

Loom

Studio: **LucasArts**

Designer(s): **Brian Moriarty**

Part of series: —

Release: January 1990 (DOS) / April 1991 (FM Towns) / 1992 (DOS CD version)

Main credits: Programmers: **Peter Lincroft, Kalani Streicher**
Graphic Art: **Gary Winnick, Mark Ferrari, Steve Purcell et al.**

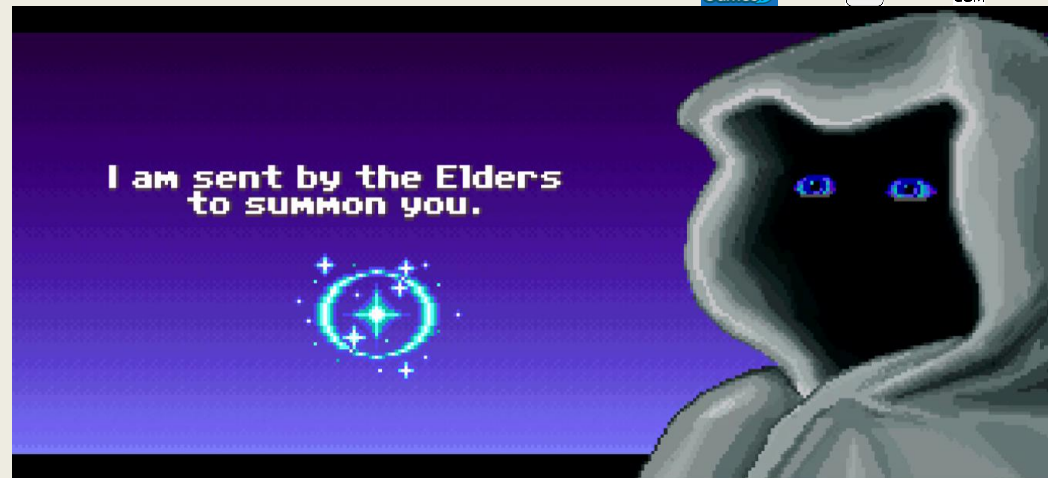
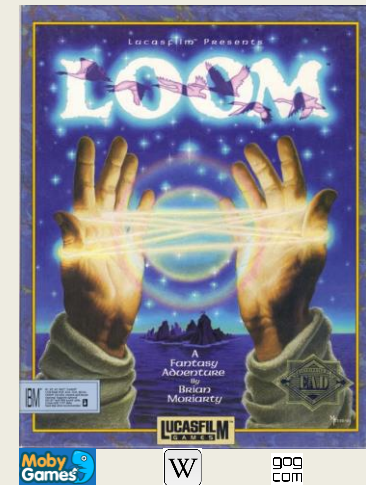
Music / Sound Effects: **George Sanger (+ Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky!)**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (104 mins.)

Basic Overview

Many of the finest video games from past decades, whether you revisit them as a veteran player or (something that happens very rarely indeed) pick them up out of historical curiosity, not even having been born at the time of their original release, make you instinctively go, «oh, how I wish this one came out or, at least, was remade *today!*» And it's not just the obvious matter of better graphics, sound, or gameplay mechanics — usually it is also a matter of depth and detail, with modern games

allowing players the kind of immersion into one of those fantastic universes that they could never be offered at the dawn of computer gaming, when studios were small, writers were scarce, storage space was limited, and a new game was supposed to provide you with, at most, a couple weeks worth of entertainment / challenge (well, perhaps up to a month if it were some sort of sprawling, repetitive, potentially infinite RPG or strategy game). Actual situations where a classic experience from the early days would be dusted off and remade in the full spirit of the original, but making full use of modern possibilities, are very rare in the business — perhaps **Resident Evil**, whose lovingly crafted remake from 2002 all but obliterated the need for the



original, could be quoted as a textbook example — but most of us «retro-philes» probably harbor those secret dreams for most of our old favorites, if only out of a secret desire to pass our preferences on to our children and our children's children.

There are, however, cases when I look back at *some* of these games and realize that they are perfect just as they are — that any tinkering with the original concept, style, and laconic presentation will hardly lead to anything other than cheapening the effect and dissipating the magic. For instance, trying to transform something like Christy Marx's **Conquests Of Camelot** into yet another modern day episode of **Assassin's Creed** would remove the beauty of telling King Arthur's story as a sort of simple, elegant morality tale for children (including that inner child within us grown-ups, of course); it might still have ended up a good game but it would be an altogether *different*, and probably much less unique title. Hampered by technical limitations, good designers and writers in the 1980s and 1990s did not employ mere technical solutions — they came up with their own ways to tell their story and immerse you in their world, ways that no longer make sense in newer ages of gaming but now look wond'rously strange and, perhaps, even oddly inspiring when, like a finely aged silent movie, we approach them with the preconception of «this feels so *different!*» rather than «this feels so *old!*»

No other game from the Golden Age of Adventure Gaming epitomizes this feel for me better than Brian Moriarty's **Loom**, LucasArts' bizarre reimagining of *Swan Lake* that, in a sense, remains the «ugly duckling» of the studio, though perhaps «black sheep» would be more appropriate — the only openly non-comedic game to come out of classic LucasArts, the only LucasArts adventure game based on its own universe of lore and the only one to design and implement a unique playing style that nobody has been able to properly emulate or develop further ever since. Short, full of gaps and unanswered questions, in some ways rather more like a demo or sketch than a completed game, it never got a sequel, it never got a remake, it is largely ensconced in memory as a dramatic failure (which it never was) — and, for what it's worth, it should probably stay right as it is. There is no way I can see to make this perfect-for-1990-oddity work anew in the totally transformed age of video gaming; even a simple graphic remastering would be questionable (and I had absolutely no problems with the remastered graphics of **Day Of The Tentacle** or even the completely redrawn graphics of the first two **Monkey Island** games).

