

Gabriel Knight 3: Blood Of The Sacred, Blood Of The Damned

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Jane Jensen**

Part of series: **Gabriel Knight**

Release: November 19, 1999

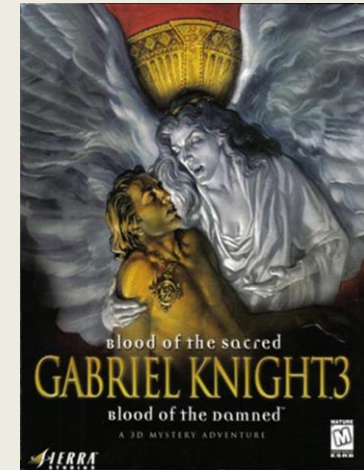
Main credits: Producer: **Steven Hill**

Lead programmer: **Scott Honn**

Lead artists / animators: **Ray Bornstein, Aubrey Pullman**

Music: **Robert Holmes, David Henry**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (12 parts, 751 mins.)



Basic Overview

Gabriel Knight 3 was the last ever original adventure game to be developed and published by Sierra Studios — almost miraculously, it was the only project to survive the dark day of February 22, 1999, when the unfortunate decision of Ken and Roberta Williams to sell the company to the crooks at CUC International eventually led to catastrophe (you can read all about it in Ken's own highly entertaining book, astutely titled [Not All Fairy Tales Have Happy Endings](#); I shall not concentrate on any gruesome details of that story here). Apparently, even after most of the Sierra veterans such as Al Lowe and Scott Murphy had been sacked and their incipient sequel projects to *Leisure Suit Larry* and *Space Quest* cancelled, Jane Jensen was temporarily spared and allowed to finish her work, since, unlike the others, she had already been at it for quite some time, and Sierra's new owners decided that at least this particular investment had to pay off somehow.

Precisely how the knowledge that this was clearly going to be the last *Gabriel Knight* game, let alone the last Sierra game, influenced the game substantially is unclear; it did, of course, influence it technically, which was particularly unfortunate due



to the ongoing transition to 3D graphics, including an original engine — too much effort was directed at achieving a stable run for the game, and they still ended up going over budget. At the very least, the good news is that at the end of the day, *Gabriel Knight 3* still reflected the artistic vision of Jane Jensen (for the most part): the story goals that she set out to meet were generally met, and while the bittersweet ending to the game predictably left fans yearning for yet another story, it also can be said to have rounded up the overall trilogy quite nicely. Petitions for a *Gabriel Knight 4* keep shaking up the Internet every now and then, but somehow it seems to me that it is not so much the copyright issues with Sierra's inheritors that keep holding Jane back from making it (she did, after all, manage to produce an inferior remake of *Sins Of The Fathers* to commemorate its 20th anniversary), as the general feeling that with the third game in the series, she went as far and as high with the «Shadowhunter Legend» as creatively possible — thus, any potential sequel would only be a disappointment.

Because if there is one general characteristic to set *Gabriel Knight 3* aside from the previous two games, it is wild, unbridled ambition. Remember how, in my previous reviews, I was complimenting Jensen on making her protagonist more of a «local» troubleshooter, busy settling old personal scores and minor murder mysteries, than an «ordinary guy saves the world» type? Well, now that the first two games have clearly established that the «ordinary guy» is quite extraordinary, the time has finally come for him to do just that and save the world — no less than from the coming Anti-Christ himself — as well as discover that his «Shadowhunter» legacy extends way, *way* beyond the Middle Ages and is, in fact, directly tied in with the overall pathway of humanity as it is written in the stars and decoded by those who have the proper understanding.

Originally, Jane merely intended to do a game about vampires (this was already subtly hinted at in *Sins Of The Fathers*, where Gabriel's rummaging through the Schattenjäger library led him to discover a tome on lycanthropes — presaging the events of the second game — and another on vampirism). However, at a certain point fate led her to the same notorious pseudo-historical volume — *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* — that had already formed the basis of Charles Cecil's and Revolution Software's [Broken Sword: The Shadow Of The Templars](#), and would soon enough become the major influence for Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*; upon getting acquainted with it, Jane realized that the ridiculously thrilling narrative of the book could make a perfect setting for her own vampire story, just as the (far more real) story of the complex relationship between Ludwig of Bavaria and Richard Wagner had already made a great background for her werewolf mystery.

The big difference was that the scope of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* was much wider — involving the bloodline of Jesus, the Temple of Solomon and the Knights Templar, the phoney «Priory of Sion», the modern day aristocratic families of Europe — and the potential of the game to offend plenty of people in the Christian circles was far greater. The latter danger, fortunately, was mostly avoided due to not too many loyal Christians playing the game in the first place (*The Da Vinci Code*, with its

incomparably wider popularity, suffered much more of a backlash); at the very least, I am not aware of any active «CD-ROM burning» going on in the early 2000s around the Bible Belt. The scope and ambitiousness of the game's tale, on the other hand, did create a problem, if only for the insane amount of lore that had to be introduced one way or the other, and then transformed into a series of puzzles — but also because the somewhat earthly and irreverent character of Gabriel Knight suddenly had to cope with his mission taking on a truly universal purpose.

With all the substantial and technical challenges set out for Jensen, it is not too surprising that *Gabriel Knight 3* never quite got the same level of either contemporary or post-factum respect and admiration as its predecessors — it is actually much more astonishing that the game got completed in the first place, and without becoming a totally bumbled mess at that. In the following sections of the review, we shall see that serious problems haunt pretty much every aspect of the game, as it keeps suffering from such lapses of logic, taste, and polish as Jensen would have never allowed herself in the days of *Sins Of The Fathers*. Yet it also has certain unique redeeming qualities to make these lapses more forgivable — and it manages to finish the Gabriel Knight saga on a globally epic and personally tragic note which, in terms of pure raw emotion, might deliver the single sharpest barb into the heart of the adventurer, courtesy of Jane Jensen's wicked psychologism. And remembering that the note in question was also the final death chord in the melody of Sierra On-Line makes it even more poignant.

Content evaluation

Plotline

As it often happens in sagas that start out strong and end up losing their balance, the weakest game in the *Gabriel Knight* series also features the most complex and twisted plot of them all — so complex, in fact, that the story has to begin with a separately available graphic mini-novel to fill you in on the series of events leading to the odd circumstance of Gabriel, for some reason, getting off a late night train in the middle of nowhere... more accurately, at the little station of Couiza in the south of France, just miles away from the tiny village of Rennes-le-Château, which, as we soon shall learn, holds the key to the destruction or salvation of humankind.



The graphic novel lets us know that a little while back, Gabriel Knight and Grace Nakimura, now more or less settled in their «Resident Schattenjäger» and «Assistant to Resident Schattenjäger» roles in Rittersberg, Germany, were invited to Paris by Prince James Stewart of Albany, an exiled descendant of the House of Stewart of Scotland, to help him protect his newborn baby from the threat of the «*night visitors*» — a mysterious clique of allegedly vampiric personalities known to prey on the Stewarts and drink their blood at night. Obviously incredulous at first, Gabriel still accepts the night watch and immediately fails it, as the Night Visitors downright *steal* the baby from the cradle, and now he has to pursue them through the streets of Paris, the train station, and the compartments of an actual train until the annoyed kidnappers finally knock him out, so that he only comes back to his senses when the train approaches Rennes-le-Château.

[Rennes-le-Château](#) is, of course, quite a familiar place for anybody interested in the «alternate history» that concerns the Knights Templar, the bloodline of Jesus, and the mysterious pastor Bérenger Saunière, whose alleged discoveries and enigmatic architectural projects around the area play an important role in the game right from the start. Retelling this background in the present review is pointless, as there are myriads of sources already dealing with it in sufficient detail, especially since *The Da Vinci Code* massively popularized it in a way Jane Jensen never could have hoped to (start with a little [Wikipedia](#) if you happen to be late to the party). Most of the actual plot of the game, then, consists in gradually unveiling the details of the legend of «Jesus' Heirs» as Gabriel and, eventually, Grace learn more and more about the history of the region; tying these details into the protagonists' current predicament as they eventually begin to understand the connection between all this pseudo-historical crapola and their employer; and, ultimately, realizing how Gabriel's own Schattenjäger destiny has led him to become an active participant in this important business — through inevitability rather than incident.

