

Phantasmagoria

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

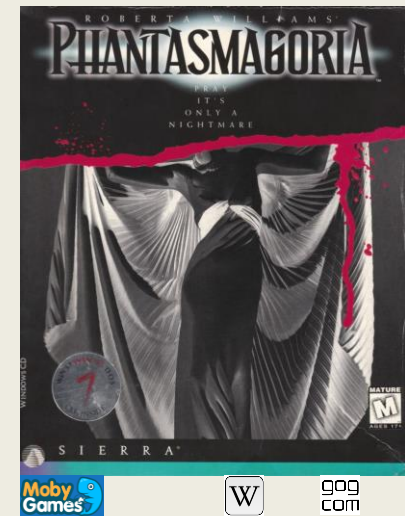
Designer(s): **Roberta Williams**

Part of series: **Phantasmagoria**

Release: August 24, 1995

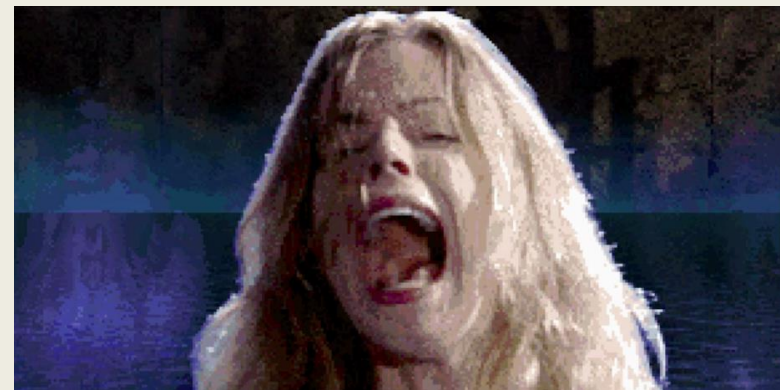
Main credits: Director: **Peter Maris**
Programmer: **Doug Oldfield**
Artist: **Andy Hoyos**
Music: **Jay Usher; Mark Seibert**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (6 parts, 320 mins.)



Basic Overview

Roberta Williams' *Phantasmagoria* was hardly the first FMV (full motion video) game to be released on the market — the format, in its classic form, had been activated at least three years earlier, with titles such as *Night Trap* and *The 7th Guest* — but it arguably remains the most famous, or, rather, the most infamous representative of this dead-end genre. This is in a big part due to the arch-heavy promotion arranged for the game by Ken Williams: as the legitimately next in a series of innovative projects led by his wife Roberta, *Phantasmagoria* received the VIP treatment from Sierra On-Line back when Sierra On-Line was at the height of its artistic, critical, and commercial fortunes. In 1993, *Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers* successfully advertised itself as the herald of a new age in computer gaming (if not in the art world in general); one year later, *King's Quest VII* showed the world that a computer game could be (almost) as beautiful as a Disney movie; and with *Phantasmagoria*, Sierra's plan was to demonstrate that a computer game could easily compete with a movie, *period*.



That the FMV format would be tested out on a horror game was pretty much predetermined — Roberta Williams had wanted to do a bona fide horror game for years (her *Laura Bow* series had tiny elements of horror throughout, but was still essentially

in the detective mystery genre), however, she felt that digital animation was an insufficient medium for a convincing horror experience and that only live actors could make the player truly empathize with whatever was going on. Now that graphic resolution, video editing software, and optical disk storage capacity were more or less up to par, she launched herself into the project with verve, without even realising all the innumerable technical difficulties that would still go along with it. It has been written plenty of times about how quickly Sierra ran out of budget, how chaotic and painful was the entire process of filming and editing the game sequences, and how, despite all odds, the game still managed to be profitable, ultimately becoming Sierra's best-selling title, though quite far from critically best-received. The very fact that even the respective Wikipedia article, put together from dozens of sources, remains one of the longest articles on a Sierra game, shows just how definitively *Phantasmagoria* has passed into legend: good or bad, it remains a one-of-a-kind watermark of human achievement in the sphere of merging together the digital game and the video movie media.

Contrary to the impression one might get from reading certain retrospective descriptions, initial reception of *Phantasmagoria* was not overtly negative — the whole thing radiated *different!* so starkly that even those critics who were, from the very start, offended by the silly plot, bad acting, lack of taste, and clumsy gameplay, had to admit that there was still something special about the game; and there were even those so taken by that something special that they did not even notice the silly plot, bad acting, etcetera. But as time went by and the FMV experience learned to overcome some of its original problems (e.g. in Sierra's own *Gabriel Knight: The Beast Within*), and then as more time went by and the FMV experience withered and died in the face of the 3D graphic revolution, the novelty wonder of *Phantasmagoria* quickly wore off, and the game eventually saw itself humiliatingly relegated to lists of «Worst Ever» titles, or, perhaps even worse, to the wobbly area of Campy Guilty Pleasure. At least in those early days, to play the game you had to extract it from its imposing *seven-CD* package (a record of sorts), one look at which already implied a certain reverence. But with the digital download epoch upon us, and in an era in which a 2Gb-weighing game is looked upon as a pitiful indie project, nothing remains of that reverence, and these days, people who still launch *Phantasmagoria*, or people who agree to kill some time to watch a YouTube playthrough, go into it expecting nothing but a bit of giggly, campy fun — and come out of it fully satisfied.

