

review: Hell Cab (CD-ROM)

by Christopher Breen

Type: Moral adventure

Publisher: Time Warner Interactive Group (800/593-6344)

Retail Price: \$99.99

Mail Order: \$64.00

Requires: 68030 Mac, 13" color monitor and graphics card supporting 256 colors, 3MB RAM, CD-ROM drive with minimum throughput of 150KB per second. Current version not compatible with AV Macs. NEC CD-ROM drives are generally not compatible with Hell Cab or most other CD-ROM games.

Protection: Cannot be loaded onto hard disk

If you've attended the last few MACWORLD Expos, you've probably found one particular aisle blocked by crane-necked individuals oohing and ahing over the demo of a CD-ROM adventure carrying the animated image of a grinning Beelzebub. Captivated, you blew off a database lecture to watch as a demonic cabbie named Raul compelled you to join him in a diabolic tour through the streets of New York. Shoving aside button-laden expo-ees, you rushed to the guy with the headset, fell to your knees, and begged to purchase a copy.

"You want it, do you?" hissed the Time Warner Interactive demonstrator, kicking you away from him. "You are fascinated by Pepe Moreno's glorious graphic presentation? Enthralled by these fine human actors playing the parts of cruel Roman emperors, enchanting love slaves, and tragic French soldiers? You crave the wonders of our CD-ROM technology?"

"Yes! Yes!" you cried.

"Hahahahahahahahaha!" cackled the company rep. "It's not ready yet! You'll have to wait and wait and wait until you get a small taste of what Hell is really like!"

"Aaaaahhhhhhhh!!!"

You can relax now. After the seemingly endless traffic delays inherent in the release of complicated products that the marketing folks hype long before their scheduled shipping date, Hell Cab has finally rolled into town.

[Oh, You Didn't Go to Expo?](#) Not to worry, here's a brief synopsis. You play the part of a weary traveler who has arrived at New York's JFK airport with a little time to kill between connecting flights. Enter Raul Delgado, a representative of the Devil who apparently drives a cab in his off-hours. Raul stops you in the lobby and offers to take you sightseeing around the Big Apple. With little else to do, you proceed outside to accept Raul's invitation.

It must be your lucky day, because Raul assures you that you will be getting the "special tour." With a reassuring grin your driver asks you to sit back and relax as he shepherds you across the bridge, into Manhattan, and to the Empire State Building. Yes, things are going swimmingly until Raul pulls up to the curb and tells you that it's time to pay up. Shouldn't be a problem, you think. You stopped at the ATM in the airport and withdrew what seemed to be a reasonable amount of cash. But look, wouldn't you know it — you're a few dollars short. You apologize, you plead, you bully, but to no avail. The only way out is to accept Raul's offer of a deal that will "save you big bucks." Yup, a signed agreement with the Dark One himself. Simply answer a few questions, scrawl your name on the dotted line, sit back, and prepare for a journey designed to test your moral mettle. If you survive, you may have enough cash left over to pay your fare and get back to JFK.

The adventure is divided into three main parts; a trip back in time to Nero's Rome, an excursion to the trenches of World War I, and finally, a stop in the Jurassic era. The Empire State Building serves not only as the jumping off point of your adventure but also as the terminus for each of the three segments. During your travels you are presented with numerous moral and physical challenges (thinking puzzles and arcade-like actions). Your successes and failures are tracked by the "Soul-O-Meter," a taxi-meter that details both your remaining lives (you are given three at the outset) and the state of your soul. If you lose all of your lives or soul, you die for good and all and must suffer damnation eternally because "you've been a very bad boy." For female players, I doubt that using your gender as an excuse will help in any significant way.

[I'm in Heaven.](#) If you've seen a copy of Pepe Moreno's *Batman: Digital Justice*, then you're familiar with the quality of artwork you'll find in *Hell Cab*. For those who have somehow

missed Batman, it should suffice to say that the graphics in the game are nothing short of breathtaking. Hell Cab is further enhanced by Jim Ludtke's eerie 3-D animation sequences and Jeff Essex's outstanding musical score. To top it off, the performances by the cast are convincing and entertaining.

In addition to Hell Cab's attractive exterior, the game contains a number of little surprises that, while often adding nothing to the plot, are a delight to discover. The Empire State Building, for instance, contains a trove of wonderful QuickTime clips ranging from a preview of Freakshow, the upcoming (and perhaps even more hellish) project created by animator Ludtke and musical group The Residents, to episodes of the "Dead Sullivan Show." Raul's taxi also holds a number of goodies that are worth a poke and a prod.

