

The Curse Of Monkey Island

Studio: **LucasArts**

Designer(s): **Larry Ahern / Jonathan Ackley**

Part of series: **Monkey Island**

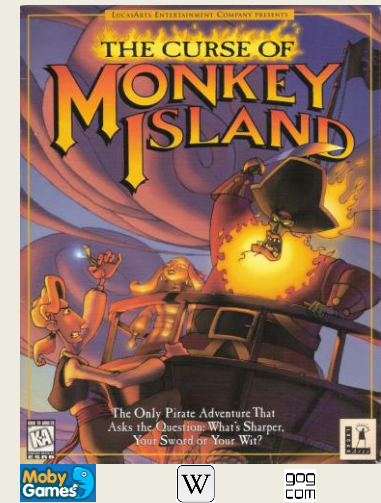
Release: November 1, 1997

Main credits: Programmers: **Jonathan Ackley, Charles Jordan, Chris J. Purvis**
Lead Artists: **Larry Ahern, Kim Lyons, William V. Tiller**
Music: **Michael Land**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (8 parts, 468 mins.)

Basic Overview

It is not entirely clear to me why, of all the possible paths to follow, LucasArts decided to choose a sequel to the first two *Monkey Island* games in the fall of 1996. Neither of the two was exactly a bestseller, which should have mattered at the time that some of the studio's newer games, such as *The Dig* and, especially, *Full Throttle* were finally beginning to move hundreds of thousands of copies. Worse, both clearly reflected the coherent and unique vision of their chief designer Ron Gilbert, who, as of 1996, was no longer employed at the studio and could, at best, offer creative advice from a distance (which, as far as I know, he did not, though he did go on record praising the game long after it was released). We should probably just ascribe this to a certain mystical aura that surrounded *Monkey Island* more than any other LucasArts achievement — and at the center of which was situated LucasArts' single most memorable, adorable, and legendary playable character, Guybrush "I want to be a pirate" Threepwood. I do not know just how much fan pressure the studio had to endure, but I do easily believe that sending in a letter saying *BRING GUYBRUSH BACK* would be a far more natural thing to do in the mid-1990s than, for instance, *BRING BACK ZAK McCracken* or *BRING BACK BOBBIN THREADBARE* (the latter actually gets a sarcastic reference at the end of this game, more or less hinting at the truth — some adventure game characters die in body *and* spirit, while others get lucky enough to pass on into legend).



By far the oddest and riskiest decision was to place the renewed fate of Mr. Threepwood into the hands of two employees who had very little to do with *Monkey Island* in the first place. Larry Ahern had been with LucasArts since 1991 and had indeed worked on *LeChuck's Revenge* — as graphic artist and animator, which is a pretty long way from story writer and general game designer. Jonathan Ackley came in even later, in 1993, and worked as a programmer on several titles, from *Day Of The Tentacle* to *Full Throttle* and *The Dig*. Neither of the two had, in fact, had any prior experience designing adventure games, meaning that putting them on the project was quite a massive gamble for the studio — and, as I shall try to show below, the decision had both positive and negative effects.

The main and quite objective positive effect was, of course, that the game became a commercial success — a far more decisive one than the sales results of the first two titles. At first, it fared much better in Europe (especially Germany) than in the States, but eventually the pace picked up, turning *Curse Of Monkey Island* into the best selling unit of the entire franchise, a success that its sequel, *Escape From Monkey Island*, already failed to repeat. Even more importantly, perhaps, *Curse Of Monkey Island* became the default game to introduce a revamped and refurbished Guybrush Threepwood to a whole new generation of young gamers — the generation which already had much higher technical demands for a good game than the previous one, expecting their Guybrush to look all sharp and dandy in high graphic resolution and talk in an actual human voice. For many of the modern nostalgic gamers out there, *The Curse Of Monkey Island* remains the definitive entry in the series precisely because it was their first encounter with the absurd and twisted world of three-headed monkeys, insult sword fighting, and rubber chickens with pulleys in the middle.

Because of these specific circumstances, saying anything negative about the game in certain circles is liable to getting you ostracized. Yet, this still being a relatively niche topic and all, I will (ironically) «gather the courage» to say this from the start: both as a challenging adventure game and as a respectable artistic entry in the *Monkey Island* canon, *The Curse* is a deeply flawed, substantially unsatisfactory title, with many inventive and inspired «little» ideas which never really gel into a big, cohesive, meaningful whole. Actually, it is its principal flaw which is quite big, cohesive, and meaningful. The first two games, created by Gilbert, were (generally successful) attempts to create a large, sprawling meta-world of mock-fantasy, one that would both celebrate our knack for creating an imaginary past for our species and ridicule it at the same time. Conversely, *The Curse Of Monkey Island* is an attempt to create a *Monkey Island* game — no less and no more that.