This is not quite right, in my opinion. One thing that *Phantasmagoria* was never intended to be, and one thing that it is definitely *not*, is «funny» (well, anything, including *King Lear* and *Schindler's List*, can be «funny» if you wire your brain in certain ways prior to the experience, but that really says more about yourself than these works). Stupid, unbelievable, clumsy, even insulting to one's intelligence — but on a gut level, the game actually works, and in this review, I shall try to show why it does. Many people writing their own reviews of *Phantasmagoria* see it necessary to confirm the «guilty pleasure» status, with

formulae such as «yes, of course it's an awful game for many reasons, *but...*». Well — correction: there are many *things* that are awful about *Phantasmagoria*, but even when all of them are put together, they still do not make it an awful game. As far as I'm concerned, even today, when played in the right state of mind, *Phantasmagoria* on the whole succeeds in its original and primary purpose; it is only when you let your mind overthink the issue and take charge over your emotions — not really a very good strategy for experiencing an art piece — that you begin to feel ashamed for enjoying it. And it is precisely this paradoxical situation — how could a game that is objectively «bad» on so many levels still get it «right» on the whole? — that makes *Phantasmagoria* a relatively unique title, if not in the entire history of video gaming, then at least in the history of Sierra On-Line, or maybe adventure gaming as a whole. So let us explore this a little more closely.

Content evaluation

Plotline

It would hardly be an exaggeration to state that Roberta Williams, a woman of exceptional stamina and audacity when it came to designing and producing video games, was never exactly what you'd call a «master storyteller». Her scenarios for *King's Quest* and *Laura Bow* were usually a melange of well-explored motives from fairy tales, myths, mystery stories, and various literary pulp, whose chief attraction was her ability to turn them into a variegated, but logically connected system of puzzles for us to solve. Whenever she paired up with a more imaginative partner, the improved results were immediately noticeable (as in *King's Quest VI*, bearing the writer's seal of Jane Jensen); however, for *Phantasmagoria* her sole writing partner was Andy Hoyos, a Sierra veteran who had previously worked exclusively on graphic art for the games and would never again be credited as «writer» for the studio — suspicious, no?



Hardly surprising, then, that the principal plot of *Phantasmagoria* will take approximately five seconds to be chopped up into a small bunch of bearded tropes by connoisseurs of the horror genre from its roots in medieval fantasy stories to the Gothic novel and more recent transformations in Hollywood movies all the way up to *The Shining* (there are so many direct parallels between Kubrick and this game, I was almost befuddled to find that Roberta had, after all, resisted the temptation to have the

heroine's mad husband chase her around with an axe, shouting *HERE'S DONNY!*). Man and wife move into a luxurious, abandoned, supposedly haunted mansion — wife inadvertently stumbles into a secret room and discovers a terrible secret — man is driven insane by the same evil spirit that formerly possessed the mansion's previous owner — wife has to save the world by driving the spirit back, at the cost of sacrificing the husband. You've heard / seen / read it all before, right?

None of this, within the context of an adventure game, is necessarily bad by itself. However, compared to all of her previous games, Roberta commits precisely *one* fatal mistake — almost a *crime*, in fact, that one single thing which doomed the game from the start. Having designed a story that is essentially «pre-modern» in nature, a tale that owes its motivations, details, and morals more to the tales of Charles Perrault and the novels of Ann Radcliffe than to Stephen King or Wes Craven, she decided to set the action in the present time, rather than a fictionalized version of the 17th or 18th century, where it so very obviously belonged. I can only hope that she did this not because she actually thought «hey, this could work» (most of the time, Roberta comes across as a very intelligent and perceptive person), but rather because it would have been much more difficult and expensive to model a pre-Industrial Age setting for an FMV production.

Even so, to understand in this situation is easier than to forgive. At the very start of the game, we are supposed to suspend disbelief at the idea that somewhere on a small island off the coast of good old New England, a practicing magician in the late 19th century had built himself a huge Gothic mansion (not forgetting a separate family crypt linked to the house by a complex system of vaulted underground passages!); that upon his passing, the mansion had remained unoccupied for almost 100 years in almost exactly the same state that his master had left it in (though, apparently, somebody did take good care of the dusting and took the time to install modern infrastructure); and that, somehow, a couple consisting of an ambitious photographer and his writer wife, who had just published her first bestseller, could — and *would* — afford to move into this mansion, because there is nothing a successful young writer dreams of more than to move into a huge Gothic residence in the middle of nowhere in order to find peace, quiet, and inspiration for her new novel.

This initial premise is already so delirious (in my own gaming experience, the only thing that rivals it in whackiness is the universe of *Resident Evil*) that even if some of these things were eventually to be justified within the game, it would be much too late. It is perhaps best that they are not, and neither are all the gaping plot holes, inconsistencies, and illogical actions of the game's protagonists that I won't even bother listing, because all of them have been laughed off dozens, if not hundreds, of times in various accounts of the game. At times, it feels as if, perhaps, Roberta was intentionally *mocking* her audience — I mean, for God's sake, the name of the magician who used to own the mansion is (drumroll!) *Zoltan Carnovasch*, which, admittedly, is a little better than something like "Ferdinand Al-Rasputin", but not by much. I suppose that "Zoltan" implies a

Hungarian origin for our bad guy, but "Carnovasch" is an impassable impediment — my best guess is the Greek surname *Karnavas*, slightly misspelt and Germanized, ultimately chosen for proximity to the word *carnival*. Of course, all bad guys ultimately immigrate to the coast of New England from an amalgamated Eastern Europe, the land of Dracula, Slobodan Milošević, and crazyass orthographies. But even most of these guys usually think twice before introducing themselves as *Zoltan Carnovasch* to the stupefied authorities on Staten Island.

