

y Bill Jahnel

he entry of movie studios into the game publishing genre has been creeping up on all of us. In some cases, this was expected — after all, Star Trek titles have been licensed from Paramount for ages. However, not as many games have come from movies that were not tied directly to the science fiction or fantasy genre. Blown Away is the first game, to my knowledge, that ties a police, action thriller motion picture directly to a game title in a cross promotion. While I was not surprised to see a trailer for Blown Away (the movie) in the game, I was surprised to find that the start of the video began with MGM advertising the CD-ROM game. The advantages of big studios lining up to do games are obvious — they have the video equipment for crisp live action scenes and they have the money to back incredible programming. However, while MGM has been in the business of entertainment, the product of movie studio turning to back a game production seems to result in a mixed bag of great playability and bizarre programming choices. Oh yes... and an overabundance of Irish brogue.

[Primed for Action](#)

You start the game in a sequel to the movie. Gaerity (Tommy Lee Jones' character) is now gone, and Justus McVee, who considered Gaerity a mentor, blames you for his death for fingering him to the authorities. Long ago, you left behind your connections to the IRA, changing your name from Liam to Jimmy Dove. But Justus has kidnapped 4 of the most

important people in your life and now is working to force you to play fiendish games in order to try and diffuse the explosives he's set up to be the undoing of you and the people you care most about. The storyline is very strong yet pretty independent of the original movie itself, making the game engaging in its own right without feeling you are just replaying old scenes from the film.

Explosive or a dud?

Blown away is quite beautifully rendered. The interface is clean with automatic movement pointers, well-defined hotspots, and a clean menu action. To check scores, get the menu, or get a clue, you need only move the pointer to one of the corners until it changes to a new icon. The whole package of game, sound, look, and feel is extremely impressive (including the ability to click through QT sequences which you have heard or seen before). However, slower machines should make sure to play in quarter screen video (slower machines apparently being anything non PPC; my O40 which is jacked up to over 40 megahertz and has 32 megs of RAM still experienced sound drops when playing full screen video.)

However, a strategy games lives and dies by its playability and its puzzles. And Blown Away offers a weird mix of the sublime to the sub-lame. Some quick examples. The exit from your original predicament is a time magic square puzzle — nothing particularly new, but the timing makes it a little more ticklish, especially since every minute the game freezes one of the numbers in place, making you have to reorder the puzzle pieces. In one sequence, to save one of the hostages, you go through a series of puzzles: a Simon-like knockoff where you follow the playing of tunes on a xylophone; a "labyrinth" game where you tilt a board with holes in it to make a marble exit the other side without falling into the holes on the board; and a devilish "train game," where you try and load falling pitons onto a moving toy train without having them roll onto a detonator pan. This final puzzle is a good example of the ingenuousness of the game at its best. While it can be frustrating as hell, especially since most strategy games don't require this level of manual dexterity, it also most accurately simulates a pressured feeling that you have to stop or intercept a certain amount of objects before they very visibly cause the detonation of an explosive device.

However, some of the other gauntlets are silly, if not just stupid. The worst are their ideas involving a number of word games: turning on the lights in your apartment by flipping the first letter of the word (blank) "IGHT" and figuring out if it wants light, sight, right, might, fight, etc. The "Video Poker" game similarly is an impotent little dud that makes you guess at the first letters of a word that somehow vaguely ties to the hostages. Worse, once you "get" one of these words, you are supposed to roam the apartment finding "clues" that will move you to the appropriate hostage. It is a very clunky and unrewarding interface. Some of my friends even gave up at this point because of the gauntlet. This is unfortunate since the gauntlet is one that must be passed to get to the heart of the rest of the game. The manual is great to get you to a certain point but it doesn't offer solutions for players who are confounded, and the hint line was similarly not useful when people were absolutely baffled.

In Summary

Blown Away has some great moments in it. One very nice feature is that you may skip the plotline development and try each of the individual puzzles outside of the game context. You can also pause and save in most places. What is most unfortunate about Blown Away is that its original central clearinghouse (when you are rescuing the three first hostages before you have to try and save your daughter) is extremely clunky, making the game less enjoyable than it should have been. The fact that it has a number of manual-dexterity puzzles is not a negative. In fact, it quite accurately simulates some of the skills one thinks of when working to diffuse bombs. Blown Away has a number of real treat puzzles in it, if you are willing to put up with or bypass some of the more inane gauntlets to get to them. Jimmie Skaggs is marvelously over-the-top as Justus, even if some of the scripting for him was corny. Changeling is to be congratulated for setting up a hintline that costs only the price of a long-distance phone call. It should be remembered, however, that by the time players are willing to shell out for a phone call, they want more than "Make sure to examine the room for all hotspots" and other forms of general information.

Pros

- Slick graphics and interface
- Engaging plot
- Fun over-the-top villain
- Strong information in the manual to help you get started
- Some extremely well-executed puzzles that require manual dexterity as well as logic

Cons

- Central choke point for getting to other areas extremely poorly executed
- Some puzzles unoriginal
- Some puzzles downright lame

Publisher Information

Name: Changeling Inc
Address: 2507 Albata Avenue
Austin, Texas 78757-2102
Phone: 1 (800) 769-2768
Hints: 1 (612) 996-6390

www.changeling.com