

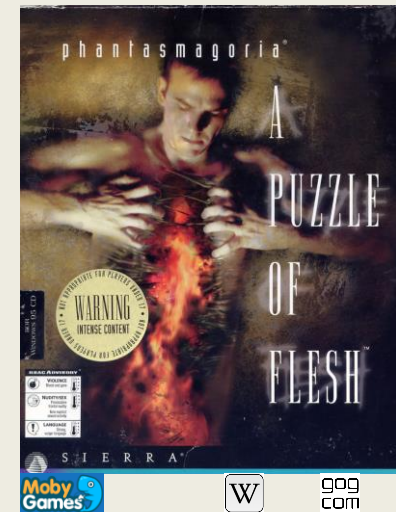
Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle Of Flesh

Studio: Sierra On-Line
Designer(s): Lorelei Shannon
Part of series: Phantasmagoria
Release: November 26, 1996
Main credits: Director: **Andy Hoyos**
 Director of Photography: **Matthew Jensen**
 Art Director: **Jeffrey Lane**
 Music: **Gary Spinrad**
Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (5 parts, 290 mins.)

Basic Overview

The market law is harsh, but it is law: the massive commercial success of *Phantasmagoria* more or less put an imperative to Sierra that a sequel should be produced as soon as possible. There was one problem, though: Roberta Williams was not interested. She had already endured the hardships of working on two equally challenging and innovative games at the same time (*King's Quest VII* and the first *Phantasmagoria*), and quickly understood that she could succeed only if she'd hand the creative reins over to another designer for at least one of them — thus most of the work on *King's Quest VII* ended up in the hands of Lorelei Shannon, a former writer of guides and hintbooks for Sierra. For the next *King's Quest* game Roberta was determined to take back control — the Great Mother of the Kingdom of Daventry simply could not bear the idea of abandoning her child for good. This meant that the sequel to *Phantasmagoria* would have to go to somebody else. Who? Why — Lorelei Shannon, of course!

The most important twist that Shannon introduced to the *Phantasmagoria* franchise was that the second game in the series would not be a sequel, or a prequel, or, in fact, in *any* way related to the first title other than through a general theme of horror and the supernatural (as well as a brief Easter Egg reference). In this way, *Phantasmagoria* could become Sierra's own



equivalent of *The Twilight Zone* — the first such «thematic series» in the company's history, presenting players with story after story that would simultaneously challenge your brain and creep out your senses. That said, I do not know if there were any serious plans to make *Phantasmagoria 3*, and this is largely irrelevant because Sierra's former owners and employees would lose the possibility to make any serious plans whatsoever pretty soon after the shipping of *A Puzzle Of Flesh*.

What is relevant is that, upon release, Shannon's game made nowhere near as impressive a mark on the gaming world as the original *Phantasmagoria*. Most of the reviews were starkly negative, and sales figures are hard to locate — clearly, they were nowhere near the level of Roberta's brainchild. The main reason for this was that the game already seemed to drag behind the times: FMV may have been all the rage in mid-1995, but by late 1996, the format was entering its death phase, as players who were formerly intrigued by gaining control over live actors eventually became disillusioned by the cumbersome nature of the format and the lack of genuine challenge. To smash the all-pervasive cynicism, a new FMV game had to be damn, *damn* good, and *A Puzzle Of Flesh*... just wasn't. Critics ripped it to pieces on all fronts — stupid, hole-ridden plot; piss-poor acting; clumsy control schemes and stunted gameplay; frustratingly trivial puzzles, other than a few frustratingly difficult ones. In short, all the flaws of the original *Phantasmagoria* multiplied by the lack of a novelty effect. At least Roberta Williams was taking the first steps in a new, uncharted medium; Shannon, insisted the critics, was merely repeating her predecessor's mistakes.

This judgement is only partially true. As we shall see below, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* does take home plenty of lessons, and it does improve in a whole variety of ways on the flaws of *Phantasmagoria* — even if these improvements were insufficient in their own time to redeem the fate of FMV-based games in the eyes of consumers and critics. Most importantly, though, Shannon's game is simply a whole other beast. Where Roberta's fantasy, as it had always been in all her games, was fixated squarely on the past (*Phantasmagoria* is essentially Victorian Gothic horror stupidly placed in purely nominally modern times), Lorelei instead conceived and produced a distinctly modern game, not so much because of its sci-fi elements but mostly because of its emphasis on relations, sexuality, and psychotherapy — all of these elements still relatively novel for videogames (particularly the gay / bisexual features of the characters). In some ways at least, it was a stab at making *the* single most serious and mature game in Sierra's history up to that point; certainly nothing even remotely close to it could ever have been produced at LucasArts or, in fact, by any other game studio in 1996.

If you take a look through the user reviews of *A Puzzle Of Flesh* on the Steam, GOG, or other websites, a fairly frequent judgement, well visible above the foundation of squarely negative assessments, will go something like this: «Objectively, it's quite a bad game that cannot be successfully defended... but there's something really special about it that makes me love it in spite of all its awfulness». «Demented masterpiece», «something you have to see to believe» — such phrasings are found

commonly even in reviews whose authors dish out one star out of five (then probably run back to rewatch all the juicy scenes with sex and gore). My own position is even more sympathetic: since I prize plot-based video games more for the effort invested in world-building and immersing the player in the atmosphere than for the actual «gaming» elements, I can easily forgive *A Puzzle Of Flesh* some of its more egregious flaws — and wholeheartedly embrace and even fetishize the idea that no other PC game I have ever played managed to be more disturbing and visceral. Well, there's always survival horror, of course, but that's creepy feelings of a whole other nature.

