eview: Critical Path

by Ross Scott Rubin

Type: Action
Publisher: MediaVision
Retail Price: $59.95

Street Price: $45.00
Requires: 25 MHz 68030, 640 X 480 256 colors, 4 MB RAM (2 MB free, 150 KB/sec CD-ROM drive)
Protection: None

he Doomsday clock has struck midnight, killing 90 percent of the Earth's population. Your base is eventually laid waste and you must venture off to a haven in your Apache chopper with three comrades . Unfortunately, technical problems force you down and a missile sends Kat's helicopter twirling down to its demise. Both your pilot Grier and Kat's passenger, Nighthorse, are killed at the hands of evil traps.

 Critical Path, which ships with the Mac and Windows version on the same CD-ROM, begins as Kat makes her way into the fortress to supply you with an important helicopter part that you both need to escape. You find yourself in a control room whose screen layout superficially resembles the old remote control in Drew Pictures' Iron Helix. Critical Path, though, has far more toys to play with. A series of buttons to the right of the quarter screen video display control various   machines within the factory while a detonator responds to numeric codes. How are you going to figure out those codes, though?

Funny you should ask. In front of all this virtual gadgetry lies the scribblings of Dr. Minh, your basic homicidal psychopath whose voice bears an uncanny resemblance to Marvin the Martian's. This guy is so wacky that, in addition to having built a bizarre prison filled with deadly traps, he actually mixes upper and lower case letters in his writing. Pretty scary, eh boys and girls?

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Running Numbers. The notebook stores all the codes for working the factory gear, bombs and big guns that will allow you to save Kat's tail (she has nine lives, get it?). The codes are so thinly veiled that they may as well be outlined in neon. Minh refers to such cryptic terms as the number people dial in an emergency, the temperature at which paper burns and Satan's number. Mensa members flee in fear.

Critical Path is very finicky about the precise timing in which you set these codes because, you see, Minh is sitting pretty in his own control room fighting your codes with his own. Anyone whose ever attached two mice to a Mac and fought for control over the screen will appreciate the weeks of amusement this can bring. Minh is also fond of popping onto your video screen, but is about as intimidating as the Pillsbury dough boy. For the timing-impaired, Kat occasionally screams that if you've got any way to help her, do it NOW!

Along the way, you'll get to play with plenty of machine guns, molten metal, electrocution chairs, and death-delivering conveyer belts. Kat complains often and blows away a lot of mutants, but when you get stuck with having to save her it's a matter of plug-and-chug to find the right code. Those with a feminist bent may find it refreshing to have the herone Kat as a tough, cussin' survivalist who is equally at home flying a helicopter as she is wasting psychos with major league firearms. However, you're always looking over her shoulder like a guardian angel, ready to spring a trap or big explosion just when it looks like the shot's going to hit the fan.

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There has been worse acting on a CD-ROM than that by Eileen Weisinger, but the inane, whiny lines she has been fed are sometimes excruciating, especially when you have to suffer through the same scene several times in a row. It's too bad Critical Path's designers took themselves so seriously. This game needs an enema.

Critical Pan. Anyone who has played admittedly less-complex Dragon's Lair-type games will understand that, once you understand what to do when, game play flies by in well under an hour and it's much like watching a bad movie with rendered scenery. Until that time, save often and deal with Critical Path's DOS-like menu structure

Sorry Kat, but this is one CD better suited to a litter box than a jewel box.

Pros
• Should sit well with nostalgic Dragon's Lair fans
• Runs reasonably well on older hardware
• Takes advantage of 16-bit graphics
• CD-ROM makes an attractive coaster

Cons
• Some gratuitous profanity
• Video is a "quarter-screen killer"
• Codes are ludicrously simple
• Repetitive, linear play
• "It's just a game. A sick game."   —Kat