eview: The Magic Death: Virtual Murder 2

by Bill Jahnel

Type: Murder Mystery CD-ROM
Publisher: Creative Multimedia
Retail Price: $49.99
Street Price: $24.99
Requires: 256 color, 3.5 MB RAM, QuickTime, CD Rom Drive
Protection: None

he capacity of CD-ROM games to store long QuickTime films was first utilized in a mystery gaming environment by the Sherlock Holmes Series.   The ability for actors to be playing suspects interviewed in these "movies" and the large data capacity made for more interesting and interactive possibilities in the often-neglected mystery game genre.   The Virtual Murder series is another hat thrown into the mystery game arena.   The richness of ideas and the script of the game, coupled with strong production values, should have made the Magic Death a superb and solid piece of mystery entertainment.   Sadly, an interesting premise and many well-acted and engaging characterizations of suspects are marred by a desperately flawed interface and sparsity of documentation.

The Basics.   The Magic Death is a timed game, but it takes an opposite approach from the Sherlock Holmes series.   The Holmes games keep track of your time and then show how you did against what the minimum need to solve the case would be.   (This information is usually useless, since there is no way to "pre-know" which suspects to interview and matching the "Holmes time" could only be done by sheer luck, not deduction.)   The Magic Death's premise is that "Most major crimes are solved within the first six hours of investigation." Like the Holmes games, each event (a suspect interview, looking at a piece of evidence, gathering background data) takes a certain amount of time.   Playing the Magic Death is a race against the clock in order to solve the case before you are pulled off of it.

The game has a series of events in order to make an arrest.   First, you are introduced to the murder of a young doctoral candidate doing anthropological work on Haitian religious practices.   Her death, in what appears to be a form of Voodoo ritual, is explained in an introductory QuickTime movie which can be replayed without any time penalty.   You are then able to examine a series of clues -- from physical evidence to suspect interviews -- each

with their own time costs.   After you feel you have gained enough information, there is a gauntlet to be passed in the form of the Press Conference, where you must answer 7 out of 10 of their multiple-choice questions about the murder.   If you are unable to you are returned to gather more evidence, having lost time in the press conference.   Once past the press, you may select up to 3 of the 12 suspects for a second, more in-depth interview. During these interviews your case may be shored up, and you might even extract a confession.   You are placed in a final screen -- the warrant -- where you must choose from various columns such as the murderer, the motive, the method, and time of death.   Once these facts are accurately confirmed by the judge, you are brought to a final screen interview wherein you find out if you have caught your elusive prey, or if you must try again -- assuming you still have enough time on the clock if you have erred.

The Interface -- The Good, the Bad, and the Unexplained.   The Magic Death is frustrating because there are so many good ideas packed into it which are then inadequately handled, implemented, or explained.   The instruction booklet in the CD Jewelcase, for example, neither explains that you might want to copy the main program onto hard drive for increased performance, nor even how to save the game in progress.   There are a series of important navigation ICONS on the left, for example, which are NEVER explained in the Read Me, the instruction booklet, nor the help file.   This made accessing the murder mystery a hundred times more frustrating than necessary.   (For players information, the ICONS mean "Go back one screen," Help (that's obvious), Listen to a piece of rumour or hint, Access your electronic notebook, find out how much time a task takes to implement, Quit the game (which then will allow you to save if you Quit, but ONLY if you go to Quit -- only mentioned in a rather unintuitive place in the online help and certainly not intuitive for a player wanting to save their position to click on the Quit button hoping that they can save.)

Some interface features are really rather remarkable, such as in the investigation of the physical crime scene.   When you do so, you are given the ability to look at things close up and then run various forensic tests -- this gives a real hands-on experience to investigating the murder.   You may also interview each of the twelve suspects, have a search made of the apartment (which you do by looking at a floorplan and clicking on each individual room to be searched), go ask question of a Voodoo expert, and even look at physical evidence -- an audio tape, a diary, a financial statement -- which was left on the victim's desk.   If your search in the crime scene turns up any fingerprints or blood, you can then get physical evidence from the twelve suspects -- their bloodtype, height, weight, shoe size, and whether or not their fingerprints matched any fingerprints found.

Another extremely good feature is the notebook.   It records the most pertinent facts of each clue you pick up.   While you may not write your own notes in it, the notebook provides an easy access for information and is one of the strongest features of the game's interface.

