

# The Secret Of Monkey Island

Studio: **LucasArts**

Designer(s): **Ron Gilbert / Dave Grossman / Tim Schafer**

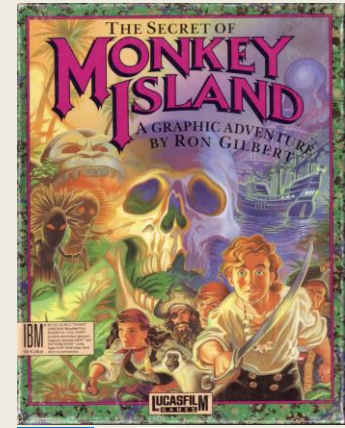
Part of series: **Monkey Island**

Release: October 1990 (original) / July 15, 2009 (remake)

Main credits: Graphic Art: **Steve Purcell, Mark Ferrari, Mike Ebert, Martin Cameron**

Music: **Michael Land, Patrick Mundy**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (Special Edition only; 5 parts, 260 mins.)



## Basic Overview

*My name's Guybrush Threepwood, and I want to be a pirate.* There is a faint chance that you might have heard this line from somewhere even if you are 18 years old and your mom hadn't even hit puberty when **The Secret Of Monkey Island** hit the market back in 1990. Because, although the **Monkey Island** titles may not be among the most inventive, the most profound, or the most revolutionary games in the LucasArts store — such games as **Day Of The Tentacle**, **Grim Fandango**, or even **Loom** have them solidly beat in many different respects — somehow ultimately it is Guybrush



Threepwood who has emerged victorious as the primary mascot of LucasArts, if not classic adventure gaming in general. He is the ultimate lovable anti-hero, the exemplary trickster without a cause, the embodiment of pure, unadulterated zaniness which transcends both parody and satire and veers off into the same uncharted territories as Monty Python. He is the reason why generations of adventure game players still burn with nostalgia for some of those old times, and are happy as heck whenever they succeed in passing a bit of that spark to their younger offspring. And, being way larger than a pirate's life, he also bears a bit of responsibility for the demise of the genre... but all in due course, mates.

Conceived around 1988 by Ron Gilbert, the main genius behind most of the early LucasArts classics, **Monkey Island** was originally intended to be LucasArts' stereotypical game with a pirate theme — largely to indulge Gilbert's childhood love for *Pirates Of The Caribbean* (not the movie, which did not exist as of yet, but rather the amusement park). But Gilbert's weirdly warped mind simply refused to process reality with realism, meaning that if you hoped and aspired for an actual pirate game, you should have rather been knocking on Sid Meier's door. Instead, Gilbert produced an «anti-pirate» game, one that ended up anachronistically merging perfectly modern attitudes with an allegedly 17th-century setting, and lampooning both with an equally irreverent verve.

Above everything else, though, it gave adventure gaming its very first protagonist to form a special, intimate bond with *you*, the player. It is true that playable characters in most LucasArts games specialized in breaking the fourth wall from the very beginning, but Guybrush Threepwood did this with a particular flair, and had more depth (and width, and height) to him than, say, Zak McCracken or even Indiana Jones. A little nerdy, a little naïve, moderately sharp-tongued, and clearly a romantic teenager at heart, he was pretty much the perfect PC for the geeky young adventure gamer of the early 1990s; and unlike many other characters, he managed to carry his charisma pretty much intact into the more modern gaming eras. Of course, it is difficult to imagine a game like **Secret Of Monkey Island** being made today (unless we're talking about the ivory-tower based indie adventure community), but it is not difficult to imagine a game like that still being played and admired today, as it admirably navigates past all the sensitive topics and still manages to be witty and funny.

## Content evaluation

### Plotline

Boiled down to its essence, the story that Gilbert and Co. told us in **The Secret Of Monkey Island** is, well, fairly standard *Pirates of the Caribbean* Disney type material. A young man dreams of becoming a pirate, goes through several challenging trials to prove his worth, meets and falls in love with a beautiful damsel along the way, and goes on to rescue her from the competing hands of an evil ghost pirate, assembling a loyal crew and following the kidnapper almost to the end of the world. What's new? Nothing, except that the young man's name is Guybrush (legend states that *guy.brush*



was the original name for the character's sprite file), the trials are as ridiculous as they come, the damsel makes it clear that her rescuer is actually in bigger distress than she is, the loyal crew does not even lift a finger to help their captain, and the evil ghost pirate is overcome with... a bottle of root beer, more or less.