Doubtlessly, this is somewhat related to the personality of the game's creator — and, as I always insist, if you cannot properly align a video game with a specific creative personality, that game probably ain't worth a nickel. In this case, we're talking Brian Moriarty, an exceptionally bright and «outta-the-box» alumnus of Southeastern Massachusetts University with a degree in English literature (which does often show) and a combined Steve Jobs-ian passion for technology and the humanities, though, alas, none of that Steve Jobs-ian talent for channelling public admiration. Moriarty's early claims to fame were his designing and writing for several classic text adventure titles for Infocom — such as **Trinity** and **Beyond Zork** — but with the text

adventure market pretty much evaporating by the late Eighties, he had to find a different outlet for his talents, and ended up at LucasArts, to which he dedicated five years of his life — all of it resulting in one semi-finished game that you can complete within 1-2 hours of gameplay (**Loom**) and one failed project which he ultimately had to give up to other designers (**The Dig**, which only saw commercial release two years after Moriarty'd already been gone from the company).

Since absolutely nobody except for battle-hardened Gen X veterans (myself excluded — I was born just a wee bit too late for that) plays text adventure games anymore, and since Moriarty's post-LucasArts career has concentrated far more on writing and lecturing than on game designing, **Loom** is pretty much the only title he may count on being remembered for — but even that one title is more than enough to be remembered. It was neither «behind its time» nor «ahead of its time»; more properly, it was «out of its time», a bizarre experiment heavily applauded by the critical community and, for that matter, not exactly underappreciated by the market — at the very least, it sold well enough to redeem its budget, which was all that was required at the time to let you stay at LucasArts (*don't lose money* and *don't embarrass George* were the two chief directives for everybody working in the company at the time — ah, the Golden Age!).

But even though it ended almost literally in mid-game, the proposed sequel never materialized — perhaps because, as it happened in the musical world to people like Brian Wilson and Pete Townshend, the artistic ambitions of its author ultimately proved too heavy and/or too confusing to smoothly get off the ground. There *might* have been a way to properly expand the fantastic universe created by its author, to build up on the ideas for its musical background and gameplay mechanics, but neither Moriarty himself nor anybody else was able to find it or implement it. Although **Loom** was certainly not the only LucasArts game to have never received a sequel (the same fate befell **Zak McKracken**, for instance), it became a proverbial example of a *revered* and *outstanding* game not to receive a sequel — going as far as to become a regular target of in-game inside jokes for the studio, from the «ask me about **Loom**» running gag in the **Monkey Island** games to the cheesy, but accurate exchange between Guybrush Threepwood and Captain LeChuck in **Curse Of Monkey Island** (Guybrush: «*If you kill me, there'll be no more **Monkey Island** sequels. No sequels means no work for you. You'll become just another has-been that nobody's heard of.*» LeChuck: «*Ohhh! That could never happen to ME! I'm LeChuck!*» Guybrush: «*Do you know the name "Bobbin Threadbare"?*» LeChuck: «*Uh, no.*» Guybrush: «*Exactly.*».)

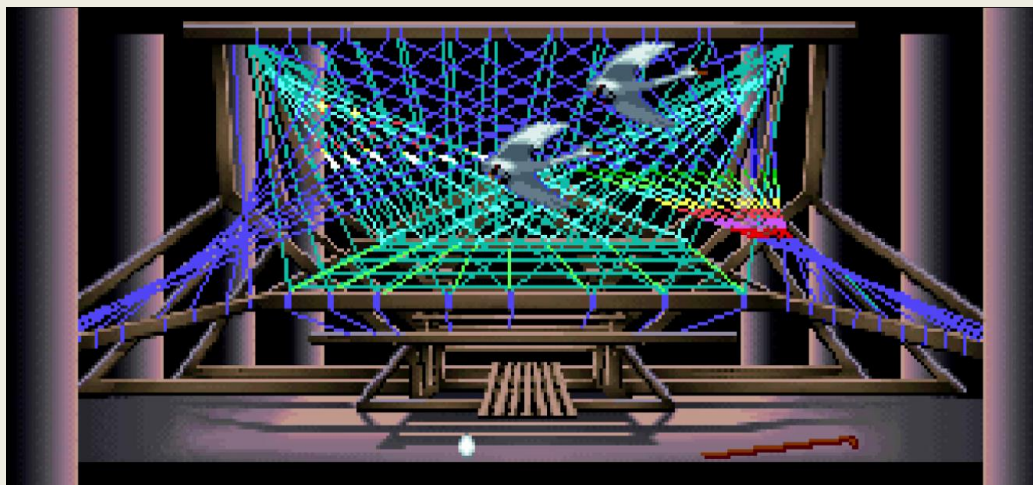
Apparently, there *were* plans for a sequel — in fact, Moriarty, staying well in line with the strategy of his company's founder, envisioned **Loom** as a trilogy, with two subsequent parts that were to be called **Forge** and **The Fold**, respectively, but the first of these never went beyond a basic planning document, and the second left behind nothing but the name. (A curious [Italian-based fan project](#) tried to resurrect **Forge** about two decades ago, but wound up abandoned with just a demo version

of the first chapter, and what I've actually seen did not really look too promising anyway). Given that **Loom**, in its finished form, ended up pretty tiny compared to even contemporary LucasArts games, and *yet* Moriarty complained about creative and physical exhaustion after the title finally shipped, this is hardly surprising. What is surprising, or at least what is a bit of a puzzle worth looking into, is how such a short and almost minimalistic game could have resulted in such an exhaustion. Was there really something *extra* special about **Loom**, something that required spending two or three times the amount of artistic mana as compared to the usual line of product delivery — or was it all just a big and hollow put-on, a bunch of empty, dead-end ambitions that resulted in a stillborn oddity rather than a unique, inimitable masterpiece? This is what we'll be trying to understand over the course of the ensuing review — so let's get to it.