The game's protagonist, who herself goes by the no-slouch name of Adrienne Delaney, through pretty much *all* of the game behaves exactly the way we'd expect a heroine of an old-fashioned Gothic novel to behave — amazed, confused, terrified, but brave and determined enough to go it alone, since she is probably stranded in some lonely castle from which there is no escape anyway. Except that for Adrienne, all roads are open: you can even visit the nearby cute little town of «Nipawomsett» (is that supposed to sound Algonquian?), where some of the locals will be happy to share their concerns about the Carnovasch Estate with our heroine, but that will be pretty much it, since, apparently, Nipawomsett has long since defunded its police and the only local protection is offered by vicious guard dogs. And Adrienne has a cat.

As far as the basic laws of organizing a bona fide horror story are concerned, the game evolves reliably and predictably. Action is split into seven chapters (each corresponding to its own CD), with each next chapter gradually gaining in intensity. First comes exposition and exploration, with only faint premonitions of danger. At the end of Act 1, the jack-in-the-box comes loose, and you begin to observe the personality changes in Adrienne's husband, Don, who gradually mutates into an asshole, then a psychopath, then a rapist and alcoholic, and finally a crazy cackling murderer. At the same time, Adrienne gradually opens up new and new hitherto hidden areas in the mansion, learning about Zoltan's history — apparently, the man really was a 19th century Bluebeard, killing off all his wives before they even had a chance to record a proper breakup album. Finally, just as she learns of a proper way to send the evil spirit possessing her husband back to Hell, the husband decides to follow in the footsteps of Carno... and at this point, the game turns into something completely else.

I realize that few things in the universe could have been able to elevate such a plot to any sort of respectable position. But even in such a dire situation, *something* could be done — at the very least, by means of quality dialog that could patch up some of the most blatant holes and illogical phenomena, as well as make the characters into approximate equivalents of real human beings. Unfortunately, most of the time the dialog in the game feels as if they'd hired a 10-year old with a total deficit of social skills and zero book reading experience. A minor example from a sequence in which Adrienne, angry about finding some locked doors in the house, confronts her realtor in Nipawomsett:

Adrienne: Are you sure you gave my husband all the keys to the Carnovasch Estate? There seem to be some locked doors.

Realtor: I gave him all I had. But if you don't believe me, why don't you just check for yourself?

Adrienne: Well, I think I will. (*Checks the files, finds a large key in one of them.*) Ah-ha! Carnovasch Estate. All the keys are... what's this?

Realtor (*examines the key attentively*): It's a very large key.

Adrienne: (*Stares with condescension*).

Realtor (*throwing up his hands*): So sue me!

Adrienne: (*Eats, shoots, and leaves*).

This is certainly not a principal sequence or anything, but I quoted it specifically to illustrate the, uh, «magic realism» of the characters' behavior in the game. And this is *before* we even get around to spending time with two of its most obnoxious heroes — the clairvoyant homeless lady and her retarded overgrown son, both of whom Adrienne encounters on the premises of the estate and immediately proceeds to hire as house help because, honestly, who *wouldn't* hire a couple of batshit crazy homeless dudes who just happened to spend the night in your barn? Not only is it progressive, but now, in the immortal words of Allen Toussaint, you also get your fortune told for free. Thrown into the game as comic relief, Violet and Cyrus goof around for a while, spoiling the reputation of homeless people all over the globe, before eventually meeting their fate at the hands of a completely deranged Don later in the game (provided you take the extended ending and run around long enough to actually discover both of their corpses).

«Retro-dialog» between Carno, his wives, and their lovers, mostly shown to Adrienne in psychedelic visions through various mirrors in the houses, is even cornier, coming in short, trite, children's primer phrases ("Zoltan! I love only you, you must believe me!" – "I want to believe you, grumble grumble") that would have horrified Victorian pulp writers. It is, in fact, so bad that I have a hard time believing all of this was not intentional — that Roberta and Andy did not specifically exclude all marks of literary prowess from their characters' speeches, so that the player would only focus on the atmospheric dynamics of the game, in the same way that, for instance, Robert Bresson famously prohibited all of his actors from «acting», striving to strip his movies of the faintest signs of artificial exaggeration. But no, Roberta Williams is not Robert Bresson, and I do not have any justification to suspect some sort of extra artistic «anti-depth» in her script.

Indeed, were *Phantasmagoria* to be judged on the strength of its story and dialog alone, it would unquestionably have to be rated as the worst Sierra On-Line game of all time, and a serious contender for the Top 10 Worst Plot-Based Games ever made. Its saving grace is, however, that its plot as such does not matter — or, rather, it only matters inasmuch as it is a clumsy, grotesquely deformed skeleton upon whose bones Roberta paints her disturbing, unsettling spectacle. The comforting thing about it is that the game does a pretty good job of automatically shutting down your brain at all the right moments, rather than waiting for you to take the initiative yourself.

Puzzles

In her early years, Roberta Williams was a fairly solid puzzle designer — the challenges she set out before the player could hardly qualify as «uniquely brilliant», but *King's Quest* and *Laura Bow* always delivered the goods. With *Phantasmagoria*, it is clear that Roberta's priorities had undergone a serious shift. First and foremost, this game was supposed to hit you in the feels — and getting hit in the feels, real hard, does not go along all that well with putting pressure on your brain cells. One minute you're witnessing a gruesome vision of a uniquely horrific murder, and then the next moment you have to go and figure out the correct procedure for opening a locked door? sounds pretty anti-climactic, doesn't it?



