

In the place of Tim Curry comes Dean Erickson, a bit player in various TV shows who actually hoped that his starring role as

Gabriel could be his big break, but eventually went on to found an investment advisory firm (in more recent photos, he looks more like Gabriel's lawyer in Munich than Gabriel himself). Either all by himself or as directed by director Will Binder, he introduces a huge personality shift to Gabriel — this character is clearly less cocky, less blatantly self-confident, is no total stranger to shyness and humility, and generally reserves his sarcasm for snobs and assholes who really deserve it rather than spewing it around 24/7 with no signs of discrimination. His badboyishness is now more like a nostalgic badge which he can still proudly wave around if required ("do you like women, Herr Knight?", he is asked at one point in the game by a particularly sleazy member of the club, to which he half-cockily, half-embarrassedly replies, "I've been known to..."), but overall, it's as if the events of the first game really knocked him down a peg or two.

This means that you will most probably either hate Erickson's performance next to Curry's, or love it — it would be difficult to experience comparatively strong emotions for both, and it would be impossible not to be affected by their differences. Personally, I remember a sharp original pang of disappointment, not because I disliked Erickson's Knight per se, but more because this was one of those Sean-Connery-to-Roger-Moore types of transitions where you find it hard to accept that the same fictional character has just received a personality reboot for no apparent reason. Over time, though, I learned to appreciate the rather fine nuances of Erickson's acting: the mimics, the gestures, the well-placed theatrical pauses, that thin aura of negligence and sloppiness combined with streetwise intelligence, even the major tantrum which he throws at Grace as the curse begins to affect him — all of that is pretty well done, want it or not. If he'd only spent less time twitching his lips or running his hands through his hair in the cutscenes... but I guess that is more the fault of the director and the FMV format than anything else.

Joanne Takahashi, as Grace, usually gets more flack for her acting, but honestly, I don't think she does a bad job, either. In the first game, Leah Remini's Grace was a mostly quiet, reserved, sarcastic fountain of wisdom, which she preferred to dispense from behind her desk rather than hopping from place to place or getting herself involved in much of anything. In *The Beast Within*, her role is more active, as we have to deal with her not only in the capacity of researcher and investigator, but also in that of a jealous lover (at the beginning) and a brave and caring rescuer (at the end). If there is a single flaw in her performance, it is probably that she takes the role *too* seriously, and tends to overact every time the script requires a strong emotion — her hysterical reaction to Gerde in Chapter 2, for instance, would only look convincing if there were a long and transparent story of deep emotional traumas leading up to it (it is a bit hard to believe that Gabriel's leaving New Orleans for Rittersberg was really the only thing to cause our lady to jump off her rocker). But other than that she's as fine as can be — she is Japanese-American, she is intelligent, she is beautiful, she is well-spoken and sharp-mouthed, and she is adorably clumsy in

every single bit of romantic scenery (some might think of this as a negative, but I suppose that a character like Grace Nakimura *would* be quite clumsy and uncomfortable about romance in real life anyway).

That said, I think everybody and their grandma would agree that the single best bit of acting in the game is delivered by the Polish actor Peter Lucas as Baron Friedrich von Glower. Why that guy never made it big time (I think his biggest break would later be a supporting role in David Lynch's *Inland Empire*, a movie that nobody remembers any longer anyway) is a total mystery to me — chalk it up to the mysterious lottery of fortune, ever once in a while liable to supporting mediocrities like George Clooney or Jon Hamm (sorry, guys) over actual talent. Lucas' von Glower is, simply put, *the* single greatest villain in video game history, at least in terms of how elegant, intelligent, multi-sided, caring, and overall sympathetic you can make a guy who has also made it his life's purpose to destroy the lives of people he actually cares about. He steals every single scene in which he is present — fortunately, there are quite a few of them — and there is something hypnotic about his voice even in a lengthy sequence where you just read a letter explaining his plans and motives. If only he were given higher quality dialog — if only the lead writer for the project had been, say, Herman Hesse instead of Jane Jensen — the scenes in von Glower's residence, where he explains his «philosophy» to Gabriel, would have been totally iconic... though I guess that they are *still* iconic in some ways, at least as far as FMV gamemaking is concerned. In addition to this (insufficient, but still respectable) layer of intellectual depth, he is also able to portray some good old-fashioned homoerotic attraction that comes across as elegant and courteous rather than sleazy, cheesy, or riddled with over-the-top clichés of writers and actors who try a bit too hard — an advantage of the game for which Jensen and Lucas have to share the honors.

