

review: *Alone in the Dark*

by Roman Victor Loyola

Type: Adventure

Publisher: MacPlay (800/4MACPLAY)

Retail Price: \$59.95

Street Price: \$39.00

Requires: 256 color Macintosh with 3 MB of free RAM running System 6.0.7 or higher; 68040 or PowerPC processor suggested

Protection: None

acPlay's *Alone in the Dark* is your basic get from point-A to point-Z adventure. The game's storyline centers around Derceto, a haunted mansion once owned by artist Jeremy Hartwood. The ghosts and monsters that inhabit Derceto drove Hartwood insane, and caused him to hang himself. But, while everyone agrees that Hartwood had a few screws loose, nobody expected him to take his own life. It is up to you to investigate, and explore Derceto to uncover the mysteries behind the mansion.

To venture out on your mission, you choose from two characters: Edward Carnby, a private eye who needs the money and has a taste for the supernatural, or Jeremy's niece, Emily Hartwood, who cannot believe that her uncle would take his own life. As Edward or Emily, you must search through the rooms of Derceto, and find the proper clues to discover the source of Derceto's mystical madness. But the demons and ghosts of Derceto will do everything within their power to stop you, so you need to arm yourself properly, and work on your hand-to-hand combat skills.

No Need For Funny Looking Glasses. So, what makes this game different from other point-A to point-Z adventures? Well, instead of two-dimensional animation, *Alone in the Dark* uses three-dimensional polygon graphics. If you have seen or played 4D Boxing or the Sega arcade game *Virtua Fighter*, then you are familiar with the technology. To create full-bodied characters and objects, groups of polygons are connected to form shapes. The results are full motion, three-dimensional figures, instead of a flat, two-dimensional characters. And you cannot have three-dimensional characters in a flat world, so the mansion itself is three-dimensional and contains depth. For your viewing pleasure, *Alone in the Dark* switches automatically between nine different camera angles in each room. The combination of these three parts result in game play that gets you totally absorbed into the world of Derceto.

Home Alone? Your adventure starts in the attic of Derceto, working your way down through the rooms, picking up clues and objects along the way. You will want to collect as many items as you can find; there really are not any throw away items, and you will use the items to resolve the situations as they appear. Areas in certain rooms are designated as hot spots, and can trigger an attack by a zombie, ghost, demon, or any other creature within the vicinity.

If you are playing with the sound on and you trigger a hot spot, the “attack theme” plays. The music is a good warning before an attack, so once you hear the music, get ready to do battle, or run like the wind. To fight, you can use a weapon you have found, or you can throw blows with your fists and kick with your feet. And be on the lookout for bathrooms – they contain first aid kits that will restore any health you have lost during battle.

As you search each room, you will find books and parchments with information to help you. You will find different weapons to use against the creatures, and assorted items such as old military swords, musical records, and keys to use in different rooms to guide you closer to finding the secrets of Derceto. You are limited to the number of items you can carry, so be smart about your inventory. And keep your eyes open for uncharacteristic detail in each room – it could lead to a secret pathway or hiding place.

Everything is rendered for three-dimensional viewing. The option window allows you to examine each item you pick up, rotating it to give you an overall perspective. The rendering is clean and attractive, using bright and beautiful colors. The characters have the cornering that is familiar with polygonal construction, but the faces of Emily and Edward are well done and as round as possible. The creatures, such as the zombies, the mini dragons, and the biting spiders are artfully done, but their constant movement sometimes makes their detail hard to see. The animation, for the most part, is clean and smooth, although sometimes it looks as you are walking on an invisible layer on top of the floor.

A Room With A View. Since *Alone in the Dark*'s playing field is three dimensional, it is important to view the rooms at different angles. In addition to the hot spots that trigger attacks, there are spots that trigger different camera angles. The angles are adjusted to give you the best view possible. If you are in close quarters, the angles will be from above (like an overhead security camera) or from below (as if you were lying on the ground and someone was standing above you). In more standard sized rooms, the angles are adjusted to work with what your character is doing – for example, if you are browsing through a cabinet or trunk, you will get a view facing the furniture.

While MacPlay did a good job configuring the automatic non-battle views, the angles can get awkward during an attack. The distance between you and your opponent is important – too close and you will not be able to land a punch before the creature strikes; too far and you will get clobbered as you wind up for another blow. Certain angles make it difficult to judge distance. And, depending on the CPU you are using and the area of the room you are in, the game will hit the hard drive, causing a slow down in animation and dropped frames. This can make your fight scene choppy and throw your timing off. The only way to avoid this is to get in a good location as you are preparing to do battle.

Key Bored. You must use the keyboard to navigate through *Alone in the Dark*'s options. The mouse is used only to access the pull-down menu items, such as Save, Quit, etc. For instance, if you want to read a book you have found, you must hit return; that brings you to the three windows of the option screen. Then you use the up and down arrows to select the book in the first window, and the right and left arrows to move to the third window, the action window. You then use the up and down arrows to select the appropriate action. The second window tells you how much health you have left.

The space bar is used in combination with other keys whenever your character needs to perform an action, such as fight or search. You need to hold down a key to act – to throw a punch you must hold down the space bar and an arrow key. You cannot tap the buttons, or your character will not react.

Using the arrow keys can be slow and cumbersome. It would be much easier to use the mouse and click on the items and actions you want. There are quick keys to take you into the different modes, such as fight, search, and throw, but the key navigation and the key usage could have been improved by either reconfiguring them, or by using the mouse.

Foreclosure. The adventure itself is intriguing as you search for clues and figure out how to use the items you have collected. While the interface may take some getting used to, the graphics will make you forget about the keys you are pressing. The rooms and the objects are a pleasure to look at, with clean, colorful three-dimensional shapes and sizes. The creatures of Derceto are creepy, spooky, and intimidating. And all the characters move with fluidity with good speed. The graphics are *Alone in the Dark*'s strong point, separating it from your typical point-A to point-Z adventure.

Pros

- Excellent 3D graphics
- Great sound
- Automatic camera angles
- Fluid animation

Cons

- Clumsy keyboard interface
- Some camera angles inappropriate
- Certain areas can cause choppy animation