Even more importantly, the FMV format brought some obvious limitations to the classic procedure of point-and-click gaming. According to Roberta's plan, each and every action taken by the player had to be reflected cinematically — picking up stuff, using stuff on stuff, even *unsuccessfully* using stuff on stuff. Before FMV, you could very easily animate tons of extra actions, including those that did not lead to any useful results; at the very least, you could slap on a text window stating "no, you cannot insert the mayonnaise sandwich into the electric socket, and you'd be sorry if you could" and get away with that. But now that a new, fully cinematic age of adventure gaming was supposed to be dawning upon us, it turned out that (a) it would take *too* much pressure on the actors and the filming team to take multiple blue-screen takes of all this extra action, and (b) it would have probably taken not seven, but seventy-seven CDs to carry it all — and the video sequences already had to be horrendously compressed as they were.

Later on, Jane Jensen, who faced the exact same problem for *Gabriel Knight: The Beast Within*, would find a compromising way to work around it — in her game, many onscreen hotspots could at least be clicked on just to get a verbal description or reaction from the lead character, without any additional cinematography involved. But apparently, Roberta would not have it. In *Phantasmagoria*, something actually happens each and every time you click on a hotspot — even if it is just to look upon a portrait hanging on the wall, Adrienne will be shown walking up to it and staring at the picture. If you click on a sofa, the heroine will walk up to it, slowly set her butt on its surface, fidget around for 5-6 seconds, then just as slowly stand up and

walk away — accomplishing absolutely nothing, but giving you, the player, a tiny illusion of absolute control over the blasted environment. This is one feature of the game that probably looked overwhelming at the time, but now just looks stupid. Who wants to kill 20 seconds of one's precious life watching an FMV sprite sit down on a sofa and stand up from it? (Unless, of course, you find something Zen-like about the whole thing). There are dozens of such moments all over the game — which is even more ridiculous considering they could have spent this part of the budget on something much more meaningful.

Like designing an actual puzzle, for a change. The biggest difficulty you are going to encounter in this game is finding all the right hotspots and direction arrows, desperately waving your talisman-shaped cursor around the screen to see it change from piss-yellow to blood-red. Once you know where all the goodies are located, grabbing stuff and using it on other stuff is trivial work. Pick up a tool to open a trapdoor. Grab hold of a soup bone to distract an impeding animal. Use the old newspaper-on-the-floor trick to get a much needed key. (I'm listing all this spoiler stuff just because it is all but impossible to «spoil» any brainy challenge in this game, since there are next to none). And if all of that still somehow happens to be challenging for you, cheer up — there is a huge friendly red skull at the bottom of the screen, clicking on which will always result in its telling you, in an appropriately doom-laden voice, what exactly you should be doing next. I wish I had me a skull like that at home.

That said, in all honesty, the chief goal of *Phantasmagoria* is not to just make you beat the game, but to provide you with the Complete Phantasmagoric Experience — and that, admittedly, is just a tad harder. A lot of the sequences, including some of the most chillingly famous, are optional: as time goes by, things change about the Carnovasch Mansion, and in order to catch them all, you have to explore all of its locations over and over again, which is tricky, because some actions will automatically result in the current chapter being completed, and some or all of its optional events gone for good. And since, in an almost unique turn of events for Sierra, *Phantasmagoria* does not feature a point system, you won't even have a vague idea of how much juicy action you might have missed upon completing the game. And no friendly red skull is going to give you any advice on *this* part, which is too damn bad, since it is actually the best part of them all.

As far as actual user-friendly design is concerned, though, I don't think the game has any significant flaws. Maybe just one: at one point in the game, in order to achieve progress you have to closely examine one of your picked-up objects in order to turn it into something different. That can actually be a stumble, since the «Examine object» option in the menu is not immediately presented as something particularly useful (you just get a nice little 3D close-up of the gadget), and this is the only point in the game when you are supposed to find out that it has a vital practical application as well. (I suppose you can be made aware of this if you consent to carefully reading the manual before playing, but who in the world reads game manuals? this is a frickin' adventure game, not an IKEA challenge!)

In the Adventure Game Logic department, the game does not commit too many crimes — most of the crimes lay with the actual plot, rather than with player-dependent ways to advance it — although it does look as if every once in a while, puzzles look the way they do simply because somebody did not have the time, money, and energy to make them look a bit more believable or challenging. For instance, at one point you need to repair a telescope by inserting a missing lens — which you should probably be able to buy in some store in Nipawomsett or at least uncover in some dark corner of some dark attic in the house; in reality, the missing lens will be found sparkling at your feet on the sandy beach, approximately 20 or so meters away from the telescope itself, and all you have to do is pick it up and use it on the telescope. Thus, this is essentially a non-puzzle that (a) adds virtually nothing to the gaming experience and (b) makes no sense from a realistic point of view. Why is it there at all? Beats me. Maybe Roberta Williams has a secret thing for girls inserting shiny objects in little holes. (Sorry).

At the very least, for the first six chapters in the game you set your own pace for all this pseudo-puzzle solving. Things change drastically with the last chapter, when you are thrown into a race against time and forced to take action quickly and decisively, or face the gory (*very* gory) consequences. This sequence — a two-part chase through both formerly explored and completely new parts of the Estate — has frequently been lauded as the high point of the game, and while this extra praise sells the rest of the experience a little short, I do have to admit that it's pretty damn well designed. You shall probably die a lot, but the game immediately reverts to the last cut-off point when you do; and although the sequence as such is not long, they really went out of their way to include a lot of filmed dead-ends, often trapping you into thinking that you are doing something right when in reality you are not. The tension really helps out here, even if the actual puzzles remain just as simplistic as they were. Which, in turn, brings us to the most important, if not the *only* important, selling point of the game: THE FEELS.