Over the years, the game has managed to accumulate a small, but loyal cult following, which has even prompted the original lead actor, Paul Morgan Stetler, to set up a special channel in its memory ([‘Conversations with Curtis’](#)) — it ran out of steam fairly quickly after a set of curious interviews with most of the other actors, but it does offer quite a few goodies for those who are steadfast and true (the best gift is probably 25 minutes worth of [terrific quality uncompressed video](#) from the game). That said, it would be useless to ascribe this mini-phenomenon to anything other than sheer nostalgia, or to deny that *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is, first and foremost, a cultural artefact tightly restricted to its own epoch. Our task, then, is to determine if there is any reason whatsoever to revive that relic for modern or future players, other than purely historical, so let's get to it.

Content evaluation

Plotline

One thing you can say for sure is that Lorelei Shannon operates on a seriously broader scale than Roberta Williams. If the original *Phantasmagoria* was more or less structured as a short story, with all of the game's content packed into one cohesive storyline, Shannon's oeuvre feels more like a short novel, with several connected, but distinct threads running through it — threads that never really manage to smoothly connect at the end, but for a while, intertwine fairly intensely for us to really notice that putting them all together does not make too much sense.



The main narrative concerns you playing as one Curtis Craig, a young, nerdy, neurotic employee at a large pharmaceutical company called Wyntech, where you typically spend your days confined to a tiny cubicle in which you mechanically write up

assorted documentation for various drugs and stuff. Apparently, this is an inherited job, since your father used to work at the same place — that is, before he was gunned down in cold blood right in front of his house, for reasons unknown. This troubled past may or may not underlie the various illusions, nightmares, and hallucinations that Curtis begins to experience on a regular basis everywhere he goes or stays, be it at home, at work, or at either one of the remaining two or three places in which the game generously allows you to hang out. So it is Curtis', or, rather, *your* sacred duty to get to the bottom of this situation, take a little psychotherapy, unravel your twisted path, and find a suitably Freudian cure for all the shit you have to endure.

So far, this is all mostly Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. Unfortunately, after a short while Curtis' surreal visions start to become supplemented with fairly realistic — and gruesome — murders of his co-workers, one after another, at which point it all shifts to Fincher's *Se7en*. There will be staplers, sledgehammers, electrocution, and other delightful little inventions which certainly rival the almost equally inventive ways of murdering people as seen in the original *Phantasmagoria* — in fact, they almost rival the fatalities of *Mortal Kombat*, with the exception that everything here is taken deadly serious. It will take Curtis some time to realize if it was really *he* who did away with all these people... and the realization will be far from obvious.

If Hitchcock and Fincher are too lightweight for you, welcome to *Venus In Furs* as the game throws yet another, almost entirely autonomous, line at you. It is not enough that Curtis is having an affair with his pretty straight work partner, Jocilyn, while at the same time experiencing a clear pull toward his pretty gay work partner, Trevor; in addition to that, *another* of his co-workers, the audacious Therese, insists on having him as her BDSM partner, because few things in life are more fun than getting to whip the shit out of a skinny nerdy guy with glasses. On the other hand, what's better than a little distraction at the local BDSM club when you keep getting hallucinations of yourself as an axe murderer all day long? Throw that one in, too, with a navel piercing on top.

Finally, about halfway into the game it becomes clear that there is going to be a major sci-fi twist to all of that — involving no less than an alternate universe, an illegal barter system with mysterious aliens, a substitution of identity, and a bizarre, messy finale in which Freud, Stephen King, and, uh, Ed Wood are all invited on the development team. This is where we fly out into yet another dimension, well beyond *The Twilight Zone*, and begin wondering about just how much Lorelei Shannon really wanted to bite off, before the team went off the budget and was forced to cut more content than Orson Welles on *The Magnificent Ambersons*, ultimately reducing the last stretch of the game to a senseless, barely comprehensible mess.

I am not saying that, had *A Puzzle Of Flesh* been an actual novel (and it is strange that Shannon, who would go on to become a professional and frequently published writer, never attempted a novelization), it would have become a genre-blending

masterpiece of sci-fi horror. At best, it might have enjoyed the popularity of a second-rate Stephen King work. But given that there were actual movies that managed to eclipse whatever literary significance there might have been in King's oeuvres (such as *Carrie* or *The Shining*), an FMV video game based on that kind of subject *could* have been a success — at least, in theory, what with the medium's special advantages helping take the focus away from the inane elements of the plot.

However, the major problem is that the plot of this game seems to be *totally* subdued to the very fact of its being a game. When you put all of it together, you do not get an impression of a cohesive story, whose separate elements all serve any global, general purpose. The basic line of thinking here is more like «okay, what should a *modern*, progressively-oriented, innovative adventure game about the supernatural have in it?» At least Roberta's project followed some sort of unified, if extremely naïve and shallow vision; Lorelei's is just all over the place. Need a bit of really brutal gore — check. Need us some rough and kinky sex — check. Need aliens from another dimension — check. Need to expose greedy, sinister, man-eating corporations — check. Need to promote psychotherapy — check. Need a sympathetic gay buddy — check. Everything is thrown at the walls with the primary purpose of Featuring Mature and Disturbing Themes in a Video Game; the purpose of making you sit back and think on what the hell it is all supposed to mean is distinctly secondary.

When the ultimate truth is finally revealed, it's not even as if it does not make sense (because it does), or as if it does not have any moral points to it (because it does — the moral of the game is that everybody is an asshole). The worst thing is that it feels like a barely believable copout. For about three quarters of the game's time, it is possible to keep an open tab on Shannon and even tolerate some of the painfully generic psychotherapeutic clichés she flings at you from inside the doctor's office — since there is a genuine element of intrigue involved. Once that intrigue gets murdered in a ridiculous gust of sci-fi melodrama, the entire house of cards comes crumbling down. Could it have been handled better if the game's ending was not so rushed? If we were given an extended chance to wander around the four corners of «Dimension X»? If we were let in on more details from the early life of the «real Curtis» and the «imitation Curtis»? If we actually got to understand how Jocilyn, the love of Curtis' life, got wind of the Project? If we got a better notion of the significance of the entire BDSM angle to the story?