Of all LucasArts games ever created, this one (and its even less satisfactory sequel, of course) is the quintessential epitome of the «give the people more, more, more of what they want» principle — not coincidentally, unlike the first two games, which sold poorly despite getting rave reviews upon release, *Curse* seems to have been slightly more popular with fans than critics

(though I may be mistaken here, since I am only basing this judgement on a very small number of mixed reviews). Yet there is a reason why the names of Ackley and Ahern are rarely, if ever, mentioned alongside the names of such acclaimed LucasArts «visionaries» as Ron Gilbert, Dave Grossman, or Tim Schafer — or even such less famous, more «cult» names as *Loom*'s Brian Moriarty. This is because these names, in all honesty, simply do not matter. Names matter when inscribed on a work of art; *The Curse Of Monkey Island* is a fine, enjoyable piece of product. Perhaps it works better when taken completely outside of context — this is something that should be confirmed for somebody who played this game *prior* to the first two, and preferably was older than 12 years at the time — but, unfortunately, it makes even less sense when it is taken outside of that context. Let us take a closer look now and try to determine what exactly went wrong here, and whether it was at all possible to not let it all go wrong in the first place.

Content evaluation

Plotline

The first and most obvious problem of the story that Ackley and Ahern had to write for the game is that the story... simply could not be written. At the end of *LeChuck's Revenge*, it is made perfectly transparent that the entire universe of *Monkey Island* is, in fact, little more than a fantasy, explicitly played out or implicitly and covertly imagined in the brains of two young brothers, fueled by the visual wonders of an amusement park. You *could* go out of your way and interpret the whole thing somewhat differently, but then you could also choose to believe, if you so wanted, that Prince Hamlet really feigned his own death in order to go undercover under the rule of King Fortinbras so as to seek out the *true* killers of his father. For all intents and purposes, the second *Monkey Island* game closed the book on Guybrush Threepwood and put it under a heavy rock, which at least required a bunch of heavyweights to lift.

Ackley and Ahern were no heavyweights, so, when pressed for a proper way to resume the story, they chose the simplest of all possible approaches — when all else fails, bullshit your way out of the situation. At the start of the game, Guybrush appears adrift on the ocean, without a single clue about whatever happened in between his discovery of «Big Whoop» and the present time. Approximately three quarters of the game are then spent in complete ignorance, as Guybrush merrily goes around on his



business. Then, in the last act, as the Ghost Pirate LeChuck materializes once again and decides that he's got some serious time to spare, he delivers before the bedazzled Guybrush a story so convoluted, so full of holes, so utterly meaningless and unfunny, that, in all honesty, it might have been more honest to just leave the mystery a mystery.

Actually, the *main* plot of the game — to which Guybrush's lonesome drifting on the ocean and the crazy final act are only related on a purely formal level — has nothing to do with «Big Whoop», LeChuck, or Guybrush Threepwood's troublesome family relations. In the cargo hold of LeChuck's ship, Guybrush finds a beautiful diamond ring, which he promptly gifts to Elaine Marley, his fiancée, as a wedding gift. Putting it on, Elaine is struck by an old voodoo curse and turned into a gold statue — meaning that most of the game, naturally, will be spent by Guybrush trying to figure out how to undo the spell. The same way most of *The Secret Of Monkey Island* was spent trying to pass the Three Trials, and most of *LeChuck's Revenge* was spent putting together the map pieces for the «Big Whoop».

Grumbling naysayers sometimes protest at this point specifically, complaining that Ackley and Ahern went against Elaine's character, transforming her into a Damsel in Distress. This aspect does not bother me in the least: Elaine's character as such, the way it is presented in the introduction, is as strong-willed and sarcastic as ever ("*Let's face it, LeChuck, you're an evil, foul-smelling, vile, codependent villain and that's just not what I'm looking for in a romantic relationship right now*"), and her transformation into a statue — which certainly does not show any weakness of character — simply takes her out of the game for the majority of it, which is... more or less the same status she'd occupied in the previous two games as well. Besides, LucasArts would clearly overcompensate for this by vastly enlarging Elaine's role in *Escape From Monkey Island* three years later, so let bygones be bygones.

Nor, of course, should we really get angry that the plot is, after all, merely an excuse for introducing the game's many whacky secondary characters, locations, and puzzles — this strategy is more or less in agreement with Ron Gilbert's original vision (though a little less in agreement with his vision for the second game). As usual, over the course of the game Guybrush is going to visit several islands (most of the action takes place on the rather lacklusterly-called Plunder Island and Blood Island) and meet a solid mix of both returning fixtures (the Voodoo Lady; Stan the Salesman; the Cannibals of Monkey Island) and new presences (too numerous to mention in a single sentence). The jokes, puns, gags, surrealism, absurdity, irony, parody just keep coming. So what the hell *could* be the problem?

To give a precise example, let us rewind all the way back to the introduction. We open up on Guybrush drifting across the open sea in a strange kind of ocean craft, vaguely resembling a flatiron. He is writing in his diary: "*Really, really thirsty now. If*

only I could have a small drink of fresh water, I might have the strength to sail on." (An entire bottle of 'Monkey Spring Water' floats past us in the foreground, but Guybrush is too busy writing to notice.) "If I could reach land, I might find water and some food. Fruit, maybe... some bananas..." (A bowl of fruit and an entire bunch of bananas float by, without Guybrush noticing.) "Oh, why do I torture myself like this? I might as well wish for some chicken and a big mug of grog for all the good it will do to me." (A live chicken standing on a barrel of grog floats by.)