Content evaluation

Plotline

Brian Moriarty's ambitions as a storywriter for the video game market go back to a much earlier period than **Loom** — his text-based **Trinity** for Infocom was, after all, about altering time and space in order to save the world from nuclear apocalypse — and there can be no doubt that he was specifically hired at LucasArts to try and find a somewhat more serious angle for the studio than the goofy, sarcastic fun style it had become tightly associated with ever since **Maniac Mansion** had



established LucasArts as a serious challenge to Sierra's monopoly on graphic adventure games. **Loom** is certainly not devoid of humor — there are plenty of sarcastic one-liners and inside jokes to make the player smile — but it was, indeed, the first LucasArts game to date where humor, satire, and goofiness were not the chief focus of the designers.

Instead, Moriarty made an attempt to flesh out a story that, while essentially sticking to the common gaming trope of the save-the-world-from-evil-boss type, could draw the player in with its own unique fantasy universe, the kind of thing that was relatively common in RPGs but not so much in adventure games. Of course, Sierra had **King's Quest** for the fairy-tale nerds and **Space Quest** for sci-fi nerds, but both of these franchises were there mostly for the basic story, the puzzles, and (in the

case of **Space Quest**) some good laughs. Meanwhile, **Loom** was there for the vision — the *grand* vision, as it were. Previous adventure games skirted around the idea of epicness, borrowing motifs, characters, and occasional phrase turns from epic folklore and literature; **Loom** was to dive into the world of EPOS head first, taking the same kind of risk that George Lucas had done with *Star Wars* twelve years earlier.

As in all of the allegedly «original» fantasy universes submitted for our approval over the past half-century or so in all the areas of artistic creativity, **Loom** is mostly a synthesis, taking its inspiration from sources as far removed from us as Greek tragedies and epic poems, and as close to us as the latest *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* movies (this is LucasArts, after all). Somewhere in between lies such an odd source of inspiration as Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, appropriated for its transformation motifs rather than its tragic romance (the one thing that **Loom** either did not have time for, or did not care about in the first place). Yet despite all the influences and borrowings, the universe of **Loom** has its own patented structure, and the major plot engine of **Loom** — the idea of integrating the motifs of *weaving* and *music-making* — belongs exclusively to the mind of Mr. Moriarty. Take O'Shaughnessy's (and Willy Wonka's, and Aphex Twin's...) famous "*We are the music makers / And we are the dreamers of dreams / Wandering by lone sea-breakers / And sitting by desolate streams / World-losers and world-forsakers / On whom the pale moon gleams / Yet we are the movers and shakers / Of the world for ever, it seems*" — then change just one word, *dreamers*, to *weavers*, and there you have it: the meaning of **Loom** in a nutshell.

Even an abbreviated retelling of **Loom**'s entire plot would take too much space; there is quite a lot that happens over its less than two hours running time, and what is not there directly in the game had to be crammed into a 30-minute audio Prologue that actually came packaged together with the disks as an [additional audio tape](#) (!). To single out just the main points, the whole thing takes place in some ultra-distant future period, when, after the collective actions of Trump, Putin, Taylor Swift, Elon Musk, and people who invented words such as «vlogging» and «microtransactions» (sorry), the world as we know it has effectively collapsed — perhaps several times — and the remaining survivors, in order to ensure the most efficient way of prolonging their survival, have become segregated into small professional communities, the Guilds, with each Guild reaching the ultimate perfection in their particular skill, occasionally even crossing into the supernatural. Why exactly this strict division of labor (presumably, with a decent bartering service set up among the different Guilds) has helped humanity survive better than any other remains a mystery, but it *did* result in the Guild of Weavers managing to tap right into the very fabric of the universe, with their Great Loom almost taking on a life of its own and capable of producing unpredictable, baffling, and occasionally dangerous patterns (hello, ChatGPT!). For this, the Weavers were banned to a remote island, where, seemingly, they have been spending the last thousand or so years of their lives trying to contain their little nuclear Loom.

What happens next, both within the audio drama prologue and the first 10-15 minutes of the game itself, is fairly chaotic and does not always make perfect sense, but does have a little of that Promethean vibe to it as several solitary characters oppose the conservative values of the community and rebel against the natural rhythm of Fate. The result of all that disruption is... *you*, «Bobbin Threadbare», The Chosen One, who watches the entire Guild being mysteriously transformed into a flock of swans and evacuating the island, leaving you to make your own journey, on which you must try to (unsuccessfully) reunite with your brethren, (also unsuccessfully) stop a power-hungry madman from releasing Chaos, and ultimately watch the world being torn in two halves where you can sort of save one and leave the other one to Chaos...

...okay, to be honest, I think that the plot in its most monumental, epic layers is not a particular achievement that Brian Moriarty could truly be proud of. For an «out-of-the-box» type of writer, there is really too much in **Loom** conforming to classic stereotypes — such as the usual corrupt antagonist deluding himself into thinking that he can exercise control over the primordial Evil (I suppose that, want it or not, the entire LucasArts studio revolving around the *Indiana Jones* themes at the time did rub off on Mr. Moriarty), or the usual *Chosen One Gotta Save The World Because Those Who Are Supposed To Be Wiser Than Himself Are Really All Complete Idiots* trope. It's all very twisted and convoluted, with an entire heap of lore poured over your heads across the game's less-than-two-hours playing time, and lots of baffling internal contradictions about which you could not even say whether they are careless plot holes or not, because the whole thing is so short anyway that it requires your own imagination to fill those plot holes in by definition.

