

review: **Flashback**

by Ivan

Type: Arcade/Adventure

Publisher: MacPlay (800/4MACPLAY)

Retail Price: \$59.95

Street Price: \$39.95

Requires: 256 color Mac, 7 MB free HD space, 3 MB free RAM, System 6.0.7 or later

Protection: None

lone figure flees from numerous pursuers, dodging laser fire at every step! Mercifully, he finds a door. . . open, dammit, open! A blast misses his head by inches, as the door opens, revealing a vehicle bay! The hunted leaps through, jumps onto a nearby hover bike, and guns it for all he's worth. The bike screams out into the warm night. Free! But not safe . . . the hunters are still on his trail. An enormous hover ship closes in on the figure, firing salvo after salvo. The figure weaves and turns, but he's hopelessly outclassed. Inevitably, a well placed shot sends him crashing down into the jungle below...

Welcome to the world of Flashback.

Arnold Would Love It. If you don't read the dumb mini-comic that comes with the game (and don't — it's really dumb, and doesn't offer any important information), then all you'll know, having experienced the events described above, is that you're on the run from some unpleasant people who are very determined to make your stay here as short as possible. You'll have no idea who you are, what you're doing here, or why someone is trying so hard to kill you. Your first priority, beyond simple survival, is to recover the holocube that was flung from you when you crashed into the jungle. Maybe it has some hint to your identity. . . ? And so, step by step, you must regain your precious memories, defending against vicious brutes at every step. On regaining your memory, you'll find out that the conspiracy that has hounded your every step is much vaster than you thought. . . it's part of a horrible alien plot to destroy not just you, but the entire human race! And only you have the critical information to save yourself and humanity, a secret locked away in your forgotten self.

I bet some of this sounds familiar, doesn't it? Much of Flashback's plot is strongly reminiscent of Arnold Schwarzenegger's "Total Recall."

Not that that's a bad thing. . .

[Let The Games Begin!](#) Though not related to Out of This World, Flashback is a spiritual sequel, and a natural extension to it. In Out of This World, control of your character was limited to walk/run/shoot and a couple of special cases where you could jump/swim/roll. But part of what makes Flashback superior is the amount of control you get to exercise over the character. In Flashback, your character walks, runs, performs several types of jump, rolls, and can draw and fire while doing most of the above. There's just nothing cooler than running into a roll and coming out of it with gun drawn, ready to blow your bewildered opponent away. All of these actions are beautifully animated, taking advantage of extensive rotoscoping. (For those of you who aren't animation buffs, rotoscoping is a technique where animators take film footage of people in motion, and then draw over that film, resulting in character animations that move exactly like real people.) And unlike OoTW, which used a flight simulator-like graphic engine, Flashback's graphics are all detailed bitmaps, allowing for much finer detail in your character's movements. The big exception to this are the cut scenes, such as the one described above, which are done in a style similar to OoTW, allowing for stunningly cinematic animated sequences.

Another big difference between OoTW and Flashback is the number of types of opponents. In

OoTW there were basically just the big gray guys, with an assortment of killer plants thrown in. In Flashback, there are numerous types of opponents, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Mutants will just fire until either you or they are dead, but can be tricked by throwing rocks behind them, which makes them turn around, leaving them an open target. Cyborgs will employ an acceleration device to zip past you and try to fire before you can turn and fire. Police carry shields and levitation backpacks, and are particularly nasty. Besides these enemies, there are also various electronic drones, exploding mice, and other bombs. And of course there are the aliens. I don't want to describe them, because the first time you meet them you'll be caught completely by surprise. Just take my word for it that they're extremely cool, and very tough.

You control all of Conrad's complex motions entirely via keyboard (the PC version allowed for joystick control, but I haven't found it in the Mac version yet). Unfortunately, the keyboard is not customizable, which is rather rude, as many players prefer to create their own keyboard settings. But on the bright side, the preset keyboard layout is pretty decent and includes triple redundancy, so you can pick which of the three layouts you prefer. All three layouts require both hands (unless you have really long pinkies). The basic keys are up, down, left, right — which do about what you'd expect — and an action key that acts as a modifier, letting you perform running jumps, standing jumps, running rolls, etc. The other two important keys let you access and use inventory items. The inventory comes up in a small window, and the game freezes while you're browsing, which makes it much less likely that you'll fumble and get the wrong item at critical moments. All in all, it's a pretty efficient setup considering how much it allows you to do.