On all these accounts, Jane Jensen, as an accomplished master storyteller, rarely slips up. With such a massive and daring undertaking, some plot holes, illogical events, and loose ends are almost inevitable, but we'd already gotten accustomed to those over the previous two games in the series. Jane's original additions to the story — most importantly, the entire vampire and Anti-Christ angle, as well as the expansion of the authors' of *The Holy Blood's* theory into an even more grandiose story of the Sacred Brotherhood — work fine, suggesting that if you're building up a pseudo-history castle, you might as well go *all* the way and make it a pseudo-history Tower of Babel, lest people actually remain capable of *believing* some of that stuff. The unexpected denouements and surprising plot twists are not always completely predictable, yet generally make sense. And even if the game goes completely Indiana Jones on you by the time the last act comes along, well, you can't really say you have not been properly warned — throughout the entire thing, Jensen has been slowly preparing you for something grandiose and epic awaiting you at the last minute, even with all the irony and sarcasm strewn around for good measure.

If there is one main reason why the overall plot feels a little flawed and inferior compared to both *Sins Of The Fathers* and *The Beast Within*, it is precisely the *massiveness* of it all. Jane has opted to insert almost all of the content of the *Holy Blood* book inside the game — meaning that you shall have tons and tons of red herrings along with the stuff that matters — and getting one's head around it can be seriously confusing and disorienting, especially if you do not plan on replaying the game any time soon. And for all that complexity, there is not enough counteracting it with soul and individual conflict. The first game, after all, had as its background the ordeal, torment, and revenge of a scorned and maligned spirit (Tetelo), making Gabriel a pawn in the tragic love story of his ancestor and an African slave girl; the second dug deep into the backstory, psychology, and emotions of King Ludwig, bringing a strange historical character back to life in a brand new coat of mythology. Here, the only character from history who is somewhat emotionally relevant to the present ends up to be Jesus himself — but only at the very end, and in a rather corny manner at that. We do not get to properly empathize for any of the Knights Templar, or anybody from the Priory of Sion, or even for the cold and distant Abbé Saunière — perhaps the most obvious character whom Jensen could have «humanized», but refused to do so.

For that matter, we do not even get a particularly impressive or complex antagonist: next to Tetelo / Malia Gedde from the first game or Baron von Glower from the second, Gabriel's main adversary here only appears in a couple of scenes and acts as a fairly stereotypical movie villain. This might, however, have been an intentional decision: *Gabriel Knight 3* is a game that is not so much about fighting the evil as it is about understanding the good. As creepy and scary as that entire vampire angle can occasionally get, every time it crops up it almost feels like an unwelcome intrusion on the main story, akin to, say, a bout of malaria interrupting progress on an important archaeological excavation. Even before the game's forces of Evil are defeated, they already end up so ridiculously diminished that I could not even define the final boss fight as a properly climactic moment for the game — the true climactic moments come *after* the final boss fight. And if that was Jane Jensen's intention all along, who could blame her? «Evil» is overrated anyway.

With no great personal conflict embedded in the heart of the game's backstory, it is not surprising that *most* of the personal conflict here takes place within Gabriel himself — or, rather, between himself and Grace. As in the second game, you will be obligated to play for both Gabriel and Grace, interchangeably, but if in *The Beast Within* they spent most of the time separated from each other, *Gabriel Knight 3* places them closer than ever before — sharing the same room in a hotel, no less — and spends much more time sorting out their personal relations and issues than both of the previous games put together. Again, my opinion is that this part of the game is also handled pretty well: Jane offers a mature, complex take on male-female issues without clearly stating on whose side her chief sympathies lie (*hint*: on Grace's, naturally!), and although every once in a while

the corresponding dialog slips into caricaturesque (e.g. Gabriel complaining: «*havin' her around is like wearing a freakin' chastity belt!*»), on the whole what goes on between those two strong personalities is quite believable, and the sad, if not completely tragic, conclusion to the relationship, with Jane refusing to grant her heroes a happy ending, feels natural.

There are two small, but significant problems to this angle, though. First, this time around the Saga of The Schattenjäger and His Assistant feels like a story that is almost completely separate from the main plot of the game; in *The Beast Within*, the relationship between Gabriel and Grace was essentially a part of the spiritual test that the protagonist had to go through, but here it's like Gabriel has to constantly multi-task between solving the mystery and managing his love life, and the two lines only come together at the very conclusion of the game, and not very convincingly at that. Second, for some reason that does not seem to find complete justification, Jane has designed Gabriel to be *much* more of an asshole this time around than he ever was in the first two games. In *Sins Of The Fathers*, Gabriel was a bona fide womanizer with a penchant for crude, politically incorrect, formally sexist, but ultimately friendly quips and jokes, and his snarky interactions with Grace were largely a game of wits to which both sides openly consented; in *Gabriel Knight 3*, he actually says (and does!) quite a few things that are, to put it mildly, quite ungentleman-ly, not to mention undeserving of a true Schattenjäger. This is a rather harsh transformation of character which (a) feels unnatural coming off the legacy of the previous two games, (b) feels uncomfortable when the guy in question is your own playable character and is supposed to do all sorts of noble deeds and save the world. God knows I like to be forgiving to characters who do not always act in accordance with the dominant moral code, but the thing is that, as a consequence of this unprecedented erosion of the character's morality, Gabriel Knight in this game emerges as less of a believable character than he was in the first two games. (More details on this below, when we get around to discussing Tim Curry's vocal performance in this game).

And speaking of believable characters, that's quite a serious, if not fatal, problem on a general level. More than the first two games in the series, *Gabriel Knight 3* is a «character museum» — starting with the oddly assembled tour group staying at the same hotel with Gabriel. Each member of the tour group is a personality in his or her own rights, but most of these personalities are fairly unpleasant clichés. The tour leader, Madeleine Buthane, symbolizes the «sexy French femme fatale» stereotype, with each of her quips, gestures, and actions transparent to such an extent that when she is eventually revealed as a secret police agent (no big spoiler here), one can only take pity on the French government qualification standards. The two British matrons — Lady Howard and her companion Estelle — likewise illustrate all the predictable sides of British stereotypes (the haughty, despicable aristocrat and the haughty, despicable aristocrat's lapdog). The Australian, John Wilkes, has all the irredeemable qualities of a typical «Aussie» and none of the virtues. The Italian guy has «I come from the land of Machiavelli

and the Borgias» written in invisible ink on his forehead (at least *that* stereotype is the less common one when it comes to representation of Italians in popular culture). And on and on, ad infinitum.

It is possible that Jane, in her desire to somewhat lighten and enliven the tone of the mystery, was influenced here by the likes of *Clue* (as an Easter egg, there is even an explicit reference to *Clue* hidden in Gabriel's interactions with the French maid at the hotel). The problem is that *Clue* was a comedy from top to bottom, whereas *Gabriel Knight 3*, at certain points, like both of its predecessors, demands that you take it seriously, requesting to make an emotional impact on you. Thus, whenever any one of those cartoonish, boorish NPCs suddenly starts behaving like a regular human being — for instance, Madeleine, who seems to have a change of heart out of the blue at the very end of the game — the plot shifts from corny-funny to corny-maudlin, baring all of Jane's deficiencies as a writer for all the world to see. It's even more frustrating when you understand that all those characters really only exist for you to chuckle at their behavioral patterns, rather than make significant contributions to the development of the plot — it's fairly obvious right from the start that not a single member of the «tour group» has anything to do with the kidnapping or the entire holy blood business, and that for the most part, they're just here for comic relief. *Way* too much comic relief.

In an attempt to butter up veteran fans, Jensen even announces the return of our old pal, Detective Mosely, from the first game — setting up his arrival in a completely deus-ex-machina way and offering an even harder-to-believe justification for it in the final act. Predictably, he is also made into an even bigger buffoon and clown than he was first time around; as Gabriel's «secondary» involuntary sidekick, he crops up all over the place mainly to be made fun of (sometimes rather wickedly), not only by Gabriel, but by Grace as well. In *Sins Of The Fathers*, he at least played the necessary role of the «Incredulous Cop On The Job», later to be swapped by «The Only Good Cop On The Job»; here, his only reason for existence is to serve as the butt-end of Gabriel's jokes — and then, at one tough turn in Gabriel and Grace's story, to temporarily act as Gabriel's own guilty conscience. It's strange that Jane did not come up with the idea of making Komissar Leber from *The Beast Within* into yet another tour group member as well — come to think of it, what the game *sorely* lacks is the presence of a proverbial German policeman. Most of the other major European nations are already here, anyway, so where are the Germans?

And *yet*, despite the obvious ridiculousness and crudeness of all these aspects, which almost turned me off the game on my first playthrough, it eventually became possible to warm up at least a little to its combination of slapstick and seriousness. Naturally, a videogame equivalent of a mix of *Clue* with *Rosemary's Baby* seems like a horrible idea in theory, and probably feels the same in practice — but then, at a certain point, you might just go... *why not?* So one minute, you're making silly jokes about the relative benefits of French and Australian foods, and the next one, you're dealing with horrific vampiric murders

destined to lead to a reign of demonic terror... and what's so wrong with that? There's a particularly memorable sequence of events in the middle of the game, when one minute you are catching Mosely with his pants down (*not* literally), doing some really silly stuff in the dead of night — then, the next minute, you return to the hotel to experience one of the game's most blood-curdling encounters. The contrast still stands out in my mind, for better or worse.

