

neak Peek: **Lode Runner: The Legend Returns**

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NOTE: Screen shots and information presented in this article are based on a pre-release version of Lode Runner and are subject to change before final release. This article is not a review.

In the early to mid-80s, one of the more popular computer systems for gamers was the Apple][+ and the Apple][e. Companies and personalities such as Sirius and Nasir, Bill Budge of Pacific, Scott Adams of Adventure International, Roberta Williams of Sierra On-Line, Electronic Arts' plethora of developers, Penguin and Pelzarski, Fudge and Avant Garde, the Carlstons and Brøderbund: all developed super games for this platform. Although the rudimentary graphics and sound now look somewhat immature, these folk were trailblazers in electronic gaming. Some of their programs — yes, even today — continue to hold up well.

There were few titles in those days of yore that could capture a user for hours and hours. When you only had 48K of RAM to work with, and a CPU that was slower than cold honey, various tricks and programming secrets had to be used to maximize titles and hold an audience. Remember Sierra's Time Zone and its multitude of disks?

One of the early titles that continues to stand out in my mind as one of the most playable and enjoyable games ever to reach the Apple][computer family was Brøderbund's Lode Runner. Here you had a simple task — run up and down ladders to escape capture and certain death as you attempted to defeat The Bungeling Empire! Rotten folk chased you, requiring you to use certain strategies to “trick” them into either falling into traps, leaving them in one section of the screen while you grabbed goodies elsewhere, and employing bombs that not only squeezed the stuffing out of your opponents, but also enabled you to sometimes escape rather handily from their clutches.

I'm Back! Presage, a game development house in northern California (see this month's interview with Presage), has acquired the rights to develop the Lode Runner title and is just about ready to roll-out Macintosh, Windows, and DOS versions of the game (it will be published by Sierra/Dynamix). Expect both the Windows and Mac versions to be available by the time you read this preview (or shortly thereafter). The company is also already working on a CD-ROM version that should see release before Christmas. (Hmmm, talk about a full programming plate!) The CD will feature two new worlds, be complete with Red Book audio (all studio recorded), some cool new sound effects, and several new game elements and varied puzzles that aren't available on the disk version.

he rewritten code takes advantage of the graphics and sound capabilities of the Macintosh computer, as well as the new multimedia capabilities of Windows machines. For those unfamiliar with some of Presage's previous work, read on: Prince of Persia (for Brøderbund), Lemmings and Oh, No, More Lemmings (for Psygnosis). Presage also manages a number of ports from Macintosh to Windows as well. According to Jake Hoelter, Mac programmer supreme at the company, they also work on educational titles. Many Mac families have enjoyed The Backyard series from Brøderbund — yep, another Presage development project. Plus Maxis' RoboSport and New World Computing's Spaceward Ho! for Windows and DOS were also converted by Presage for those companies.

Hoelter, the most responsible party for the coding of this new release, said that Prince of Persia was his inspiration for his efforts. He wanted a game that not only possessed a unique personality — something that required more than simply running around and killing things — but a game that actually engendered an exciting mood for the player. Lode Runner certainly presents a complete game environment, and Hoelter has succeeded in accomplishing what he set out to do.

Getting Started. For those unfamiliar with Lode Runner, the object of the game is rather simple in execution. All you have to do is defeat the Bungeling Empire! Steal the gold to prevent them from using it for their ill-conceived purposes. To accomplish this, you must avoid or otherwise detain the Mad Monks in their attempts to zealously slay you. This requires you to alertly think ahead and strategize each level. There are 150 regular levels (and perhaps there are some special levels and Easter Eggs throughout that you should find!). Play is either via the keyboard, the mouse, or via an I/O device like Advanced Gravis'

Mac GamePad, which I thoroughly enjoyed using for this preview. There are also 20 or so levels for two-player gaming. One player would use the left side of the keyboard, the other the numeric keypad, and go to head-to-head in defeating the empire. Because you can define any keys you wish to control your hero, what's most comfortable for each player is easily available. Again, a twin GamePad input works really well for such gameplay. The mouse was not exacting enough in its positioning to satisfy my desire for on-screen persona placement.

The levels present individual puzzles for you to solve, whether it be how to grab the last bit of gold and then make a mad dash along the screen to the suddenly visible exit, or simply how to rid yourself of the pursuing Mad Monks long enough to collect the treasure required for the exit to appear. You can temporarily or permanently destroy "bricks" of ground by using some of the tools supplied with the game. The only drawback is that you can only carry one tool at a time. So, you might have to retrieve tools that appear in each level at various locations and "store" them in a single area of that level, ready for use when you need it. To use the tool, you must move across it, and the item appears in your inventory.