The entire sequence is mildly funny, as a nice enough representative of the "expect the unexpected" comedic trope. But somehow, it is nowhere near as funny as the opening to *Monkey Island 2*, where Guybrush has to explain his entire backstory to Elaine while hanging on to a rope with one hand and clutching a heavy chest in the other ("It's kind of a long story" – "It's OK, I've got time"). The reason is simple enough: we are well aware that the floating water bottle, fruit, and chicken on the barrel make absolutely no logic sense whatsoever – whereas the rope-hanging sequence promises a potentially explainable intrigue (which, indeed, is eventually explained). This does not mean that Gilbert's *Monkey Island* never included logic-defying absurdities out of nowhere (remember the three-headed monkey?) – but it is somewhat symbolic of the respective priorities of the Gilbert-era and the post-Gilbert era games.

The priorities of *The Curse Of Monkey Island* are made clear from the get-go: cram as much funniness per square inch as physically possible. It doesn't matter if they are not all *that* funny, or if they do not make any kind of sense, it does not matter if they are recycled or they are fresh, it does not matter if they are running gags from older games or something invented on the spot – just DO IT. Some of the characters, like Murray the Evil Skull, are introduced into the story with the exclusive function of being funny and nothing else; others serve some nominal function or other, but essentially are still there to be funny and nothing else. Every dialog line spoken by Guybrush or by somebody else – I mean, almost literally *every* one – has to be funny. Or die trying. Never in the field of human humor was so much owed to Guybrush Threepwood.

And guess what – this is not necessarily a good thing. Behind all the puns and gags, even while on Plunder Island, where my goals still remain reasonably clear (get together a crew, get yourself a ship – the same as in *Secret*, actually), I often find myself at a loss about what to do, simply because I happened to miss my latest directives behind the incessant, interminable wall of hit-and-miss hilariousness. I'm not even saying the jokes are not funny (though with this kind of quantity, quite a few are *bound* to be unfunny, as proven by the most basic application of the probability theory) – I am saying that after a while, a certain numbness sets in when you just can't take any more. It gets worse by the time you get to Blood Island, where the plot becomes even more twisted and even less logical, and it reaches a nightmarish peak in the final act, with LeChuck's «Carnival of the Damned» that feels like a Sesame Street version of an Hieronymus Bosch panorama of the Apocalypse (and no, it is

really nowhere near as wonderful as this description could suggest).

Two things in particular irritate the hell out of me. One is the endless stream of self-references — ironically, even if the game seems to have attracted far more novice fans than the first two, it reads as if it was very specifically designed with exclusively the old fans in mind. It's as if Ackley and Ahern had made themselves a detailed check list in advance and spent most of the time crossing items off the list. The return of Wally the Cartographer? Check (he was not blown up, but recruited by LeChuck to become his next henchman). Insult sword fighting from the first game? Of course it's back, with a fresh bunch of new insults for all the fans of "You fight like a cow" out there. The Voodoo Lady and Stan the Salesman? Doing fine as usual, completely predictable with their merchandising shtick. Pirate jokes? Check. LeChuck taunts? Check. Stupid sea shanties? Check. Ridiculous contests? Check. Gags that go all the way back to 1990? Check. In fact, the only reason that *some* of the original characters from the first two games have not returned (like Meathook, for instance) is that they were probably saved up for the next sequel.

The other thing is that, for all of Gilbert's surrealistic whackiness, the man knew where to draw the line. There *are* moments of sheer absurdity in the first two games — such as, for instance, Guybrush's "use staple remover on tremendous dangerous-looking yak" confrontation in the Governor's mansion — but most of them, when you stop and give it some thought, have an inner intelligence, parodying or ridiculing some parallel absurdity in real-life universe (in this case — the proverbial «adventure game logic» as such). Much, if not most, of the sheer absurdity in *Curse Of Monkey Island* is absurdity for absurdity's sake, which could, perhaps, be taken in small doses, but certainly not when you have to pretty much live inside this absurdity — Guybrush's hijacking of The Sea Cucumber, with its gorilla Captain LeChimp, is a particularly dumb episode, as is almost everything that happens on Blood Island and specifically the very last act of the game (Guybrush's interaction with Dingy Dog and Wharf Rat at LeChuck's ghostly carnival), where occasional genuinely funny jokes are presented in an overall setting of WHY WHY WHY OH GOD WHY????

Given that Ackley and Ahern almost literally throw *everything* at the wall, some of it does stick. Here, off the top of my head, is a brief list of mini-motives that actually work: 1) Murray the Evil Skull (the game's single most brilliant invention, unfortunately also run into the ground way before the game is over, but... "you're about as fearsome as a doorstep" — "is it a really EVIL-looking doorstep?" gets me every time); 2) the pirate actors rewriting Shakespeare ("now that you have confirmed that I have produced a work of unredeemable trash... I'm more or less guaranteed to have a financial success on my hands") — this is at least a reasonably sharp jab at certain contemporary theatrical practices, which is why it's actually funny; 3) the lactose-intolerant volcano worshipped by the paradigm-shifting vegetarian cannibals on Blood Island — again, mainly because

this kind of humor makes deep sense (even deeper in 2020 than it did in 1997).

And that's... about it, really. Every other part of plot ranges from «okay, ha ha» to «passable» to tedious to downright disgusting (there is a particularly ugly moment where you have to take a tattoo map off the back of an obnoxious guy by literally broiling his back in the sun and peeling off his skin — what the hell? I'm all for dark humor, e.g. "he's had a sudden and unexpected relapse of death", but this is rather sadistic non-humor, which needlessly makes Guybrush into a much bigger asshole than he's ever been). There may be decent small jokes and puns spread throughout the desolation — it's only the little things that can be the saving grace of this game — but while they do make the time pass by more cheerfully, it is definitely not enough to positively color the overall impression of the game.

