

review: Heaven & Earth

Reviewed by Douglas Kiang

Type: Puzzle/problem solving
Manufacturer: Buena Vista Software
Retail Price: \$59.95
Mail Order: \$36.00
Requires: Mac Plus or better, System 6.0.7
Protection: One-time manual-based question
IMG Rating: ✓✓✓✓✓

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

The master’s final words echo in your head as you gaze up the long, twisting path. Ahead of you lies a vast mountainous landscape, enshrouded in clouds. As you climb higher, the mist clears bit by bit, offering tantalizing glimpses of the wondrous scene that awaits you at the conclusion of your pilgrimage. For now, however, only the path lies before you, and it is on the Path that you must concentrate, step by step, meeting each challenge, until you reach your destination. A bitter wind kicks up dust in swirls and eddies about your feet. You clutch your shawl tighter about your neck and move on.

The Game. Heaven & Earth is a lavish, beautifully designed game that is as much of a pleasure to look at as it is to play. It is composed of three segments: a deceptively simple Card Game, an interactive Pendulum, and nearly 600 illusions, puzzles, and brainteasers that test your dexterity and problem-solving skills. Once you have gained some knowledge of the different puzzles, you can proceed on to the Pilgrimage, a series of 108 challenges that comprise your journey to the mystical Tibetan kingdom of Shambhala.

Heaven & Earth ships on six floppy disks. The reason for this is that there are actually three separate versions of the game included in the package—a black and white version, and both 12" and 13" color versions. You must install a specific version for a specific format (which means that PowerBook owners may have to maintain two sets of resources on their hard drive, b/w for the PB's monitor and color for the home monitor.) However, since each version is designed specifically for that format, Heaven & Earth’s beautiful 256-color images entirely

fill the screen, with none of the “letter-box format” black border around the game. The interface is smooth and professionally done, with both a menu bar and certain areas within the screen that you can click on to navigate to other parts of the game. The sounds and music that make up the game are excellent original sounds that enhance the gameplay. Heaven & Earth is truly a “multi-sensory” experience, in that the sounds can give you equally as much information as the visual cues.

What is perhaps most attractive about Heaven & Earth is the fact that, aside from the Pilgrimage, you progress in a nonlinear fashion, skipping around to different puzzles and games as you desire. When you tire of one puzzle, you can try another one simply by choosing it from the screen. The care that the programmers have taken to tailor the game to a specific format is readily apparent, especially in the black and white version. While many games simply duplicate the color game in black and white, Heaven and Earth makes creative use of shapes and shading to create a black and white version whose gameplay is equivalent to that of the color original.

Heaven & Earth’s manual is thorough and informative, but many players will want to simply dive right in and explore. Much of the fun in these puzzles lies in figuring out what to do and which rules apply in which situation, and the game sports an excellent online help system that explains most of what the manual tells you about each specific type of puzzle.

Illusions Of Grandeur. Most of Heaven & Earth’s puzzles are accessed through a separate screen called the Illusions gateway. They are organized into twelve categories, with titles ranging from “Cursor Warping” to “Anti-Maze.” Each category contains 48 separate puzzles divided into four levels of difficulty: Ocean, Desert, Mountain, and Sky. This means that in total, there are nearly 600 optical illusions and brainteasers in this section of the game alone! This should be enough to keep any puzzle fanatic busy for quite a while. The puzzles have been very carefully arranged so that they build up in difficulty, always starting off a level with a few easy ones to introduce you to the concept, then getting progressively harder. Some of them can be solved in a matter of seconds, while certain memorable puzzles took me over an hour to complete. Some will only reveal themselves after you have given up in frustration, walked away, and started doing something else. The puzzles are unique and original, and the graphics and sound effects are superlative. You can at any time skip ahead to any of the later levels by selecting them from the menu bar; you don’t have to worry about access codes or anything of the sort. The menu bar also serves as a handy way to chart your progress, as it places a check mark next to puzzles you have completed.

The puzzles deal mostly with manipulation of various shapes, tiles, and objects. One particularly clever category deals with three-dimensional blocks that will make you feel like a character in an Escher drawing. Another great category consists of all sorts of variations on the sliding tile puzzle. (Thought Apple’s “Puzzle” DA was hard? Get a friend to help you do these!) Overall, the Illusions section provides an enormous variety of puzzles that are both clever and intelligent, and is equally effective as a temporary diversion or long-term obsession.