I don't really know the answer to these questions; all I know is that, whenever I replay the game, I usually lose interest right after the final murders, and absolutely hate to go through Curtis' final adventure in Dimension X (though, to be fair, the illusionary sequence in which he is chased around the facility's wreckage by his zombieified colleagues is creepy fun). But to me, that does not immediately negate the impact of the main bulk of the game — and given how well accustomed we are these days, for instance, to TV shows that start out great and end on some ridiculous note of shame (just because the principal writer never bothered to properly think out the ending when pitching the proposal), there is no reason why the same kind of

TV logic could not be applied to a video game as well. If your ending seems to be taking a dump on everything that made the game intriguing, just erase it from memory — and invent your own, if it's that important to you.

To me, it is more important that out of the three FMV games produced by Sierra, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is the one featuring the most realistic dialogue and action sequences from its live actors. *Gabriel Knight: A Beast Within* unquestionably had a far superior plot and far stronger emotional highs, but Shannon really made a strong emphasis on her FMV heroes behaving like real people in a real environment — for which purpose she wrote tons of realistic, often (though not always) intelligent and occasionally funny dialogue. Possibly my favorite parts of the game are the ones in which you are allowed to simply cruise around your office, phoning or directly hitting on your various co-workers — particularly Trevor — and chatting them up on various topics, either related to your trials or just completely off-the-wall. Naturally, Shannon ain't no Tarantino when it comes to disclosing the transcendental aspects of the mundane, but this here is still a kind of dialogue that you will never, ever witness in any other adventure game from Sierra On-Line:

Curtis: *Hey, bud. How was your second date with the mysterious Jay, huh?*

Trevor: *A dud. Big time. I mean, once I got past the sexy eyes, the gorgeous cheekbones, I saw the squid beneath the skin...*

Curtis: *Oh, what a drag.*

Trevor: *You're telling me! He spent half the evening picking apart Bela Lugosi's acting, and the other half staring at his own bad self in the bathroom mirror!*

Curtis: *He doesn't like Bela?*

Trevor: *Mmm-hmm.*

Curtis: *Well piss on him, then!*

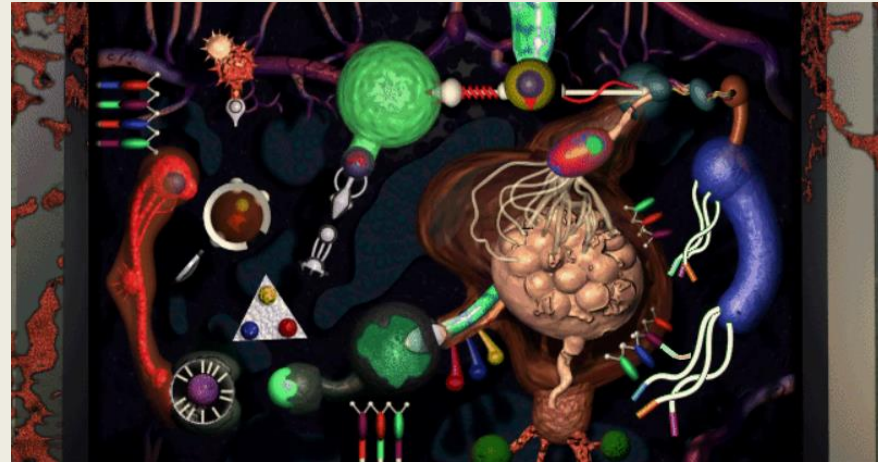
Is this great off-the-wall dialogue? Not in the slightest. Is this the kind of dialogue you'd ever expect to see in a 1996 adventure game? Certainly not. Is this the kind of dialogue that two real people in 1996 could have been having between themselves? You bet. Especially if both were fans of Bela Lugosi... and, maybe, a little *Pulp Fiction*. For all the corny sci-fi shit that Shannon throws at us, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is surprisingly gritty and realistic in its smaller-scale moments: the business stuff, the police procedure details, the swinging gay attitude of the adorable Trevor, and even the portrayal of the BDSM community (in which Shannon was seemingly quite invested herself, but I *really* don't want to know). As long as you never forget to apply the usual disclaimer — that you have to judge all of this stuff against other video games, not against great cinema or literature — the story and the overall everyday world of *A Puzzle Of Flesh* emerge as true accomplishments for their specific era. It is just that, unfortunately, the flaws of the production are so much in your face that they are often easier to concentrate on than the virtues — probably a typical situation for each FMV game ever made.

Puzzles

This, alas, is an area where kind words are hard to come by — which automatically means that, since *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is after all a puzzle-solving adventure game, it is just as much a *bad* game as its predecessor in the series, which is not the same as saying it is a bad experience, but still results in lots of merciless one-star ratings from amateur reviewers.

Fact of the matter is that, while Lorelei Shannon did have her own vision for the universe, atmosphere, and storyline of the game, she had relatively little interest in envisioning it as a set of actual challenges. In fact, something tells me that she might have thought any serious challenges would only confuse and irritate the players by unnecessarily hindering them from learning what happens next. Consequently, not only does the game fully embrace the simplistic mechanics of *Phantasmagoria*, but it generally makes things even easier for you, as if that was possible. Consider this:

1. *Phantasmagoria* at least took place inside a huge mansion with many rooms, specific details and objects within which could change from chapter to chapter, stimulating exploration — furthermore, most of the time you could also make excursions into the small, but important outside world, just to check if the solution to your current puzzle lay anywhere within its boundaries. In contrast, the world of *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is most of the time limited to two measly rooms of Curtis' apartment and the tiny space of his work office — all the other areas open up only at specific time intervals when they are truly needed. How hard can it be to do whatever it is you're supposed to do if your choices are *that* limited?
2. While we may all generally hate pixel-hunting for hotspots on the screen, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* goes way too far in trying to eliminate that hassle. Your cursor, an enlarged logo of the Wyntech corp, is absolutely frickin' *huge*, and finding the right hotspot on the screen is every bit as difficult as clicking on a blazing neon sign that says *CLICK HERE*. In addition, the number of such hotspots is extremely small, since, just as in *Phantasmagoria*, 90% of them serve important pragmatic purposes — you will never have Curtis just absent-mindedly comment on some insignificant detail for a bit of trivia or a light joke (as could still be the case in *Gabriel Knight: The Beast Within*).
3. Inventory objects can usually be acquired only at the precise time moment when they are actually useful, never earlier than



that, so you won't waste any time trying to fruitlessly apply them to everyone and everything in sight. For instance, there is a table in an auxiliary room at Wyntech which you can look at but can do nothing with. On a certain day, a hammer appears there that you can pick up and use. Why wasn't it there from the very beginning? Because you'd have no need for it (actually, not quite: the correct answer is that because you would have been able to solve a particular puzzle earlier than necessary for Shannon to progress the story).