So, ultimately, I think that the concept of building the game's storyline on a contrast between bubbly, lightweight comedy and pretentious, ambitious epic drama — nothing new in art in general or video games in particular, *but* taken to a whole new level of intensity — works well in theory (more on that when we discuss the atmosphere of the game); it is just that it is rather poorly realized here, particularly when it comes to comedy. One thing in particular that I've noticed to often annoy players and critics is the sheer amount of sarcasm: apparently, Jane herself realized that as the story progressed, it got buried under *way* too much pathos, and thought that the best way to shoot it down a little was to make Gabriel — or some of his pals — have a snarky remark in response to pretty much *everything*. «Sarcasm instead of true wit», people angrily reacted, and while I do not necessarily think that sarcasm and wit are mutually exclusive, I, too, occasionally get tired of this angle; yes, it was present in the games from the very start, as Gabriel Knight is quite a sarcastic guy by nature, but in the first two games, the script had his snips and snarls under control. Here, the game just goes overboard, and when you add up Gabriel's increasingly mean and egotistical behavior, it is hardly surprising that third time around, it is difficult to experience the same love for the character as the first two games allowed you to have.

In the end, putting all my thoughts on all the three games together, I think that the *Gabriel Knight* saga would have strongly benefitted from having an extra writer — leaving all the mystery and history twists, of which she is such a total master, to Jane Jensen, *but* placing the burden of depicting the emotional and spiritual evolution of the game's main characters on somebody else's shoulders. Then again, *whose* shoulders? There are very few, if any, dialog writers in the gaming world capable of mature, realistic psychologism, and Ingmar Bergman, unfortunately, was quite unavailable every time Sierra started up a new *Gabriel Knight* project. So I guess that we simply have to work with what we have. Personally, I like to imagine that it must have been Gabriel's brief stunt as a werewolf in *The Beast Within* that was at least partially responsible for his transformation into this asshole character in the next game — maybe there was a little fur left behind or something. Just a couple more on-the-spot excuses like these, and in light of the game's major storytelling ambitions I am ready to forgive it its many character-building flaws. Forgive, but not forget: in the storytelling department, *Blood Of The Sacred* shall forever remain a relative disappointment of the «bites-off-more-than-it-can-chew» kind.

Puzzles

Oh boy. It will be impossible to complete this section without making a reference to Old Man Murray's famous [Death Of Adventure Games](#) (a.k.a. *Who Killed Adventure Games?*) essay, so we might as well skewer the elephant in the room right now. The essay, published in September 2000 on (back then) one of the most brutally critical and influential websites on video gaming, took one of the puzzles from Jane Jensen's latest games as a strong counterargument to the theory that the recent demise of adventure games was mainly due to the market pandering to hordes of new consumers, too dumb for puzzle-solving and merely yearning to shoot things up instead. The puzzle in question was Gabriel Knight's necessity to impersonate his friend, Detective Mosely, in order to be able to rent the best bike in town (because all the best bikes are reserved for the tour group, of which Mosely is a member and Gabriel is not). This involved (*spoiler alert!*) distracting Mosely with a piece of candy in order to steal his passport from his back pocket; stealing some wardrobe items from various locations; collecting some black cat hair by intimidating the cat into squeezing itself inside a hole covered with sticky tape; gluing the cat hair onto Gabriel's face with maple syrup; and adding a black moustache with a black magic marker to Mosely's passport photo in order to minimize the facial difference between Gabriel and himself. Yep, that's one hell of a puzzle alright.



Concluding that "*it should be pretty clear at this point that Adventure Games committed suicide*", Erik Wolpaw, the author of the OMM essay, pretty much turned the «Cat Moustache Puzzle» into a legendary Internet meme, so that even lots of people who never played *Gabriel Knight 3* probably remember it as «that game with the awful puzzles». Even Jane Jensen herself has gone on record numerous times, explaining that the puzzle in question had nothing to do with her and that it was concocted by some other team members at the last minute when they were running out of time and money to implement her allegedly far more rational, but also more time-consuming scenario — something that nobody would ever be able to confirm or disprove. But even if she were lying to save face and the «Cat Moustache Puzzle» *was*, indeed, fully designed and implemented by hers truly, it would certainly be too much of a stretch to use it as an illustration of everything that's wrong with *Gabriel Knight 3*, let alone ascribe the entire demise of the adventure game market to this kind of design.

For that matter, I don't even believe there is anything wrong with the «Cat Moustache Puzzle» *per se* — it's just that it found itself in the wrong game. Were something like that, with a little more humor and surrealism, offered to, say, Guybrush «Monkey Wrench» Threepwood in a *Monkey Island* game, nobody, not even Wolpaw, would have batted an eye, because such puzzles belong in LucasArts' absurdist, cartoonish worlds by nature. It is only the fact that a *Monkey Island* style puzzle suddenly found itself in one of the *Gabriel Knight* games, usually known by their gritty and realistic approach to things, that can make one roll one's eyes. And if Jane is actually right and she did not have anything to do with the puzzle in question, then the real problem here is how the corporate approach can fuck up an artistic vision, rather than how an artistic vision can deteriorate into artistic looniness (which *does* happen occasionally, but not in this case).

Thus, with all due respect to the late great Old Man Murray, blaming the decline of adventure games on the «Cat Moustache Puzzle» would be like blaming the break-up of the Beatles on 'Revolution #9'. As a matter of fact, in terms of *general* puzzle design *Gabriel Knight 3* holds quite a respectable position in the Sierra canon. A particular innovation, following up on the idea of «division of labor» already introduced by Jane in *The Beast Within*, is that the game has two completely distinct lines of «puzzling» — Gabriel's and Grace's. The Gabriel-led sections are generally easier and more traditional — it's mostly about being in the right place at the right time (there are some heavily time-dependent sequences in the game that can very easily be missed if not doing stuff in its correct order), pixel-hunting to collect evidence, exhausting dialog trees with everyone you meet, and, well... the cat moustache puzzle. Nothing too complicated here, but nothing particularly illogical or unreasonable, either (minus the cat moustache puzzle); if you ever tend to get stuck, it will most likely be because you have forgotten to check out some important location where something is going on that you have to be a part of in order to advance time forward and reach the next section of the game (all of which takes place over a period of three days, each of them separated into several distinct time blocks, after each of which many of the NPCs will shift to some other location or some other activity).

The pattern shifts completely upon the arrival of Grace at Rennes-le-Château on the evening of Day 1, after which she becomes a full-fledged playable character in her own right. Like Gabriel, she also has to do some snooping around, evidence collecting, and talking, but her *main* sphere of affairs is logical thinking and deduction, culminating in the game's major and most inventive puzzle — the decipherment of *Le Serpent Rouge*, Jane's heavily re-written version of an actual document that was anonymously deposited into the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in 1967 and has since been linked to the «Holy Blood» mystery. As in her previous two games, Jane here makes subtle changes to history, «editing» the mystical instructions of the original document in such a way that its puzzle might really be solved — and the «treasure of Rennes-le-Château» could actually be brought to light. And what a way that is!

The puzzle of the *Serpent Rouge* is stretched out all across the second half of the game, as there are 13 sections to the document, corresponding to the 12 zodiac signs plus one final entry, and each one requires one or more separate brain illuminations. Much of the puzzle is to be solved through «Sydney», an incredulously overpowered piece of analytical software which allows Grace to find all sorts of hidden geometric patterns on the local map, conduct formal analysis of texts and graphic images to discover correlations, and locate all the necessary information inside Sydney's own mini-Wikipedia. But every once in a while she will also have to use her feet, scouting out the various locations, taking measurements, making comparisons, prying useful info from various NPCs, etc. At times, the going might get a bit too technical for people's tastes (especially for those who have hated geometry all their life, like I do), but there is absolutely no denying that, on the whole, the puzzle is quite well-balanced and that most of the solutions do not require to make intense leaps of logic. (There is also a subtle hint system built into the game itself, represented as bits and pieces of Grace's own thinking process, that can make life easier without fully giving away the answer).