Finally, while the indignation of some fans over the surprise ending of *Monkey Island 2* may be understood (but should hardly be shared), I'd take a hundred endings like those over the chaotic mess that is the ending of *Curse*. If you are not familiar with it, I will just say that it involves a giant «Dynamo-Monkelectric Snow Monkey», and that should probably be enough. What happened to the good old innocent days of bottles of voodoo root beer? What we have here before our eyes is a horrendously twisted, needlessly complicated, grotesque-beyond-measure expansion of the *Monkey Island* universe in every possible direction — which is a downright catastrophic decision for a game that originally grew out of a pirate-themed amusement park. (Ironically, but perhaps predictably, much the same fate would later befall the *Pirates Of The Caribbean* franchise, whose first installment had a pretty decent plot loaded with innocent fun, but each new movie just kept on piling stuff up and around until the whole thing simply imploded onto itself).

Of course, an argument always can be made about overthinking the whole deal — instead of simply taking *The Curse Of Monkey Island* for what it is, an unpretentious piece of lightweight entertainment, and enjoying the hell out of it. But, as I said, this is only possible if you somehow manage to completely detach the grappling hooks that join *Curse* with the Gilbert-era games — and this, in turn, is only possible if you have never played the Gilbert-era games in the first place, which, in turn, is stupid precisely *because* the game is so goddamn self-referential all the time. I sometimes wonder just how different things would be if I happened to play the games in backward order; but then again, putting your underwear on after your trousers is also an option that can lead to unpredictable results and unique experiences... what was the suggestion again?

Puzzles

Unfortunately, the arbitrary whackiness of the game has its first and foremost reflection on the game's system of puzzles — which is also quite arbitrarily whacky. The first thing you should know is that *The Curse Of Monkey Island* comes in two

flavors — regular and «Mega-Monkey», promising the player extra challenging adventure goodness; naturally, the seasoned adventurer shall not settle for anything less than «Mega», but the seasoned adventurer should be wary that the mega-er the game is, the more surrealistic, cartoonish logic it is going to throw at you, some of which goes way, way beyond anything Ron Gilbert could ever have imagined in his most feverish dreams. And this is not a compliment.

The challenges begin as almost deceptively simple — the Prologue, which plays out the same way in both versions, is a breeze, more of a gentle tutorial, really, which just shows you how to use the dialog system, how to pick up and use objects, how to hunt for hotspots, and how to play a simple mini-game (using a cannon to shoot up boats with ghost pirates). The tables turn on you, however, once you finish your preliminary investigation of Plunder Island and begin working toward achieving your actual goals. This is where the game veers into decision after decision that can be reached, in my opinion, only through sheer luck or diligent perusal of every available point-and-click option.



How to defeat the Eddie van Halen-level pirate at banjo? Do something that defies not only common sense, but even all the hitherto explored pathways of Monkey Island logic. How to pull closer a dangling rope in order to escape quicksand? Find a solution in the style of Sierra's *Incredible Machine*, no less. How to snatch a gold tooth from one pirate to present it to another one? Welcome to the «Golden Tooth Puzzle», perhaps one of the most famous cases of the much-maligned «adventure game logic» (almost as famous as the Goat Puzzle of *Broken Sword*, the Rubber Ducky puzzle of *The Longest Journey*, and the Cat Hair Moustache puzzle of *Gabriel Knight 3*). If you solve the «Mega-Monkey» version of it without a walkthrough, you should apply as designer for whoever it is that currently holds the right to the entire franchise.

Just like the story itself, the puzzles are hit-and-miss: for each Gold Tooth Puzzle, you get something a bit more reasonable and fun — for instance, getting out of the snake's belly requires you to produce a perfectly natural concoction (the fact that you must mix it *inside* the snake's belly is perfectly acceptable within the parameters of the *Monkey Island* universe), and using a swarm of parasites to get a certain pesky pirate out of the barber's chair is something that would spring to mind quite naturally. Unfortunately, we tend to remember such games by the hours spent in frustration, trying to solve the virtually unsolvable, rather than the minutes spent logically deducing the probable; and the Ackley / Ahern approach to *Monkey Island* is heavily tilted toward the former rather than the latter. Do not even get me started on the final act, all of which operates on

some sort of demented William S. Burroughs-style action mechanism (if you actually did complete the Disgusting Snowcone puzzle all by yourself, you must have a *really* good dealer).

In between the regular puzzles, you also get a small bunch of «special» ones — a small variety of mini-games, most of which have their good and bad sides. One involves winning the first part of the banjo contest, where you have to pay close attention to the strings picked by your opponent and repeat the melody (think of this as a prophetic anticipation of *GuitarFreaks* and *Guitar Hero*, if you wish) — a challenge that at least makes sense (though it gets tedious on the Mega-Monkey level). Another is the return of Insult Sword Fighting, which was probably brought back due to its popularity with the fans — except they did not bother at all changing even the slightest thing about its mechanics, simply slapping it back on *exactly* the way it used to be in the first game, and I am not sure how this could be regarded as a good thing.