On the whole, I am surprised to say that conspicuously and unquestionably proverbial «bad acting» is all but lacking in the game. Even the horrendous Mrs. Smith, played by veteran TV actor Judith Drake, is acted out quite credibly — she is just an utterly annoying character, written in by Jensen because she probably wanted to show all the mysterious ways in which God sends us help from above (sometimes it even comes in the shape of an annoyingly super-sweet provincial lady who can't keep her mouth shut for a second), and she plays the part precisely like an annoying character should. Nicholas Worth is an imposing and hilarious Kommissar Leber (the obligatory big dumb detective who alternately helps and hinders the protagonist); Richard Raynesford does a convincingly all-out nasty Baron Von Zell; and charming old gentleman Kay Kuter (whom players will probably more commonly recognize as the voice of Griswold Goodsoup from *Curse Of Monkey Island*) plays a wonderful Werner Huber, the owner of the Rittersberg inn and the Herald of Doom for both Gabriel and Grace (you haven't lived, really, until you saw and heard him make that grimace and intone "WE-E-E-E-REWOLF!" in a voice seemingly carved from the Rock of Ages). In short, if you *do* want Proverbial Bad Acting, go play *Phantasmagoria* — next to that one, all

these guys deserve their Oscars.

In terms of actual cinematography, the capacity of the game is understandably limited — there is not that much you can actually do against a green screen — but it is impossible not to mention the climactic opera scene at the end, for which Sierra *really* went all-out, hiring real opera singers and putting on quite a grand theatrical show, with excellent editing work and tension build-up quite worthy of a Hitchcock production (or at least a Francis Ford Coppola, though I think Hitchcock is clearly a bigger inspiration for Jensen). It is the single most outstanding moment in all of Sierra On-Line's cinematography — and, probably, *the* highest point of the entire FMV era as well, the likes of which we have not seen ever since and most likely never will again, which is a pity (grand cinematographic spectacle in 3D animation is quite common these days, but still, it can never truly replace the same spectacle put up by real people of flesh and blood).

One can only speculate how much better it would all have turned out if the game had been produced at least 5–6 years later than it was. The resolution of the videos is horrendously low, necessitating total compression and interlacing (at least there now exists a patch that helps you de-interlace the videos, making them a bit more watchable on modern screens); the green screen impediment means that the characters' contours are crudely and unnaturally sticking out against the backdrops, reducing immersion; and the few elements of CGI integrated with real video capture — such as the werewolves in the last chapters — look much too cartoonish and clumsy when contrasted with actors, which really takes away from the intended feel of horror (especially today, of course, but even in 1995 the difference in quality was clearly visible). Not everybody was willing to look past these technical deficiencies back in 1995, and, clearly, very few people will be willing to do that 25 years later. But just as we now marvel at, for instance, the skills of the artists who could at one time record the entirety of **Sgt. Pepper** on 4-track tape machines, so might we actually feel inspired by the work of the people who could make a generally believable experience of hunting werewolves in the cities and forests of Bavaria by putting a bunch of unknown actors in front of a blank screen.

Sound

By 1995, Robert Holmes, who had composed the original soundtrack to *Sins Of The Fathers* as well as acted as the game's producer, was not just a composer, but also Jane Jensen's husband, and so there was clearly no way that he would not be responsible for the score to the second game as well — and thank God for that.

If the game was going to feel less than a traditional game and more like an interactive movie, with big fat emphasis on the *movie* part, that also meant that its soundtrack would have to feel more like an actual movie soundtrack — with strong, memorable themes going beyond mere background accompaniment. After all, when we're dealing with an actual adventure game, you usually do not want the music to be overbearing and overwhelming, because sooner or later you are going to get stuck in some specific environment, and wrecking your brain over puzzle solutions with loud, expressive, dynamic music intruding inside your busy space will eventually become torture and probably lead you to turning the sound off altogether. But if at least half of your gaming time is going to be filled up with watching cutscenes, *that* is a whole different thing altogether: it means that making music into an integral part of that experience is an obligation, and that music better be worth it.



Whether Holmes would be able to pull it off was not evident from the beginning, precisely because the scale difference between the soundtracks to *Sins* and *Beast* was like the difference between, let's say, an album of surf-rock instrumentals and an Andrew Lloyd Webber-type rock opera. However, right from the opening themes of the Prologue and the opening chapter we may be reassured that the man is fully up to the task. Despite all of the music being MIDI-synthesized (real orchestration surely would have been nice, but BUDGET BUDGET BUDGET), Holmes succeeds in getting the required epic effect over and over again, largely taking his cues from the symphonic rock of the 1970s, I'd say — I can definitely hear echoes of Pete Townshend's keyboard work on **Quadrophenia** in some of the tracks, among other, sometimes less flattering, things (such as American arena-rock *à la* Journey).