Finally, I feel compelled to mention here the inevitable comparison to the Prince of Persia games. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, my personal opinion is that the Prince games have a bit more style and panache. But as I say, that's a purely personal preference. Ignoring that, I would say that Flashback at least matches, if not surpasses, any standards set in challenging gameplay or complex storytelling by either of the Prince games.

[The Wonderful World of DOS](#). I first played Flashback when it was released for the PC, and enjoyed it enough to buy the Mac version, partly to replay it, partly to see what kind of job MacPlay had done in porting it. And surprise! It turns out that Flashback is that most rare of rarities in the Mac gaming world: a decent DOS port. The graphics are done in uniformly smooth, high resolution, and the interface is simple and easy to use. OK, the truth is, it's not exactly a DOS port. The DOS version of Flashback was released over a year ago, but Interplay usually develops for cartridge platforms first, then for PC, and finally for Mac (and then for 3DO, but I have an unpleasant suspicion that order will change, putting us last again). So what we really have here is a port of a Super Nintendo or Sega Genesis game (you tell me the difference), hence the superior graphics and simple interface. It's ironic, really. . . Flashback comes to us by way of the PC, but is superior to many PC games because even Nintendoheads expect better than crappy DOS graphics and interface design.

Now that you've absorbed the previous paragraph, I have a confession to make. The fact that you read it is an indication that: 1) I'm big enough to admit the depths of my ignorance or; 2) I'm too lazy to rewrite the danged thing. Y'see, after writing it, I went back to check out the name of the group that did the Mac programming, to make sure I got it right. In doing so, I found a line in the about box that stated "High resolution artwork by Mike Kennedy and Dan Barry." High resolution. Huh. OK, so I was curious, and I dug up my original PC Flashback disks (only two of 'em, but four for the Mac version, hmm), reinstalled the PC version and booted it up. And I'll be damned if the graphics in the Mac version hadn't been completely enhanced! Jaggies gone, greater detail in all objects, improved color palette, you name it.

Another really interesting thing I'd forgotten about the PC version was. . . wanna guess? Yep, that's it. . . off disk copy protection! Page, column, line, word. I wasn't sure I could even find the manual, but after hunting through a pile of DOS game manuals, I was lucky enough to locate it. Found the keyword, played for awhile, and learned another interesting thing: it wasn't just a one time deal. Nope. You have to hunt through the danged manual every time you play.

One really nice thing we Mac people got that wasn't in the PC version is a vastly improved save feature. The PC version of Flashback reflected its cartridge origins, and instead of letting you save your game, you get a code. Since there are only 8 codes throughout the entire game, restoring to a code position usually means redoing an awful lot of work. Besides the codes, there were devices in the game that sort of allowed you to save. . . when you died, you would automatically be restored at the last save device, but these were only good during the current session, and quitting the program meant losing the save. In the Mac version, you still need to find one of these save devices to save, but thankfully, your game is saved to an external file just as you'd expect, and you can restore whenever you like. I suspect we can thank the programmers at Presage for this (and for removing the copy protection). . . these guys obviously understand the Mac community. Oh, and the codes still exist as a pleasant reminder of our superiority to PC gamers, and they do come in handy because they let you review the beautiful cut scenes at the end of each segment!

[Buy it buy it buy it!](#) I can say with sincerity that Flashback has entered my personal top 10 list of best games for the Mac. If you enjoyed Out of This World of the Prince of Persia games, you'll almost certainly enjoy Flashback. And if you have friends who played it on their PC, you'll get a great chuckle out of showing them what a real gaming machine can do.

Pros

- While keyboard layout is not customizable, thank goodness it's at least a good layout
- Terrific character animation
- Very challenging opponents
- Much longer than its predecessor, Out of This World

Cons

- Keyboard layout not customizable