

pectrum Holobyte, \$49. Requirements: 33MHz 68040 or better (PowerPC processor recommended), System 7 or better, QuickTime 2.0 or better, double-speed CD drive, 12MB free RAM, 640x480 256-color display.

With A Final Unity, fans of Star Trek: The Next Generation have the opportunity to partake in one final mission with the crew of the 1701-D. The game begins with the Enterprise being assigned to investigate suspicious Romulan activity along the neutral zone. From there, the game quickly escalates into a full-fledged episode of quintessential Trek mystery and intrigue. The game is complemented by the voice talents of the complete Next Generation cast, and consequently feels very genuine.

A Final Unity has variety of play modes, the main focus of which is (thankfully) the Away Team Mission. On each away team mission, four crew members are beamed to the surface of a planet where they must explore the area, speak with the locals, overcome obstacles and search for clues to solve the greater mystery of the suspicious Romulan activity.

The away team mission play mode is the most engaging component of a Final Unity and is highly reminiscent of the King's Quest series. Brightly colored landscapes and well-animated characters complement the high-resolution graphics (you heard me right—this is not a cheesy 320x240 PC port) and draw you into the game. You control all four characters—where they walk, who they talk to, what they see and what tools they use—and each possesses certain strengths. Knowing which character to use in which situation can prevent unwanted setbacks. For example, Data or Geordi are best to investigate engineering or scientific equipment, whereas Deanna will be able to tell you if another character is hiding something.

Many of the away missions are offer engaging and lengthy sub-plots which make the game feel very robust. Invariably, however, all away missions will provide you with valuable clues to help you determine what exactly it is the Romulans are up to.

Final Unity offers two other major play modes: The Bridge, where stoic characters converse amongst themselves and other viewscreen visitors; and Engineering/ Tactical/Astrogation stations, where you are presented with a wide variety of controls for the ship. The Bridge mode offers the least interaction and very little animation, and play involves no more than speaking to nearby crew members to gain additional information or insights into the current situation.

Engineering and Tactical offer a confusing array of controls that no person could expect to master within the time frame of game play. Thankfully, you can opt to have a “delegate” (Geordi and Worf) perform all those functions for you, saving you the trouble of learning the ins and outs of the ship, as it were.

You will occasionally be required to use the Astrogation controls, however, to get from one location to the next. The astrogation controls, too, are somewhat confusing, and you’re best not to try navigating by clicking the rotating star chart. The way in which the game interprets your clicks is so bizarre that you’ll rarely luck out and locate your destination sector. Stick to the sector controls below the star chart.

The game has three difficulty settings which vary only in the level of prompting the crew will give you and whether or not you will have the responsibility of picking the four-member away teams from the crew’s roster. At the easy level, away teams are chosen for you and characters will make suggestions if you seems to be faltering. At the highest level, you choose your own away teams and you must always ask characters for their input; it will rarely be volunteered.

A Final Unity has a few notable flaws that affect its playability and enjoyment. Video segments appear at half size rather than full-screen, unlike the PC version of the game. While this is understandable for slower Macs, an option for pixel-doubled video segments would have been welcome. Additionally, warfare between the Enterprise and an enemy is completely incomprehensible. Even with the delegate turned on, you’re unlikely to understand the jittery on-screen action with its rapidly changing view points. In some cases, the Enterprise will blow away the attacker; in others, the Enterprise will be destroyed. But the reasons for success or failure are very hard to grasp.

The most significant flaw of A Final Unity is its lack of self-determination. Initially, you will get the impression that the quadrant is your oyster, and you can veer off path as you like. By the end of the game, however, you will feel quite the opposite. Whether it be through the suggestions of crew members or the game’s unwillingness to allow you to divert from the task at hand, you soon come to understand that there is only one true path to success. Alternative choices are often so obviously incorrect only a fool would choose them. Admittedly, there is some room for variance—but not much.

Final Unity is a great diversion and expertly recaptures the spirit of The Next Generation. In many ways, the game is akin to watching an engaging episode of TNG, complete with subplots and plot twists. While it is certainly not the be-all and end-all of role playing games, it is an enjoyable adventure—especially if you long for a return to King's Quest-type game play.

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hangeling Software, \$45 US. Requirements:
System 7.1 or higher, 68040 processor or
Power Macintosh, 8MB RAM (6.5MB free RAM)
2MB hard drive space. Contact Fargo Electronics,
Inc. (612) 943-2696

You say you love puzzle games, but you crave a little excitement too. Not content with just the mental contortionism of traditional puzzle games, you long for a little more adrenaline in your diet. What you need is to try something a little dangerous, a little edgy—how about defusing bombs? If you have ever wished for a game to fray both your mind and your nerves, wish granted with "Blown Away".

Loosely based on the film of the same name, Blown Away blends some difficult and original puzzles, the nerve-racking pressure of a time limit, and a fast-paced, if not terribly original, storyline. These elements combine to form one of the more engaging puzzle games in some time. Unfortunately, the quality of this game makes it all the more tragic that it represents one of the most infuriating PC to Mac translations I have ever encountered. It's almost enough to compel me to warn you away from Blown Away, except for one little problem: the game is just too damn much fun.

