eview: Dracula Unleashed

by Douglas Kiang

Type: CD-ROM Adventure
Publisher: Viacom New Media (708/520-4440)
Retail Price: $79.95
Street Price: $45.00
Requires: 68030 Macintosh or better, 4 MB RAM, system 6.0.7 or later, CD-ROM drive (double-speed recommended)
Protection: None

racula Unleashed is billed as an "interactive horror movie," which is probably as close as one can come to describing what this game does, since it has elements of both a B-grade horror film and an A-grade adventure game. There is something evil afoot in 19th-century London, and only through careful investigation and notekeeping will you be able to shed some light on the events that have occurred. The video segments that make up most of Dracula Unleashed are well-written and engaging, and though some might be a little overacted at times, they really do a fine job of creating that gothic horror movie atmosphere that may find you resisting a strong impulse to look over your shoulder as you play the game late at night.

Previous "interactive movies" were really quite limited in their interactivity. They would often either require the player to press an arrow key at precisely the right moment, or allow the player to choose between a series of pre-recorded endings to a murder mystery. As a result, most of the sense of exploration and experimentation that abounded in more traditional "adventure games" fell by the wayside in favor of fancy film sequences and jazzed up sound effects that made the player feel like a passenger in a car that already knows exactly where it's going.

Dracula Unleashed combines elements of a movie and a traditional adventure game. The game seeks to draw you into the gothic setting of the Dracula legend through video clips, digitized sound, and spoken dialogue. The interface is very well done, and makes it easy to steer your way through 19th-century London. The result is an "interactive movie" that looks and sounds much better than most adventure games, and engages you and captures your

imagination much more than most movies. In the end, it is a combination that works very well.

The story takes place in London of 1899. You are Alexander Morris, brother of the late Quincey Morris, who has died mysteriously while investigating a series of grisly murders in London. In your quest to discover the circumstances of your brother's death, you must travel around London talking to people and taking notes, much as an investigative reporter would, to ultimately uncover the evil beast that stalks the London streets.

Reality Bites. Most of the story is told through a series of prerecorded video segments which you view by traveling to different locations on your map of London. Rather than passively watching the movie, you do get to decide where you are going and what you will do next. In terms of actually interacting with the characters, you are somewhat more limited here than you would be in a traditional adventure game. For instance, you cannot ask them questions directly, or hold any sort of dialogue with them. Neither can you pick up or inspect objects within a scene; any relevant objects will automatically appear in your suitcase as you leave a room. The video clips themselves are all prerecorded and do not change; the "interactivity" all takes place before you actually view a given clip, and which clip you see depends on what actions you have taken.

For example, if you visit a particular place without bringing a certain item, you may see a video in which the character is not very helpful. But if you do find that object and then visit the character again, you may see a different video segment in which he in turn gives you another object that you need to progress further. The short video clips that you see upon visiting a place can be very different depending on whether you have a certain item in your hand, the time you choose to visit, or whether you have previously spoken with one of the characters. The people you meet may make references to things you have already done, or items you have found along the way. By listening carefully to the video clips, you may hear clues which will help you figure out what to do.

Bit Long in the Tooth...? The video clips were filmed with real actors and real sets, and this places Dracula Unleashed much higher on the realism scale than many other adventure games that use office furniture for props and underpaid programmers for acting talent. Although some of the scenes are a bit overacted, and several of the actors have some of the worst "British" accents I have ever heard in my life, for the most part the scripts are well-written and you will find yourself paying careful attention to the actors, for the key to solving the puzzle is hidden in what they say and how they say it. The game uses a standard movie controller to pause, play, and step back and forth throughout the video clip so you can review what has been said.

As you visit different places, you may find it handy to keep notes on what you have seen and heard. Dracula Unleashed features a journal that automatically updates itself after each video clip. After viewing a segment, you can click on the journal icon and a new page will be created with a short synopsis of the events you have just witnessed. The text is also read aloud at the same time. This can be a very valuable and effective way of storing notes so you can refer back to them at crucial points in the game to figure out anything you may have missed. However, one drawback to this system is that the player is not able to keep his or her own notes in the book; they have already been prewritten and appear as you complete various sections of the game. If there were a way to keep your own notes, perhaps in the back of the book, it would heighten the player's sense of being actively involved in the detective work, and not just a passive observer.

The Plot Coagulates... In addition to keeping written notes, the Journal also allows you to store addresses which you can show to the taxi driver who ferries you around the city. As you visit different characters, the Addresses section fills up, and you can also view a Map of London with the various locations marked. This is important because in Dracula Unleashed it is vital to keep track of time. Each visit takes time, and it takes a certain amount of time to get to each place. If you spend too much time zigzagging back and forth all throughout the city, you will almost certainly run out of time, in which case you are (excuse the expression) dead meat. There is even a special pocket watch that will allow you to keep an eye on the time, because just like anybody else your character needs to sleep. If you go a day and a night without returning home to sleep, you will become weak from fatigue and turn from predator into prey. These touches really make the game much more interesting and keep it realistic.

In a Similar Vein... One of the many areas in which Dracula Unleashed really shines is in its interface. I found it to be very well-thought out and easy to use. Colorful, animated icons tell you what each function does; clicking on the suitcase icon opens your inventory, for example, and clicking on the ear icon will give you a verbal description of different items in your suitcase. To interact with objects on the screen such as doors, all you need to do is click directly on the screen, which is a very sensible and intuitive (no more "open door" icon!) Most functions are also directly accessible from the menu bar.

Another helpful feature of Dracula Unleashed is (appropriately enough) the online help. You can receive detailed verbal instructions on what each of the icons does. As with just about everything else in the game, all of the text in the online help screen is read aloud, which is a classy and effective way of communicating information to the player and immersing you in the gothic world of 19th century London. If it weren't for the subject matter, which might be a bit too dramatic and eerie for small children, the verbal features of Dracula Unleashed would be ideal for learning vocabulary and pronunciation. In any case, this feature is great

for just about anybody and really adds a lot to the mood of the game.

In addition to the video segments themselves, the graphics and sound are very well done. The sound, in particular, is an atmospheric soundtrack with a digitized choir and orchestral flourishes that really sets Dracula Unleashed apart from other adventure games — it's one of the only games whose background music I didn't turn off after several hours of play.

...Doesn't Suck! Dracula Unleashed tries to cross the bridge between movies as passive entertainment and adventure games that actively involve you in decisions that affect the outcome of the game. By developing the story through a series of video clips with real actors, Dracula Unleashed achieves a level of realism that is much more compelling than a traditional adventure game. In addition, the elegance of the interface and the digitized soundtrack both draw the player even deeper into the shadowy mood of the game. Overall, the combination works quite well, making Dracula Unleashed a very enjoyable game to play.

Pros
• Great interface
• Smooth, clear video
• Digitized soundtrack
• Well-written plot

Cons
• Limited interactivity