And thus it is that even if in general *Gabriel Knight 3* is the weakest part of the trilogy, it is the only game out of the trilogy to have, at present, earned *two* separate Wikipedia pages on its puzzles — one to illustrate one of the *worst* adventure game puzzles of all time ('[Cat Hair Mustache Puzzle](#)') and one to illustrate one of the *best* ones ('[Le Serpent Rouge Puzzle](#)'). So say what you will, but this does make it a very, very special achievement in gaming history. The contrast is quite telling: on one side of the equation, you have a veritable mastermind, not afraid of raising the stakes with each of her new projects and always pushing herself to new heights and challenges — on the other side, you have transparent malfunctioning and mismanagement, stemming from a corporate approach to production and, well, simply the fact that games were becoming too *big* to be able to stay under proper, firm control of their own creators, regardless of good or bad intent. It's a cumbersome, awkward system of trade-offs which barely even existed before the early 2000s, but has since then become the norm for the gaming industry just as it has already been the norm for just about any mass-oriented cultural industry.

Anyway, back to the puzzle issue. Like I said, most of the game has you alternating between the more «intuitive» puzzle-solving routine of Gabriel and the more «logic-based» research by Grace on *Le Serpent Rouge* — until the final act, that is, when the secret of Rennes-le-Château is finally cracked and Gabriel, with Mosely and another companion in tow, sets out on a journey to reclaim the «treasure». At this point, the game enters veritable Indiana Jones mode and becomes more of a *Broken Sword* type of experience (justifiedly so: if George Stobbart had to jiggle dials and solve sliding puzzles to beat the Knights Templar in their games of wit, why shouldn't Gabriel Knight do the same?). This is the only section of the game in which you can actually die (a principle strictly observed by Jane in all three games), and to avoid that you'll have to practice your chess

skills, your verbal associations, and, yes, even your manual dexterity at times (properly timing Gabriel to deal with the giant razor-sharp pendulum can be quite a chore). This is far from my favorite section of the game — not so much because of the puzzles themselves, but largely because it feels more silly than intimidating, more on which below in the «Atmosphere» section; as for the actual challenges, I think they are pretty well designed and it is more of a standard case of «hating action sequences in adventure games» that can be responsible for their negative reception than anything else.

Like all the other *Gabriel Knight* games, this one, too, does not feature any dead-end situations — at any point in the game, if you are missing something to overcome a challenge, you can always get it. It *does* feature Sierra's classic point-based system of achievements, and there is a ton of easily missable stuff that will leave you with a much less than perfect score at the end; as with so many other Sierra games, the real challenge is not beating the game, but beating it perfectly, for which you'll have to do a ton of extra work — like hunting down every suspect's fingerprints, for instance, or painstakingly jotting down each of their mopeds' license numbers, even if the game absolutely does not *require* you to do that. Overall, I think that the sheer number of «point-bearing» actions you can perform in the game is at least twice as much as in any of the two previous ones; I only wish there had been some sort of reward for this at the end, other than the pure satisfaction of seeing «965 out of 965» flash across the screen for a quick second. Like an alternate, «richer» ending scene or something.

Still, while staying mostly true to the classic structure of Sierra puzzles, *Gabriel Knight 3* closes the Sierra page in gaming history on a genuinely high note, blowing to smithereens Eric Wolpaw's far-fetched claim of «adventure games committing suicide». Perhaps if it were made based not on the Cat Moustache puzzle, but on the relative complexity and obtuseness of *Le Serpent Rouge*, it would have made more sense — but that, of course, would transfer the blame off the shoulders of the game's designers and onto those of the former readers of Old Man Murray.

Atmosphere

Although *Blood Of The Sacred* could never claim to have *more* «feeling» to it than the previous two games, there is at least one major bonus which I've always admired and which quickly forced me to make peace with the game despite all of its substantial and technical flaws. Unlike the first two games, what *Gabriel Knight 3* really has in spades is *space*. Prior to this one, Gabriel and Grace were really confined — most of the gaming process took place in small, usually claustrophobic environments, with the player



teleporting from one place to another; even the creepy Bayou St. John in New Orleans and the dense Bavarian forest consisted of a small bunch of separate screens, offering no activity whatsoever and very limited movement. You could admire individual details of scenery, but the games mostly came alive because of your interaction with its numerous colorful characters than because of the feeling of simply *being* in some exciting location.

The shift to a 3D perspective, while it turned out to be quite dismal from a graphic perspective (more on that when we get around to «Technical features»), really helped connect the dots and, for the first (and last) time ever, place Gabriel and Grace in the middle of a real world, where you could actually move from Point A to Point B by using your feet and feeling the ground under them. Of course, this is not an open-world RPG, and if you want to move really far, you still have to take a bike and «teleport» across the map — but wherever you end up, there's still ample space to roam around. Much, if not most of it is empty space — because, once again, this is not an open-world RPG, but rather an adventure game with a limited budget, so that Jane's team simply did not have the time or resources to properly populate all that space with people, or even houses that would look a little bit more different from each other.

Even so, this arrangement ultimately results in an oddly enticing... *peacefulness*. The first two games, particularly *The Beast Within*, had a pervasive atmosphere of tenseness and suspense. Wherever you went, you were discovering alarming evidence, talking to shady characters, finding yourself in creepy Voodoo museums or suspicious hunt clubs. In *Gabriel Knight 3*, most of your time will be spent wandering around the empty, lazy, sunny streets of Rennes-le-Château or the equally empty, lazy green pastures of its nearby surroundings. Birds will chirp; brooks will babble; light breezes will blow; and most of the people you meet will be lazing around, enjoying the sunshine, birdwatching, wine-tasting, or simply minding their own quiet and inobtrusive lines of business. At a certain point, you shall all but forget that you are actually here to solve the mystery of a bunch of vampires stealing people's blood at nighttime — what a bunch of nonsense! You are simply taking a well-deserved vacation in the lazy, sunny southern regions of France, where nothing ever happens and all the people simply lead their life in a state of blissful purple haze.

Honestly, by the time you get around to visit Mr. Larry Chester, who, according to the latest reports, is spending a sabbatical writing a book on the Templars in a nice, spacious cabin lodged on a gorgeous mountain slope, away from the hustle and bustle of city life and with gorgeous views on all four sides, you might already be thinking «well, I've *finally* found just the spot I'd like to retire to, and who really cares if there's a Temple of Solomon somewhere underneath it?». Simply the fact that, at just about any time in the game, you can quit whatever you're doing and clear your head by taking a leisurely walk through the empty cobblestone streets of a little town, admiring its odd neo-Gothic architecture, or by climbing the grassy, sandy slopes of

the imposing Mount Cardou, or by visiting the cozy little bar at nearby Rennes-le-Château (for some reason, Gabriel cannot order any drinks, though) — all of this makes the game into one of the most peaceful, becalming experiences in the Sierra catalog; the only analogies I can think of are the *Quest For Glory* games, but most of the environments there were always rife with random danger. Here, most of the time the danger is not even subconsciously *felt*, let alone experienced.

As you progress with the main story, it does become gradually punctuated with «points of creepiness» — but even those, to a certain extent, turn out to be deceptive, for instance, when Grace searches through a spooky wine cellar in the direction of a spooky crying sound, only to find out that it was actually produced by an ordinary wine press. When the first night falls upon the premises and Gabriel finds himself spying on two shady characters who seem to have much more business in Rennes-le-Château than their status should suggest, there's a vague *hint* that things might get sinister — but the most you get is a rather baffling Masonic handshake, quite a far cry from vampiric fangs in the darkness.

Even after the peaceful scenery of Rennes-le-Château *does* experience its first taste of vampiric murders, the peacefulness still wins over — a thorough search of the murder scene gives Gabriel a couple of really creepy visions, but they are *very* short and your brain will most likely block them out five minutes later, just as it blocks them out for Gabriel himself, who is visibly disturbed for about five seconds before resuming his jokes and mild flirt with Madeleine Buthane. And even after the events of the second night, when Gabriel has his first meeting with actual vampires, the mood quickly gets back to «serene» for most of the third day — it is not until the final «Indiana Jones» section of the game that a dense atmosphere of suspense and danger finally envelops the title character. And even *then* that atmosphere is dissipated every ten seconds by Gabriel's sarcastic remarks ("*Charming lamps! It's nice to be able to see just how fucked you really are!*").

That particular part of the atmosphere produced quite divisive responses, by the way, and that's putting it mildly — many, if not most, of the game's critics were annoyed by the never-ending streams of sarcasm coming from *both* Gabriel and Grace under 99% of the circumstances, happy or sad, auspicious or ominous. It is as if, on an almost subconscious level, Jensen was so terrified of the overall incredibility and silliness of the plot that sarcasm was her reflectory response to it. (Here's an actual dialog example to clarify this point. GRACE: "*So Rome kept trying to wipe the heretics out – to bury the secret of the bloodline*". GABRIEL: "*Gee those wacky popes – ya just can't trust 'em.*" MOSELY: "*Maybe it's those funny hats – you know, all that weight up there on their heads.*" GRACE (sighing): "*Fine. I'll shut up now.*" Happens *ALL* the time).

