

ulse Entertainment. Price: \$54.95 US.
Requirements: System 7.1 or higher,
68040 processor or Power Mac, 8MB
RAM , 2X CD ROM, 8-bit color or higher.
Contact: Pulse Entertainment (310)
264-5579 ; www.badmojo.com

Just when I thought there was nothing new under the sun (or in this case under the furnace)... just when I had consoled myself that pretty much most games were just variations on the same themes... then along comes this...this...THING. It crawled into a small crack in my computer, invaded my thoughts, took me to a weird place that I didn't think a game could, and it kept me there.

Bad Mojo from Pulse Entertainment (producers of Iron Helix) represents what you get when you combine powerful technology and genuine free thinking: a game so simple, twisted, unique, and visually jarring that it actively engages your imagination. There are plenty of games out there that are the product of "twisted" minds, but precious few are both twisted and original. This elusive combination has given birth to the year's most engrossing puzzle game and may set the stage for a whole new genre: Other-Species-Role-Playing Games. In this case, the other species is the common, basement variety American cockroach. And if you are afraid of roaches, then this game is either great therapy or your worst nightmare come true because Bad Mojo has more roaches than a barbecue at Cheech and Chong's place.

Drawing inspiration from Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis", the object of Bad Mojo is really quite simple: navigate as a roach through the various rooms of an old bar, collecting information, solving puzzles, and overcoming barriers to unlock the mystery of how to return to your human form. You assume the role of Roger Samms (a clever but loose anagram of Kafka's Gregor Samsa), a struggling entomologist who is preparing to disappear after embezzling millions of dollars from a research grant (to study cockroaches of course). As he prepares to flee, he remembers to bring along a family heirloom left to him by his mother who died tragically in childbirth. As he picks up the locket, Roger is struck by a magical spell that, for reasons not yet clear, transfers his consciousness into the body of a cockroach.

The environment of Bad Mojo is so visceral and realistic that it creeps, seeps, and stinks. If you've ever been grossed out by what it looks like under your oven, magnify that and you will have some idea how unnerving this game is. The game's designers wallowed in their premise, and took it as license to look under every appliance and capture every detail of the most filthy household crannies. Trust me, you NEVER wanted to get this good a look at a urinal cake!

The insect animation is truly disturbing. Your roachy alter ego flits and moves with such agility and striking realism that you may have to fight the urge to hit your screen with a rolled up newspaper.

Even the audio elements of Bad Mojo are outstanding. The sound effects are realistic and, often, absolutely stomach churning. If you have any problems with maggots, I would suggest

turning down the sound in the kitchen. The music is suitably creepy and interesting and undeniably sets the mood of the game.

The photorealistic visuals here are compelling, varied, and well-rendered. I have played complex maze games which didn't generate the fascination and dread I felt crawling through Bad Mojo's kitchen. What's more, it's not just cool scenery; the environment is as much a vital and interactive character as any other you encounter. It is in fact your main enemy. Your free movement is hampered by various uncrossable and toxic substances, and traps designed for your destruction. While many serve as boundaries within which you must operate, quite a few must be conquered and crossed. It will take more than avoiding paint spills and defeating roach motels to move through this game, though; you will also encounter a number of other floor dwelling creatures who must be heeded, avoided, or destroyed for you to survive.

The populace of this little-seen world is what you'd expect: other roaches, silverfish, rats, spiders, and ants. Many of these denizens will volunteer their help and advice (although its often somewhat cryptic) but you must first discover how to attract their attention. Others will kill you if given half a chance; ironically, Roger's own cat is your most dangerous adversary.

Fortunately for you, your roach-self retained its full human cunning and is a problem solving insect. And there are plenty of problems to be solved. None of the puzzles are very revolutionary but they are challenging; you will not finish this one in a couple of sittings. What is really elegant about them, though, is that they usually require some physical activity from your antennae'd alter ego.

They say that the secret of life is being aware of your limitations, and that is rarely more true than in this game. You have no voice and no hands. You can't lift anything and can't carry anything that doesn't want to be carried. You can't jump, swim, or move anything bigger than you. To use an old cliché, you have nothing but your wits to protect you. What you can do is climb walls, use your weight to move things, hang upside down, and crawl into cracks. While all this may seem obvious, it is your world and, to succeed, you must master the few skills available to you. It is surprising how intellectually unprepared you will find yourself for roach life; it was well into the first level when I realized that I could climb UNDER a table top.

In addition to learning to see the world through roach eyes, the other challenge facing you is to learn to, as the manual puts it, "drive an insect". It will come as quite a shock to anyone who has played any new games that Bad Mojo requires only four buttons. Let me repeat that...four buttons! Forward, backward, turn clockwise, and turn counterclockwise. That's it. Yet this game requires more manual skill than most high-speed action games with a whole keyboard full of controls.

What can I say but "Buy this game"? It's fun, it's disturbing, it's visually stunning, its music is appropriate and unobtrusive, it's easy to learn, and it's thought provoking. Basically, it's a joy to play. My only criticism, and it's barely a criticism, is that it's too short. I know the old showbiz adage is always leave 'em wanting - I was left wanting A LOT more. Since puzzle games don't have much replayability, it's important to strike that tenuous balance between too short and "when-will-this-flippin'-game-end?". I believe that Pulse erred a bit too much on the side of brevity.