In other words, while Moriarty did manage to create a somewhat unique fantasy universe based on an interesting premise (the Guilds as the main structural cells of humanity, rather than the usual economic and cultural add-ons as they are usually seen in everything from *Dune* to D&D) and an intriguingly colorful (or, more accurately, colorless) protagonist, he was either unable or unwilling to deliver an equally interesting storyline that would make ample use of this premise. Over the course of two or so hours of gameplay you manage to uncover and, if not exactly *defeat*, then at least sabotage an evil plan for world domination, but it still feels like a slightly bloated first-draft pilot version that any movie executive would probably return with a bored "yeah, so?.." kind of reaction. Even the main villain has essentially *one* big scene all to himself and is seemingly dealt with for good before we can properly establish his motivation.

The miracle of **Loom**, therefore, is not that it has a great fantasy narrative (it does not), but that it manages to work so well *in spite* of the mediocre narrative. The dynamics of that universe do not truly matter; what matters is its bizarre constituency — the images, the sounds, the basic mechanics of everyday life. If the grand scheme is disappointing — it just goes to show you that heroes are heroes and villains are villains all over the multiverse — the peculiars are anything but.

Puzzles

Probably no other aspect of **Loom** has been discussed as much in whatever reviews, essays, and general write-ups exist on the game as its unique puzzle mechanics — so unique, in fact, that, like most things of such a radical degree of uniqueness, it was doomed to have no influence whatsoever on the realm of point-and-click adventure games: everybody admired it, nobody was smart, bold, or crazy enough to properly imitate it. In case you *do* need to be informed, **Loom** completely abandoned the realm of the lexicon — LucasArts had already revolutionized the industry (not necessarily for the better, but that's a whole other discussion) when they replaced the classic Sierra-style parser with lists of preset commands, but Moriarty went farther than that. His universe was a musical one, and it needed a musical, not a verbal, means of communication.

You do, of course, communicate with other NPCs met along the way in words — but apart from the usual «exhaust all possible dialog options» requirement that is occasionally necessary to advance the game, everything else in the game is achieved through the use of the protagonist's magical musical distaff. (To be honest, the distaff in question looks more like a regular magical staff rather than, per definition, "*a device to which a bundle of natural fibres (such as wool, flax, or cotton) are attached for temporary storage*", but since we're talking Guild of Weavers, clearly they couldn't just do with a *regular* staff). The distaff functions as a primitive, but powerful musical instrument, upon which the protagonist can cast series of musical notes — each combination corresponding to a command or spell, except that you have to learn these spells along the way, and only a few notes are open to you from the beginning; as you progress and gain more experience, additional notes open up, allowing for more flexibility.

One could argue that this is simply a more sophisticated (and pretentious) way of encoding the exact same commands that you used to type in in parser-based games, or select from the list of verbs in LucasArts' classic early titles. Thus, producing the musical sequence E-C-E-D is essentially the same as selecting "*open*" from such a list, except that it takes more effort to



remember the damn thing and more time to execute it. But, in fact, the ability to «dissect» a command into a sequence of notes opens up a whole new way of looking at it — although, unfortunately, the game only capitalizes on this opportunity in one aspect: most of these musical «drafts» work both ways, so if you need to *open* something by casting E-C-E-D, this means you can *close* it by casting D-E-C-E, and so on. This is something the player has to keep in mind: the game lets you directly learn each draft only in one direction, so when the time comes to do the right thing, you have to remember the general principle and experiment with your drafts by casting them backwards. (Ingeniously, those few drafts that have no imaginable «reverse» variant, like Heal or Reflect, are encoded with palindromic note sequences).

Needless to say, this musical language could have been so much more — or, at least, could have been taken to further and further heights in subsequent titles, had the game ever stood a chance of living on. Associating notes with different elements, or different magical spheres, or different emotions, etc., could have led to truly opening up a new reality for adventure games, making your brain switch to a seriously different pathway of encoding and decoding information. Yet there are also limits to how much pressure the average brain of the average player can withstand — and a serious red line between the realms of creative entertainment and educational headache. **Loom** never really crosses that line, only hinting at the true otherworldliness of the game's puzzle mechanics that could be; yet even that small hint is enough to solidify the impression that you are truly navigating an alternate reality where everything you've been previously used to is different.

The actual puzzles are not too difficult, as there is a limited number of «drafts» to weave and an even more limited number of hotspots on the screen to cast them upon — even so, the player might occasionally find oneself stumped when a certain operation requires two or more different drafts to carry out (particularly if one or more of them are «reverse» actions that have not been tried out previously). Fortunately, most of the actions are fairly rational and logical (in stark contrast to something like **Monkey Island**), and a few of the puzzles are examples of simple and elegant intellectual brilliance (like the way you have to deal with the Sheep to save them from the Dragon, or with the Dragon herself after she abducts you instead of the Sheep). Only at the very end of the game does the course of action start to drift into an absurdly surreal direction, along with the plot itself, but by that time the game practically walks you through on its own anyway.

Every once in a while, you have alternate pathways to resolving complex situations, but not too often; the game could certainly have used more of those, as well as more red herrings and side options, just to let the player truly taste the potentially infinite possibilities of the «musical approach» — however, LucasArts' stringent budgets always prevented the game designers from going all the way, and in some respects, their «user-friendly» approach to player interaction paid off worse than Sierra's parser (for instance, Sierra's programmers did not have to bother with graphic encoding of hotspots, at least, not until they

fully embraced mouse controls). Theoretically, you can try out any draft on any object, but most of the time you will simply get generic failure responses.