To prop up the continuity effect, Holmes borrows and reworks quite a few of the older themes from *Sins*, such as the main Gabriel Knight theme, or the Police Station theme (which, appropriately, is now playing at specific intervals inside the *German* police station, with an appropriately more brutal percussion sound). However, all of them are intensified, and Holmes' trademark piano riffs are bashed out with all the force he can give them. The piano, in general, is the most important instrument here, intermittently churning out epic, depressing, or romantic moods depending on the situation; one exception is a frantic «Danger Theme», which typically bursts out of nowhere to scare the shit out of you whenever it is necessary — for instance, during Grace's nightmare sequence, or during a pivotal moment when Gabriel stumbles upon the gruesome evidence

inside the werewolf lair. The sequencing arrangements are also interesting — thus, while the music within cutscenes is always rigidly scripted, outside of them the themes for specific locations do not loop around continuously, but rather crop up, play out, and fade away with intervals of silence between them, presumably to prevent you from getting irritated by constant sonic accompaniment if, for some reason, you tarry too long in one place (which is never really the right thing to do).

Holmes' biggest challenge for the game, of course, was to come up with at least a brief snippet of the Lost Wagner Opera — the key element binding the 19th century segment of the story to the present time. Any lesser mortal would have cowered at the challenge, but a big strong woman like Jane Jensen certainly would not have married a spineless wimp unable to beat Herr Richard at his own game, and so Robert actually sat down and composed a 10-minute piece (with Jane providing the libretto), performed in full during the climactic Transformation scene in the last act. Of course, it does not really sound much like Wagner (not least because Wagner himself had relatively little experience working with a MIDI interface), but there *is* something Wagnerian about it all the same — like the impressive whirlpool of strings during the ominous Minstrel Dance, somewhat reminiscent of Wagner's proto-minimalist moments (such as the *Rheingold* overture); most importantly, it gets the job done, slowly and masterfully deepening the colors until the explosive revelation. (As a sidenote, I would like to remark that the whole story of *The Beast Within* and specifically the dark supernatural tones of it, crossed with the idea of damnation and salvation, is actually much closer in spirit to von Weber's *Der Freischütz*, whose romanticism was a direct predecessor to Wagner — unfortunately, «a lost Weber opera» would neither have fitted in with the Ludwig/Wagner narrative nor sounded as impressively for the average player. I would not be surprised to learn that Holmes was more influenced by Weber than Wagner, though).

Regardless of these details, it is clear that the soundtrack to *The Beast Within* was one of the most ambitious sonic undertakings in at least Western videogame history up to that point — and even if you lack the ability or desire to test it out within the game itself, I still recommend experiencing at least [two or three themes](#) in order to grasp the overall seriousness of the entire project. It is actually quite befuddling to me that, despite showing such major progress here, Holmes was not picked up by any major movie or videogame studios ever since — then again, it is also perfectly possible that he is just a simple, modest, unambitious, stay-at-home soul, perfectly content to restrict himself to writing soundtracks for his spouse's games for ever and ever since, God bless the both of them.

Interface

And this is where we come to the last and, conversely, least impressive part of the game — the interaction part. As long as you *watch* the game, it is relentlessly great, but, as we have already seen in the *Puzzles* section, as soon as it comes to actually proving *your* own worth, it begins to disappoint. The interface of the game generally follows the new pattern introduced with *King's Quest VII*: still images and video cutscenes occupy about 2/3rds of the screen, the rest of it being given over to the menu bar which is... surprisingly empty (apparently, the middle chunk was supposed to be given over to subtitles, but ultimately the game shipped without them — there is a fan-made patch that actually adds English subtitles, though). You really only have a small inventory window out there, as well as your trusty tape recorder which allows you to relisten to important conversations (a feature carried over from *Sins Of The Fathers*) and a video replay option which allows you to rewatch some important scenes (not all, though). At least you can freely save and restore your games at and from every location — thankfully, Jane dispensed with the utterly stupid «bookmark progress» alternative of *King's Quest VII* and *Phantasmagoria*. On the other hand, the division of the game into several chapters introduced in the same games works very well for *The Beast Within*, both agreeing with the same division (into «days») of *Sins Of The Fathers* and allowing us to alternate between Gabriel and Grace on a chapter-by-chapter level.

Unfortunately, one thing Jane could not dispense with is the utterly minimalistic point-and-click interface, which forces you to helplessly wave your dick, uh, I mean, cursor around the screen until it reaches an otherwise unidentified hotspot and changes into a dagger, at which point you click on it to either get a verbal description or interact with it. The lack of different options means, for instance, that sometimes in order to achieve progress, you have to *first* click on an object to get its verbal description, and then click on it *again* to interact with it and actually get somewhere. This is annoying and stupid, and I am pretty sure Jane (with her very nice set of alternate cursors in the first game) must have hated it, but such were Sierra's laws of the time — what has been predetermined by the next generation of Roberta Williams games, goes for everybody else's games as well.