The Press -- the Fourth Estate goes stupid: One of the game's greatest flaws is in its implementation of its gauntlet routine.   Like in Sherlock Holmes (or any other authoring of a murder mystery game) there comes a time when you must check to verify the player has indeed made the proper logical deductions without simply guessing.   The Press in the Magic Death serve this function as does the Warrant section later.   However, the questions generated by the press are said to be "tough" by your superior -- more accurately, they are "Stupid."   Some of the details are indeed important to solving the murder.   Other details -- such as the obsession with the weight of the women suspects in the game -- is of questionable value and extremely stupid considering that the player is under a time frame where they are supposed to eschew looking for unimportant details.   A better implemented databank of possible questions (which would have been more pertinent to solving the crime) would have made this area much better.   Worse, the electronic notebook, one assumes, is there so you can take a minimum of paper notes.   What a surprise to find out when you are in the press conference that you can't access your own notes on the crime!   Since (once again) this is an entirely UNDOCUMENTED feature, players are left "holding the bag."

Another interesting quirk is that the game does not check to see if you've even gathered information   in order to answer questions.   Therefore, it often behooves the player to go in, collect the meaningless random data on an unsaved game, then return to "really" play the game.   But circumventing a game's quirks by cheating does not speak well of the implementation and design.

Lastly, it would have been nice in the wrap-up to have a replay of the events leading up to the murder in a single QuickTime movie.   How one murder, for example, was able to carry out the murder is questionable at best. . . and certain other pieces of physical evidence would be better explained in a wrap-up that are otherwise left hanging.

Bugs.   In addition, the Magic Death has an annoying habit of not always being able to find the file it is looking for.   I had this happen three time to me -- once in the help files, and twice when looking at the diary.   The reason for this appears to be that the Magic Death is searching for a file "Diary1" in the data folder (out of a series of diary files -- "diary2", "diary3", "diary4", etc.) but the name of the first diary file is simply "Diary" without the number.   Luckily, clicking on that file will then get the game going again without harm to the position or time in the game.

Getting Right Down to it.   The Magic Death is a well-written, well-acted, poorly implemented and tested game.   It offers 3 endings, but those endings are only generated by small

alterations in physical evidence (foot- and fingerprints, for example) and not by rewriting much of the testimony.   (However, the murder's end stories are fun to go through!)   There is nothing more painful than to see what supreme potential this product had and then to see flaws in implementation cause it to waste that potential.   (It does not surprise me, for example, the game won a Bronze Envision award for its script.)

At a street price around $25 / 30 as a stand-alone or about $20 tacked onto a bundle, the production value alone should be worth looking into.   But Creative Multimedia would do well to take into consideration some documentary enhancements, alteration of the counterproductive press gauntlet, and full access to the electronic notebook before releasing the future generations of this series.   The two games in production now (which will be released as the "Who Killed. . . ." series) do promise to be even more tantalizing, with expansions on some of the strength of the Magic Death (such as multiple crime scenes to investigate) and improvements on the multiple-ending implementations (changes in testimony and other features, which will expand the re-playability of these games.)   I sincerely hope they will fix the other aforementioned problems, because the strength of Shannon Gilligan's writing, the strong performances of the actors, and the innovations which are in the game (such as in collection of physical evidence) have all the ingredients for a superior product line in the future.

Pros
• Inexpensive CD Rom
• Lush graphics and production
• Mystery / plot itself engaging and well-written
• Suspects diverse, interesting, and well-acted
• Innovative approach to Physical evidence gathering
• Electronic notebook automatically logs pertinent information
• Multiple Endings
• No copy protection

Cons
• Poor to almost nonexistant documentation; documentation that exists covers some things that are unnecessary and omits even how to save the game in progress
• The electronic notebook cannot be accessed when it is needed, making duplicating writing down things in the notebook onto paper essential and destroying value of this feature
• Gauntlet to pass to second level (Press) asks many non-pertinent questions, working against theme of collecting only information that is important to solving the case
• Multiple endings based on very small variations, making re-playability only minimally entertaining
• No "Wrapup" of actual murder facts and information, in order to explain otherwise unexplained phsyical evidence.
• Unfound file bug exists