The third mini-game actually comes packaged together with Insult Sword Fighting — it's essentially a spoof of micro-management strategic games (and maybe a bit of Sid Meier's *Pirates!*), where you have to constantly upgrade your guns after winning each sea battle, in preparation for mightier opponents. The best thing about this part is probably the names of the cannons — ranging from 'Holemaker Deluxe' to 'Paingiver 2000' — but the mechanics of both the battles and the bartering system is exactly the same with each new turn, meaning that the «spoof» element is what is essential here, not the actual fun of playing.

That said, I don't think I want to get too mad about the game's challenges. In the end, all of them are doable. Even the Disgusting Snowcone puzzle, as stupid as it is, will be eventually overcome through trial and error — how hard can one point-and-click puzzle be, after all, when you are limited by three NPCs on a single scrolling screen and a small bunch of inventory objects? The main flaws of the game are not in its puzzles; in fact, as far as puzzle design is concerned, you could easily call *Curse* a pretty damn good *game* — though as a *world*, it is a relative disaster.

Atmosphere

The Curse Of Monkey Island has one and only one dimension, and that dimension is humor. You could try and say that about the first two games as well, but you'd be dead wrong — in exactly the same way as Ackley and Ahern were wrong when they went about faithfully capturing all the superficial features of Ron Gilbert's world, and all but completely missing out on what was invisibly present under the surface. The original *Monkey Island* was tremendously funny, for sure, but it could also be subtly mystical, tense, even creepy: for all the stereotypical cheesiness of all that Caribbean voodoo imagery, Gilbert never forgot that his favorite amusement park could also scare the shit out of you under certain conditions. Most importantly, he

never forgot that somewhere underneath all that cheese there was a seed of something genuine — man's fears, superstitions, psychological terror of the unknown and the unfamiliar. If you have played these games as a kid and have never been creeped out even once, be it onboard LeChuck's ghost ship, or in the lava-lit hell under Monkey Island, or in the Voodoo Fortress, you must have been a *really* jaded, cynical kid, and maybe you enjoyed torturing kittens, too.

The Curse Of Monkey Island does not have even a single moment of genuine creepiness. The Ghost Pirate LeChuck has been turned into a complete caricature of his former self (not surprising when your right hand mate is Dinghy Dog); the Voodoo Lady's abode is guarded by the equally caricaturesque Murray the Evil Skull and prominently features a broken chewing gum machine and an inflatable alligator (compare the far more, ahem, *realistic* voodoo entourages in the first two games); and even Death itself has been turned into a puzzle-solving mechanism which can be as recurrent as you wish it to be.



Again, none of this would be all that bad if the game were a self-sufficient title; but since it so obviously takes *pride* in being a legitimate sequel to the first two, reintroducing so many of its characters, tropes, and motives, comparisons are inevitable. Besides, believe it or not, there *may* be such a thing as «fun overdose». At a certain point, the two extremes meet, and «funny as hell» becomes «abysmal», which is all about the game's final act (Guybrush trying to grow up again at the Carnival of the Damned).

There are, of course, lots of very funny individual jokes in the game, which I could quote until morning. ("Why would you sign on with a ship of the living dead, Wally?" "Well, at first I had some misgivings about it, but thanks to LeChuck's seminars, motivational lectures, and audio-books-on-parrot, I've become a vicious corsair! You can too! Ask me how!") There are also lots of very unfunny individual jokes, which I could quote until the evening. ("Are you wearing a fake beard?" "Actually, it's a highly sophisticated beard weave, made from the chest and back hair of real pirates!") — and both of these are just from the opening dialog with Wally, even before Murray the E-V-I-L Skull moseys along and becomes the primary mascot of the game.

Unfortunately, when your «atmosphere» consists almost entirely of jokes, and when the entire game eats, sleeps, breathes,

and shits jokes, this does not make up for much of an atmosphere. Plunder Island is... funny. Blood Island is... funny. A bit darker than Plunder Island (mostly because of the colors), perhaps, but still... funny. Carnival of the Damned is... funny to the point of vomiting. The Voodoo Lady is funny. So is Stan the Salesman. So is Griswald Goodsoup. So is Dinghy Dog. So are the singing pirates ("We'll fight you in the harbor, we'll battle you on land, but when you meet singing pirates, they'll be more than you can stand" — wait, no, not funny. Whoever wrote that pirate song should be keelhauled, honestly). And this is not *Day Of The Tentacle*-level funny — much, if not most, of this humor is not really *smart* humor, it's just... jokes. The pirate jokes in particular are getting quite stale, har har me hearties.

I honestly feel like I could write an entire dissertation on the artistic differences between the Gilbert version of the *Monkey Island* universe and its formalistic projection in the post-Gilbert era — except that there would probably be no audience for it, so I shall simply wrap it up with another small bunch of analogies. The relation of *LeChuck's Revenge* to *The Curse Of Monkey Island* is like that of Black Sabbath to Candlemass, *Gone With The Wind* to *Scarlett*, *Psycho* to *Psycho II* — art that diligently copies the main features of its predecessor without being able to copy its genius, because, well, some people are geniuses and some people are Jonathan Ackley and Larry Ahern. 'Nuff said.