Thank God nobody ever thought of hiring Jane as a co-writer for *Final Fantasy*, or she'd probably short-circuit on her first work day. Admittedly, this way of writing is fairly common, and may be said to have been shared both by her contemporaries

(e.g. Charles Cecil of the *Broken Sword* fame) and followers (Ragnar Tørnquist would occasionally be grilled for committing the same sin with *The Longest Journey*, although he did tone it down somewhat for the *Dreamfall* sequels). And personally, I don't even regard it as a sin *per se*; there is nothing wrong with the instinctive desire to puncture your balloon upon blowing it up to ridiculously disproportionate volumes. But I do agree that the game somewhat loses balance with this approach. At least *some* of the time, Gabriel comes across as an obnoxious prick, so deep set upon pinpointing all the flaws of humanity that even Woody Allen would look like St. Francis of Assisi next to him; and at least *some* of the time, Grace gives the impression of a first-generation neophyte pandit, so happy with her ability to show off her intellectual baggage that the condescension pheromones begin to choke the living daylights out of you. (I mean, does she *really* need to explain to Mosely that Moulin Rouge is not only the name of a cabaret, but *also* a painting by Toulouse-Lautrec? Would poor Detective Mosely even know who Toulouse-Lautrec was in the first place?).

Ultimately, it is this odd — and totally unique in all of my gaming history — combination of «Sarcasm and Serenity» that builds up the game's atmosphere. «Mystery» and «Terror» definitely come in third and fourth, while «Emotionality» limps along somewhere at the far end; even the bitter romance bit between Gabriel and Grace is so much coated in Sarcasm that it is not until the final minutes of the game that it dares to flash you a bit of pure feeling, by which time, of course, it is much too late not just for the protagonists, but for the players as well. It is only in retrospect — as in, replaying the game more than 20 years later and realizing that we still do not know anything about the ultimate fate of our heroes — that I find myself tearing up a bit during the final scene when Gabriel is reading Grace's note. Back in 1999, this finale felt oddly tackled on like a happy Hollywood ending to a tragic movie (except here it's vice versa — a sad ending to a tale of intellectual irony).

It is just as ironic that this combination was most likely accidental: if the «Sarcasm» bit was clearly thought out meticulously, then the «Serenity» part of the atmosphere must have come out more of the technical circumstances of building the game than any intentional design on Jane's part — the new 3D engine, the limitations of the building blocks, the open-world elements, the increased power, realism, and clarity of the game's sound effects, etc. Had the game been designed — or, for that matter, remade — today, it is more than likely that Rennes-le-Château would not be *nearly* as peaceful and quiet as it is represented here, and that the endless grassy knolls of the lands outside of Rennes-le-Château would also be populated with more detail and, perhaps, turned into straightahead «scenery porn», which would be a huge improvement in terms of straight visual attraction but could also take away some of the (unintentional!) atmospheric charm of the original. But this already takes us into the realm of technical features responsible for the atmosphere.

Technical features

Graphics

Now here comes the really sad part of the story. As I already mentioned in my other Sierra reviews, upon the decline of interest in FMV games around 1996-1997, the studio (whose death bell has already been rung after the acquisition by CUC in 1996, though nobody knew it at the time) went ahead in two different directions. On one hand, for a while they continued to produce really lovely-looking 2D games, mostly switching to a cartoonish style (e.g. **Leisure Suit Larry 7**) that was not particularly original, but looked good on the screen and, barring the nasty pixelation effect, continues to look good even today (and if somebody ever took the damn effort to remaster those old games, the way they regularly do at LucasArts, would look even better — that kind of art is *very* conducive to modern remastering technologies).



On the other hand, with the entire gaming world having begun to embrace 3D, some of the games, most notably **King's Quest: Mask Of Eternity**, **Quest For Glory V: Dragonfire**, and **Gabriel Knight 3**, would be developed with their own engines, made to run on Windows and DirectX, and feature the ability to move the camera around the protagonist so as to be able to watch the action from different angles. **Gabriel Knight 3** was arguably the most advanced of these games and the only one to take advantage of most of the state-of-the-art technology — which is why, unsurprisingly, its shipping had to be delayed for more than a year over the initially planned release date. And was it all worth it?

Sadly, *no*. In the long run, one of the main flaws of the game is that it would have been far more watchable and playable today, had they chosen to stick to cartoonish 2D imagery instead (say, made it in the style of Charles Cecil's first two **Broken Sword** games — those that he made before succumbing to the curse of early 3D himself). The GK3 team certainly have to be commended for designing and building their own 3D graphic engine (called the *G-Engine*) from scratch, mainly by courtesy of the excellent software engineer Jim Napier; furthermore, they have to be admired for releasing the game in a *relatively* workable state. I remember playing it on my Windows XP machine sometime in the early 2000s, experimenting with different settings and *usually* getting along with few problems, though image clipping was definitely an issue and every once in a while

your character could vanish into thin air or have nothing left from him / her than a few strands of hair. Technical issues did exist, but they were relatively few and you quickly learned to get around them; a few would be resolved with downloadable patches, and on the whole, as you can see from [my playthrough](#), the game can be run fairly smoothly on today's machines, with the lengthy loading times no longer a problem and the glitching kept to a minimum by making all the right tweaks to all the wrong parameters.

What *cannot* be fixed, not even with a diligent effort at remastering, are the ugly early-generation polygonal models that represent the characters. Sure, they look more like actual cinematic human beings than the minimalistic sprites from the early days of 1993's **Sins Of The Fathers**, but back in 1993, we took the impossibility of realistically representing the human shape and human motions on screen and had no problem psychologically «inflating» the characters to proper scale. Likewise, while the FMV style of **The Beast Within** had its sore deficiencies due to obligatory graphic compression, or due to the impossibility of freely controlling your characters on screen, the action as such was still realistic — the actors looked and acted like poor-quality projections of human beings because, well, they *were* human beings. And then the cartoon-style animations in Sierra games such as **King's Quest VII** or **Torin's Passage** came along and they also looked nice and smooth, just the way they usually look in actual cartoons.

In **Gabriel Knight 3**, the onscreen characters neither look too much like human beings when you stare at them, nor feel like human beings when you take control of them and guide them around. More often, they look like human stumps, with grossly simplified and misshapen limbs, plasticine hairstyles, vacant stares, and movements that make C-3PO look like Baryshnikov in comparison. When taken together with the ever so often exaggerated, hyperbolic voice acting (on which see below), this initially produces a very odd effect — as if you've been inserted in the middle of some psychedelic marionette show, rather than in an actual murder mystery taking place somewhere in the real world. Eventually, you get a bit more comfortable with that, but even so, the game's ugly graphic rendering continues to haunt you when, for instance, you are supposed to memorize a complicated series of Masonic handshakes produced by joining stumpy polygonal fingers in clipping-riddled combinations; or when the «vampires», who are supposed to add an atmosphere of bone-chillin' creepiness to the game, turn out to look like a bunch of straw dolls with emo hairstyles.

One might — and probably should — simply blame it on the inefficiency of computational resources around 1998–1999, since, clearly, this problem is typical of *most* of the 3D games from that period; but (a) at the very least, given how quintessential Sierra was to the developing and publication of Valve's **Half-Life**, couldn't they have at least gotten somebody from the Valve team to show them how to be more cutting-edge with 3D technologies?; (b) no excuses or explanations can eliminate the fact

that those character models looked ugly back in 1999 and look just as ugly, if not uglier, even today. (My rookie opinion on those matters is that there should have been a complete and total ban on 3D character models until at least the age of **Half-Life 2**; but then, of course, life simply does not work this way).

Things are much better when it comes to background art, much of which has been rendered quite lovingly; on the whole, the architectural vistas of Rennes-le-Château hold their own charm next to their real life prototypes, unless, that is, you try to zoom in on specific details as close as possible (which is something you simply are not advised to do). Even so, interiors fare much better than exteriors — that whole atmosphere of serenity which I was talking about earlier, for instance, may be severely undermined if you decide to examine the grassy knolls and rocks of the countryside too closely — and sometimes the game forces you to do this, like, for instance, when you are supposed to spot the site of a freshly buried object. At least today it is not much of a problem to run the game at its maximum resolution (1024 x 768), which makes it possible to admire things like the paintings on the walls from a safe distance — back in 1999, running the game at max capacity taxed your resources just as much as, say, something like ray tracing technology does in the 2020s.

