y Gene Alloway

rawn from a very successful comic book favorite, Sam & Max Hit the Road by LucasArts brings a wonderfully funny and violent cartoon world onto our disk drives. Sam (a dog) & Max (rabbit-like creature) are Freelance Police, with a dangerous (for others) knack for intervening in both real and imagined crimes. Along the way they introduce us to carny freaks, thugs, bigfeet, and bad roadside attractions. It is a well-done, inspired visit to an insane world guided by two very endearing, very loose, cannons.

Ya Wanna Tell Me What Happened Here, Ma'am?
In our story, Sam & Max have just got off a case saving the world and a random female from the machinations of an evil, robotic doctor. At the Commissioner's request, our buddies travel through a hail of bullets from Flint Paper's office (a friendly neighborhood private eye) to a carnival to investigate a missing bigfoot. From there our heroes travel from Snuckey's restaurants to gator farms to gravity vortexes to get their man, er, beast. They face oversized trout, an irritable country-western singer and his bodyguard Lee Harvey, nerdish clerks, and celebrity vegetables, all milestones on their noble quest. Along the way, Sam & Max even have time for a little entertainment, like Wak-a-Rat, Hiway Surfin', and the Car Bomb game.

Put the Key in WHERE, Little Buddy?
The system requirements for Sam & Max are a little more extensive than some Macintosh

games. In addition to the requirements mentioned above, Sam & Max require that Virtual Memory and any memory manager be turned off. This means no RAM Doubler, for those of you out there who use it (like I do), make sure you do have at least 4 MB of free RAM, otherwise you may need to remove fonts and turn off extensions. Also, if you have enabled File Sharing, you need to turn that off as well.

THIS is My Kind of Road Trip!

The play of Sam & Max is easy to understand, fun, and a little deranged, just like the characters. We get introduced to the characters in an opening "cut" scene, or short animated sequence like a movie scene. Here you learn information about both the characters and the story. After the cut scene, the real interface shows up, and you have a number of options, but only for Sam.

Max is at once a sidekick, tool, and a dangerous random element, so there is little control over him. However, he does follow Sam most of the time. By clicking on the box in lower left corner of the screen and choosing a "verb icon," or by hitting a letter on the keyboard, the cursor changes to an icon based on what you want to do. Actions represented by verb icons include "Pick Up," "Use," "Talk To," "Look At," "Walk," and "Use Max" (bless his soul). The cursor will automatically change to the opposite of your chosen action if that action is not possible. For example, the clenched hand icon representing "Pick Up" automatically changes to an open hand meaning "Cannot Pick Up" if there is nothing to pick up. If you can't perform a particular task, you generally get a message from Sam as to the reason why. It is a good way to scan a room or an object to see if you can act on it, read it, or even talk to it.

If you do talk to someone (or something - sorry Max), you are also given a number of options ranging from the helpful to the silly. While you don't choose what you may say, you are provided a set of icons representing the options to ask a question, make a declaration or a non-sequitur (Where did you hide that gun , little pal? None of your damn business, Sam), or stop the conversation. If the person/thing you are talking to has specific information about something in which you are interested, icons with the picture of the topic in question are provided.

As the game progresses, you learn about different places across the USA, some of which are just for the games mentioned above, while others are places you need to visit. Places like the Mystery Vortex, Mount Rushmore (nasal bungee jumping is fun!) and the World's Largest Ball of Twine Exhibit are both educational (in a twisted sort of way) and important to solving the mystery. They appear on a big map of the country as you learn about them, so you can't go to too many places out of sequence, a big help for younger players.

Sam & Max succeeds on a number of levels, and my caveats concern technical issues, not entertainment or creative ones. The successes include story and writing, art, animation and sound, and the supporting materials. The story is solidly based on the vision of Sam & Max's creator, Steve Purcell. In fact, he was involved in animation, background art, and the design of the game. It shows clearly. The story hangs together like a cheap suit, just like the comics, and the one liners are sharp, funny, and continuous. The games are even attention grabbers, even if they are not politically correct. Who can resist whacking rats or blowing up cars? Few people on my block, let me tell ya.

The other parts are just as good. The art is zany, cartoony, and very stylish. All kinds of colors are used, and there are many things to see and read all over the place. The animation and sound both played well, with no skips, jumps, or freezes. In some places, the animation is continuous, working fine even when you initiated other activity elsewhere on the screen. Lastly, the supporting materials are superb. You get a good, thorough introductory manual containing background, technical support contacts, installation information, troubleshooting, and instructions for playing the game. In addition, there is an excellent tip book, containing three levels of hints (vague, less vague, and the answer), a list of stuff to pick up, where it is, and where or how to use it, and finally a story summing up the whole adventure. There is no way you will get stumped for too long.

The downsides to the game are not major, but they are notable. The first downside is that Sam & Max is not plug and play. I tend to use my computer for a number of different tasks, maybe more than some other folks. However, Sam & Max will probably require anyone to at least go over their extensions, and turn some off to speed up the game. Any of the many users of RAM Doubler will also have to change their system slightly, turning off the utility for the duration of play. This is not a killer problem, and I don't want to even imagine what it must be like to set this up on a Windows machine, but I am a spoiled Macintosh user, and I would prefer less reconfiguration.

The other downside is replay value. I know, I know. Linear adventures are supposed to take enough time that you get your money's worth completing it once. And Sam & Max is attractively priced to start with. However, I am a fan of multiple story lines leading to the same or similar ends, so this is generally a bone of contention with me. I want to be able to play a game more than once to its conclusion when I buy it. I wouldn't care so much if I didn't like he game, so this is actually a back-handed compliment, I suppose.

Overall, the verdict on Sam & Max is guilty of being a great game by reason of insanity. It is fast paced, immediately and continually engaging, wonderfully funny, and attractively presented. It has a good price, a wide potential audience, and a lot of thoughtful puzzles. This one will be hard to beat for comedy and entertainment. Indeed, it is so good, I may weep openly.

Pros
• Great, surrealistic, hilarious storyline
• Very good animation
• Great games and gags
• Unique and powerful interface
• Lots to explore in most scenes
• Great sound

Cons
• Little replay value (though whacking rats is never-ending fun!)
• Significant demands on system configuration

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