The fact that you can play the game on several levels of difficulty — either with the notes being marked on the distaff or without any markings, forcing you to learn and reproduce the drafts by ear — does not make the game particularly more complicated, rather simply more tedious for those of us without a good musical ear. In the end, it's all about the idea rather than its perfect realization, which, granted, would be fully forgivable for a pioneering effort. It is the inability to capitalize on this invention that makes me more sad than **Loom**'s own limitations.

Atmosphere

So perhaps the story told through **Loom** is confusing and trope-ridden, and the puzzles of **Loom** are relatively few and simple (in spite of the groundbreaking mechanics of their realization) — but even so, there was nothing else like **Loom** back in 1990, and from a certain viewpoint, there is still nothing else like **Loom** even today. Of course, fantasy world building was hardly a new thing in video gaming after ten years of *Ultimas*, *King's Quests*, and *Might And Magics*; however, in the Sierra On-Line vs. LucasArts-dominated adventure game market, a full-fledged original fantasy universe with its own lore and ideology was, at that time, still a relative rarity — such things were usually thought of as the RPG domain, and RPGs were still strategically-oriented experiences rather than the cinematic mastodons they would become in the next century (see something like **Ultima VI** or **Might And Magic 3**, released around the same time as **Loom**, for comparison).

Although all of LucasArts' own previous games could technically qualify as «fantasy», they weren't really high fantasy — most of them expanded either on pre-existing universes (*Indiana Jones*; the Caribbean pirate fantasy of **Monkey Island**) or on pre-existing cartoonish tropes (**Maniac Mansion** with its «mad scientist lab» setting). By contrast, **Loom** was neither parodic by nature nor directly based on somebody else's foundation. Instead, it was a brief, but fulfilling fantasy Odyssey,



taking the player through at least four visually and atmospherically different realms before uniting them in a single fate. But even better than that, it was a bit of a psychological, melancholic, slightly sentimental Odyssey, one that actually invited you to identify with its character and see the world through his «mystic eyes», rather than just use him — like King Graham — as a mechanical vehicle to guide you through its vistas and puzzles.

After all, when a game opens to the proverbially romantic sounds of Tchaikovsky and a dazzling vista of seaside cliffs under a multi-colored sunset — *and* when the very first action you, the player, are free to make by contemplating a lonely brown leaf hanging from a nearby barren branch, with the sad laconic commentary "*Last leaf of the year...*" as it slowly topples to the ground, never to be seen again, well, one might argue that there is already more atmosphere in those opening few seconds than in most preceding or contemporary games. Oddest of all is the protagonist: cloaked, hooded, with indigo-blue eyes intensely peering out of an unseen face, like some sort of Invisible Man, but armed with mystery instead of mischief. We did play for somebody visually similar in Sierra's **Manhunter** series from around the same time period, but the protagonist in those games did not have much by way of personality. Meanwhile, Bobbin Threadbare is essentially a child in his formative years — a little naïve, somewhat smart, very inquisitive, and just a trifle sarcastic — and this combination of uncomfortably spooky appearance with a sensitive and empathetic nature is quite startling.

The inquisitiveness comes in handy once Bobbin learns of his destiny and sets off on his personal Odyssey. The initial setting of the game — the Weavers' Guild itself — is somewhat of a cross between a Northern tribal settlement (all those yurts set up on the shore) and an ancient Greek pastiche (upon entering one of the yurts, you somehow end up in a temple with majestic columns and all the works). From there, Bobbin transitions to the Guild of Glassmakers, all of it Emerald City-green and elegantly futuristic; the Guild of Shepherds, all predictably pastoral and united with Nature; and the Guild of Blacksmiths, industrial as hell to its red-and-gold core. Bobbin's interactions with all of those environments and the people representing them are usually laconic, but he does manage to make at least one new friend in each, and through their short cutscenes they even manage to establish their own personalities — the Wise Advisor from the Glassmakers, the Sweet Young Potentially Romantic Interest from the Shepherds, and the Young Boy Sidekick from the Blacksmiths. (They never really get to fulfill their actual functions, but we can all dream on).

All of these locations and characters feel strangely wispy and dreamy, more like symbols or allegories of something than actual agents of the plot, and together with the music, this really makes **Loom** feel more like an allegorical dream than a proper legendary-hero-saves-the-world piece of fantasy. Very rarely do you actually experience a sense of concrete purpose while playing — yes, you know that technically you are searching for the swan-transformed members of your Guild, but you barely

understand why they were transformed, you have no idea where they are, and most of the time you're too busy solving other problems anyway. You solve puzzles, learn and use magical drafts, talk to people, sometimes trick people, and your own motives in all this usually remain vague and confusing. Maybe this was unintentional — maybe Moriarty just kept stumbling and groping in the dark himself — but as far as I'm concerned, he did achieve the finest result of them all: where others would have generated sheer *nonsense*, he somehow produced *mystique*.

Do not be mistaken, though: **Loom** is not a cuddly one for the kiddies. Bobbin Threadbare may exude a child-like innocence, but there is a crucial scene in the game when his jailer, intrigued by tales of the Weavers, demands to look at his unhooded face in exchange for a favor, which Bobbin rather casually agrees to. We never know — other than an off-screen scream — what ensued and in which particular way the jailer did confirm the «no man can see my face and live» legend of Bobbin's ilk, but we can certainly tell it wasn't pretty. (*Note*: in the inferior talkie version of the game, as well as in the bonus addendum to the original if you played on the hardest level, you *could* see what happened, and it was a little disappointing). Bishop Mandible, too, is quite viscerally eliminated by Chaos — and then there are all of Bobbin's friends who end up dead or at least disembodied by Chaos and his minions. Much of this was terrifying by 1990's standards, and with a little immersion, some of it can still feel terrifying even today. The borders between gorgeous fantasy dream and bloody nightmare are really thin here, though, fortunately, the nightmare aspects are never realistic enough to become properly traumatic.