Yes, it is true that the 3D engine brought a lot of welcome freedom to the playing process — the possibility of moving your character in all directions while smoothly changing the camera angles does wonders for the brain (although, to be honest, this possibility was still limited, since even within a set location, the game operated in «blocks» separated from each other through changing screens, just like in older Sierra games). It was also possible to turn off the cinematics during dialogs, giving you complete freedom to watch your characters talking and gesticulating from any angle — meaning lots and lots of extra work for the programming team. But even so, I distinctly remember myself already back at the time, not at all thrilled about the new developments, all but *forcing* myself to accept the ugly polygons so as to complete their transformation into beautiful landscapes and realistic human beings inside my own mind. Imagine how it all must feel *now*, in the age when 3D graphics are often hard to tell from real cinematography?

As the recent attempt at remastering the old **GTA** games has clearly shown, ancient 3D is all but impossible to remaster — it is much easier to remake such games from scratch than give them a respectable facelift. This means that **Gabriel Knight 3**, together with its equally unlucky LucasArts companion from the same period, **Escape From Monkey Island**, has been doomed for all time. The only relief is that, somehow, the game's critical reputation has somehow managed to circumnavigate its graphical embarrassments — supposedly, the complexity of the story and the characters contributed to this, whereas, on the other hand, the plot and puzzles of **Escape From Monkey Island** just did not have the proper magic spell to distract players and critics from the horrendous effect of its visual imagery.

Sound

Music does not play nearly as important a part in **Gabriel Knight 3** as it does in the previous two games, and this is not so much due to the fact that the series' principal musical director Robert Holmes had relegated most of his duties to a lesser known (and less talented) understudy, David Henry, as it is to the decision of making the entire soundtrack ever so slightly less obtrusive and active, less focused on catchy or haunting themes and more on creating a general sonic ambience. Most of the outdoor action, in fact, has no music at all — that «serenity» atmosphere I was talking about is rather achieved by the sounds of the birds and the brooks and the wind, rather by anything man-made. Meanwhile, the indoor themes are largely dominated by gentle synthesizer hum and tasteful little impressionistic piano melodies (somebody's clearly been listening to a lot of Satie in his spare time, be it Robert or David).



The music does get predictably louder and more dangerous during certain dialogs and cut scenes, providing its fair share of suspense (usually not resolving to anything too serious, given the game's plot conventions), but in general, I would say that if you are bound to remember *any* of this soundtrack, it's more likely to be one or several of the melancholic-nostalgic piano tunes that accompany the more sentimental aspects of Gabriel's world-saving mission, or of Gabriel and Grace's doomed romance. In fact, there's a bit of a tasty paradox in here: even as **Gabriel Knight 3** in general raises the stakes on the epicness and monumentality of the narrative, its *music* actually sounds less dramatic, monumental, and Wagnerian than it did in the previous two games. The opening themes there were either driving and tempestuous (**Sins Of The Fathers**), or doom-laden and dreary (**The Beast Within**); the [opening theme](#) of **Gabriel Knight 3**, despite some furious acoustic strumming and crashing cymbals, is dominated by a sad and intimate piano melody that already presages the sad and intimate ending of the game before it has even started. It sort of gives you your first big hint that you *may* think this is a game about saving the world from the anti-Christ, but in reality this is a game about how an inflated ego can ruin the personal future even for a guy with the best of intentions, or — to complicate matters even further — how kind-hearted altruism and unbearable egoism can suddenly turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

The game does occasionally recycle themes from its predecessors, mainly to ensure continuity (for instance, the perennial 'When The Saints Go Marching In' theme is, for some reason, playing at the bar in Rennes-les-Bains, and the 'St. George's Books Theme' from the first game sometimes crops up during Gabriel's dialogs with Grace, triggering a bit of nostalgia for your first ever experience with the series), but this is not a big goal for the composers. Perhaps they thought that such «lazy», inobtrusive musical backing would work better in a 3D setting — and perhaps they were right if they did. I can only say that some of those piano themes did end up becoming earworms eventually (there's a particularly dark-romantic theme ringing during Grace's exploration of Montreux's library that I always yearn to hear), and that the emphasis on the piano does give the game its own unique color, as opposed to, say, the emphasis on dark synthesized cellos in **The Beast Within**.

In any case, whatever be the ultimate comparative judgment, I can find no serious faults with the game's musical soundtrack, which is, unfortunately, *not* the case when it comes to the voice cast. With 3D animations replacing the short-lived FMV fad, we are now back to pure voice acting mode — a good thing for video games which, even in 3D mode, still have more in common with cartoon animation than real acting. This time around, however, Jensen seems to have found herself with a much more restricted budget that did not allow for another star-studded cast like **Sins Of The Fathers**. Most of the actors here are professional, but relatively small-time players, which, unfortunately, makes itself noticeable rather quickly. Jensen's only «success» was in being able to make Mr. Tim Curry in person reprise his role from the first game, wiping out the shadow of **The Beast Within**'s Dean Erickson and probably sending thousands of fans into paroxysms of sweet delight when the casting was announced. Alas — who knew this decision would turn out to be the second most tragic decision about this game? (The first one, of course, was the decision to make it in 3D.)

I am not entirely sure of what happened to Tim Curry's attitude between 1993 and 1999; I can only assume that he got six years older, and probably thought his character should have also gotten six years older — and sixty times as obnoxious. The Gabriel Knight of **Sins Of The Fathers** was a confident and sarcastic, yet also naturally curious and excitable young man, whose nasty attitude was largely reserved for inadequately arrogant pals such as Detective Mosely, and whose womanizing ways at least *formally* had a sort of gentlemanly sheen. You would have thought that after being «cleansed» from his sins upon assuming his role of Shadow-hunter, and after several years spent carrying out Shadow-hunting duties in Europe, Gabriel Knight's «knightly» qualities would have become enhanced, while the (still somewhat lovable) assholeish properties of his character would have faded away due to all the proximity to so much holiness. *Particularly* after that whole werewolf thing in the second game, when his very spiritual essence was at stake and all. The Gabriel Knight we would all be expecting in the third game would certainly be a wisened up, more reflective, more responsible sort of fellow — hopefully, still retaining his

sense of humor and a bit of the old mischievousness, but definitely more somber, melancholic, and solitary than he was when we saw him last. That is, provided we're actually following *believable* patterns of character evolution.

Apparently, though, «believable» is not a proper word to be pronounced in the presence of the respectable hero of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Six years later, Tim Curry's Gabriel Knight has transformed into a seriously cheeky, know-it-all, mock-it-all character who now speaks about twice as slow as he used to, making sure that each of his syllables is drawled in the most obnoxious and sarcastic way possible. Even the formerly self-respectable and slightly mysterious introduction of "Knight. Gabriel Knight" has been transformed into "Kn-n-n-n-ight. Ga-a-a-briel Kn-n-n-ight" as if he were mocking himself, yourself, his name, God, and the French government at the exact same time. And he does that *CONSTANTLY*. The only reason why Jane Jensen did not have the guy fired midway through is, unfortunately, because that was probably the exact way she wanted her character to behave — in fact, some of Gabriel's dialog seems to have been specially tailored for that approach.

There are veteran gamers out there who claim to have been turned off by Curry's faux-New Orleanian accent and cocky phrasing from the get-go; myself, not being able to tell very properly a real New Orleanian accent from a fake one produced by an English person, I was never bothered by the lack of authenticity, preferring instead to find pleasure in the mildly ironic, mischievous, but well-meaning intonations of Curry's Gabriel Knight in **Sins Of The Fathers**. Maybe he was not a true New Orleanian, but he played a truly colorful individual all the same. Skip ahead to **Gabriel Knight 3** and that truly colorful individual has mutated into the kind of person you usually want to whack with a stick on Facebook even without actually hearing his voice. *That's* a «Schattenjäger», sworn to fight evil and protect the innocent? Okay, so maybe you don't need him to talk like the Dalai Lama, but when a typical observation on the street reads "*I have no idea who lives here, but they're probably not interested in meeting me... well, I know it's hard to believe, but, you know, they're French!*", I'm sure that Jesus is quietly weeping up there in Heaven, traumatized by just how much the bloodline has degenerated over the millennia.

Granted, it's not *always* that bad; once you get a little used to the drawling speech tempo and the never-ending waves of sarcasm, the pauses between truly cringeworthy moments slowly start getting larger — however, they never cease altogether, and by the time Gabriel receives his final epiphany at the end of the game, it is all but impossible to take his «transformation» seriously, seeing as how we were so completely unprepared for it. As I already wrote in the previous sections, Jane Jensen bears the lion's share of responsibility for turning a once beloved character into a barely tolerable asshole, but Curry willingly hops on that train and seems to be *really* having fun here. As a particularly «so-bad-it's-totally-unforgettable» moment, I invite you to watch [this little interaction](#) between Gabriel Curry and the proverbial French maid — trust me, there was nothing even remotely like this in the first Gabriel Knight game. The intonations alone are enough to melt the ears ("WOULD YOU BE

ABLE TO CLEAN THEM FOR ME?"), but somebody also had to write that dialog... and that somebody was the *same* person who provided a fully rewritten version of *Le Serpent Rouge* for one of the most elegantly complex adventure game puzzles ever designed? Man, the world is even less black-and-white than we thought...

