

review: **Return to Zork**

by Eileen Mullin

Type: CD-ROM Adventure

Publisher: Activision/Infocom

Retail Price: \$79.95

Street Price: \$49.95

Requires: LCIII/68030-25 MHz or faster Mac with 4 MB RAM (2,500K available), System 7.0 or higher, 13-inch color monitor with at least 256 colors, single speed CD-ROM drive. Either 100K, 3 MB, or 50 MB hard disk space, depending on install.

Protection: None

ife used to be a lot simpler for hapless adventurers. Got your lamp? Check. Got your sword? Right here. If you could draw a map, you could act on all those fortune cookie messages—go on a long journey, meet interesting strangers, and collect great treasures.

Now, with Return to Zork, the classic computer adventure game meets the MTV generation. In-your-face animated graphics and sounds predominate as you explore a vast, complex world plagued by evil forces. Familiarity with the five previous games in the celebrated Zork series isn't a prerequisite, but will definitely add to your enjoyment of the game.

Open immediately. As Return to Zork begins, you're the new grand prize winner of the IT&L Vacation Sweepstakes, entitling you to a free trip to the Valley of the Sparrows resort. What happens next, though, isn't like anything you've seen in those commercials with Ed McMahon and the giant checks. Soon after arriving in the newly renamed Valley of the Vultures, you come across an even worse example of urban blight: the town of East Shanbar has disappeared building by building, and the neighboring West Shanbar is heading for the same fate. Can you help figure out what's going on here?

Grue Confessions. Conversations with the characters who cross your path—along with poring over all reading material you find—will bring you up to date on recent sinister events and give you some historical background. A wide variety of logic puzzles are at the heart of your travels. Although you need to solve certain puzzles before you can access other areas of the game, if you get stuck at any one point there are always plenty of other avenues to explore and puzzles to attend to in the interim.

Your conversations are integral to unraveling many of these puzzles; in this game it is essential that you reach out and touch someone. An innovative feature lets you express one of several emotions to your conversational partner. Are you interested in what they have to say? Bored? Suspicious? Most of the possibilities offer predictable responses—what would you expect to happen if you threatened a surly

sorcerer-type? Sometimes, though, taking a certain tone of voice will produce an unexpected clue to progressing in the game.

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[To and Frobozz](#). You advance to new locations by moving your cursor (a hand icon) until it changes to a red navigation arrow indicating a possible exit, then clicking. Your cursor changes to a magnifying glass icon when you click an object you can zoom in on for closer inspection. As you sweep your cursor, identifying labels appear over the objects that you can interact with in each location. As in the text-based Zork games, careful examination of new surroundings helps you avoid overlooking valuable clues. Graphics for the still scenery are colorful and attractive, although not as stylized as those in *Myst* or *Journeyman Project*.

Pressing the space bar reveals your inventory. As in many other computerized adventure games, your inventory items can be used individually, in conjunction with other objects or with other creatures. Logic should be your guide, but when you're stumped a certain amount of trial-and-error usually pays off.

Whenever you select an object, another character, or use one object with another, a diamond-shaped action interface appears. The interface consists of an array of smaller diamond-shaped icons with textual labels of all possible actions you can take with the materials at hand. On the plus side, this interface eliminates the limitations of the text-based parser native to the earlier Zork games and other text-adventure games. Sadly, though, this feature removes a lot of the mystery of putting together two items and seeing what happens. If you're barking up the wrong tree, you may not even get the chance to be disappointed; the interface just won't let you try out your hare-brained schemes. Worse, it's all too easy to select—and carry out—by accident an action you didn't intend to choose. This is a problem when you accidentally throw a glass instead of taking a drink, or strike the blacksmith with your sword instead of just handing it to him.

There are three useful objects permanently housed in your inventory that optimize *Return to Zork's* interactive features. An instant camera with an inexhaustible supply of film lets you photograph every noteworthy scene or individual you run across. A tape recorder picks up every spoken utterance you hear, which you can play back as needed. Finally, a TeleOrb is the medium through which the Wizard Trembley speaks to you, offering running commentary, hints, and brief history lessons. As you meet characters, you

can show them all the photos you're carrying and play tape recordings for them. The actors will often respond with essential info or hints for dealing with the subject of the photo. This puts you in a role better suited to Brenda Starr than a hapless adventurer, but hey, sound bites have never been more valuable. Using these tools often and with gusto are essential to completing the game successfully.

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Flathead Of The Class. You can measure your progress by the ongoing awarding of points (out of a possible 225) for successful actions on your part. There doesn't seem to be any real copy protection. A pop quiz early in the game regarding the Great Underground Empire's calendar system may send you to the game's reference manual, called the Encyclopedia Frobozzica, but the correct answer can also be found indirectly by searching newspaper clippings you find in the game.

Return to Zork requires careful, methodical play and often compels you to retrace your steps to get items or carry out actions in order to move ahead. Patience is a major virtue here.

There are a number of actions that will get you killed but it's possible for you to save your game at any point in the adventure as a hedge against treading into unsafe waters. You can save multiple games and access up to 99 saved games at any given time. The interface for loading and saving games forces you to keep all your game files in the same folder, but you'd probably do that anyway.

Glitches. Some system extensions and disk compression software may cause conflicts; the manufacturer recommends turning off non-essential extensions before playing. Virtual memory must also be turned off. While playing on a Quadra 950, the game ran very smoothly except for one movie sequence that consistently ran in an endless loop.

You Ain't Nothin' But a Hellhound. As visually attractive as it is entertaining, Return to Zork offers an intriguing feast of logic puzzles to adventure game enthusiasts. The game is time-consuming but ultimately rewarding to those who have the patience to work through false starts and follow a painstaking journey. The huge cast of characters is a refreshing change from the generally lonely nature of the CD-ROM adventure genre. We can only hope that in the future we'll have more opportunities to immerse ourselves in Zorkian culture and go exploring again.

Pros

- Runs at 640 X 480 with no “interface area”
- Intricate story line; many hours of play needed to solve puzzles
- Numerous challenging puzzles; requires great attention to detail
- Entertaining movie sequences with personality-rich characters
- Novel interface for inventory use and interaction.

Cons

- Scaled-up graphics in some places
- Transitions from still scenery to movie sequences are jumpy
- Proprietary digital video technology sometimes causes audio to fall out of sync
- Sometimes hard to select the action interface option you want.