Technical features

Graphics

The only true advantage that *Curse Of The Monkey Island* had over the two games — an advantage that has, in retrospect, been reduced to ashes after the release of the remade versions — is that it was released in 1997, not 1990 or 1992, which, among other things, meant a completely reworked and improved graphic engine. For all of Larry Ahern's flaws as a game designer and dialog writer, I certainly cannot blame Larry Ahern as a graphic artist, which is what he began with at LucasArts and which, honestly, is what he should have stuck to all along. (One should also not neglect the contributions of Bill Tiller, who was largely responsible for the artwork in both *Full Throttle* and *The Dig* two years before).



Fortunately for us all, in 1996–1997 there was still relatively little incentive for adventure games to go 3D (poor, poor *Escape From Monkey Island!*), and full-motion video was obviously out of the question for LucasArts' worlds of whimsical fantasy — so the only remaining alternative was to go full-out cartoon style. Here, Ahern and Tiller refuse to follow in Sierra's Disney-worshipping footsteps and set out on an individual path — the style of the background drawings is not immediately reminiscent of any particular cartoon prototypes (though, honestly, I am not *that* much well-versed in the history of animation to make an expert judgement). In any case, what matters is that the game is beautifully drawn — and even though it has, so far, eluded remastering, all the backgrounds still look quite dazzling on modern monitors. Vibrant colors, realistic shadows, clearly defined shapes, meticulous attention to detail, you name it. My only complaint is that, keeping up with the «take everything up to eleven» principle, most of the screens look even more cluttered with stuff than it used to be in the previous games; the streets and squares of Plunder Island, in particular, look something like Russian country houses where people traditionally dump all of their city stuff that they are too reluctant to just throw away. With so much random stuff occupying your screen, it is sometimes hard to make out directions, not to mention the traditional national pastime of Hotspot Hunting, which can become a nightmare under such circumstances.

Character sprites are also carved out beyond reproach — well, *almost* beyond reproach, because here, too, the game loyally follows the principle of Total Comedic Exaggeration. Mr. Threepwood, in particular, underwent some serious surgery, having literally been stretched out as a gummy figure — lean and lanky, almost twice his original height and just as emaciated (that's what a few weeks adrift at sea will do to you in the *Monkey Island* universe, I guess). Nevertheless, he still somehow manages to look like a Guybrush should, which is harder to say about his sweetheart Elaine Marley — now dressed in full pirate gear, sporting a rather grotesque huge head of hair, and with most of her face occupied by either her eyes or her lips, making her probably the most expressive, but also the most unnaturally looking NPC in the game. Likewise, the appearance of LeChuck has also been refashioned — now, with his beard twice as large as his face and his face taking on a vaguely insectoid / reptilian shape, he totally looks like a funny doll, much less imposing even in close-up cutscenes than he was as a tiny, limping sprite back in *LeChuck's Revenge*.

That said, all the sprites and animations fit in perfectly well with the game's comedically enhanced spirit. There are also far more close-ups and cut scenes this time, demonstrating the full potential of LucasArts' animators — the introduction scene, in particular, plays out almost like a full-fledged cartoon, with tons of action, explosions, and stuff, a stark contrast with the far more humble introductory settings in *Monkey Island 1* and *2*. In short, it is not difficult to see how easily the game could have dazzled teenage (or even adult) imagination back in 1997: with its release, LucasArts had finally (once again) caught up with

Sierra in terms of visual awesomeness. And even if, as you might have already guessed, the game itself will never occupy a top spot on the LucasArts shelf for me, I do wish for it to eventually get the same remastered treatment that *Day Of The Tentacle* and *Full Throttle* have already received — both were graphically inferior to *Curse* when they came out, but now look «comparable» in their remastered states, and it is somewhat unjust that one of the most graphically advanced games for its time still remains in exactly the same situation that it was almost 25 years ago.

Sound

I must honestly say that, no matter how many times I play the game (well, not a lot, actually), I cannot remember a single thing about its musical soundtrack — well, other than the main theme playing over the credits, of course, which is not exactly new. This is actually a little weird, because if there was *one* creative link tying the game to its past, it was composer Michael Land, the creator of iMUSE and overall nice guy. But everything that he wrote for this game barely registers — the themes are usually quiet, background-ish, unassuming, repetitive, and even less memorable than before. Oh, and apparently a lot of old fans love ‘A Pirate I Was Meant To Be’, but while the associated task (find a way to disrupt the blasted buccaneers’ rhyming scheme) is fun, the song itself is just one more of those «hey, it’s a pirate-themed game, we knew you folks wanted to have another pirate-themed game for us, so here’s another pirate theme for you!» moments, ahoy there matey and all.



So to hell with the music and let us just talk a bit about *the* single most important and monumental achievement of the whole thing — the addition of a full voice cast for the game. While I may be wrong here, I do believe that it was the voice acting thing, and nothing else, that really sold the whole thing back in 1997. For the first time ever, we could hear Guybrush Threepwood talk — and not just talk, but talk with the voice of Dominic Armato. If you have never seen Dominic Armato, check out some of his videos on YouTube (apparently, he is a food critic most of the time) — he literally *is* a real-life Guybrush Threepwood in all but physical appearance (in which, ironically, he is a bit more reminiscent of the Ghost Pirate LeChuck, which is fine 'cause they're brothers anyway), and he nailed the role perfectly upon being hired by LucasArts at the tender age of 21.