Atmosphere

When it comes to B-movie level experience, the important thing is, of course, not whether the plot makes any sense or if the script writers managed to come up with some truly original and unpredictable ideas; the only thing that matters is whether the movie fails or succeeds at capturing your attention and making you care about what is going on. (In a way, you could actually argue that this is not that much different for A-level movies as well, or *any* work of art in general). And if certain things are done just right — the acting, the camera work, the editing, the little individual touches — it is, at the very least, theoretically possible to make one care even about a character who goes by the name of Zoltan Carnovasch. *Theoretically*.

If *Phantasmagoria* were an actual movie, I seriously doubt that it would have ever attained that level of quality. But Roberta Williams was not making a movie; she was fleshing out a chunk of virtual reality, where player involvement and agency take

the place of certain cinematographic aspects, and this particular relationship between screen and conscience was handled by her just right — at least, I know for sure that it *can* work right, since it legitimately worked on me.

The main character of *Phantasmagoria* is not really Adrienne Delaney, empathizing with whom is pretty much impossible due to the inane script and generally bland acting (on which see below). Nor is it the ominous Mr. Carno, who makes himself visible every once in a while but is given no time at all to demonstrate any character development. The main character is, of course, the Mansion itself — a large, twisted, opulent, and fairly unpredictable entity which, fairly quickly, begins to shift and transform before your very eyes, to the point that eventually you might get a little pang of fear before checking into a room that you have only just visited in the previous chapter.



At least at the very outset, with things still relatively normal, you have Don, the photographer husband, working his ass off in the extra lavatory which he plans to turn into a dark room, and you can always run to him for company and comfort. By the beginning of the second chapter, Don has locked himself inside the dark room for good, and you are left to rummage around the place all by yourself — a lonesome and confused presence inside a huge and mysterious house which seems to have a life, and an evil agenda, of its own. Everything is rigged to that effect: the backdrops, the lighting, the creepy music accompanying you throughout, the ghostly ambient sounds. Each time I needed or wanted to emerge from the claustrophobic confines of the Mansion into the open air, I remember inadvertently making a small sigh of relief — and note, no zombies! It is not the easiest thing in the world to get a classic *Resident Evil* vibe going with actual evil only being implied, rather than witnessed, most of the time, but Roberta and her directors did a good job.

Looking at all these developments in their general cultural context is not particularly interesting. Echoes in the hall, visions in mirrors, a disappearing necklace, a grim mechanical fortune-telling automaton, a movie projector or a gramophone record starting up on its own — we all know that from countless horror art pieces. What is interesting is that some of these, at least, can make you jump, and others *will* want you to rush out of that mansion, get in your car, and drive straight out to the small and peaceful village of Nipawomsett, so as to soothe your nerves a bit in the local friendly general goods store, whose owner is

chilling out to the instrumental sounds of 'Cell Block Love' from *Leisure Suit Larry VI* (one of the few self-referential Easter Eggs in the game). Unfortunately, given how little there is to do in the town, and how unresponsive the local population is, you *will* have to go back sooner rather than later.

The game arguably reaches its atmospheric peak in Chapter Five, the one and only time when action switches from daytime to nighttime — at that point, even being outside brings no relief whatsoever, and the whole place seems besieged with spooky nightmares to destroy your sleep process on that particular night. This is when the mirrors, scattered around the house, lock into Bluebeard mode and begin showing you the juicy, gory, and, might I say, fairly inventive (for once) ways in which the nice owner of the house used to murder his wives — the very bits that triggered most of the controversy around the game, leading it to be banned and castigated around the globe. Are these sequences «tasteless», just a gratuitous show of violence to titillate the darker brain areas of the game's (predominantly male, as usual) audience? That is certainly a possible way of looking at it. But a more natural way, in my opinion, is to see them simply as the culmination of a slowly and efficiently increased feeling of existential dread, which had started accumulating already at the beginning of the first chapter. You can play the hardened nihilist and laugh these scenes off the same way we laugh off a *Mortal Kombat* fatality, but even then, deep inside you will know you are most likely doing this just to shake off that feeling of dread. These sequences are not there for laughs — and certainly not for the faint of heart and/or stomach, either.

Then, at the beginning of Chapter Four, there is the equally infamous «rape scene», another source of major controversy BECAUSE RAPE RAPE RAPE — though, technically, the scene begins as a fairly innocent and consensual lovemaking scene between Adrienne and Don, in which the latter is seemingly trying to «atone» for his bad behavior in the previous chapters, before becoming re-possessed by his demon and turning to much more rough action. Poorly acted as it is, I think that the scene tickled people's nerves not so much because of the forceful action itself, but largely because it was *you*, the player, who was being forced on the screen. Like it or not, by the end of the third chapter you and Adrienne Delaney, to a certain degree, have become one, and, let's be honest, who really wants to be forcefully penetrated in one's bathroom by an ugly-looking dude with a ponytail, so busy making retarded demonic faces that he even forgets to properly pull down his boxers?... okay, sorry, I think I'm making this feel less horrific than it should. In reality, the event does mark a turning point in the game, after which the dread begins to accumulate at an accelerated pace, rarely letting go until the explosive finale.

Not even the ill-fated comic relief, coming in the form of such poorly conceived characters as the cartoonishly sleazy realtor in Nipawomsett and the disastrous duo of Violet and Cyrus, can spoil the mood. I distinctly remember, for instance, actually being relieved upon visiting Violet's stupid, cringey «seance» in Chapter Five, simply because it felt like a relatively safe space,

in the company of dorky, but much needed friends, where you could shake off the dreariness of the nighttime Estate. The very fact that having company — *any* company — in this place gives you a nice and warm feeling is a good sign that Roberta and Co. must have been doing *something* right.