Other than that, «puzzles» are usually of the same variety as in *Phantasmagoria*: find the right object X, use it on the right object Y. The very first of these was a methodological disaster that has since figured in nearly *all* reviews of the game, since (a) it looks extremely silly and (b) it is encountered so early on that it is encountered even by those reviewers who never go further than the first half hour of the game in question. It is, in fact, so silly and so easy that talking about it hardly counts as a spoiler: in order to retrieve your wallet from under your couch, you have to send in your pet rat Blob after it — then get her to come out by enticing her with a candy bar. Naturally, this is a great opportunity for writing stuff like «yeah, that's *totally* me starting my every morning» and such — but, in Lorelei's defense, this bit of nonsense was most likely put up there just to give newcomers to the adventure game genre a bit of early training with the inventory system; none of the subsequent puzzles dare to be *that* defiant about common sense.

As in *Phantasmagoria*, progress in the game will typically depend upon your exhausting your options — such as talking to all of your co-workers, which is also a bit clumsy because there are no specific dialogue options, you just have to click and click on them continuously until y'all run out of things to say. One logistic decision is particularly questionable: during Curtis' therapy sessions, he can discuss various topics with his doctor by presenting her with select inventory items out of his pocket — so, instead of an actual verbal menu with options like «talk about parents», «talk about the murders», «talk about BDSM», etc., you have to symbolically «give» the good doctor bits of your mother's lace, a button off a victim's shirt, an invitation to the club from Therese, etc. This seems to be less of an artistic design decision and more of a last minute workaround in a situation where you *need* a dialogue menu but cannot have one just because the previous designer left you with a crappy game engine. (Jane Jensen was able to overcome that obstacle by showing that dialogue menus are by no means incompatible with the FMV system; Shannon, apparently, did not care).

All puzzles have completely straightforward solutions; the option of choice is limited to the possibility of answering in several different ways to E-mails from your friends (as usual in such cases, I always recommend «sarcastic» or «funny» answers over «straight» — there are no consequences anyway, other than receiving correspondingly varying mini-answers). The only «big» choice you are allowed to make comes at the very end of the game, triggering one of two possible endgame videos — again, if

you are too lazy to go back and replay the sequence, I wholeheartedly recommend staying on Earth with Jocilyn, since the corresponding mini-video is a tiny bit less «vanilla» than the other... essentially, it does not matter, though.

Most of the «non-standard» puzzles in the game are every bit as trivial as the regular ones — typically, they involve guessing computer passwords (which usually stare you right in the face from less than two meters away), and at one point you are supposed to gain entry into «The Pit» at the BDSM club by solving a construction puzzle requiring the mighty intellectual level of a 2-year old (maybe it was Lorelei's subtle hint at the average IQ of the average visitor to a BDSM club, but such offensiveness would sort of negate the entire point of including that part, wouldn't it?). There were, in fact, only two times in the entire game where I got hopelessly stuck and had to submit to a walkthrough. The first one required me to combine two objects in the inventory in a pretty specific way to unlock a secret compartment — which was pretty mean, considering that this was the very first time that the game required you to combine anything *and* that using both objects separately led to failure and not the slightest hint that they should have been combined.

The second one you have most certainly guessed if you already played the game — and yes, it is yet another reason to abhor the final section, taking place in «Dimension X». In order to get back to Earth, you have to start up some sort of infernal engine by performing a lengthy and tedious series of operations without an instruction manual, essentially getting on by trial and error alone. This *Incredible Machine*-style monstrosity appears totally out of the blue, feels more complicated than all of the game's other puzzles *combined*, irreparably ruins the immersive effect, and seems to act as a time-wasting substitute for the lack of a properly filmed ending. Imagine being able to take a day trip to London, except you've been taken directly to Big Ben and have to spend the entire day studying the mechanics of its cogwheels — this is the direct equivalent of Curtis Craig's adventure in Dimension X, no more and no less.

If not for situations like these, one might simply want to take it easy and accept that *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is the closest Sierra ever got to a simple interactive movie, an experience that merely wants to put you in the shoes of the protagonist, gently take you by the hand and guide you through a set of easily openable doors, rather than make you wrack your brain. Unfortunately, every once in a while this nice, perfectly enjoyable interactive movie just *has* to remind you that it is also a piss-poor adventure game. It is entirely up to us, then, if we prefer to dwell on this, venting our frustration in the form of one-star reviews, or try to put the torture out of our minds as soon as possible and just move on to discuss the juicy part of the experience — its atmosphere. Personally, I prefer to take the positive route and vouch for the latter.

Atmosphere

Every now and then, I come across an assessment of *A Puzzle Of Flesh* that goes something like, «this is the videogame equivalent of a decent / tolerable / crappy B-movie», and for some reason, these comparisons, understandable and justified as they are, irritate the heck out of me. Maybe it is because, from this perspective, 99% of videogames ever made, even some of the very best ones, are really equivalents of B-movies — after all, where is that special videogame whose level of writing would be on par with Woody Allen or David Mamet? In reality, videogames can allow themselves to be way below the level of creative standards acceptable in more «noble» media when this is compensated by the advantage of making *you* an active part of the experience. A Roger Corman movie is certainly «B» when it is a movie; but make it into a good *interactive* movie, and presto, you're eligible for an upgrade. Let's face it — would you rather be willing to play a game based on *The House Of Usher* or, uh, I don't know, *The Seventh Seal*? (And *please* do not rush to answer even if you happen to be an intellectual snob...).