Slow And Steady Wins The Race. The Pendulum section is billed as more of an “anti-arcade” game, and as such, it may be frustrating to those expecting an action game. More traditional arcade games focus on speed and fast reflexes, but here these skills take a back seat to patience and steady, well-timed motions. The object of this section is to direct a large pendulum over several vortices on the game field by moving the mouse. Veteran arcade gamers may want to jump right in and swing the mouse wildly all over the field, but true to Heaven & Earth’s philosophy, there are kinder, gentler ways of doing this. By moving the mouse slowly and steadily, you can gradually affect the direction of the pendulum’s swing. I found it helpful to wait until the pendulum was at the apex of its swing, then nudge it in the

right direction. Once you get the hang of it, there are certain elements in the Pendulum section that should appeal to action game players. Hand-eye coordination and proper timing are key to solving the four levels of the Pendulum. And on top of it all, if you find yourself slipping into a calm, meditative state and murmuring mantras under your breath, don't say I didn't warn you. :)

It's In The Cards. The Card Game is, like all the other aspects of Heaven & Earth, beautifully designed and presented. Inspired by the Japanese game of hanafuda, the object of the game is to win points by choosing cards from a dealt pile and combining them to create high-scoring hands, or "tricks." Certain cards depict astral phenomena and serve as bonus multipliers when combined with other cards. Some cards have animated designs that are accompanied by wonderful sound effects when they are selected. You create different combinations of cards by dragging them over one another with the mouse; when you create a match you hear an audio cue and the info bar tells you what the point value of that particular match is. To get more information about the cards, you can click on a card and select "Get Info" from the menu bar, which will give you the season, the type of landscape, and the bonus value. Unfortunately, you cannot use "Get Info" on cards you are thinking about choosing from the dealt pile, because as soon as you click on the card to select it, you automatically choose it. This shortcoming aside, the integration of a point-and-click interface and the menu bar is well-thought out and works wonderfully with this game.

The Card Game is fairly simple to learn, but it may take a while to learn all of the combinations (this is essential in order to get the high scores you will need to attain in the Pilgrimage.) Here, having the manual handy will be very useful, so that you can refer to the scoring chart. There are many possible hands, each with their own point values, so this can be a bit complicated to follow at first. Still, much of the fun comes in experimenting with different combinations; the program will give you a breakdown of the points for any given combination.

We're Off To See The Lama... Finally, once you have had some experience in the different types of puzzles, you have the option of continuing on to the Pilgrimage. Each of the 108 puzzles in the Pilgrimage will be one of the types you encountered elsewhere in the game: it could be a Pendulum puzzle, one of the 12 categories of Illusions, or even a Card Game in which you are dealt a specific number of cards and you need to form combinations with them to reach a given point total. These puzzles, however, were created especially for the Pilgrimage; they are not merely duplicates of puzzles seen earlier. The Pilgrimage is the one area of Heaven & Earth that is linear; you must complete each of the steps in sequence to reach the end of the pilgrimage. Along the way, you are shown a mist-shrouded scene; as you complete each step, the scene is cleared block by block, so that as you continue on the path to enlightenment more and more becomes clear to you.

Overall, Heaven & Earth is a professional, well-designed, well-balanced game, with much that will appeal to just about any type of game player. It uses a "lookup" form of copy protection, but only asks a question the first time you start up and then usually does not request one again unless the application is moved. However, the questions it asks are directly related to the gameplay, so if you've played the game at all, chances are you will know the answers to many of the questions without dragging the manual around with you. This is a very unobtrusive form of copy protection, and as such it is to be commended. The graphics are outstanding, and on a PowerBook I found the black and white version of the game quite well done. It is an excellent game to play with a companion, as everyone invariably has different skills. In Heaven & Earth, undoubtedly everyone will find something he or she is good at.

Pros

- Beautiful 256-color full-screen graphics
- Many original, creative puzzles
- Minimal copy protection
- Smooth interface
- Online help

Cons

- Requires lots of disk space