Alone in the Dark

Ugly zombies, a haunted house and devil worship – spooky stuff. Can a three-year-old game with gorgeous graphics but a dodgy control system still impress?

Forget Edward Scissorhands, meet Edward Pointyhands. How does he manage to pull the trigger on his gun?

In the beginning was the game. The game was an unadorned, simple thing. It didn't sound terribly exciting and it didn't look terribly exciting, but it was fun. It cost ten pounds and you spent several weekends trying to beat it. Then came the game as concept.

As Edward turns to leave the room, he's surprised by a
member of East 17 who got lost en route to the toilet.

The game as concept is an adorned, beautiful thing. It sounds exciting, looks exciting
and makes you irresistible to members of the opposite sex. It costs around £50 and you
play it three times. Once to find out what it's like, once to check it was really that bad,
and once to show your friends how bad it is.

Alone in the Dark, which was programmed three years ago, is game as concept to
some extent. It's one of those curious titles that you feel you've got to have. It was
groundbreaking in its time, and even today remains a bit of a classic, despite its
sometimes incredibly frustrating faults.

The plot? You, private detective Edward Carnby or Emily Hartwood, are investigating
the death of Jeremy Hartwood, who lived in a mansion called Derceto. Previous to his
death he had been carrying out translations and experiments, which appear to have
unleashed strange forces upon the house. It's an adventure game that offers arcade-
style fight sequences, movie-style graphics and clever camera angles.

Funnily enough, all of the characters in the game (including
this scary monster) were designed by Pablo Picasso.

Test of time

Alone in the Dark's polygon characters retain their individual look, and the constantly changing camera angles add to the atmosphere. However, the innovative graphics make actually playing this game an ordeal – one minute you're happily wandering across a room away from the camera, the next the view changes and you're walking into the camera. You're at the mercy of which way the camera chooses to swing, which makes fighting an aggressive zombie frustratingly difficult for the first few times, until you start to get the hang of things.

To exacerbate this problem, Alone in the Dark adopts the control system used on the PC: it uses arrow keys. Unfortunately, on a standard Mac keyboard the arrow keys are all in a row, which means that it's nigh on impossible to move about quickly. Because the programmers haven't included a key definition screen either, you're stuck with their alarmingly unintuitive choices. If you have an extended keyboard, however, you're laughing.

Now what sort of a devil worshipper would live in a house like this? Take a peek through the keyhole.

Alone in the Dark has a steep learning curve, although after a while things start to make much more sense. Don't expect to be eased into this game – give it a couple of minutes and you'll already have been attacked by a strange bug-eyed monster and a pink-haired zombie. If your reactions aren't good, you'll die, repeatedly, and you'd be well advised to use the Save Game function regularly. On the other hand, it's a comprehensive, long game, and if you're looking for tough opposition, you'll find it here.

And Alone in the Dark has lots of other plus points. The number of weapons it offers, and innovative ways of using them, means that fighting is never boring. The puzzles are always entertaining, if sometimes annoyingly obscure. Then there's the variety and

weirdness of the monsters, who creep up on you in perfect timing with the music – your heart will occasionally miss a beat. And there's the atmosphere – a combination of classic graphics, an enormous house full of hidden rooms, clever camera angles and sinister music. The game as concept might not be perfect, but it offers a few unsettling moments and lots to think about for a while.

Josef Morrell

Price: £44.99. Out: now.
Requires: Mac II or better, 2Mb of RAM, System 7 or later, 256-colour monitor, 7Mb of hard disk space.
Contact: Infogrames on 0171 738 8199.

Graphics 75%

It would have been 90%, but those great looking graphics really don't help the gameplay along at all.

Sound 90%

Excellent. Hoots, whistles, creaking floor boards, crisp gun shots and groaning zombies.

Gameplay 75%

Great to look at, and the adventure part is fun, but the control system makes the fight sequences frustrating.

MACFORMAT rating 75%