Returning to what I started out with in the opening paragraphs — about how certain things can only work well in a retrospectively antiquated setting — *all* of this weird atmospherics is only kept alive by the laconic and (unintentionally) «primitive» character of the game. Bobbin's short replicas; the general brevity of the game's dialogs; the relative quickness with which the player travels from one area of the world to another; the overall simplicity of the puzzles — what all these qualities do is they kill off any possibility of «pretentiousness» or taking this whole thing more seriously and realistically than it should deserve. (A major reason why the talkie version of the game works worse than the silent version, which I shall explain more in the *Sound* part of the review). Instead, the sparseness and primitiveness emphasizes the game's «dream» nature, as well as its child-like properties.

There is, indeed, a lot that Bobbin Threadbare and his much luckier contemporary, Guybrush Threepwood, have in common — the famous "*ask me about **LOOM***" running gag of **Monkey Island** is not merely a fortunate chronological coincidence — such as their combination of wit and naivete, kindness and sarcasm, insatiable curiosity about the strange world(s) surrounding them, and occasionally childish behavior. But Guybrush, for all his attractiveness, is a meta-parodic post-modern character, whose primary function is to deconstruct the surreal reconstruction of the universe around him. Bobbin has no

such mission; his ordeal is to fix things rather than tear them apart, though greater forces at play eventually show him the futility of all this small-scale work. In fact, if you sit back and start overthinking the effect of the game, **Loom** eventually takes on the form of a great tragic metaphor — the story of an innocent kid who wants to do simple good in the world, but ends up as a cogwheel in the hands of its evil masterminds, or just as a helpless victim of Fate. This is really more Oedipus than Guybrush Threepwood — given all those subtle references to Greek mythology in the Weavers' Guild, I'm sure the analogy must have been right there in Moriarty's mind.

Looking over this section one more time, I fear that it came out confused and confusing, but that is very much in keeping with the game itself, so I'll probably leave it like it is. It *does* take a sensitive and discriminating approach to perceive **Loom** as a one-of-a-kind tiny romantic gem lost on the vast prairies of digital fantasy worlds; players who are more concerned with vast amounts and internal coherence of lore might very well find themselves frustrated and disappointed. But perhaps when the world finally crashes and burns and all you have left is a couple hours' worth of electricity for your PC, booting up **Loom** might be a suitably appropriate way of saying goodbye.

Technical features

Graphics

The original **Loom** was published as a DOS game in early 1990, at which time it was still limited to 16-color EGA graphics. That version, simplified and pixellated, is still available and very much playable; however, comparing it with the CD-ROM-based VGA versions that came out for FM Towns (in 1991) and then again for DOS (in 1992) leaves little doubt in my mind that the game works much better with 256 colors than it does with 16, and that it simply had to be downgraded originally due to budget limitations. (VGA titles for DOS did not begin to ship properly until *late* 1990, I believe — **King's Quest V**, one of the first groundbreakers, came out in November, with Sierra always being at the forefront of graphic innovation — but the VGA standard itself had been introduced as early as 1987; it simply took some time for it to reach the mass market).



I have come across more than a few remarks from veteran players about how the original 16-color version of **Loom** actually looks better than the VGA rendering, and all I can say to that is that nostalgia is a hell of a bitch. Here, for instance, is a screenshot from the early AMIGA version (same EGA as the DOS version) corresponding to the one from the VGA version reproduced above:



You can certainly see here how the artists honestly *tried* to convey the strangeness and «warped reality» of the universe here with 16 colors — the interaction of the various blue components in the sky section, combined with the subtle gradations of unbroken and dotted lines on the horizon, is impressive, as is the stand-out of the reddish «last leaf of the year» against the overall cold blue patterns of trees, rocks, and the seascape. But it has nothing on the corresponding VGA image, which is just a perfect example of the early days of «scenery porn» if there ever was one. In there, we actually see a gorgeous sunset, reflecting *purple* on the water and casting a rainbowish perspective on the entire horizon. The rocks are gray and barren, while the trees next to them have an odd deep purple glow — not even clear if that is their natural color or if it is all a trick of the *very* special light cast on the world of the Weavers.

Admittedly, I deviate here from the opinion of [Brian Moriarty himself](#), who, like the honorable purist he wants to be, defends the EGA version to the death, pointing out how its visual creativity could not even begin to exist with the technical limitations it had to circumvent. He believes that the limited color palette was a major bonus to **Loom**'s atmosphere — that, for instance, if we see all of the Weavers' Guild in different shades of blue, with none of those yellow or red additions, it probably adds to our impression of it as a cold, dark, sinister location. But why should it be so? The Weavers' Guild has no obligation to be wedged in some sort of frozen tundra, nor does it have to give out a 100% impression of impending death. By adding more colors and skilfully mixing them, the VGA version succeeds in making the universe of **Loom** a more vibrant place on the

whole, and, where possible, an even stranger place than it looked like in the original version. I can certainly understand Moriarty's bitterness about the fact that the VGA remasters were made without his supervision, but that does not exactly elevate his rants above the status of «petty bickering». (The complaints about cutting out the original game's content in the «talkie» version, on the other hand — now *that* is something I can get behind; we'll talk more about it in the *Sound* section).

Anyway, one thing that both the EGA and VGA versions do have in common — arguably the single most important visual touch in the game — is the stark color contrast between the different Guilds. After all those deep blue and purple hues of the Weavers, Bobbin makes his way to the Glassmakers' Guild, which is all about different shades of green, coloring assorted futuristic geometric shapes — the realm of cutting edge technology! — then it's off to the Shepherds, where the landscape, obviously, is also green, but a more natural shape thereof — then there's the industrially-tinged Blacksmiths' Guild, all about different shades of red and yellow and black (even the skyline is red!) — and, then, finally, there's the island and castle of Bishop Mandible, again returning to green, but this time in a sickly, rotting corpse-like shade of green. Then, of course, Chaos takes over, and it's all about a pervasive blackness threatening to engulf all those lively (or not so lively) colors. In the end, there is probably more color symbolism in this game than just about anything produced in any video game up to that point; you could write a whole thesis on the subtle coloring nuances in the EGA and VGA versions.