In terms of sheer atmospheric pressure, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is perhaps the single most unique, if not to say manipulative, game in the Sierra canon — and much of this pressure is achieved almost by accident. One thing that Shannon and her filming crew did not want to do was rely upon the blue screen approach: apparently, they saw the results of the original *Phantasmagoria* as well as the second *Gabriel Knight* game and decided that it all looked way too artificial and clumsy (in which they were absolutely right). So most of the game was actually filmed in a real studio — and since, obviously, Sierra lacked the budget to construct a large set, everything had to be shot indoors. There are practically no outside shots in the game at all. You have Curtis' tiny two-room apartment, Curtis' cramped working space, some narrow corridors from Curtis' hospital and Wyntech's evil basement, Dr. Harburg's office, and a few other spots, movement between all of which is automatic (you never see Curtis taking any form of public transport).

Above everything else, this makes *A Puzzle Of Flesh* excruciatingly claustrophobic. The apartment is bad enough, but the sight of Wyntech's working space — a set of tiny cubicles separated from each other with green panels, without a single window in the room — is enough to get you thinking that one could so easily go nuts in this kind of environment, even without a troubled alien past or a psychotic mother hunting after you with a pair of garden scissors. Whenever I had to spend any amount of time

in that place, sorting out the E-mails and recovering lost passwords, I eventually caught myself walking over to the center of the room to take a drink from the water cooler just to escape that painful feeling of being locked up — and that's coming from a pretty introverted person.

A stark contrast is found between Wyntech and the scenes in Dr. Harburg's office, which were filmed in broad daylight with the windows partially open and letting in natural sunlight (at least, I *think* it's natural — it is hard to tell with all that video compression going on). Even then, with the curtains partially drawn and electric lights providing their own counterpoint from inside, the produced effect is odd rather than optimistic: it's as if we are being relocated from the hell of Wyntech into a virtual «twilight zone», a limbo of sort from where there is a fifty-fifty chance of things getting better or worse. In any case, heading off to those sessions does provide the sense of temporarily stepping into a relatively safe zone, and so do the occasional bits of relaxation with your friends Jocilyn and Trevor in the *Dreaming Tree* diner. Unfortunately, both locations are only available at specific times, whereas the hell of Wyntech is pretty much always open — except for a few times when the police are busy scraping off evidence from the latest murder.

«Claustrophobic» is, of course, only one of the associations; a far more intentional one was that of «nastiness». Apparently, David Fincher's *Seven*, which I already mentioned above, was a real influence on Shannon; and even if she only borrowed the very idea of a sequence of exotically arranged killings from the movie, without bothering to copy the idea of their symbolism, the seemingly gratuitous violence is still unnerving when it is *you* who get to walk around the premises and keep receiving hints that this might all be a result of *your* doings. (The first murder, for instance, is not actually shown in its own timeframe, but only as a series of flashbacks when Curtis arrives upon the crime scene). In any case, the claustrophobia and the nastiness, like the weak force and electromagnetism, eventually turn out to be two sides of the same coin — make you, the player, as uncomfortable as possible. While I won't go as far as to say that *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is capable of driving a sane person crazy, I would certainly recommend you to stay away if you already have plenty of psychological problems as such.

As to what concerns the BDSM angle... well, the entire thing is fairly clichéd and probably not even up to the level of *Fifty Shades Of Grey*, let alone anything more serious, but visually and sensually it does fit in with the «nasty» feel of the game. There is no attempt to somehow sugarcoat or romanticize the whole business — from the unsavory types inhabiting Therese's favorite club to the grossly grotesque scene of Curtis getting his navel piercing to Therese's own stalking behaviour, it's all about wallowing in delightful depravity, and when Therese herself finally gets what's been coming to her, it is probably the single most *Seven*-like moment in the game — as in, isn't getting electrocuted in your own blood the highest possible BDSM experience there is?

It is highly likely that you will walk away from the game feeling filthy; it is almost as likely, especially in our deeply sensitive age, that you will walk away feeling offended, one way or the other. If anything, it might not so much be the equivalent of a B-movie as it could be the equivalent of listening to a G. G. Allin record — okay, that might be going *too* far by way of analogies, maybe swap that with The Birthday Party. It's heavy, *really* heavy shit, and certainly totally un-fuckin'-believably heavy shit for Sierra On-Line: I am not even certain that Ken or Roberta Williams actually saw the final product, or they and their family values might have pulled the plug on it (then again, Ken was probably way too busy selling Sierra's ass out in 1996 to pay much attention to the creative side of the business anyway).

Oh, and yes, the less said about the atmosphere of the game's final segment, the better. «Dimension X» was the one part of the game where they had no choice but to use the blue screen approach, with Curtis' sorry sprite lost and bewildered against an alien landscape — which is not that badly portrayed, but can at best count as a tiny appetizer for the real thing. (It's a bit amusing to think that precisely at the same moment when *A Puzzle Of Flesh* was being released, Ken Williams was negotiating with Valve over the publishing rights to *Half-Life*, given how Curtis' teleportation jump into «Dimension X» resembles, in more ways than one, Gordon Freeman's journey to Xen — and not only that, but both protagonists have to carry out a brief mission of neutralizing the big baddie and going back!). The imagery is not bad, the little alien amoebas are cute, and the music is appropriately sinister, but you will be spending most of your time dealing with the infernal engine machine anyway. In a perfect world, Shannon and crew might have been able to properly depict «Dimension X» as a wond'rous and desirable alternative to Curtis' sorry existence in his Wyntech cubicle, but... budget is budget.