Well, at least Curry's less-than-stellar performance is somewhat compensated for by the splendid work done by Charity James as Grace Nakimura, our second protagonist whose role in this game is every bit as important as Grace's role in **The Beast Within** — and on a scale of 1-to-3, I would say that while Charity's delivery comes slightly behind Leah Remini's in the first game in terms of clarity and likeability, it certainly restores Grace's original cool-headed, neophytically-intellectual nature as opposed to the somewhat psychotic, deeply imbalanced behavior of **The Beast Within**'s Joanne Takahashi (which was not too bad by itself, but simply did not feel believably compatible with Remini's portrayal). James sort of borrows all the *good* qualities of Curry's Gabriel — smart, sarcastic, confident, ultimately well-meaning — while leaving out most of the *bad* ones — the smugness, the offensiveness, the propensity for bad jokes. Even when she sounds condescending (be it to Mosely or to any of the clueless locals), there's usually a whiff of sympathy to be heard in her voice, rather than straightforward mockery.

And that's even without mentioning how good she is at regular phrasing — right from the start, she displays a phenomenal command of all sorts of microtones, whispers, groans, sneers, and gasps, which *really* brings her close to the player. Roaming all over the hotel and the countryside with Grace after you just explored those locations with Gabriel is a true delight, since, unlike Gabriel, she is able to mix her irony with sincere admiration, rather than just scoff at everything in sight. At this point, I'd say that Jensen gets to be a much better writer from the female perspective (duh) than the male one, and Charity James is a great choice to voice that perspective. (Fun fact: the very same year, Charity James also voiced Governor Elaine Marley in **Escape From Monkey Island** — making her, in a sense, the Valkyrie of classic adventure games conducting them to their final resting place. Unfortunately, she didn't have much of a memorable career ever since).

The rest of the cast is hit-and-miss; even if some of the actors went on to become legends or semi-legends in the business, too many of them are reduced to comedic *Clue*-style stereotypes by the script. The saddest tale is that of Jennifer Hale, soon-to-be one of the greatest video game voice actresses of all time (hello, Commander Shepard) but here forced to fake an unconvincing French accent as Madeline Buthane, the sexy-secret-agent-femme-fatale leader of the tour group. Jennifer seems ready and willing to play a caricature, but the grotesque portrayal quickly gets annoying (even so, Hale's talents are very much on display as she revels in practicing various degrees of «removing the mask» over the course of the game, effortlessly alternating between fifty shades of «suave» and fifteen more of «*dangerously* suave»). Another link to **Mass Effect** is Carolyn Seymour, the future voice of the motherly-memorable Dr. Chakwas, here playing Estelle Stiles, the admiring companion of ex-actress

Lady Howard — with her voice arguably affected less with theatrical / hyperbolic mannerisms than others, her companionship is perhaps the one I crave the most during my playthroughs. (Unlike Lady Howard, voiced by Samantha Edgar in the most overbearing manner possible — although, granted, the character is supposed to be overbearing and insufferable).

Special mention should probably be made of John de Lancie in his role of Montreaux, the owner of the mysterious Château de Serres — he only gets about two scenes in the entire game, but tries real hard to provide a bit of a Hammer Horror atmosphere for both of them, playing a character somewhere in between Vincent Price and his own Q from *Star Trek* as he veers between taunting and horrifying his interlocutor. Montreaux's lengthy monolog on immortality and eugenics in the middle of the game is a far cry from the psychological creepiness of Baron von Glower's ruminations on human and animal nature in **The Beast Within**, but it's still quite a delicious throwback to those days when theatrical villains could fling their simplistic philosophy at the viewer and you'd lap it up just because the intonations were so seductive.

On the whole, though, the cast *really* suffers from the sin of overacting. Perhaps most of those guys had their background in theater rather than cinema or TV, or maybe they were just cued that they all had to make the absolute most of their voices before the microphones — or maybe they all tried to follow the lead of Tim Curry, so much in love with his own voice that he feels as if it were the greatest gift a player could ever receive in one's lifetime. Against the background of constant hyperbole, rare exceptions such as Simon Templeman's relatively quiet and courteous impersonation of Prince James of Albany tend to get lost in the overall impression. Fortunately, much of the game will be spent in relative silence as Gabriel and Grace simply explore the environment and solve their challenges without having to engage in fussy dialog with the stereotypical stock characters of French, Italian, or Australian backgrounds.

Interface

With a unique 3D engine came a brand new interface that, like just about everything else in the game, somehow managed to combine cuteness and comfort with ugliness and incoherence. Moving your playable characters around was relatively easy, except that the game included no options to vary their speed — both Gabriel and Grace apparently regard it as way beyond their dignity to run around the place, so when you're out in the countryside, moving from one spot to another can take far more time than the average impatient gamer



would want to allow oneself. At the same time, camera controls are engineered in such a way that you can pan out or move away from your character (either standing or moving) as far as the environment allows you to — which is actually *the* (odd) way to make them traverse a large span of territory: set Gabriel or Grace in motion, quickly move the camera to the spot where you want them to be, then click the move button again, and presto, they appear on the spot in a couple of seconds rather than in half a minute, which would be the appropriate time if you'd been focused on them all through their movement period instead. Einstein would be proud!

This feels a little weird, but it's easy to get used to; much worse is the fact that, due to the roughness of 3D graphics, large masses of space can feel disorienting, and the connection points between separate blocks are rarely evident. Usually, the mouse arrow changes into a special «exit shape» whenever you come across such a point, but ever so often, it's a real chore to locate it, especially in all the valleys and ravines of the countryside, some of which are connected by minuscule, hard-to-locate passages and some require taking the bike to get to. Other games reserve their pixel-hunting for finding and picking up various small objects; in **Gabriel Knight 3**, most of that process will be reserved for finding the various exits.

General interaction with objects and people is handled in more of a LucasArts than a Sierra way: click on anything clickable and the game highlights the target with a set of tiny icons that represent either actions ('take', 'open', 'push', 'talk', etc.) or, if you transition into dialog mode, the various topics for conversation. The icons are nicely designed, even if you cannot always properly decode their meanings before clicking on them — and even if some are clearly added merely to tickle you with the illusion of choice. For instance, many of the windows in the game are accompanied with the 'open' option, but there's maybe two or three windows overall that you *can* actually open. Some of the choices merely remind you of the happy innocent days of the parser, when you had to use your *own* brains and imagination to try out various fantastic and outrageous scenarios of resolving the situation, rather than rely on somebody else making a pre-designed menu for you — e.g. when you need to get the French maid out of the way to search the guests' rooms, there's a 'bind and gag' icon cropping up, whose only purpose, apparently, is to earn you a "*you must be sick!*" rebuke from Gabriel. Yeah, right. If *I* must be sick, why did the game designers put that icon up in my face, expressly saying 'click me!', in the first place? At least in the days of the parser, that would *really* be me taking on full responsibility for my perverse actions.

The dialog trees are constructed nicely and aesthetically, and, like it was in the second (but not the first) game, dialog topics gradually disappear as you exhaust them one by one. The downside is that, apparently, this time around there is no way to keep an in-game track of your conversations; Gabriel has a tape recorder and Grace has a notebook, but you cannot use them to pick up on what you have learned from other people, which is kind of a bummer given the wealth of historical and current

information that is going to be piled on you throughout the game. As for choices, those are pretty much non-existent, but that's the way it has always been in Jane Jensen games — there's absolutely no way that she is going to let you flesh out *her* beloved characters, Gabriel and Grace, according to *your* preferences. You can sometimes try out different solutions to a single issue (for instance, making a ton of fake IDs in preparation for your first meeting with Montreux), but only one of them is going to work anyway.

Speaking of making IDs, much of your gametime, particularly when you are playing for Grace, is going to be spent playing around with «SYDNEY» — the dynamic duo's supercomputer that multi-tasks as an encyclopaedia, a data repository, and a set of analytical tools. Again, it takes a bit of time to get used to its interface, but on the whole, it is quite impressively and logically organized, and although some of its AI abilities border on the magical (for instance, a universal system of machine translation that severely beats GoogleTranslate and everything else in terms of accuracy — back in 1999!), the overall feel is quite serious. You can actually get lost browsing the information database on all things mythological, mystical, and occult alone — granted, most of that stuff was loaned by Jane from the online [Mystica](#) encyclopaedia (which is still going strong as of 2023), but at least it's far more useful reading than, I dunno, trying to memorize all the fictional lore of the Faerûn or Elder Scrolls universes. And as for that toolkit... well, I'm not sure that you can have such a lot of fun with it *beyond* just using it to solve the required puzzles, but I certainly cannot find a lot of flaws with the organization of its geometric and linguistic sections (and, as I already said, I sort of *hate* geometry).

