

review: *Arc of Doom*

by Bill Jahnel

Type: CD-ROM Eco-Edutainment Game

Publisher: Sunstar (203/785-8111)

Retail Price: \$59.95

Street Price: \$45.00

Requires: 020 Macintosh or better; 256-color monitor; CD-ROM Drive; 4 MB RAM; 300k disk space.

Protection: None

“Edutainment” games had once been the ugly step-child of the gaming industry, until the blockbuster Carmen Sandiego series made geography and history come alive. More recently, the Miracle Piano System — though usually classified as purely instructional — gave people game interfaces in order to teach the basics in a manner your old metronome-toting piano teacher never dreamed. However, edutainment products walk a precarious line — they must live up to the demands of teaching useful information while presenting it in a format that is enjoyable and playable. *Arc of Doom* is a troubled mixture of good intentions, some good ideas, junior high to high school level science information on geology, plate tectonics, and volcanism, and some rather poor documentation and implementation decisions which in the end make *Arc of Doom*’s educational and entertainment sections much weaker than their internal information.

EcoWarriors. You begin as the leader of Beta Team, an investigative unit of the privately-funded Redmond Institute. The Institute has been investigating a bizarre series of earthquakes, volcanoes, and other seismic and geologic disasters which have been devastating the Earth. Notably, these disasters seem to be increasing and have no known natural origin; Alpha Team, the investigative unit that first went out to examine these issues, has disappeared and it is your job to go investigate these disasters.

Should It Take Longer To Set Up Than Play? The documentation on *Arc of Doom* is incredibly vague. The first time through when I played during the initial setup, I felt that more detailed instructions for an educational tool would have been valuable, as the initial “setup” of the adventure takes as long — if not longer — than the game itself takes to play. The

game can be broken into three phases: Setting up your character/team, reading the database, and playing the game (which has in itself two distinct phases).

et Rolling. . . Sloooowly. The leadup to the game takes a substantial time investment. Most of the QuickTime movies that introduce the problem are not optional, and there is no way to click on them to bypass ones you may have heard before. There is a “Secrets” set of files — a prodigious amount of background information that you must review in order to actually get to the game. Spending the time reading all the material in the secrets section and reviewing the QuickTime “vidlink” messages probably will take an average of twenty or more minutes. There is extensive information on plots, including an unfolding information that points to one of the Alpha Team members as having been a spy — a very promising starting premise, but the information takes a long time to wade through.

You then also must go through an extensive period of creating your character — getting a “Power Score” setting for various skills and attributes, selecting your third member of the team (the android FIS is always assigned as your second teammate), getting “target practice” and “flight practice” (actually both are crosshair-shooting events, where you use your wrist raygun/communication tool or the ship’s missiles to hit targets), and then finally, but certainly not least of all, wading through an enormous database of geoscience information.

Geology. The database is very good. It explains in brief detail, along with QuickTime and animated sequences, geologic and seismic formations, volcanism, gravity (and its effects on geologic activity). . . and thrown in with the geosciences, one brief lesson on light and color. The database is designed at the junior high or high school level. It presents the information

is a straightforward manner, along with boldfaced linked keywords you can click on where one can bounce back and forth to cross-related topics. It also has some QuickTime clips from those “natural disaster movies” that we all enjoyed in science (I hate to admit it, but there is something too cool as a kid about seeing lava erupt, starting from our earliest ventures in the world of paper maché volcanoes with baking soda, red food dye, and vinegar). When you get your original power scores, you are told that you can increase your science to super science by reviewing the database. Indeed, if you take the time to read the entire database you will spend at least an hour of time, even assuming you are skimming, just hitting everything you can, and not absorbing the information. However, reading it all can give you the superscience score skill of 10, and, as they say, be warned: you will be quizzed on this material later.

Finally — eventually — you, the android FIS, and Teammate #3 (whom you have selected from a number of candidates in the Redmond files, hopefully with skills that augment your own) get underway.

Does It Really Matter? The playing of the game can be broken into two phases: Exploring until you get to the bad guys’ underwater lair, and exploring the underwater lair itself. FIS, your android companion, is a Trekian Data knockoff, the other characters have amusing personalities as well. Unfortunately, even if you chose some team members for physical or bargaining skills, the number of times they get to use these skills is minimal. One very good idea that the game developed was that whenever a power score is checked — for luck, intuition, or puzzle-solving — you would see its representative icon flash briefly at the bottom left of the screen. A positive upbeat tone means you made the roll, a downer and you blew it. In implementation, though, you aren’t able to assign your teammates many of the tasks you might want them to — for example, they cannot talk to other people for you, which if your intuition skills are low might prove difficult for extracting information as you may not even get certain options to discuss.