Technical features

Graphics

Of all the Sierra games ever made, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* was probably the one that required the least amount of graphic artistry; this was because, in contrast to their two previous FMV efforts, most of the action was filmed in a real studio, rather than against a blue screen that would later be filled up with (at least partially) painted art. Like most innovative decisions, this one, too, had both its pluses and minuses — the inevitable negative side effect was that most of the backgrounds could only look as rich, detailed, and imaginative as they would arrange them in the studio, which ultimately meant *not* rich and



imaginative at all. Compared to the cheesily opulent bedrooms of the Carnovasch Mansion in *Phantasmagoria*, or to the glamorous Bavarian scenery of *Gabriel Knight 2*, Curtis' living room and cluttered work cubicle are not much to look at, nor are the interiors of Dr. Harburg's cozy office or those of the grimy, nasty-looking Borderline club. The static backgrounds are largely perfunctory, and the game's cutscenes place 99% of the emphasis squarely on character acting and nothing else (well, I'd say those chocolate shakes at the Dreaming Tree that the characters never seem able to finish look pretty appetizing, but that's about it as far as possible distractions are concerned).

Only one small section of the game has no choice but to systematically integrate live action with CG art, and that is the alleged «Dimension X», of course, to which Curtis is forced to make his own proto-Gordon Freeman trip. Some credit has to be given for the artist who designed the place, and judging by the amount of detail and by the clearly visible struggle for imagination reflected in that work, they had to make really serious cuts to the segment — wasting all that effort on three or four screens worth of material would have been quite painful for the original artist. Oddly enough, «Dimension X» kind of fits in visually with the overall *nasty* look of the Earthly locations in the game: it is a weird and intriguing-looking place, but in a dangerous and disgusting sort of way, which makes the resemblance to Valve's *Xen* all the more striking. With its odd shapes, sickly blue and green colors, creepy bio-engineering devices, and potentially lethal local life-forms, it does look a lot like what *Xen* could have looked like if it were represented by static 2D backgrounds rather than 3D polygons. Too bad that most of your time in that place will be spent trying to disentangle that doggone infernal machine (see the *Puzzles* section).

But let us now get back to the main bulk of the game and talk a little about its main visual lure — the *acting*. Now it is more or less a given that just about any review of the game, professional or amateur, will almost inevitably mention «bad acting» as one of its principal flaws. The tricky situation here, though, is that it is all but impossible to load up the game and not *expect* bad acting — because (a) FMV games are not supposed to have good acting, (b) Brad Pitt and Nicole Kidman are *not* listed in the credits, in fact, nobody you know is listed in the credits, so they *must* be bad actors. Plus, it's a game about gruesome murders, wild kinky sex, and aliens, so it's *gotta* be bad acting.

Truth is, it's not *bad*. Not a single performance here is genuinely outstanding on the level of Peter Lucas in *Gabriel Knight 2*, but cumulatively, I would say that *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is the best acted out of the three Sierra FMV games, and that out of all the actors who get more than three or so lines of dialog, not a single performance strikes me as particularly overwrought or cringeworthy. For some reason, the only actress to have been carried over from the original *Phantasmagoria* was its worst nightmare — the abysmally clownish V. Joy Lee — but this time, she only gets a tiny bit part, playing a mental patient in Curtis' ward (a role she *still* manages to flub: just how bad an actor must one be to even fail to properly represent a lunatic?).

As for the main cast, their chief problems are not so much in portraying believable or empathetic characters as in coping with the excesses of the dialog — which, as I have already mentioned, tries as much as possible to be more mature and realistic than in previous Sierra games, but still cannot help frequently borrowing from the pool of genre clichés (Jocilyn's "*right now, I just really need to feel you inside me*" certainly takes the cake, but neither can we forgive the stereotypical Big Bad Corp Guy Paul Warner or the equally stereotypical Dumbass Cop Allie Powell — "*I don't have to listen to DICK, Craig!*"). Even so, there is clearly a whole lot of commitment here, and if it feels as if sometimes the actors are hamming it up a bit too much, this can be excused by the nature of the medium — acting exaggeration was as much a given for FMV shoots as it was in the era of silent cinema, since the necessity of video compression for the CD format required the videos in question to be as «expressive» as possible (this also explains why there are so many close-up shots — the only way you could properly see the characters' faces was if they occupied the entire screen).

Paul Morgan Stetler, the actor playing the main role of Curtis Craig, gives quite a believable performance — if you were a shy, nerdy, secretly bisexual bespectacled little guy with a history of mental illness, tormented by hallucinations and suspicions of schizophrenia, you would most certainly be able to empathize with the character. Again, it is not quite *his* fault if you get tired of all the times he has to take off and put back on his glasses, or freak out in front of the mirror, or go off his rocket before his psychotherapist: blame it on the script which often runs out of creative ideas. At least it gives Stetler many more opportunities to show various shades of emotion, from humor to terror, than poor Victoria Morsell received in the first *Phantasmagoria*.

Out of Craig's two conflicting love interests, Paul Mitri as Trevor receives the top award: his performance even has a historical significance in that it was one of the first, if not *the* first, relatively non-clichéd portrayal of a gay character in a video game. Mitri's Trevor is certainly flamboyant and theatrical, but the flamboyance is shown as more of a side effect of his sexuality than of his flaunting it, and he has a gift for exuding charm and friendliness even through the corniest or the most narcissistic of his dialog lines. I think he even manages to salvage Shannon's «[Bunny And Potato](#)» story — every now and then, she gets the urge to prove to us how much she's learned from Tarantino's movies but never really gets it right all by herself (the side stories just lack the required kind of offbeat nature and humor), yet Mitri somehow turns this little bit into one of the game's most endearing moments. (Considering that the best performance in *Gabriel Knight 2* was given by Peter Lucas as the clearly homoerotic-minded Baron von Glower, I'd say Sierra's producers had quite a solid sense of the LGBT spirit back in those out-of-the-closet Clinton years).