In other words, the game's plot is thoroughly protected from being moth-eaten by clichés of the swashbuckler genre because it thrives and feeds on those clichés, ridiculing and inverting them at every step — which is, of course, the game's very reason for existence. Arguably the most fondly remembered and often quoted example of that is the trial of sword fighting, in which Guybrush learns that the most important part of the fight is not the physical mastery of your weapon, but the intellectual mastery of the art of proper taunting (*soon you'll be wearing my sword like a shish kebab!*). Of course, the authors got that idea from classic Errol Flynn movies, where it was hovering around, just waiting to be picked up, but they did pick it up and successfully ran with it. Likewise, many a movie had previously exploited the theme of having the protagonist Assembling A Team only to find out that he could probably stand a better chance if he pulled the job off on his own — but only in **Secret** is that idea carried to its glorious conclusion, where you have to spend a good third of the game putting together a mish-mash team of a bunch of deadbeats, only to immediately realize that their only function on your ship is that of heavy ballast. (Which is why I always end up sinking the ship after landing on Monkey Island — it's just so deeply satisfying).

However, simply inverting clichés is only half of the masterplan: the other half, in true Monty Python spirit, is to fill the game up with all sorts of delightful anachronisms, which fulfill the double function of making you laugh and bringing the atmosphere of the game more in touch with the modern spirit (or, more accurately, with the *post-modern* spirit). This involves both specific situations (for instance, digging up T-shirts instead of more conventional «treasure») and specific characters (such as Stan the ship salesman, modeled after every annoying salesman in comedy movies from all time). The (semi-)rational explanation for why Guybrush Threepwood keeps acting like a present day teenage nerd rather than the expected cousin of Jim Hawkins would only appear in **Monkey Island 2**, but the genre as such does not really require an explanation: don't think it over, just enjoy the overall goofiness.

Being the very first game in the series, and produced at a relatively early stage in LucasArts history, **Secret** does suffer from being a bit short. Except for Guybrush himself, each character, including the love interest Governor Elaine Marley and the arch-enemy Ghost Pirate LeChuck, gets a very limited amount of screen time and only a small handful of dialog lines, making them rather two-dimensional (thankfully, this flaw would be largely rectified in the next game): LeChuck is just your stereotypical cartoonish evil guy, Elaine is your stereotypical strong female character, and everybody else is usually reduced to a single function (salesman Stan's is to annoy the hell out of you with his endless yapping, lonely pirate Meathook's is to

demonstrate the effects of traumatic experience on the swashbuckler's unstable mentality, etc.). But to condemn the game for such limitations is like condemning a 16th century novel for not showing the psychological depths of a 19th century one — **Secret Of Monkey Island** should be compared to what came *before* it, not *after* it, and which computer game before it happened to have a protagonist whose chief talent was holding his breath for ten minutes, and who would be told that "to be a pirate, ye must be a foul-smelling, grog-swivelling pig"?

### *Puzzles*

Despite all the humor and whackiness and stereotype inversions, **Secret Of Monkey Island** is still first and foremost a classic adventure game, and this means heavy emphasis on puzzles — for each heartfelt outburst of laughter you will experience many, many minutes of figuring out where to go next and which outrageous combination of objects should be produced to solve the next challenge. In a well-advertised «anti-Sierra» move, Gilbert does take pity on the players by completely wiping out the option of being able to die *and* any possible deadlocks resulting from taking a wrong turn or wasting a precious object at some earlier point in the game, completely eliminating the need for constant saves and restores. However, this comes at the expense of thinking up fairly harsh puzzles — and in a game where logic is Pythonesque and imagination runs wild, this can easily translate into hours of frustration (*could*, that is, in the pre-Internet-walkthrough era).



That said, compared to even the second **Monkey Island** game, **Secret** is relatively forgiving in that respect: there are fewer locations to turn to, fewer objects to roam for, and somewhat less outrageous solutions to come up with (yes I'm looking at you, stupid «monkey wrench» puzzle!). In fact, the game even has a hilarious send up of such outrageous solutions — at one point in the storyline, you end up losing control of Guybrush as he takes things into his own little AI hands and performs a set of actions such as «give stylish confetti to heavily-armed clown» and «push tremendous dangerous-looking yak», which probably parody classic text adventure games even more than late Eighties Sierra or LucasArts, but are still hilarious all the same.

As for the actual puzzles, most of them still fall under the «find objects A and B and combine them into object C to use on object D» category, and follow their own, slightly warped, but ultimately understandable and often even predictable Monkey



Island logic. Sometimes you might find yourself stuck due to a timing requirement, but just as often the game is willing to bluff you into dreading a real murderous challenge when the answer is far more obvious (like the situation where Guybrush has to confront Meathook's deadly parrot).