Naturally, when it comes down to the frenzied chase scenes of the last chapter, you won't have much time to spend on feeling claustrophobic and uncomfortable. This is a perfect time to panic, given that no matter where you are, two or three seconds spent in confusion doing nothing will imminently lead to capture and death — and while, once again, it is extremely easy to laugh off Adrienne's death sequences when you're on the outside looking in, it is quite a different matter when *you* yourself are Adrienne, and have been so for quite a period of time. The feeling of a necessity to escape at all cost, to take improvised, quick, and risky action, to aggressively defend your life against your own partner — all of this is actually quite real, and in the heat of the matter you shall hardly have any time to seriously evaluate just how unrealistic is Adrienne's blue-screen posturing in this context, or how corny Mad Don's behavior is, or how they were not able, after all, to realistically merge their computer-drawn Demon with the filmed Adrienne in a single shot.

At the very end of the game, when in its final shots we see Adrienne walking away from the mansion in a clearly catatonic state of mind, we finally get to become completely and utterly one with the character — simply because that final act, when you play it for the first time, is bound to leave you emotionally exhausted. Again, would it have worked as a movie? For 1995, I cannot really see it. But as a part of *your* own experience? I still got much the same vibes when replaying the game recently, even if nothing about it any longer came to me as a surprise, and the compressed old video looked abysmal when played in full screen mode. Granted, this is all due far more to the technical handling of the game than its script — which means that this is a good moment to switch our attention to those trusty «circumstantial» aspects which save it from ruin.

Technical features

Graphics

Phantasmagoria was filmed in its entirety on the premises of Sierra's own brand new film studio in Oakhurst; Roberta and producer Mark Siebert were responsible for the cast, while little-known B-movie director Peter Maris took charge of the action. Since most of it was filmed against a blue screen, this meant that actual backdrops still had to be rendered; this was the responsibility of Andy Hoyos, and he did a pretty nifty job. There is no freedom of movement to speak of — on each screen, Adrienne and the NPCs can only move in strictly determined and highly limited patterns, random wandering around is simply

impossible for technical reasons — but within those limits that are actually possible, the integration of live actors and painted backgrounds is... well, obviously not *seamless*, but *tolerable* even today (and it must have looked pretty amazing back in 1995; I myself did not pick the game up until about six-seven years later, by which point FMV was already dead and buried).

The Mansion itself represents a rather odd combination of styles — grotesque, Baba Yaga-ish gothic on the exterior, opulent Louis XIV-fashion on the inside (particularly the grand hall and the bedrooms on the



second floor), with the Gothic elements pushed out to the periphery (e.g. the family crypt, where Carno apparently willed for himself and his wives to be buried in medieval king style). On the whole, it's fairly close to the parameters of the House of Usher as depicted in Roger Corman's classic movie, but rendered in much more detail, since you have the ability to explore the entirety of the building. Meanwhile, the outside territory largely looks like some weird desert island, with oddly shaped trees lining the territory — ironically, not unlike the evil man-hating forest in Roberta's *King's Quest IV*, though these ones are at least superficially harmless. Another thing that brings back to mind Roberta's early masterpiece is the day-to-night contrast, which makes the craggy trees even spookier and the claustrophobic feel of the Mansion even denser.

Integration of live acting with CGI effects is... okay, I guess. They succeed in making Adrienne's infamous death scenes look not just disgusting, but even somewhat realistic (at least if you do not insist on rewatching them in slow motion to understand the mechanics), and the final confrontation with the Demon seems more imposing to me than, say, Gabriel Knight's face-to-face confrontation with the Werewolf in *The Beast Within* — largely because they avoid putting the Demon and Adrienne in the same frame and thus make your brain accommodate each image on its own terms. Overall, if not for the clearly visible ugly contour lines separating the blue-screened actors from the handdrawn backdrops, I might be able to call the game an early technological marvel, but, unfortunately, it does carry the specific stamp of its time.

And now it is time to say a few words about one of the most questionable aspects of the game — the *acting*. It is usually stated as a fairly inarguable point that the acting in the game is atrocious, but the reality, I think, is a little more complicated than that. It is true that, in their attempt to carry out the dream of integrating cinema and videogaming as fully as possible, the

Sierra people were unable to enlist any serious acting talent — in a way, this is a step down even from the level of *Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers*, but then (a) in *Gabriel Knight*, actors only had to contribute their voices, running fairly small reputational risks, and (b) *Gabriel Knight* had a good script: I'm fairly sure that Roberta and Mark Seibert could not even begin to entertain the idea to lure in anybody big with this kind of drivel. They did, however, enlist professionals — Peter Maris, who directed the filming, had been in the business since the 1970s, and all the actors were actual actors (at the time, at least: I'm pretty sure most of them have long since shifted to other jobs).

Relatively little of the acting is what I'd openly call *bad*, or, at least, not everything that is bad about it is specifically due to the actors themselves. Too often, the poor guys simply fell victim to the deficiencies of the script (*you* try saying "Fine, I'll go to the store and get you your goddamn drain cleaner!" with a straight face), or to the uncomfortable conditions of working against a blue screen; I seriously doubt that if they'd gotten Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise to play the principal roles, this would have made the game an equivalent of *Eyes Wide Shut*. There are occasional moments here and there showing that both Victoria Morsell, who plays Adrienne, and David Homb, playing Don, can be convincing, but there are also way too moments showing Victoria / Adrienne rather at a loss about what to do, and David / Don has a serious tendency to overact (particularly when getting into his "mad Don" image — oh my God, that laughter...).