That, however, is the worst thing I can find to say about this truly extraordinary game. It's a breath of fresh air in a fast-paced but increasingly homogenous gaming market, and I look forward to seeing where Bad Mojo takes Pulse in particular, and the gaming industry in general.

kramerg@cadivision.com

Take 2 Interactive Software, Inc. Price:
\$49 US. Requirements: System 7 or higher,
68040 processor or Power Mac, 5.5MB RAM ,
2X CD ROM. Contact: Take 2 Interactive Software,
Inc. (212) 941-2988

Sometimes titles can be more revealing than their creators intended. So when you call a game “Hell” you better be darn sure it’s good or smartass reviewers like me will latch onto it and make you pay. Taking the gamble this month is Take-2 Interactive with it’s Mac version of “Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller”. Rest assured, it is only a colossal act of self-restraint that prevents me checking my Thesaurus for every satanic synonym I can find. Hell, while interesting to look at and moderately original, is a crushing, stifling bore of a game.

The main problem with Hell is that it isn’t really a game; it’s more of an interactive novel. As a novel, it’s initially not too bad; much better than the average computer game. While it’s hardly great literature or even bestseller quality, it is a page-turner. It wears thin quickly, though, and the “thrilling” conclusion doesn’t even begin to make up for this game’s massive problems.

The time is one hundred years on the future, the United States has been taken over by a fundamentalist political party, The Hand of God, and its charismatic (though androgenous) leader Solene Solux. Although the Hand was swept to power by popular vote, once established it turned the U.S. into a repressive theocratic dictatorship granting unlimited power to Solux as president and prophet.

One of the central events upon which the Hand rode to power was the opening of the portals of Hell in (where else?) Washington D.C. In late 21st century America, demons walk the Mall and punishment for crimes is not death but damnation. Most crime is associated with technology: all forms of cybernetics and virtual reality have been declared sinful and, therefore, illegal.

You assume the role of government agents Gideon or Rachel (depending on your gender) who, to their shock, find themselves on the business end of a government hit squad. Baffled as to the nature of their crime, they seek refuge in the underground while trying to unravel the secrets of the Hand and Hell.

Despite the obligatory array of cyberpunk tech-speak and Big Brother-ism, the story behind Hell exhibits some real and welcome creativity in what long ago became a very tired genre (usually if I so much as see the words “hacker” or “cyberpunk” on a game box, I move right on). About a third of the way through, though, I simply stopped caring—not even a great story is worth what Hell requires one to endure.

I would like to say that the visuals in Hell save it from the bargain bin, but I can’t. Which is not to say they aren’t good, at least as far as the scenery goes. The backgrounds are the real stars of this game, rendering the hellish world of 21st century DC and the regions of Hell in grim, gothic detail meticulously painted in deep blues, blood reds, and dank blacks. The scenery draws heavily on centuries of depictions of Hell from Dante right up to the twisted imaginations of the game’s creators.

Scenery, however, does not act nor is it interactive. The interactivity is left to the characters inhabiting the world and it is here that Hell really starts to come apart. Originally released for the PC in late 1994, the animation looks dated and laughable.

Characters are seen from a distance as stiff moving figures against the background. When you interact with them, however, they appear in screen insets, talking and gesturing, providing clues and information. While these chatterboxes have plenty of information to

impart, they are each given only one gesture to repeat infinitely. This wouldn't be so bad if three quarters of the game didn't consist of unbearably incessant yammering. In nearly every scene there are two or three characters whose brains you have to pick to forward the plot. As you sit behind your keyboard trying to take in all the detail, these folks (and your alter-ego heroes as well) drink while they talk, gesture woodenly and inappropriately, and move their jaws without any regard to what they are saying. It's like watching a Japanese version of "Blade Runner", dubbed into English and starring the cast of the Hall of Presidents at Disney World.

There are also two live-action characters, played by guest stars Stephanie Seymour and Geoffrey Holder, who appear periodically. Both, it is safe to say, have done better work elsewhere. Seymour, the glassy-eyed Victoria's Secret model, does an unexpectedly passable job as the computer-generated ghost of a mad bomber. Holder, the laughing Caribbean from the old 7-Up commercials, truly embarrasses himself. His character doesn't even appear except in his video journal entries into which you must hack to get vital information. I offer, however, that his pronunciations of "Belial", "Beelzebub", "Mephistopheles" are so hysterically funny, they alone could be worth the price of the game.

Also in the "guest star" cast are Dennis Hopper and Grace Jones. They, however, must have had other commitments as their characters are merely animations with their faces superimposed. It's hard to see why the game makers even bothered to cast them: both sound like bad imitations of themselves and bear only superficial resemblance. Not to give too much away, but the privilege of carrying Dennis Hopper's talking head around for half the game sounds a lot more entertaining than it is.

I will grant that this is not meant to be live action and, therefore, shouldn't be expected to be fully realistic, but surely they can do better than this. While this may have been state of the art a year and a half ago (though I doubt it), the standards have increased. It's a bit insulting, frankly, that Take-2 would wait so long to port Hell to the Mac without realizing how shoddy it now looks.

There are a handful of obligatory puzzles scattered throughout Hell, but I wouldn't deem to call this a puzzle game. The story itself is really no puzzle at all since you are revealed to you through dialogue. The puzzles are mostly word decryption and aren't terribly difficult; anyone who has played even old computer games has seen these tricks before. The remaining mysteries involve figuring out which characters to talk to and in what order for them to solve the puzzles for you. This should give you some idea of the level of "interactivity" in Hell.

Well, there's three days of my life I'll never get back. At least I had time to straighten my desk, clean out my files, wallpaper my office, and still be able to solve this poor excuse for a game. Dante forgot one circle of Hell, the one in which game reviewers have to slog through endless, boring, derivative, interactive "cyberpunk thrillers".

With its incessant talkiness, clunky interface, abysmal animation and frequent crashes, Hell has nothing to recommend it. If this is an example of the games we are missing out on by not having a Windows machine, I'll just stick with my Mac. And if I want someone to tell me a story, I'll lay back with a good book.

gak@spots.ab.ca