The honor of best design should probably go to the insult sword fight challenge — it is not much of a «puzzle» per se as soon as you figure out what to do, which is essentially just to fight a bunch of pirates one by one until you memorize all the proper «ripostes», but the best part is the final fight with Carla the swordmaster, where you have to match all your collected answers to questions that are *different* from the original ones: presumably a big surprise for all new players, and a nice as heck example of the linguistic prowess of LucasArts' dialog writers. Actually, special mention must be made of the dialog capacities of the game — **Secret** was one of the very first games to not only introduce the option of giving out different answers during a conversation, but also sometimes, though still very occasionally, to have different answers cause different outcomes: some of the puzzles are, in fact, dependent on that, like haggling with Stan over the boat price.

### *Atmosphere*

As in most LucasArts games, this is primarily what we came here for. More than about the plot, the puzzles, or the visuals, the game is really all about the dialog. From the very first bits in the intro — "so you want to be a pirate, eh? You look more like a flooring inspector!" — and down to the very last bits in the outro — "at least I learned something from all of this... never pay more than 20 bucks for a computer game!", you know you want to click on everything and everyone just to hear what these absurd projections of post-modern conscience into the quasi-17th century have to say to you. The humor is piled on so thickly that even if, at some point, the game does seem to want to scare you (particularly in the last part, when you are walking through mushroom-infested psychedelic-inferno corridors to find LeChuck's ship), it still fails ("I had a feeling that in hell there would be mushrooms", Guybrush sighs upon entering the place, reflecting Gilbert's alleged mycophobia). Well, actually, forget that, there *is* no point at which the game can scare you unless you are 10 years old at max and ghost pirates make you want to jump under your pillow.

That said, if seen from a slightly different angle, the humor of **Monkey Island** can be seen as almost as much of a curse as it



is a blessing. Other than the childishly innocent (and occasionally childishly mischievous) Guybrush himself, the only «sympathetic» character in the game is his spontaneous love interest, Governor Marley, and she only gets a grand total of two (three, if you're lucky and did your quests in the right order) scenes in the entire game. Everybody else, from the strictly-business Voodoo Lady and down to the whiny, but pragmatic shipwreck survivor Herman Toothrot, is only here for the laughs, no third dimension necessary to any of these characters. This is not a tragedy by any means, but it clearly shows why the game (along with all of its sequels) ultimately feels so slight next to something like **Grim Fandango**, where the characters would be just as funny but managed to have a modicum of soul to them as well.

Needless to say, if you ever came here in hopes of taking a digital whiff of the actual Caribbean spirit, you were deeply mistaken — there is even less of that in this than in the *Pirates Of The Caribbean* franchise which inspired the whole shenanigan, and quite intentionally so. The characters look, act, walk, and talk as if they were all clones of Robin Williams doing 17th century cosplay, around locations which look more like a joyride than an actual set of islands in the Caribbean. Had the game designers opted to put Guybrush in the Wild West instead, or the Roman Empire, or any other mythologized quasi-historical setting, they only had to change a few backdrops, a couple of names, and a batch of jargon — the only function of the whole «pirate» theme here is to actually provide a theme, much like with the Arthurian setting in Monty Python's **Holy Grail**. And, of course, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that as long as the witty jokes keep coming.

## Technical features

**Note:** *The following section will cover (and, where necessary, compare) both the original 1990 edition of the game and the 2009 Special Edition. No separate review for the remake is necessary, since it changes nothing in the base game but rather just provides a complete overhaul of its visuals, sound, and gameplay interface.*

### Graphics

With so much emphasis on the humor and general oddity, it is perhaps no surprise that the graphics in the original game were not all that impressive — putting it mildly. For 1990, the year when Sierra On-Line once again turned the tables with its transition to full-fledged VGA, the quality of **Secret's** pictures looked downright antiquated even back then. The backdrops are rather crude, detalization is kept to an austere minimum, and character sprites are just large enough to look primitively grotesque, but not too large to look hilariously grotesque (as in, say, **Maniac Mansion** with their giantly disproportionate heads and all). In short, the graphic aspect is suitably picturesque and serves the purpose fairly well, but a good example of 1990's digital artistry it is *not*.