Unfortunately, the only *truly* serious acting talent that they got, the British classical actor Douglas Seale, gets exactly one scene in the entire game — playing Carno's adopted son Malcolm, now over 100 years of age, who fills in the last pieces of information for Adrienne and gives her the recipe for putting the Demon back in his place. They even accomodated him with *slightly* less cringey dialog than usual, making his appearance in the penultimate chapter into a high point for the game. (Alas, Seale passed away in 1999, only living up to 86 years in the real, non-demonic world). Where would great videogames be in this world, really, without bona fide Shakesperian actors moving to Hollywood and spending the last parts of their lives acting in trashy movies?..

Alas, on the other side of the spectrum you shall find the mysterious and horrendous V. Joy Lee, playing the role of Harriet, the clairvoyant hobo in the red garden gnome cap. I have not been able to locate any additional info on her (other than that she also had a bit part to play in *Phantasmagoria II*) — she does not have any other acting credits listed on IMDB, meaning that she either came from some seedy theater circuit or, as a rare exception, was picked from non-professionals. (Heck, for all I know she could have been an *actual* hobo, picked off the street for authenticity's sake). Now *that* is bad acting with a flair, the proverbial kind that should be used for teaching materials. Mind you, it is perfectly possible that V. Joy Lee, whoever she is, saw things more clearly than anybody else on the team (she did play a clairvoyant, after all) and was reveling in the corny

dialog and overacting like mad precisely *because* she, unlike the other actors, regarded the whole thing as a campy, corny, comedic enterprise from the start, refusing to take it seriously. Unfortunately, such a scenario would probably be too good to be true. Anyway, regardless of what it was really like, V. Joy Lee is the living banner of all those who are unable to see *Phantasmagoria* as anything other than a platter of first-rate cheese.

Too many of the actors involved in the game are simply impossible to comment upon because their parts are so tiny — all of Carno's wives, for instance, who are there only for a few seconds to get gruesomely murdered. They put on as good a show as possible for those few seconds, but it is hard to rate an actress if all she does is scream (Leonora) or gurgle with a funnel inside her throat (Regina). Of course, the shortness of these scenes was largely dictated by technical limitations: even seven CDs could only hold *that* much video, and even that had to be severely compressed. (Ken Williams, in his autobiography, lamented that the original high quality footage had probably not survived in the archives — otherwise, it might have been possible to produce a remastered, or even expanded, version of the game).

The biggest loss is probably a certain amount of scenes that Roberta was planning to include at the beginning of the game, featuring Adrienne and Don together in the pre-transformation period. Indeed, we get to see very little of the loving husband and wife interaction — other than a tiny lovemaking scene in the intro (the one where they originally planned to show some nudity, but ended up with just a bit of sideboob) and a morning conversation at the kitchen table, Don spends the first day getting busy in the dark room, and then it's already too late. This way, we do not get to care much about his character — and are forced to treat him as just a corny, cackling villain. It could have gone much better than that.

Still, when all is said and done, I reiterate that acting (or lack thereof) is hardly the worst problem in this game. With a solid script, all those guys might have been able to pull their weight (all except V. Joy Lee — but I suppose that a truly solid script would simply leave no place for her character anyway).

Sound

One aspect of the game that genuinely deserves an A+ is its soundtrack, credited to Sierra veteran Mark Seibert (who also produced the game) and newcomer Jay Usher. The strategy here for the main bulk of the game was to leave the outdoor sequences largely music-less, adorned with nothing but quietly soothing nature sounds; however, as soon as you set foot inside the Mansion, all sorts of soft, mechanical, creepy music-box-style melodies begin to emerge, relentlessly working an unnerving effect on your conscience. Isolated keyboards, strings, bits of bassoons, percussion, chimes, snippets of ominous melodies, all working toward creating a tense, paranoid atmosphere where you constantly expect something to jump you out

of some dark corner. This sonic ambience is not as pronouncedly «deep and dark» as the one in *Phantasmagoria 2*, for instance, with the choice of instruments and tones more reflective of Roberta's *King's Quest* style — more fantasy fairy-tale-ish than the cyberpunk / sci-fi style of the next game in the series; but it somehow manages to be nearly as disturbing.

Since most of the game is centered around Adrienne exploring the Mansion, it is natural that this Mansion Ambience is the one piece of sonic tapestry that is going to stick around in your memory for the longest time — but, admittedly, there are not that many fleshed-out



musical themes outside of it. In fact, the *only* fleshed-out musical composition outside of it (various repercussions of which are constantly heard in cutscenes) is the mini-oratorio, 'Consumite Furore', that Mark Seibert wrote for the game, replete with a solemn Latin libretto and a neo-Gregorian chant recorded by a 135-voice choir (!). It sounds predictably corny by itself, especially in those spots where they begin marking the rhythm with the early 1990s style of gated drums, but in the context of the game, especially when accompanying the scenes with the Demon at the end, it is quite effective when it comes to pumping your nervous system with dread-scented adrenaline.

A special mention must be made of the stock sound effects in the game, and I certainly do not mean the creaking of chains, chirping of birds, or squeaking of doors — rather the bubbling, gurgling sounds of bloody entrails pushed through a funnel into the throat of one of Carno's wives, or the slurpy, squishy sounds of Adrienne's face mashed into pulp by the surprisingly beefy arms of the allegedly immaterial Demon. Some of those are almost delightfully disgusting, contributing even more than the visuals to making you sick in the stomach — the visuals, with their lo-fi quality and pitiful resolution, have become dated a long time ago, but the sounds are immortal. (That said, trying to hit Don in the head with a hammer does lead to the suspicion that the guy was really the Tin Man in disguise all along).

In short, I would say that the game's sonic ambience is a good pretext all by itself to play the game — given how easy all of its puzzles are, you might just as well close your eyes and simply enjoy its aural spirit, if you are annoyed by the poor quality of the graphics and the bad acting.