For Curtis' other love interest, Jocilyn, they went out of their way to actually hire an established erotic movie starlet, Monique Parent (IMDB: «*an American actress known for smoldering love scenes and intensely charismatic characters; she has been*

called *The Thinking Man's Sex Symbol*» — yes, and she must have some really good PR agents). I suppose this was mostly necessary because Shannon and Andy Hoyos decided to step up their game after all and include some *real* nudity this time, instead of that measly sideboob flash nonsense in *Phantasmagoria* — yes, horny players all over the world rejoice, because we do get to see Monique's tits in all their 640x480 pixel glory, if only for a couple seconds. Other than that, though, she has to play the role of sweet nice girl without a clue about what's going on, which doesn't exactly give her any opportunities to shine, but she pulls her functions off reasonably well, no serious complaints here.

Of course, bad girls always win next to good girls, so it is no wonder that the Best Actress spotlight here is stolen by Ragna Sigrun as Therese Banning, steady office worker by day, mighty BDSM queen by night — and, again, probably the first video game character of this type in the genre's history. Here, it is supposedly the *Basic Instinct* influence prevailing over *Reservoir Dogs*, and although, like Jocilyn, the lady is given only one dimension to play around with — the opposite one — she does a good job of reminding us guys about the nature of temptation (just how many bored white collar office workers secretly wish *they'd* have a work partner just like that?). Ironically, *her* tits are never going on show in the game — apparently, the Devil prefers to entice her clients with sexy leather instead, whereas the Angel is more about taking it all off.

None of these guys ever went on to anything big — in fact, all of them seem to have left their acting days behind them, which *could* be interpreted as proof that they were really bad actors starring in a really bad video game, but... not really. If you play Sierra's FMV games in their precise chronological order, from *Phantasmagoria* to *Gabriel Knight 2* to *A Puzzle Of Flesh*, it is impossible not to notice how quickly the acting techniques, the angles, the cinematography, the dialog improves with each subsequent title, and it actually makes me a little sad about the demise of FMV as a viable artistic and commercial strategy — much like the text parser in adventure games, just when it was beginning to get a little better, new technologies came around and throttled further development along those lines. (I do realize that filming, say, *The Witcher 3* in FMV would have required the gaming industry becoming ten times more financially powerful than the movie industry, but surely there could still be a viable market for smaller-scale stuff, no?).

Minor, but significant technical detail: like most of the games at the time, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* was made available in separate DOS and MS Windows versions, and the most commonly found digital version of the game today (the one sold on Steam and GOG, for instance) is the DOS version, because the lazy bums at Activision still have not found a proper way to make Sierra's old Windows games run well on modern systems. This is particularly unfortunate for *A Puzzle Of Flesh*, since all the video files in the DOS version are only available at lower resolutions and with dreadful interlacing, making you feel as if watching every damn cutscene through a French blind — and, unlike Sierra's other two FMV games, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* seems to have never

had a properly working patch to get rid of this nonsense. The Windows version, in comparison, is far superior, with higher graphic resolution and no interlacing — but you have to hunt for it (I ended up downloading a pirated copy, and feel no shame whatsoever about this), and then use a custom-made installer to play the game. No pain, no gain, right?

Sound

Okay, so, apparently, Gary Spinrad, the composer of the musical soundtrack for *A Puzzle Of Flesh*, has in more recent years become known as a live impersonator of Elvis Presley and Gene Simmons... [at the same time](#). If this does not exactly get your goat, I don't know what else will, but really, this is one thing I like about these brief stints people would pull off at classic video game companies in the 1990s — you can never tell where they would end up in the future, but you can almost always tell it's going to be one or another strain of really, really weird shit. Those were crazy times, and people would take bits and pieces of that craziness away with them as souvenirs for the (comparably) less crazy and more regimented 21st century.



The actual soundtrack has pretty little to do with Elvis or KISS, though. It is *very* 1990s — so 1990s it almost hurts — and mostly electronic, ranging from dark ambient to industrial to beat-heavy early synthwave or whatever that stuff is called (I should really brush up on all those electronic subgenre names from the decade, but I figure it's always fun to offend somebody when you forget the difference between house and trance), in keeping up with the game's far more modernistic setting and sci-fi overtones as compared to Roberta Williams' retro-oriented Gothic flavor of *Phantasmagoria*. Inevitably, its MIDI synths and gated drums will sound dated to modern ears, but if the entire game is essentially a time capsule from 1996, why shouldn't the music be any different, as long as it suits the game's purpose?

I think that Spinrad is really at his best here with the slow, atmospheric parts. As soon as you get control over your character, the minimalistic minor key piano theme over a haunting bedrock of woodwind synths generates a mournful, melancholic aura which does far more to make you believe in Curtis' haunting emotional traumas from his past than the game's aggressive introduction (Curtis receiving shock therapy in the hospital). Then, once you get to Wyntech, the cavernous echo of the slowly unfurling bass synth notes suggests that this is not exactly a safe or welcoming place to be before you even get to settle down in your cubicle. There are few, if any, «optimistic» themes — in fact, the safest places in the game are usually distinguished by

the relative *lack* of musical themes, e.g. the Dreaming Tree diner or Dr. Harburg's office, where the synthesizers are silent by default and only strike up their grim march when Curtis experiences another hallucination or something.

The action-packed sequences, when shit hits the fan and somebody gets murdered, predictably kick the soundtrack into overdrive, which is not too much to my taste — I think that this kind of percussion-heavy madness is more appropriate for the likes of *Half-Life* or other shooters; but I guess this is the price we have to pay if we want us a proper 1996 time capsule. What makes it worse is that the musical soundtrack is poorly synced with the voice acting, so whenever the music is loud and fast I always have a really hard time making out whatever the actors are saying (a situation exacerbated by the lack of subtitles). If ever the game stands a chance of a remaster (highly unlikely, but...), this lo-fi shit needs to be taken as much care of as the resolution upscale for all the cutscenes.