One curious exception to the rule are the close-up shots of characters' faces, starting right from the sly, sleazy, heavily bearded old pirate Mancomb Seepgood and ending with Elaine Marley, the love of Guybrush's eccentric life. The original EGA paintings by Steve Purcell were quite vivid and made good use of the limited color palette, but it is the redrawn 256-color VGA images by Iain McCaig that really made all the difference — the textures, the lighting, the shading, the almost photorealistic level of detail. In fact, the faces were so realistic that for some fans, it almost broke the immersion, detracting from the overall goofiness, which is probably why the whole thing was scrapped once it came to the Special Edition.



And speaking of the 2009 Special Edition, this is where things really got good (as they did with pretty much all of the LucasArts remasters, to be fair). Instead of doing some silly thing like going 3D, the artists preserved a bit of the crudeness of the original, but now they made it look like a feature rather than a bug — in other words, the 2009 remaster looks all crooked, jagged, twisted, and ever so slightly impressionistic like the overall psychological atmosphere of the game. The characters' faces in close-ups now look far more cartoonish, but not old school Disney-like cartoonish as in **Curse Of Monkey Island**; instead, everybody receives the «angular» treatment, which makes most of the faces look like high-class wood carvings or something, which is weird, and weird is always good for this game.

Arguably the only «miscasting» decision made in the Special Edition concerns Guybrush himself. In the original game, he was a rather short, pudgy, chubby little guy with a (presumably) mischievous stare. In the SE, however, they probably tried to match him up better with his long and lanky avatar in **Curse Of Monkey Island**, and the result is a thin, spiderish sprite with frightened, deep-sunken eyes who kinda looks like he'd just recently been liberated from Auschwitz. It is true that *most* NPCs in the remade version (with the exception of Meathook) could stand gaining a little weight, but I do keep catching myself wanting to force-feed my Guybrush all the time when I should be looking for treasure instead.

(Special mention should be made of how the Special Edition truly respects the original game by including a mode that lets you revert to the original graphics and interface at any time — providing a valuable history lesson for newbie fans while at the same time soothing the hearts of the veterans. The only downside is that the voice acting is not carried over to the original — something the developers would correct for **Monkey Island 2**).

## Sound

This is where both the original *and* the remade edition have to be commended, for entirely different reasons. The original **Secret Of Monkey Island** happened to be LucasArts' first adventure game to feature a complete musical soundtrack, playable in superior quality with a MIDI interface — as usual, in the exciting Sierra On-Line vs. LucasArts race the latter kept running ahead in terms of inventiveness and gameplay, but lagging behind when it came to technical progress (budget, budget, budget!). Anyway, while the producers still didn't quite have the money to hire an established pro such as William Goldstein (**King's Quest IV**) or at least a well-known name like Bob Siebenberg (**Space Quest III**), they settled on the next best thing — a Harvard graduate by the name of Michael Land, well educated in both classical and electronic music, who would go on to become LucasArts' chief composer and musical supervisor until the very end.



Needless to say, he probably would *not* have gone on to become all that if his very first soundtrack hadn't been such a masterpiece — unquestionably the single best soundtrack in the entire series (if only because all the other ones, one way or another, were derivative from it), and one of the 2 or 3 best soundtracks in the history of the LucasArts studio in general. Not only does it feature tons of catchy, inescapable, perennially hummable melodies (above all, the classic Monkey Island Theme and the grinning-carnavalesque LeChuck's Theme), but its weirdass mixture of quasi-Caribbean rhythms and instruments with slightly corny vaudeville hooks fits the game's general atmosphere to a tee. For instance, LeChuck's Theme has just a faint tinge of «ominousness» in its brass fanfare, just as the Ghost Pirate LeChuck himself is supposed to be more of a buffoon than a real threat. Meanwhile, Stan The Salesman's Theme sounds like a parody of some particularly obnoxious swaggy commercial — but played by the same phantom pseudo-Caribbean orchestra, further adding to the sensual confusion. At the same time, this is still a soundtrack: the most memorable themes, whisking away your attention, occur only during encounters with the game's characters — the music that plays while you're crawling through the jungle on Méléé or Monkey Island is more ambient in nature, enhancing your crazy experience but never detracting from it.