Finally, one more seductive aspect of the visuals are the close-up portraits for different characters: whenever one of them gets an unusually long piece of soliloquy, the overall perspective is replaced by a face (slightly animated, though usually just with two or three different frames). This is important, since character sprites in the game are, as was usual for the epoch, nothing to write home about, and the portraits do a good job of bringing the various NPCs back to life. Needless to say, these guys, too, look much better in their VGA versions than in 16 colors. Special prize goes to Steve Purcell for making all the Weavers look distinct from each other despite having no faces — sheerly through the different expressions of their uniformly blue eyes (inquisitive, pleading, threatening, it's all in there). This was actually LucasArts' first serious experience in the digital portrait craft (with **The Secret Of Monkey Island** heavily stepping on its tail), and they immediately bested their chief competitor at it — in Sierra On-Line, close-up portraits of characters had been introduced as early as in **Leisure Suit Larry** (for, uhm, fairly crucial reasons), but up until that time, they rarely had the same level of expressivity.

With this additional icing on the cake, it is no wonder that **Loom**, be it in its original EGA incarnation or the redrawn VGA version, remains an unchallenged masterpiece in the visual art department if we're talking late Eighties / early Nineties. Put it on a 1920x1080 modern screen, or even on a 4K one, and it still looks classy, even with all the pixellation.

Sound

I do not know if **Loom** was the first ever game to be accompanied *in its entirety* (rather than just featuring snippets) with a classical composer soundtrack, but it was certainly the first ever such game I'd ever played — and what a big difference that makes. Now there's a bit of an ironic side here from a Russian perspective, because over here Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (as well as *The Nutcracker*) is typically regarded by genuine classical fans as the epitome of cheesy corniness, largely due to oversaturation in the Soviet period (not just the *Dance Of The Little Swans*, as I believe it is even in the Western world, but pretty much the entire piece). To use an excerpt of *Swan Lake* for *anything* is typically intended to have comic rather than cathartic effect, and even when it comes to **Loom** itself, I am not sure why *Dance Of The Little Swans* was chosen to liven up Bobbin's adventures in the Glassmakers' Guild — for its «busy» atmosphere, perhaps?



And yet, video games are not like any other medium, meaning that on the whole, the choice of *Swan Lake* was not just totally appropriate — it was pretty much a *perfect* choice on Moriarty's part. Arranged by George Sanger (who, within LucasArts, was previously responsible for the NES version of **Maniac Mansion**), the MIDI melodies sound lush, resplendent, and just about ideal for complementing the «magical reality» of **Loom**'s universe. While the story of the game does not really have much in common with the narrative of *Swan Lake*, apart from the swan transformation motif itself, the fairy-tale setting clearly does. But perhaps the most important function of the musical backgrounds — which, as was common with LucasArts games at the time, play all through your gaming time unless you decide to turn the music off — is that it alleviates and dissipates any fear, unease, or discomfort you might experience while wandering through these strange lands. Even when the game is at its most (officially) terrifying, after the appearance of Chaos, the music never lets you forget that you are enclosed in a fairy-tale dream rather than a grim virtual reality with emphasis on *reality*.

Had the composer been told to create an actual *new* soundtrack for the game, taking his cues from John Williams or any lesser contemporary figure, he would probably strive to adapt the melodic arrangements to their respective environments —

for instance, come up with something «tribal» and «ritualistic» for the exteriors of the Weavers' Guild, something harshly «industrial» for the Blacksmiths' Guild, and something «spooky» or «martial» for the sections involving Chaos. Instead, the challenge was to find the most suitable themes from the ballet for each sequence in the game — a challenge that is impossible to stand up to perfectly by definition, but whose very imperfections can result in unpredictable, out-of-the-blue mood swings that might end up giving the game more character than taking from it. So maybe the already mentioned match between *Little Swans* and the Glassmakers' Guild feels weird; but using *Pas de trois* for the main theme of the Weavers' Guild makes a fine contrast with the relatively dreary-looking landscape and gray yurts of the Weavers, constantly reminding the player that, despite the deceptively drab surroundings, you really find yourself in a place of delicious magic.

Of course, to ensure the proper experience, you have to experience the soundtrack at its fullest and mightiest; early versions won't do, and even the original Roland MT-32 recordings for the PC sound rather feeble and whiny. [This](#) version, taken from the 1991 FM Towns edition of the game, is arguably the richest in texture, which automatically means that the FM Towns version is the one most recommended for any retro playthroughs (it is unclear why anyone would want to listen to the soundtrack on its own, though, other than a one-time curiosity... well, to be fair, I'm not sure why anyone would want to listen to *Swan Lake* on its own anyway, be it a classical recording or a MIDI conversion, but feel free to dismiss this feeling as a side effect of typical Russian snobbery).

The FM Towns version does lack the feature that many modern gamers would find welcoming — voiced dialogue, which would only be added a year later for the DOS CD version. Unfortunately, as nice as it would have been to hear **Loom** voiced *properly*, this was not the case; budget limitations caused only a small part of the game's script (which was not all *that* large to begin with) to be provided with voiceovers, meaning that many lines were simply cut out of the game. The voiceovers themselves were not *terrible* (as people sometimes describe them in retrospective), but rather *ordinary*, submitted mostly by a bunch of no-names who delivered their lines, got paid, and went home — detracting from the game's magic rather than adding to it. To be frank, even **Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis**, also released in 1992, featured a more convincing voice cast despite LucasArts' relative inexperience with the technology.