Another specific difference from the first two games is that **Gabriel Knight 3**, to a certain extent, plays out in real time. Stick around for long enough and you shall find some NPCs occasionally changing their locations; worse, stick around for long enough without doing the right thing and you shall be locked out of certain point-earning achievements and useful bits of information. There is, for instance, a particularly tricky moment in the middle of Day 2 when the tour group has just returned to the hotel and, in order to get the full number of points, you have to catch *all* of the members doing certain things — which is only possible if you perform all the actions in a very specific order and in a very limited time window. On the other hand, in most cases time does not advance properly until you've completed the required actions, so you can make a million trips all over the valley and still not move from the morning into the afternoon section — this inconsistency is not particularly bothersome, but it does make one question the validity of introducing time-dependent puzzles in the first place.

The most annoying time-dependent puzzles are, of course, the pseudo-«action» bits in the last section of the game — where you have to be quick enough to jump on a pendulum or shove your talisman into the monster's face — because these are the only sections in which Gabriel can actually die, and saving and restoring your games takes time, which is particularly annoying

if you realize that those deaths were not so much the result of your stupidity as the result of being introduced, without warning, to a completely different type of puzzle (pendulum), or the result of your wishing to simply look around and explore a new location before bringing the game to its end (monster). Fortunately, it's really just a couple of special situations, not enough to kill off the fun. Also fortunately, there's a way to «retry» each death situation even if you forgot to save; and as far as I know, the game, just like its two predecessors, features no dead-end situations whatsoever (you can easily miss stuff that earns you lotsa points, but none of it is really crucial to beating the game as such).

One final, relatively minor, complaint actually concerns the game's general interface as such — aesthetically, it *sucks*. The overhead menu which, thankfully, remains hidden by default; the notifications about gaining extra points; the subtitles at the bottom of the screen — all of that is rendered in a small, primitive, ugly font that somehow feels very dissonant with the graphics and is a really far cry from Sierra's generally tasteful approach to font and notification design in their games. You could certainly blame it on the newness and complexities of the 3D engine, but we have the example of **Quest For Glory V**, which was also done in (partial) 3D and handled the interface and font design issue so much better. Both the first and the second **Gabriel Knight** games had quite a bit of love invested in their interfaces — particularly the first one, with all of its silver-gray Gothic stylistics — so it's a bit surprising just how bureaucratic and perfunctory the overall style of **Blood Of The Sacred** comes across in comparison. I guess it's really no biggie compared to all the more serious issues listed above, but this is a video game, not a rescue mission — packaging is important here if you really want to convince your customers that you love your own creation as much as you want *them* to love it, right?..

Verdict: «*The Godfather Part III*» of video game trilogies — you'll probably start out by hating it, then accepting it as an inevitability.

Few games illustrate the difference between «failure» and «deeply flawed success» as transparently as **Gabriel Knight III**. So many technical and substantial problems haunt Jensen's last serious investment in the story of her favorite protagonist that writing the game off as a catastrophe is a very easy option, especially when you have influential websites such as Old Man Murray on your side. My own problems with the game run



much deeper than the ugly 3D graphics or the outrageously designed Cat Moustache Puzzle — I can only wonder, for instance, at the perfectly executed double plot by Jensen and Tim Curry to reduce their formerly elegantly controversial character to the level of human caricature; like, what they were even *thinking?*.. unless, of course, the reason is that by this time Jane herself was disgusted with the concept of Gabriel Knight and determined to fortify him in his male-chauvinist-pig image while at the same time redirecting all of our sympathies to Grace. In doing so, however, she created an inconsistency rift with the previous two games, which is a pretty big sin on the universe-crafting scale. «Mean Asshole Saves The World» is hardly my preferred idea for a great game, because *you* have to be saving the world (boring! how many more times does this stupid world need saving? let the anti-Christ triumph already!) and *you* have to be the mean asshole doing it. If I'm saving the world just so that Gabriel can poke more stupid jokes at his friend Mosely, I'd rather let the «night visitors» keep doing their thing.

Yet at the same time, there's simply too much *good* about **Gabriel Knight III** to let it wallow on in infamy. For one thing, it tries to do something different — each game in the trilogy has its own face, establishes its own structure and patterns, never ever gives the impression of «*oh, this worked so well in the last game, let's try it again*» (compare this to LucasArts' swan song, **Escape From Monkey Island**, which observed that rotten principle almost religiously). Well, okay, perhaps bringing Detective Mosely back from the dead wasn't such a hot innovative idea and should probably count as a case of «fan service», but other than that, the game seriously tries to take Gabriel Knight into a completely new direction. From that point of view, its monumental ambitiousness may not so much be a sign of Jane Jensen's ego as it is simply a fresh approach — «*let's do something really grand now, seeing as how we've never yet worked on that scale before*». Maybe it doesn't work as efficiently as it did before, but you definitely cannot accuse the designer of simply following the tried and true.

For another thing, I have always been and remain totally enamoured of the *calmness* of this game. Yes, there are tons of games out there in which you have to save the world, but most of them usually lay on the pathos and the epicness all the way through (even **The Longest Journey**, a big favorite of mine, is a hot mess where DRAMA can reach you and whack you over the head at any given point in the overall post-modern setting of the game). Here, you're simply set to roam over the green pastures of the French countryside, basking in the sunshine, enjoying the peace and serenity and, oh yeah, doing some research on vampires and Knights Templar along the way when you feel like it. In a relaxed situation like that, even Tim Curry's nasal ironic twang occasionally becomes bearable, while Charity James' croaky chirping is just adorable. It all adds a certain degree of close-to-home pseudo-realism that none of Sierra's pre-3D era games could boast.

Finally, there is the intellectual content — okay, faux-intellectual, as we are dealing with a gross historical hoax molded into mystical fiction, but, as usual, it is always delightful in a Jane Jensen game to separate true history from flights of fantasy and

conspiracy theories, and the sheer amount of work that went into fleshing this mix of fact and fiction into a set of puzzles is bewildering. Maybe this is not sufficient ground for emotional love, but it certainly deserves respect and admiration; compare the effort to, say, Charles Cecil's similar exploration of the same themes in **Shadow Of The Templars** and you will see what it is that separates lightweight amateurishness from serious scholarly devotion — Cecil essentially operates on the level of a comic book reader (although he has many other talents to compensate for this), whereas Jensen must have spent months in the library. The end result of it all is that, whereas New Orleans and Munich are two places I'd like to visit (actually, Munich has already been covered), Rennes-le-Château is one place where I wouldn't mind retiring.

All in all, my only advice to any potential retro-player is: do *not* play this game until you have explored — *and* appreciated — the previous two parts of the trilogy. Although it is formally a stand-alone title, it has to work in conjunction with **Sins Of The Fathers** and **The Beast Within**, for better or worse. Neither its relative charms nor its relative deficiencies shall be as transparent to you as they will if you play all three games in the correct order. Nor is it absolutely imperative, in fact, that you play it even if you did enjoy the other two — while it adds a whole new layer to both the story of Gabriel's path to destiny *and* to the sad tale of «good guy and good girl can't get together because they're too out of touch with the simple things in life», this layer is not really something that was even faintly hinted at before; the game does not really serve as a long-awaited answer to any deeply burning questions asked in the previous ones.

But if you do play the first two games and then make an effort to get used to this one, chances are it'll leave an impression all the same. Deep at heart, it's a tad more solemn and melancholic, more prone to make you ponder upon the meaning of life and the paths you're choosing; look past its multiple flaws and you might feel that for Jane Jensen, **Gabriel Knight 3** is more or less the same that *Quadrophenia* was for Pete Townshend in 1973 — a creaky, leaky, but monumental achievement where the author himself or herself realizes that this is essentially as deep as s/he will ever be able to go, and that post-release exhaustion sort of stays with them for all their life. And was it truly such a coincidence that **Gabriel Knight 3**, a «swan song»-type of game if there ever was one, was the very last of classic Sierra adventure games ever published? I don't think so. On the contrary, I'd like to think of it as a pretty damn good candidate for the status of «Ideal Game To Close The Book On The 20th Century» — released just at the time when games like **The Longest Journey** were opening the door to the 21st...