Still, the game quickly lulls you into being totally assured that as long as you stick out your tongue, roll your eyes, and click your cursor / dagger all over the screen, the game will just keep on rolling — all you gotta do is reach out for those sweet little



hotspots. This is why the very last puzzle in the game, when you actually have to get just a wee bit trickier with your dagger in order to solve the issue of the Beast once and for all, turns out to be so frustrating for a lot of players (I actually surveyed several «blind playthroughs» on YouTube to make sure of that) — because it requires of you to take a type of action that was never required or even hinted at in the game before. (Bad game design! Bad game design!)

Other than that, the interface is user-friendly: you can easily skip any cutscene you wish by simply clicking the mouse (comes in handy if you're a speedrunner, I guess), you can watch your progress in points at the top of the screen, and oh, I almost forgot to mention that Grace actually keeps a journal in the same spot where Gabriel has his tape recorder — in which she regularly takes notes, ordered by subject and chronology, *and* can actually read them aloud to you (along with plenty of sarcastic comments on Gabriel and just about all of her new acquaintances). The journal part is nice to have, though not essential (well, *perhaps* essential for those with short memory spans — there is, after all, quite an overload of information to be had from completing Grace's parts of the story), and I think that it is pretty much the only innovative aspect of the entire interface. Keeping journals (though not always voiced ones) would later become a fairly regular feature in adventure games (e.g. *The Longest Journey* or *Syberia*), but I am not sure just how widespread the practice was by 1995. (Certainly some of Sierra's mystery games, such as the *Laura Bow* series, could have benefited from it early on, but Roberta was apparently fine with a «dummy» journal for her heroine).

Finally, just like in the first game, you won't be able to die at all in the first four chapters (and you can't die as Grace *at all*), but eventually there comes a time when you *may* die, and later still, a time when you *will* die with 99.99% certainty, many times over before you figure out what to do. For such cases, there will be a «Try Again» option, so there is no need to continually save and restore (you might want to do just that while running around the basement in wolf form, though, to save you lots of ennui).

Verdict: *That one adventure game which takes the game out of the adventure – and gets away with it.*

Like the first Gabriel Knight game, the second one also sets the bar way higher than it could ever hope to reach. It is not truly a game as such; it is riddled with technical deficiencies which are hard to overlook or forgive; its plot is full of holes; even the best of its characters often speak in clichés and truisms; it may easily be deemed as too insulting for the intelligence of people who read books, yet too confusing and boring for those who do not. In a certain way, its fate is oddly similar to the fictional fate of its most interesting character – no, not Gabriel Knight, of course, but rather King Ludwig II of Bavaria, whose human flaws were many and whose artistic tastes were debatable, but who has managed to remain a fascinating figure all the same.



Of course, big and sprawling ambitions are not *always* welcome – they have resulted in way too many embarrassing JRPGs over the past half century, and in the world of videogames, where flash is so commonly prioritized over substance, they can easily do more harm than good in any setting. But in Jane Jensen's case, what really helped was focusing the story on personal levels, making it more of an exploration of the conflicting inner selves of 20th century Gabriel and his 19th century mirror Ludwig – an exploration which can admittedly get soapy at times, but hits you pretty hard in the feels at others (can I admit that I actually teared up at the final scene of Gabriel and Grace on the bridge? no? too late). Then, even when you stop and think and begin to be tempted to laugh at your emotional reflexes, even from a cold intellectual point of view you cannot deny that the integration of the werewolf story with the historical narrative of Ludwig and Wagner is one of the most brilliant ideas in the history of mixing together fact and fiction. So it was realized less efficiently than it could have been... but who can tell, really? It's not as if there were *precedents* for this in gaming history, right?

I do believe that if you have at least certain faint feelings for (a) adventure gaming, (b) European history, and (c) folklore-based fantasy – all three of these, that is – your life will be somewhat incomplete until you have played this game. If you are totally indifferent toward at least *one* of these points, that statement should be retracted (thus, pure history buffs will most likely scoff at the werewolf angle, and pure fantasy fans will probably fall asleep during Grace's never-ending tour of Bavarian museums). But if you are lucky enough to be interested in all three, *The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery* will most assuredly work its magic even today. Hopefully, some day a grateful bunch of fans will use the necessary AI to bring the video

files up to modern standards; until then, we'll just have to curb our expectations for the reward of a unique experience which, in some ways, has never been bettered — even if the arrival of modern standards has seemingly set up all the necessary conditions for making it artistically obsolete. Which, as of 2020, it most certainly is not.