Just about every character feature and emotion that we could have ever suspected in Guybrush Threepwood is expressed by Armato with perfect naturalness. He typically delivers his lines at breakneck speed, conveying the character's hyperactive

exuberance, but at the same time manages to transmit an air of cute naïvete and constant excitement of a curious young person suddenly finding himself in all sorts of amazing situations. *And* when necessary, Armato's Guybrush can be mischievous, cynical, even downright mean, without undergoing any sort of personality transformation — he's simply this kind of multi-faceted person, smarter than he looks on the surface and easily adapting in defensive ways to dangerous or insulting situations. He really was one-of-a-kind from the very start, but Armato made him come to life in a way in which the old «mute» games never could.

The rest of the cast is just as — well, *nearly* as (just to stress the arch-awesomeness of Armato's incarnation) — impressive. British actress Alexandra Boyd is the flamboyant, temperamental Elaine, even though she has to spend most of the game as a mute golden statue (or bound and gagged in the last act). *Terminator* veteran Earl Boen is Captain LeChuck, sputtering out his piratey lines in the most iconic piratey voice possible (though I sure wish he was given less corny lines). And Leilani Jones, whom I had previously only heard as Malia Gedde, the high voodoo priestess-cum femme fatale of Sierra's *Gabriel Knight*, is somewhat ironically cast as the Voodoo Lady, as if to specifically spoof her tragic image in that game — whether or not she is in on the joke, she gets into both roles with equal gusto; her Malia is every bit as sympathetic as her Voodoo Lady is hilarious.

Of the other cast members, worth a special mention are Denny Delk, our most beloved Hoagie from *Day Of The Tentacle*, shedding off all signs of lethargy and transforming himself into Murray the Evil Skull ("ROLL through the gates of Hell!") with all the verve that a demonic limbless set of bones can muster; Neil Ross as Guybrush's old friend Wally, as wimpy and nerdy as a geeky cartographer training for a life of undead piracy can be; and my own favorite, the charming old guy Kay E. Kuter as Griswald Goodsoup, the owner of the Goodsoup hotel — again, I guess it's just me, but it is difficult not to see his performance as a parodic «answer» to his gloomy, doom-laden stunt in *Gabriel Knight: The Beast Within*, where he was spooking poor Grace Nakimura in all seriousness with the vague menace of werewolves. Here, too, he seems to be presiding over a congregation of dead bodies and ghostly apparitions — but this is *Monkey Island*, the only serious thing about which is the impressive budget they had to spend on all these stars of voice acting.

It is easy to see how the strength of this cast alone, back in 1997, made *The Curse Of Monkey Island* into *the* one single *Monkey Island* game to rule them all by definition. Who cares about the lack of originality, the recycled corny humor, the disappearance of dark themes, when all these wonderful actors finally make your favorite characters come to life like never before? And that was the way it seemed to be destined to stay... that is, until the remastered versions of the first two games came out in 2009-2010, bringing back the *exact same cast*: Armato, Boyd, Boen, Jones, Ross, almost everybody from the *Curse* cast brought back to work their magic on the old classics. Which they did — and whoops, overnight the fortunes of

Curse were reversed, what with Alexandra Boyd, for instance, given so many more chances to shine with the beautiful dialog in *Secret Of Monkey Island*, and with Earl Boen sounding so much more creepy and threatening in *LeChuck's Revenge*.

(For the record, I'm pretty sure that LeChuck's "'Twas no mere nightmare, Guybrush! Search your feelings, you know it to be true!" line in the final act of *Curse* was inserted there only as a special treat for Earl, to console him for not having been able to deliver it in its *proper* context at the end of *LeChuck's Revenge*, because it makes no sense whatsoever in the general context of *Curse*. Once Earl finally got to say it thirteen years later in its rightful context — the scene where Guybrush and LeChuck come together as brothers — one might just as well cut it out of *Curse* to avoid unnecessary superfluosness).

That said, if we still agree to make a mental effort and party like it's 1997 (I'm game), there is no question that the voice cast is the #1 attractive factor about the game (#2 being the graphics, and #3 being the ability to rewrite Shakespeare in a formally infinite number of ways). Whenever I'm playing it, the earnest and exciting work put in by all these people easily makes me forget about the lack of interesting ideas or general vision — in the same way, I suppose, as watching all the magnificent Shakespearean actors in the *Harry Potter* movies whisks away your attention from how bad the movies really are. Truly an A++ for the effort here.

Interface

In terms of game mechanics, *Curse* added relatively little to the LucasArts legacy, since its interface was borrowed almost completely from Tim Schafer's *Full Throttle*. It did, of course, mark a complete departure from the old *Monkey Island* interface — gone forever was the verb menu at the bottom of the screen, marking a complete and utter transition to the point-and-click mechanics. The action now fills up the entire screen, and you can click on specific hotspotted objects or people to open up a coin-shaped mini-menu, which lets you look, interact with inanimate objects, or talk to animated characters. (Yes, these are *all* of your options; in the mid-1990s, Sierra and LucasArts really went on a limb competing with each other as to who could come up with a more laconic interface on the largest number of their games). The same actions are also applicable to objects in your inventory, which you open in a separate window to mess around with.