This is why, in the end, I think that the FM Towns version of the game is definitive: it has the juicy reworked VGA graphics, the complete (text) dialogue, *and* the richest musical accompaniment — *without* the generally dull voiceovers. This does not mean that the game could never have worked with voicing; it's just that back in 1992, voice acting in video games was still in its infancy. Both Sierra and LucasArts would not score their first true voiced masterpieces until one year later (this would be, respectively, **Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers** and **Day Of The Tentacle**); **Loom** ended up being merely the

training grounds for the studio, and the actors, who probably never played the original silent version and had no contact with the game's original designer, never got to really get *inside Loom's* one-of-a-kind universe. Which, in the end, is not very surprising: **Loom** is a game explicitly designed for the pre-talk era of video games, and trying to voice it was much like those few failed attempts at transforming a silent movie into a «talkie» around 1929–1930.

Interface

This last section of the evaluation is going to be very short: talking about **Loom's** gameplay interface and mechanics is barely possible because the game has *none*. Well, at least in its earliest part, when Bobbin is still getting his bearings around the Weavers' Guild — at best, all you can do is click your mouse on various hotspots, some of which will give you a slightly enlarged image of an object in the bottom right corner of the screen, accompanied with a short general description. That is *all* you get for a while. No parser, no list of verbal commands (the most typical interface for LucasArts at the time), no way to operate on or interact with any details of the environment.

Pretty sure that those players who were too lazy to read the manual (usually, that includes most of us, doesn't it?) temporarily ended up stumped, asking themselves if they'd accidentally picked up a buggy copy of the software.

Once you pick up your distaff, about 10 or so minutes into the game, things change — there is your interface at the bottom of the screen, consisting of... your distaff. If you're playing on Expert mode, this is the only thing you see — a stick, various parts of which you have to click in order to trigger different notes (by ear!). If you're on lower difficulties, you'll also see an accompanying musical staff (no pun intended), making things a little easier. You don't even have any inventory: Bobbin is allowed to handle one on-screen object or person at a time, and carries absolutely nothing except for the distaff (perhaps this is somehow meant to reflect a specific type of stoicism common to the Weavers?).

This record-setting minimalism (for an adventure game, at least) does carry a toll in that the game becomes extremely easy to beat, as long as you meticulously pay your pixel-hunting dues (not too difficult, since the number of hotspots is seriously limited as well) and diligently jot down all the musical drafts uncovered on your journey. But challenging the player was hardly a big priority for Moriarty in the first place — his prime ambition was to offer the player a brand new *language* of



interaction, mastering which would become a challenge in itself. And since **Loom**, metaphorically speaking, represents the «childhood» stage of Bobbin Threadbare, it stands to reason that its musical language also barely advances beyond the «childhood» stage — even though already at this juncture, it shows you signs of linguistic creativity when you have to understand and employ in practice the principle of «draft reversal», producing patterns that nobody explicitly taught you before by applying analogy and just a little bit of semantics.

If I'm cracking this right, any sequel to **Loom** would have probably featured a slightly more complex and advanced interface — representing the «adolescent» or «adult» stage compared to the «toddler» state of the first game — perhaps not merely limiting itself to more specific drafts, but thinking of ways to weave them together into more intricate patterns or something of the sort. Alas, with Moriarty's universe pretty much «throttled in the cradle» before it could be fully developed, we can only guess where such a path could have ultimately led.

Verdict: *More of a cosmic dream than a game, from that rare time window when you could plan a game and end up with a cosmic dream instead.*

If you have never played **Loom** and somehow this review ends up stimulating you into getting it and playing it and you end up disappointed and bored, well, there's nothing to be ashamed of. Some works of art make an immediate impression, while others require a modicum of self-nudging — which may or may not be worth the effort, depending on how you feel about it. And **Loom** requires quite a bit of self-nudging, even outside of the fact that it looks back at you out of 1990, an age in which digital fantasy universes commonly required you to fill in the gaps from your own mind, providing more of a stimulus for imagination than a self-sufficient picture.

The worst mistake you can make about **Loom**, though, is to treat it like any other story-driven video game — that is, judge it on the merits of the complexity and originality of its plot (not a wise solution) or on the sophistication level of its gameplay mechanics and puzzles (*definitely* not a wise solution). First and foremost, **Loom** is a series of interwoven visions, combining text, graphics, and music to paint an alternate reality that you investigate through the blue eyes of your own impenetrable



ghost-child alter ego. Where every other adventure game before **Loom** used the environment as a setting for puzzle-solving and role-playing, **Loom** is the environment — and your psychological reaction to being part of it. It is the very first game in the adventure genre (perhaps the very first game, *period*?) that actually tried to put the Art into the «art» of videogames; I certainly wonder what the late Roger Ebert would have to say about this one if they showed it to him instead of all those [really dubious examples from Kellee Santiago](#).

Of course, in the end **Loom** is only a faint glimmer of what could have been — the computer game analogy of a hypothetical 5-year piano prodigy who tragically died of measles the next week after delighting his first big audience at Carnegie Hall. But it is still a *unique* faint glimmer, a tiny peek through a particular doorway that has never been enlarged or flung open after the death of the initial project. Up to this day, it retains its weird status of «obvious artistic influence for game designers to be influenced by», except that no future game designer has created anything like it; the world has moved on, and those particular kinds of mushrooms that would let Alice shrink in size and pass through Brian Moriarty's half-open door have not been on the market in decades. Who knows, though: perhaps in our current age of ever-diminishing returns, when fresh ideas and approaches seem to be more scarce than the oil at the bottom of a 100-year old Texan well, some modern day Indiana Jones might eventually resume the search for those elusive fungi?..