The Special Edition paid proper homage to the soundtrack, re-recording everything (with live instruments to boot!) and bringing audio quality up to fully modern standards, also throwing up some additional SFX effects for good measure. But the



most important improvement, of course, is the addition of a fully voiced soundtrack. Before that, the first fully voiced **Monkey Island** game was **The Curse Of The Monkey Island**, a fantastic title in its own right but seriously plagued by being chained to the game's own mythology; the voice acting was arguably its largest advantage over the two previous titles — and now, with full voiceovers for the first game provided mostly by the same actors who had already owned the characters in **Curse**, **Secret Of Monkey Island** once again took center stage. Dominic Armato is the perfect Guybrush, mixing innocence, arrogance, mischief, and hyper-activity like no one else can; Earl Boen provides the perfectly cartoonish-evil voice for LeChuck; Leilani Jones is the mysteriously cynical Voodoo Lady; and Alexandra Boyd was finally able to provide some sassy character for Governor Marley (she only got a few lines in 1997's **Curse**, what with being forced to spend most of the game in the form of a gold statue). Everybody, including the minor characters, does a great job — and it is arguably the voice acting, rather than the improved graphics, which now make the Special Edition into the default version of the game, leaving the original as more of a nostalgia package.

### *Interface*

The original **Secret** featured a fairly standard version of the SCUMM interface: about a third of the screen was given over to the command list ('open', 'close', 'push', 'pull', etc.) and the inventory list, from both of which you could construct the required phrases using the mouse or the cursor keys. The same space was used to display your dialog options, from which you were supposed to choose the most useful one (or the funniest one, which were quite often not the same thing). Pixel hunting was obligatory as well, and with the graphics still not quite up to par, this could sometimes be an unfortunate extra obstacle.

The Special Edition introduced some radical changes to the old design. The picture was expanded to fill up the entire screen, while the main commands were now tied to the mouse cursor — by tapping a keyboard shortcut or scrolling the mouse wheel, you could change its shape to 'open', 'close', 'push', 'give' or whatever else. A separate inventory window could now be opened up at will, rather than having to scroll through text descriptions of the objects at the bottom of the screen. Objectively, this completed transition to the point-and-click style is better because it lets you see more of what is happening (though it does not necessarily speed up the game, since you could use keyboard shortcuts to select the necessary command in the original game as well); subjectively, one can understand old veterans feel a little nostalgia for the interface hub, but as conservative as I tend to be in these matters, there is hardly anything I could come up with to defend it rationally.

There is little to add here, since the game is a «pure» adventure title and features no arcade / action sequences whatsoever (in fact, one might argue that the whole insult-based sword fight sequence is in itself a comic send-up of all digital swordfight

action à la Sid Meier). There are some time-based actions where you have to be quick (most notably, in the final battle against LeChuck), and there is a cool psychedelic maze which turns out to be a pseudo-maze upon close inspection (you cannot cross it without a navigator, and once you have your navigator, it is no longer a true maze), but other than that, it's just you and the SCUMM interface all along.

**Verdict:** *Still a spirit-boosting hoot after all those years*

**The Secret Of Monkey Island** remains a bit of a mystery — it is a game that you (probably) immensely enjoy while playing, but if you stop to think about *why* precisely you find it so enjoyable, the answer might not come quickly, or it might not come at all. It is clearly more than just a parody; a pure parody would never be so endearing and cherishable. On the other hand, it is not exactly a masterpiece of the post-modern approach — its primary audience, after all, was a teenage one rather than an adult one, and there's only so much witty cultural referencing you can throw into something like this without confusing or boring your target recipients. It does not make you care all that much about its characters, does not offer all that much in the adrenaline thrill department, does not provide any particular educational value... so why is it so awesome?



The answer, perhaps, lies in some deep psychological area: one thing that **Secret** did better than any LucasArts game before it, heck, maybe *any* game before it, is conveying that intangible spirit of total and utter freedom and irreverence which we all crave often without even realising it. Some formal boundaries were set here, but only to be broken at any time — clichés busted on their asses, tropes overturned and inverted wherever possible, genre rules ridiculed and scorned just because we can. Take a good look back at the past 20 years or so and think on how many video games produced in that timeframe have that absolute freedom of absurdist story-telling that **Monkey Island** delivers in spades — it is quite likely that you will see the gaming industry moving away from that freedom rather than endorsing and developing it. In fact, one could argue that even **Monkey Island** itself eventually fell victim to the chain-setting trend, though this is something that I would rather discuss in more detail in an upcoming review of the third game in the series. Meanwhile, **The Secret Of Monkey Island**, despite being less polished and detailed than its sequels, has the unbeatable benefit of setting its own rules — or, rather,

setting its own anti-rules — rather than following them. And now that, in our modern age, we have been blessed with the appearance of the Special Edition, fully updating the game's technical side for the 21st century player while managing to preserve and cherish the spirit of the original product, there is no reason whatsoever to stay away from one of the funniest games of all time unless you only play *Animal Crossing* or whatever.