Unfortunately, this does not eliminate the issue of pixel-hunting, which sometimes gets really annoying, especially with the artists' obsessive desire to clutter the screen with as much junk as possible (case in point — the hold of LeChuck's ship at the beginning of the game; it is not difficult to find what you *really* need in there, but if you wish to explore all the objects to see how many jokes have been attached to them, you will need to be exquisitely agile with the mouse). Actually, the worst cases of pixel hunting are on the mini-maps for Plunder and Blood Island: a few of the locations that you can click to explore are rather

inconspicuous, so be sure to navigate your cursor meticulously over all the map areas at the first opportunity, or else you might find yourself stupidly stuck just because you forgot to check where to possibly go.

The dialog system has remained largely unchanged, as some of the options on the tree remain mutually exclusive, prompting you to replay the game in order to squeeze out all the hilariousness, while others can be explored one after another (I do wish they had a system in place that let you separate the first group from the second, but I guess it's not *that* important, after all, since this is not an RPG and your choices hardly ever matter). Of note is the feature of *timed* dialog, which was actually already present in the older games, but was not as memorable because they did not have real sound — I am specifically talking of the above-mentioned pirate song, which is kind of badly written by itself, but can be cleverly interrupted at specific points if Guybrush wants to insert a rhyme (to play along) or a non-rhyme (to disrupt the song); even the music system is tailored in such a way that the song will change melodically depending on the exact moment where you perform your intervention. This is really nicely and smoothly done. But it's just at one point in the game.

I am not entirely sure about the Options menu in the original version; mine, run through SCUMMVM, only opens up the latter's menu, where you can tamper with sound volume and subtitles, but little else. If there was anything juicy out there, like a boss key or something, it is gone forever with the advent of modern PC architecture. Should that be important, though? It probably shouldn't.

As far as overall gameplay is concerned, the game seems to be running smoothly, even on the SCUMMVM emulator. You cannot die (well, actually, you CAN and WILL die, more than once, but death in *Monkey Island* has been effectively turned into as much of a source for hilariousness as everything else), you cannot (technically) get stuck, and you can, if you so desire, fall upon a whole variety of Easter Eggs, which, by 1997, the terminally bored LucasArts staff had begun including in droves. There are deeply hidden references to other *Monkey Island* games, *The Dig*, and, naturally, Star Wars (apparently there's even a way to get lightsaber sounds during Insult Sword Fighting, though I have not bothered to check it out last time I revisited the game). It's all nice to have — but, of course, none of it is enough to change anybody's general perspective on the game, let alone mine.

Verdict: *A pleasant facsimile of the REAL thing, good enough for those who need as much Guybrush Threepwood as they can handle.*

If ever I gave the impression that I *hated* this game or anything, now is the time to reverse it. I really enjoyed the game while actually playing it – the brilliant voice acting, the nice graphics, the tricky puzzles, the occasionally funny jokes kept me busy and entertained most of the time (except, probably, for the entire "Three Sheets To The Wind" act with its tedious recurrence of Insult Sword Fighting and equally tedious cannon mini-management game, much more fun in concept than in execution). It is mainly the bitter aftertaste that sucks – the feeling that your experience has been somehow empty, or, at least, bland and shallow. The same kind of experience that one probably gets when tricked into buying a false diamond instead of a real one, even though you *know* that most people won't be able to tell the difference anyway.



Monkey Island does indeed have a curse – its original vision was so good that not only LucasArts, but even the spiritual (and, partially, legal) inheritor of the studio, TellTale Games, felt obliged to return to it time and time again. Alas, sequels in video game franchises rarely work well if they do not follow that original vision – at best, like *Curse*, they can pass all the formalities and work for a while simply on the strength of their technical innovations. But time puts everything in its right place, and in the case of *Curse*, if there is a better example of table-turning in the video game industry somewhere, I have yet to see it. Those few modern gamers with a penchant for going back into the past will most likely want to check the games out chronologically – and unless they are bona fide retro nuts, they will probably pick the remastered first two games over the mute, pixelated, and poorly running originals. Only *then* will they arrive at *Curse*, and now that it has been stripped of its formal advantages (*worse* graphics, *less* interesting voice acting for some of the key characters), I fail to see how anybody could regard it as a truly worthy, 100% satisfactory sequel.

I might even commit the ultimate sin in the eyes of the loyal fan and state that there is no principal distinction in quality between *Curse* and the nearly-universally lambasted sequel, *Escape From Monkey Island* (other than the truly miserable 3D graphics of the latter): although they were both designed by different LucasArts employees, both distort the original Gilbert-

vision in more or less the same way, and both have a relatively similar ratio of fresh-to-rotten ideas. The difference, of course, is that while *Curse* pretended that it was taking its cues from the first two games (when in reality it wasn't), *Escape* did not even have to pretend that it closely followed the model of *Curse*. But as it turns out, differences between secondary and tertiary product are nowhere near as insufferable as those between secondary and primary...

Still, on the positive side, if you agree to lower your expectations and go along with the flow, LucasArts, TellTale Games, and Dominic Armato may have done a good job of letting Guybrush Threepwood fade away semi-gracefully rather than burn out in two short years, and if that is any consolation for the fans, so be it. And if they ever decide to remaster the game, I'll sure as hell be replaying it — hey, it's the least I can do to honor the memory of the late great Kay E. Kuter.