However, in the end, this phase of the game — getting to the underwater base — does not matter. I say that, since, no matter if you make good or bad decisions during this exploration, no matter which way you go, you will end up in the underwater base, taken prisoner, and separated from your compatriots. It might happen earlier or later, but in each case you will be devoid once in the underwater base of the database or the aid of your companions.

[ater, Water, Everywhere](#). The underwater area is entertainingly rendered — the project designers spent a considerable amount of time here, and the bad guys have the coolest logo — from which you must escape your cell, regain your RayCom wrist weapon, and break into their systems in order to avert the impending disaster. There are not an overwhelming number of puzzles, but the door lock when you first try to get out of the cell is a very clever and entertaining puzzle — kudos to the game designers on that one. (If you actually got in by way of submarine, you won't wake up in that room, but during your exploration you will surely accidentally end up in one of the cells and still encounter the puzzle, so you won't miss it). There is also some shooting action in these hallways, and the shadguards or little mini-UFO guardbots are fun to nail while you look around.

The heart of the underwater complex is posing as a “minion” for a series of tests on — gasp — geology! They want well-educated minions here. Multiple-choice exams in three question batteries quiz you on the stuff from the database from the beginning of the game. This stuff is not the sort of thing that might come straight to mind — for example, do aa or pahoehoe basaltic magma flows go faster? — but is the heart of the “learning experience” in the game. And it is here — as both student and an educator — that I feel Arc of Doom failed to make some good choices in their implementation.

Since you are devoid of your android link to the Redmond Institute, you will have to have memorized a gigantic amount of database information before taking these “pop quizzes of Doom.” (Get all three questions wrong and you bite the big 'un). If you had superscience skill, the right answer will be highlighted in white after you get the wrong answer — a good touch. However, being able to answer the quiz question directly does not necessarily imply that you learned the material.

What this game had in potential — with all its tools at hand — could be amazing! For example, say they kept with their core multiple-choice quiz-system for learning (there may have been better ways, such as manipulation of physical models, which I think would have made points clearer. They come closer to this in the final puzzle, but it still is less satisfying than it could be). It could be if you could tap into the Redmond Database before entering the quiz chambers (there are six quizzes you must pass) that you were allowed the opportunity to review your information, but this option is not available. Or, say that if you got a question wrong, being the idiot minion that you were, you were then forced to review the material. (I thought it would have been fun if you failed three volcanism questions to be dropped in a pit of magma, but that's more a flight of fancy than a criticism). Instead of a multiple-choice exam, you could have stumbled across models of volcanoes that were being “tinkered with” — and by exploring the database, adjust gravity pressures or terraform or . . . well, you get the idea.

[rachnids and other Arthropods \(i.e., BUGS\)](#). The game also has some bugs that didn't get worked out — a few missing sequences where the game gives errors for “not finding a frame” — the good news is that the game does not crash, and while the bugs are intrusive when they occur, they are uncommon (though in one playsession I hit four) and do not screw up the game or gameplay.

[In Summary](#). Arc of Doom has great information for junior high to high school level teens on geology and cursory information on prismatic colors and gravity. As a database, it has a good interactive textbook approach. But its scheme for learning — study everything early on, have little reinforcement during the “game” part — and then test that knowledge mostly by multiple choice question exams — is not a key for real learning.

I found that after the exams I was better at guessing the answer, but not necessarily any much wiser walking away from the game on immediate knowledge of geology. This is too bad, because the aforementioned lock puzzle in the prison cell is a great example of what they could have been doing. There, you take a piece of knowledge on primary light color — how when primary light color “adds” to another primary it creates secondary colors, and how a primary added to its complement makes white light — and use it as a key to solving the puzzle. That type of puzzle uses applied knowledge in such a way that it is fun, and reinforces the knowledge conceptually.

In fact, I would bet that many of those who were equally informed on light and geology might walk away still not much remembering too much on basalt and silica contents, but could name the three primary and three secondary light colors. I urge Sunstar and other companies to look at innovative puzzles such as that one as keys to tools for learning, as the lock puzzle was a moment when Arc of Doom showed the potential as a superior edutainment project. I hope their future efforts will be better directed in this approach rather than the “spend an hour reading, memorizing, and slogging through information” for what amounted to forty-five minutes (or less, the first time out) of game time.

Oh, and I can't go without one last good spot: in the credits section there is an extremely funny blooper reel and the credits give a number of half-cocked grins as well.

Pros

- Very good geological textbook information
- Beginning plot is interesting and well woven
- Good graphics and music, underwater base nicely rendered
- Few puzzles, but of those one in particular is inspired

- Great QT Bloopers Reel at the end

Cons

- Takes forever to get into the game itself
- Rote scheme of learning — read everything first, be quizzed on everything later, not much reinforcement in between — the least valuable method for inculcating knowledge.
- Poor documentation
- Unable to utilize companion's skills to augment one's own many times
- Occasional missing frame bugs, but they do not crash game, just annoy