Interface

For all of its admirable and dubious innovations, one thing that remained almost surprisingly unchanged from the standard introduced with *King's Quest VII* in 1994 is the gameplay mechanics. Well, maybe not so surprisingly, considering that both games were supervised by Roberta at the same time and that of all the people at Sierra, she had to follow her own design rules, after all. Just like *King's Quest VII*, *Phantasmagoria* is divided into separate chapters — in this case, each separate chapter corresponding to the contents of a separate CD — and when you start a new game, you can actually begin playing from the start of any of these chapters (though you will have formally missed on all the optionally accessible content of the previous ones, e.g. if you could optionally get some object in Chapter 5, but begin playing at Chapter 6, you won't have that object in your inventory when you start the game up). You also cannot have multiple saves in a single playthrough — instead, there is a floating bookmark which marks your progress, which is just as annoying as it was in *King's Quest VII*.

The point-and-click interface remains utterly minimalistic: you use the exact same cursor shape to talk to people, look at objects that can be looked upon, and pick up / operate upon objects that can be interacted with. The bottom of the screen is wasted on a huge inventory window (which could have just as easily be produced in a pop-up format), the already mentioned red skull providing occasional hints (*EXPLORATION IS KEY!*), and an eye icon which lets you magnify your inventory objects, juggle them around in nice early 3D fashion, and once — *only* once, which is fairly frustrating — manipulate them in order to achieve necessary progress.

In terms of gameplay mechanics, the biggest deficiency of *Phantasmagoria* — of all FMV adventure games, in fact — is the inability to freely move your character across the screen. With a little extra work, they might have achieved this goal, but apparently, freedom of movement was seen as a superfluous feature, because, let's face it, what *do* you need it for? In classic animated games, you needed it to walk closer to the person or object you needed to interact with (otherwise, you'd always get the proverbial "You're not close enough" response), but if you could simply mouse-click the person or object in question, with the game automatically setting up a rigid beeline trajectory for your character, why would you even need to be able to move your character into some random direction, without a specific purpose?

Well, it actually turns out that the lack of free movement hurts one major purpose of the game — *immersion*. For me at least, it is more difficult to identify with the character I am playing if I am constantly railroaded into a limited set of predetermined trajectories; it feels like a conscious step back from the digitally animated stage of such video games, and one more element of turning the «game» experience into an «interactive movie» experience. Additionally, it actually makes it more difficult to

explore the territory, because this is now done not by moving your character to various areas of the screen, but by waving your cursor around it, waiting for it to turn into a direction arrow at some point — and some of these transition points are actually quite tricky, even undetectable by the naked eye.

In terms of non-standard «interesting» actions, *Phantasmagoria* is surprisingly sparse: clicking on objects and putting things on top of other things is pretty much the only thing you can do in the game. No tile puzzles, no secret combinations, no mini-games, no deciphering secret codes, not even an extra lesson of Latin for poor Adrienne. The closest you come to anything «special» are the timed sequences in the last chapter, where Williams and Seibert worked hard to put you into the real shoes of a victim running away from a maniac — although, given just how many times most people end up dying in that chapter, I am not sure that they achieved a perfect result. (Too many dead ends, for one thing — though, admittedly, it is possible to make your way out of some of these dead ends if you react quickly enough with the right tool).

Overall, *Phantasmagoria* demonstrates very well most of the frustrating limitations of the FMV format; but due to the very nature of the game, it could be argued that some of these actually work toward its goals — making you feel shut-in, helpless, and painfully limited in options against an impending evil.

Verdict: *A unique legacy piece from a specific time in history which can still work its magic on you — if you let it.*

To put it as simple as possible, I like *Phantasmagoria*. I do not «love» *Phantasmagoria*, but I would never call it a failure, or join the side of those who insist that the game is only good for a cheesy laugh, and has always been that way from the very start. As I have already stated many times, it would never work as literature, it would be a total disaster as a movie, but it *can* achieve its purpose — stir up, if not mess up, your emotional



constitution — if you clear your mind from idiotic preconceptions before launching the game. (For some reason, I am in this respect reminded of my first experience watching Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*: expecting a «comedy», as the young and dumb me was told by every single source in existence, I sat down probably expecting to see something along the lines of *Pink*

Panther, and ended up puzzled, confused, and disappointed. Words can be dangerous that way).

Of course, *Phantasmagoria* commits many errors, not all of which may be excused by the pioneering and experimental nature of the game and some of which ascend to the level of artistic crime (such as the amateurish mix-up of medieval and modern aesthetics, for instance). But when the game is at its best — which, strange enough, happens more frequently when you are walking alone through the Mansion, rather than interacting with somebody in a cutscene — it is scary, or, at least, unsettling (which is actually better than «scary»). As a passively perceived stab at an artistic statement, it does not tap into the darker sides of human nature in any sort of original way; but it succeeds — okay, it *can* succeed — at taking you by the hand and making you cross over the other side of that looking glass to immerse you in these dark sides in a way in which you have never been immersed before.

Not in 1995, at least. Since then, survival horror has become such a common genre, done in such fine ways, that it would be hard to imagine anybody who'd take *Phantasmagoria* over *Resident Evil* or *Silent Hill*. But what with it being an adventure game, after all, rather than a horror-themed shooter, *Phantasmagoria* still remains a one-of-a-kind experience for those of us who like to take that suspense at a slow, leisurely pace, unriddled with zombies or other monsters. Replaying it recently for the purpose of writing this review, I actually admired it even more than I did before — just because I literally have trouble coming up with a better example of a game in which so many things go so dreadfully wrong, yet it still manages to beat the odds and achieve its primary goal. Well done, Mrs. Williams, for making me sacrifice my critical credibility.