I Need my Weapons! One of the tools is a bomb. By running across the bomb, you collect it in your inventory. When you need to use this exploding delight, you drop it in the path of your pursuers. The fuse allows you enough time to escape it's blast which, when it occurs, removes 5 blocks of land. This could be enough "brick" riddance to completely befuddle 3 Mad Monks. If you time the explosion correctly, these red-robed rotters may not all get out of the bomb depression before the area rebuilds itself.

You'll also be able to use a pickaxe. What's neat about this tool is that you can cause a cave-in of blocks above you. Not only does this create a depression in the upper level that you might be able to use to your benefit, but catch a Mad Monk in the falling rubble and that nasty individual is somewhat deterred from continuing his pursuit of you. There are also sending and receiving teleporters. These enable you to move about the level from side to side quickly and are quite handy when it comes to avoiding capture. The only problem is that you've got to safely make it the area you wish to place one without blocking an exit for yourself to move to another area to place the other teleporter. Always, always, think ahead! You can even set up multiple teleporters.

Two more super tools include a jackhammer and a rope trap. The jackhammer is the only way to bust through permanent bricks. Lay the rope trap on the ground just in front of a Mad Monk and watch what occurs when he steps into the noose. Up he is yanked, to hang upside down, basically becoming totally ineffective for the rest of the level. Plus, any gold this character might have been carrying is now readily snatchable by you! And, as you haven't killed the poor red-robed one, another monk doesn't materialize to confound your efforts. This is a fantastic way to manage level conquest. However, be certain you don't step into your own trap. By the way, should you ever wish to drop a Bungeler that you've snared in the rope trap, get that pickaxe and strike the bricks from which the nincompoop is hanging. That'll release him and drop him down for whatever devious plan you might have in mind.

The Editor. The game has been redesigned from the ground up, yet still maintains the excitement of the original Lode Runner experience. The interface is really cool, as the screen shots attest to, and the game also includes an editor that allows you to create your own adventures. What's super great about the game generator is that the levels you design and build are usable cross-platform by any format of the game. So, if you build a Mac game, your Windows and DOS allies can enjoy your creative efforts. Just mail a disk to them, or better yet, upload the finished level(s) to them via their favorite online service. And expect many levels from them in return! The potential dollar-to-play ratio of this title is enormous, as you, your friends, and online compatriots can build and build to your heart's content, constantly

exchanging the latest and greatest levels.

As stated before, the final version of Lode Runner will include some fantastic implements yet to be included to help you be victorious over The Bungeling Empire and the Mad Monks. The conclusion I have drawn from hours of game play is that Lode Runner could well become the sleeper hit of the year! Not only will this strategy and puzzle game draw gamers who enjoy arcade-type games, but also those who thrive on puzzle solving — some of the levels will drive you completely bonkers as you attempt to retrieve that last golden treasure in order for your escape route to the next level to be revealed.

The game's sense of humor is really unique. Watch as you confound the Mad Monks when they strive to grab you, the look of puzzlement upon their faces as they suddenly realize they have become the target instead of you. Enjoy the thick, viscous areas of ground which you can utilize to your benefit to slow them down in your chase, while enabling you to retrieve a treasure you may have initially thought was too close in proximity to their territory. A feature to keep in mind is that when you're transported to a new level, should you leave your keyboard alone, the level's play doesn't actually start. This gives you ample time to consider the screen, note the locations where the Mad Monks originate, and where the treasures are located.

You can also determine the best routes to various "caverns" or seemingly inaccessible areas or where you can use your blasting powers to eliminate sections of land that will then allow you to drop into other areas of interest. Another item to keep in mind is that some of the Mad Monks will carry gold with them as they scurry about your screen. This means you must take the gold from them if you ever wish to complete a level. A variety of techniques may be employed to do this — one of the best is to blast a hole into the ground directly in front of the Mad Monk who is chasing you who also happens to be carrying the gold. When this nincompoop drops into the hole, his gold remains above him. As you can safely cross over any Mad Monk who has fallen into the depression, you can grab that gold and continue on your planned treasure hunt.

Run, don't Walk! Lode Runner is, without doubt, going to reincarnate itself as a classic arcade game. This offering is worthy of entrance into your software library, whether or not you remember the original Apple II version. Presage is definitely considering adding network play as a feature to the title, but not in the first release. They're already considering such as part of Lode Runner 2!

One of the significant problems with Lode Runner is the fact that you could find this game eating into your work time. Warning — do not take this title to work! Once you become involved in trying to figure out how to succeed at a level, your Excel spreadsheets and other memos become totally meaningless. Yep, Lode Runner is that addictive. Granted, this preview did not look at the final version. If the beta program is only half as solid as the final, production version, Presage and Dynamix/Sierra has a winner on their hands. What a predicament for an entertainment software company, to be so bound by success! This title definitely falls into the "gotta have" category.