

neak Peek: Return to Zork

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NOTE: Screen shots and information presented in this article are based on a pre-release version of Return to Zork and are subject to change before final release. This article is not a review.

You are standing by a white house.

Behind house

You are standing behind a white house. In one corner is a small window which is slightly ajar.

> go southwest, then go northwest

West of House

You are standing in a field west of a white house with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.

> open mailbox...

And so begins Return to Zork (RTZ), an epic adventure game brought back to life by the folks at Infocom. But unlike its predecessors, Return to Zork is practically nothing like the old text adventure games of the late 70's and 80's. The above words are seen only during the self running introduction of RTZ, and serve only as a reminder of how games used to be...back then. In fact, not a single line of dialogue appears in the game. The 90's version of Zork instead features state-of-the-art graphics, animation, music and gameplay all rolled up onto one shiny CD-ROM, it self a product that has proliferated in the 90's.

The original Zork series began in 1979 and thanks to its strong cult-phenomena following, the first five Zork games went on to become the highest selling text adventure games of all time. In all, over 3.5 million copies of the original adventures were sold worldwide. For some years the series was all but dead but was brought back in 1993 with the release of Return to Zork for PC-compatibles. Since its October release, RTZ PC sold over 500,00 units worldwide and is now making it's way to the Mac, with a few improvements.

So The Story Goes... It was once believed that the Great Underground Empire of Zork was destroyed, and that all the evil magic was gone for good. Not true...not true... As we all know evil magic can not die, it just waits....waits for the right moment, the right time to emerge, the right time to regroup and return to claim its dominance.

Suddenly the nightmares have become common again. People have started to vanish....POOF, gone forever! Even buildings have become to disappear. Who is brave enough to stop this madness? You, of course! You are the traveler and your quest is to save the underground empire from the evil forces that hold it captive. To win, you must solve numerous difficult puzzles in the game as you try to save humanity from the evil Morphius.

Enter Zork. As you enter the land of Zork, you realize the task ahead of you will not be an easy one . Challenging puzzles, tricks, and evil magic make RTZ an intriguing interactive adventure of danger. You start atop a lone and desolate hill, and must find your way through the town of West Shanbar and eventually into the mysterious underground empire of Zork.

You navigate your way through the world by pointing your mouse in the direction you wish to go. A small red arrow will tell you whether you can go in a certain direction. Clicking down will advance you to the next screen (ala MYST). A tight fist on the other hand means you cannot go in that direction or cannot pick up a certain object (which means you won't have to click everywhere on the screen to see if you can pick up and object). Most of the screens in RTZ are static but you are sometimes offered some visual treats in the form of full screen, full motion video. For example, when you descend from aboveground to the underground, the screen comes to life with beautiful full motion graphics (ala 7th Guest). The full screen, full motion video uses Activision's own proprietary compression technology to achieve movies that run more smoothly than Apple's QuickTime.

ne of the unique features of RTZ that separate it from other adventure games is the ability to interact AND converse with other characters. Twenty-three known actors (including Jason Hervey from The Wonder Years (the brother), Robin Lively from Doogie Howser and Twin Peaks) and Sam Jones (Flash Gordon in the film Flash Gordon)) were cast in various roles for the game. When talking to the characters, you can choose your own conversational tone (bored, mad, interested, etc) and it will elicit different responses from the characters you meet.

Other innovative features include an MIT-conceived interface that appears only when you need it. The action interface is a diamond shape palette that allows you to “build” actions. For example, you can pick up a cup and hold the cup over the palette in different areas of the palette to either throw the cup, drink the cup, put the cup in your inventory, etc. To access your inventory you simply press the space bar and the familiar inventory box appears.

[The Feature List.](#) In addition to the full motion video, cast of Hollywood actors, and innovative interface, RTZ boasts a fully orchestrated musical score, over one hour of digitized speech, and a camera and tape recorder feature that allows players to record images and dialog and play them back at another time.

The graphics in Return to Zork are nothing short of spectacular. The original images in the game were created in a 3D program called Infini-D for the Macintosh. Ironically, the graphics for RTZ were created originally on Macs but the game was released first on PC-compatibles. But unlike the PC version, the Mac version’s graphics of RTZ are 640 X 480, not 320 X 200. Because of the increased file sizes of the higher resolution graphics, some of the full motion video was left out of the Mac version so it would fit on one CD-ROM. In this writers opinion, a welcome solution.

[Returning in June.](#) Some purists and fanatics of the old Zork series will no doubt cry out that Zork is a text adventure game and you’ll probably here a complaint or two when Return to Zork, the GRAPHIC adventure game is released this June. But in this day and age of high-speed computers, advanced graphics techniques, and CD-ROM proliferation, the fact that we can’t live in the past becomes quite self-evident. The people at Infocom/Activision have come to realize that by producing a “modernized” version of Zork that takes a step into the future and not into the past. But at least it’s comforting to know that nostalgia is not dead and that it’s O.K. to look back, to wish for the past, and to wish you could one day return to Zork, a place of magic...