You are Jimmy Dove, hot shot hero of the Boston Bomb Squad. A recent string of bombings have seemed frighteningly familiar to you—familiar because they remind you of your past, a past you have managed to keep secret until now. That past is about to overtake your new life in the form of Justus, an old mate from the IRA who wants revenge on you. To get to you,

and to amuse himself, Justus has abducted your girlfriend, your partner, your mentor, and your daughter and strapped each of them to cunningly lethal bombs. You must save them, and foil Justus' plan to blow up the soon-to-be-unveiled Presidential Monument, by decoding a series of enigmatic clues and defusing a collection of sadistically clever bombs. If you fail, someone you love dies and you lose valuable points (this is, after all, a game). If this sounds like a typical computer game plot, well it is, but I assure you that the puzzles and the structure of the game itself make *Blown Away* a whole lot more.

Blown Away features twenty-four puzzles you must crack to finish the game. They test everything from dexterity to memory, reflexes, timing, logic, and occasionally luck. Despite a couple of losers, they are generally good and occasionally superb.

After a challenging warm up, the start is not very promising. One of the early puzzles is so simple and pointless, it is not so much a warm-up as an annoyance. Another is so luck-based and irrelevant that it is downright infuriating. The unfortunate thing about these early dogs is that they may discourage many players from moving beyond them to the gut-wrenchingly exciting puzzles that follow. Since it is my job, I had no choice but to press on, but otherwise I might have given up then and there. My simple advice is, don't!

Once you find your way to the hostages, you'll be glad you stuck with it. For example, to save Jimmy's mentor Sam you must employ nearly every skill available to you. First you must follow a tune on a xylophone in a lethal game of Simon Says. On the heels of this, your nerves still tattered, you must master a wooden box labyrinth. You remember this classic 70's rec room fare: you navigate a metal ball through a maze by tilting the box on its axes making sure the ball doesn't fall through holes in the board. I was never all that good at these in real life, so my hands were positively shaking by the time I defeated this one. THEN you have to finish the agonizingly difficult Train Game. Alas for poor Sam, I was never able to complete this one. I moved on with a heavy heart and a powder keg full of missed points. Maybe next time.

Rather than simply being a long finish-the-game quest, *Blown Away* is designed for replayability. It is clear that the designers strove for quality over quantity; although it takes relatively little time to finish a game, no two games are ever exactly the same. It's not even necessary to solve all the puzzles to "win" the game; you proceed, for example, even if you fail to save one of the hostages.

The scoring system also encourages repeated play. Your score is measured in points earned versus points available; the higher your percentage, the greater the score. You maximize your points by finding all the clues and solving all the puzzles in the shortest possible time. Thus, the game encourages practice, ingenuity and creativity. I must admit that after a while, the play became so engrossing that I stopped thinking about my score and focused completely on meeting Justus' challenges. In retrospect, I am looking forward to improving on my performance in the next run.

It's a good thing the puzzles in *Blown Away* are so good, or else I might have heaved it out the window. You see, like many PC games ported to the Mac, *Blown Away* suffers from an extremely clunky and counterintuitive interface.

When you first launch the game you are confronted with a video options box. I figure I've got a pretty fast machine (Power Mac 601/120), let's give it full screen and full resolution. Of course, the video was choppy and annoying, so I later decided to lower the screen size. After searching in vain for a tool bar, in desperation I hit the escape key. Bingo. This brought up a control screen with some buttons, one of which read "Options". Perfect, I thought. Actually, no: pushing this button brought up the practice screen. Why? I have no idea.

I then decided to check the manual—except the manual I was provided was for the PC version with only a Mac system requirements sticker on the back. Now in all fairness I have an advance release of this game, so maybe it will be remedied in the final version. Still, can you think of more galling way to torque off a Mac user? No help there. (Ed. Changling has informed MacSense that future versions of Blown Away will have a Mac-friendly manual addendum).

Exasperated, I decided to quit. I hit the usual Mac Command-Q. Nothing. Then I see on the control panel the word Quit; finally, something does what it says it should. At the end of my rope, I deleted the preference file and started over. There turns out, though, to be an easier way: if the initial video settings end up giving you poor performance, quit and restart the game while holding down the Option key. This will bring back the video options box and allow you to make adjustments.

I tell this little tale because I believe that the most important thing a game must be is easy to start. If I have to struggle just to get it to run, I may not give the game a fair chance. I want to encourage developers to port as many PC games to the Mac as possible, but I positively demand some adaption, common sense, and maybe just a bit of simple courtesy.

My other beef with Blown Away is the saving system. It's fairly easy to save your game so that you don't loose all the vital work you've done so far. But, the manual's claims notwithstanding, you cannot save at multiple points, only the latest. Further, you cannot launch saved games (they don't have their own icons) so you must skip though the video introduction and visit the beginning of the game every time just to get to the Load Game button.

It should tell you how much I enjoyed the substance of this game that in spite of these often agonizing structural flaws I can still strongly recommend it.

With an original and catchy premise, well designed and creative puzzles, good visuals, a compelling plot and a challenging scoring structure, Blown Away will remain on my hard drive for some time. It is, however, an object lesson in the politics of Mac games. If we don't buy good but poorly ported games, the companies decide that it's not worth releasing future products for the Mac OS. If we do slap down our cash, though, we send a message that they need not go to the trouble of actually creating a Mac version. There needs to be some compromise, but achieving it may be puzzle even more insoluble than any in Blown Away.

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