But Hell Cab's charm is not limited strictly to its beauty or eccentric accessories. The game is designed to allow the plot to fork off in one direction or another depending on how you handle certain dilemmas. You can, for instance, be "rewarded" for maintaining a lily-white soul and finishing the first two scenarios in record time by being whisked back to JFK without a visit to the Jurassic age. A player returning from this trip would find on the next go around that a more leisurely pace and tarnished soul opens gateways to areas of the game previously unexplored.

The Dark Side. Unfortunately, all is not sweetness and light. The initial release of Hell Cab (version 1.0) is incompatible with QuickTime 1.6 and, even by today's CD-ROM standards, unforgivably s---l---o---w. These failings are mitigated, to an extent, by the fact that shortly after the release of 1.0, Time Warner Interactive quietly released a "turbo" version (1.0.1) of Hell Cab that not only is compatible with QuickTime 1.6 but also advertised to be two to five times (depending on your setup) faster than the initial issue.

So here's the rub. Current owners of the non-turbo version can return their copy of the game to Time Warner Interactive along with a note requesting the turbo upgrade but they will have to wait up to four weeks for a replacement copy. Potential buyers are, by no means, out of the woods. Although I was assured that version 1.0 is out of the pipeline, a quick call to my local computer dealer told me that Hell Cab 1.0 is indeed alive, well, and on the shelves. Since the version number is not indicated on the box, buyers unwilling to wait four weeks for their game to be more playable should express their concerns regarding the turbo versus non-turbo issue to their retailer and ask to verify the version number before purchase. You can get up-to-the-minute details regarding Time Warner Interactive's exchange policy by calling 800/593-6334.

But let's suppose that the faster version is readily available. Does the turbo version really speed things up? Yes and no. When moving about from one scene to another, the speed difference between the old and new version is noticeable. But major transitions, such as when you meet an untimely end, still seem interminable. Once you've met your maker you must wait and wait and wait while the death scene plays itself out and the game loads the transition scene. Only after the transition scene is up and running do you have access to the file menu where you can choose to restore a game. After electing to restore, you again wait and wait and wait while the game locates your saved position. Ultimately, dying is not so much a challenge as it is an exercise in frustration.

Along with choppy performance, there are certain parts of Hell Cab that simply do not work as well as they could. One example is your interactions with Hell Cab's characters. Conversation is carried out between you and an on-screen character in a call-and-response format. An actor natters on for awhile and then, when he or she has finished, you click on an answer from one of the possibilities printed at the bottom of the screen. The game hints that the tone of your conversation will determine the forthcoming action. Not so. When

addressing Nero, for instance, you can be rude or sycophantic, navigate every which way through dialog buttons, and still find yourself plopped down behind bars.

Also, certain puzzles are puzzles only in the broadest sense. Take the case of a particular cache of goodies in the WWI scenario. You know that you're missing something, but only after you point and click on an unlikely location are the items revealed. One minute they're not there, the next, click and poof! an array of large objects appears before your eyes. Hell, they're certainly large enough that you wouldn't have missed them with a cursory glance. Is this some kind of arcane magic? Nope, just a bad puzzle.

Purgatory Cab. Overall, Hell Cab is neither heaven nor hell. The game benefits and suffers from the syndrome that is all too common in today's CD-ROM adventures: An emphasis on the glitzy elements of graphics, animation, and sound, but too little concern for plot and game design, and a tendency to run up against the limitations of the technology.

To their credit, Pepe Moreno and crew have created a terrific-looking product that, unlike some of the current CD-ROM titles, attempts to provide the user with a playing experience that can be quite different with each new game. The frosting on this particularly hellish enterprise is the inclusion of a number of totally unnecessary, but often delightful, treats sprinkled throughout the adventure.

But they could have done more. Here was an opportunity to create a game that addressed the perils of moral choice in a refreshing and humorous way. Regrettably, although the concept was inspired, the execution fell short. I hope that the small tease for Hell Cab 2 contained within the Empire State Building becomes reality and Pepe and the boys have another shot at it. Hell Cab 1 demonstrates a mastery of image and sound, and the technology, although still not perfect, is bound to improve. With just a bit more attention to narrative and design, they could make a hell of a game.

Pros

- Fantastic graphics, sound, and animation
- Hidden surprises
- Nice performances from the actors

Cons

- Long delays in loading certain scenes
- Not particularly interactive
- Not all puzzles are truly puzzling
- Protagonist is male only