Finally, as is usual for Sierra, the game finishes with a really crappy, cheesy, totally out-of-touch industrial-synth-rock tune ('Rage') with viciously murderous lyrics, probably sung by Spinrad himself — too pathetic, probably, even for the likes of Nine Inch Nails, whose style it somewhat approaches. I honestly have no idea why all of Sierra's game music, often fine on its own, immediately began to suck as soon as they'd add vocals to it — be it 'Girl In The Tower' from *King's Quest VI*, 'Take A Stand' from *Phantasmagoria*, or this particular piece of tripe (the only exception is Robert Holmes' pseudo-Wagner opera in *Gabriel Knight 2*, but that was obviously a very special case of do or die). At least with 'Girl In The Tower', Ken Williams had a genuine ambition to hit the charts, which explains why it had to sound like Michael Bolton; but these *Phantasmagoria* numbers, to the best of my knowledge, were not exactly marketed as potentially commercial singles. Oh well. Who the heck watches the credit rolls at the end of video games anyway?

Interface

Although in general the interface of the first *Phantasmagoria* was retained, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* did have a few subtle changes for the better. Obligatory, ever-present on-screen hubs were removed, to appear only when triggered by moving the mouse across the screen. The ridiculously superfluous hint system (*Phantasmagoria*'s rather moronic red skull) was gone for good as well. The overall area of the screen covered by static backgrounds and video cutscenes was much larger than before. Perhaps most importantly, you could now properly save your game in different slots and restore it at any time, instead of being limited to exactly one save slot per game (Shannon followed here the example of Jane Jensen, who also wisely opted for a traditional system of save slots when adapting Roberta's new interface for *Gabriel Knight 2*).

Movement from point A to point B was completely eliminated from the game — unlike the other two FMV titles, *A Puzzle Of*

Flesh does not allow you to move Curtis (or any NPC to move on his or her own) across the static background, since the filming process limited blue screen usage to an absolute minimum. In order to move from one room to another, you simply click on an arrow and get automatically transferred to a new screen; in order to move into a completely different area, you open an in-game map and select your destination (like in *Broken Sword* or other older games). This was a good thing to do, not just because it saved you time and effort, but mainly because it made the game suffer a little less from the «oh look how cool we are, now that we can move a live actor across the screen!» bravado of *Phantasmagoria* — the same bravado that made you spend a whole minute of your time watching Adrienne slowly sit down on a sofa, fidget around for a while, then just as slowly rise up again, for absolutely no other reason than «because-we-can» (a.k.a. «immersive realism»). It is still possible for Curtis to waste time on useless actions, but this has more to do with solving puzzles than with pointless dicking around.

In general, *A Puzzle Of Flesh* gives the impression of a game whose creators have finally learned their lessons and no longer feel as uncomfortable with the new format as their predecessors. Unfortunately, the major problem — a jarring discrepancy in the visual, sonic, and atmospheric properties of the cutscenes and the static interface — remained as unsolved as it was in the earlier games. Transitions into and from cutscenes are anything but smooth (the game can temporarily freeze before throwing you in or out of the scene), music flow will be interrupted and roughly shifted, graphic resolution change might wreak havoc on your brain, etc. On the other hand, this is a problem which, in its final form, has not been resolved even today — look at the *Witcher* games, for instance, whose cutscenes remain firmly segregated from the main game flow, despite no use of FMV; so let us not give the poor old title from 1996 too much flack just because its creators were unable to move mountains.

Verdict: *A deeply flawed, dated title which still preserves a whiff of its own, creepy brand of «at-least-they-tried» fascination.*

Other than unsubstantiated accusations of persistently «bad acting», I think that I can get behind every single accusation ever thrown at *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle Of Flesh*. It is a pretty poor «game», it is a pretty corny «interactive novel», it tries to bite off far more than it can chew in one go, it is visually and sonically dated, and it has a terribly cheesy song at the end of it. And yet, none of these arguments will ever make me *forget* it.



One extremely important thing is undeniable: *A Puzzle Of Flesh* was one of the strongest, if not *the* strongest, efforts by Sierra On-Line, a firmly established, mainstream mammoth of the mid-1990s gaming industry, to get out of its «comfort zone». One might grumble that they did not go far enough (especially when compared to such truly discomfoting titles as *I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream*), or, vice versa, complain that they took it way too far with all the gratuitous sex and violence stuff, but the fact remains that the game *tried* to take the adventure genre to the next level of seriousness, and for all of its flaws, the atmosphere of crazyass enthusiasm and audacity is more than enough for me to forgive the game most of its sins.

Given how common it has always been for underage teenagers to be entertained by stuff targeted at higher age groups (just how many kids greeted their entry into pubescence with a swiped copy of *Leisure Suit Larry?*), I am pretty sure that plenty of today's 40-year olds still vividly remember the nightmares this game would give them when they first laid their hands on it, expecting, at best, another *Gabriel Knight*. Today's largely sanitized gaming market would never accept this kind of title, preferring to spook you out with far safer topics, such as the zombies of *Resident Evil* or other survival horror. It is true that the promise of *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is never properly fulfilled — at the end of the game, we are not really too sure what these atrocities were all about, or what Lorelei Shannon *really* thinks about the moral (and sanitary) aspects of BDSM clubs. But we can, and *will*, remember that we have just been virtually plunged in a strange, creepy, dangerous universe which we shall (hopefully) never encounter *that* directly in real life, even if you don't really need to be a shape-shifting alien from Dimension X in order to inflict that kind of bad shit on real people.

In the end, I would say that *A Puzzle Of Flesh* is the video game equivalent of movies like Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* or Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* — the kind of stuff that requires a good combination of strong stomach, curious brain, and firm moral standards to get off on (not that I'd ever compare the rudimentary artistic philosophy of Lorelei Shannon to the visions of Peckinpah or Kubrick, but then I'm never, ever directly comparing good video games with good movies in general, either). And, for that matter, out of all video game genres, *this* particular sort of experience, even in pure theory, can only come from the adventure game — or, at best, an RPG which places much more emphasis on plot than combat or character leveling. Of course, whether that's a good or a bad thing is up to you to decide for yourself.