eview: Gadget

by Ivan Cockrum

Type: Action
Publisher: Synergy, Inc.
Retail Price: $59.99
Street Price: $59.99
Requires: 25MHz 68030 or higher, 5MB of free RAM, 640x480 256 color monitor, Double-speed CD-ROM drive
Protection: None

adget's cinematic introduction begins with a fascinating visual montage, ripe with hints of things to come.   From the opening credits to the stunning finale, this CD-ROM multimedia extravaganza is a stunning and beautifully directed cinematic experience.   Gadget was conceived and directed by Haruhiko Shono, the same artist responsible for the award winning "Alice" and "L-Zone" CD-ROMs.   If you haven't heard of any of these titles, don't feel too bad.   Though Shono's previous works have been worldwide best sellers, they've often been difficult to find in the U.S.   In fact, to the best of this reviewer's knowledge, Gadget is available in the U.S. only through Nippon Books in Los Angeles, CA.

Interactive Fiction - Not! Like Shono's earlier projects, Gadget isn't really a game (though for the sake of convenience, I'll continue to call it one).   It's more of an interactive movie, falling into the wider category of interactive fiction.   Unfortunately, as interactive fiction goes, it's sadly lacking in interactivity.   The game is utterly linear, and there are no puzzles or obstacles to overcome.   No action can be performed out of sequence.   For instance, early in the game, if you try to leave your hotel room without your suitcase, a bellhop kindly reminds you to bring it, and effectively prevents you from exiting the room.   In a few areas, such as the science museum, you have the luxury of wandering around a bit, but even then you're eventually forced back onto the planned path by the sheer lack of other options. And yet, with as little interactivity as Gadget has, the designers still managed to find space in their virtual world for a maze.   A maze!   The bane of adventurers the world over!   Why is it that all designers of interactive fiction feel compelled to inflict these things upon their unsuspecting audiences?

The plot seems to concern a speeding comet and its imminent collision with the Earth, and the efforts of a small group of scientists to create and launch an interstellar ark so that at least some of humanity may be saved. The scientists have recruited you to help them. Your goal in all this is to collect five objects, or gadgets, that are crucial to the construction of the ark. To confuse matters, there's also a group of global police who don't believe in the comet, and who attempt to enlist your aid in spying on and capturing the errant scientists. Beyond these fairly simple premises is a deeper conspiracy, something to do with a mysterious boy with cosmic abilities, and either a supernatural or extraterrestrial connection. I won't give away the ending — mainly because I can't for the life of me understand it — but it's completely unexpected and entirely fascinating to watch.

D'art and D'atmosphere. Atmospherically, Gadget is dark and brooding.   For instance, the hotel you start out in is a dead ringer for the Overlook Hotel in Steven King's "The Shining." Every scene is bathed in shadows and dramatic lighting.   Much of Gadget's score sounds as if it were performed by banging on an assortment of industrial equipment.   In some places, clicks, clangs, and clonks abound.   In others, eerie, haunting music is punctuated by the low, throbbing pulse of heavy machinery.   Yet, it is all equally compelling and oddly melodic.

Gadget is definitely a technophile's fondest dream.   It is as if the entire game takes place within the belly of some great mechanical beast, with every scene dominated by machinery, pipes, railings, devices, and fantastic vehicles of all kinds.

Gadget's art matches industry standards for 3D artwork set by games such as Myst and The Seventh Guest.   Much of its design was clearly inspired heavily by the lavish industrial architecture of the 19th century.   Several locations, most notably a glass roofed observatory, resemble the inside of England's famed Crystal Palace.   And despite how restrictive movement is, the artists have generated an amazing amount of art for Gadget. No matter where you go, you can always turn around in 90 degree increments, and with the Brobdingnagian scale of most locations, that means showing quite a lot of detail.   They also did a phenomenal amount of modeling.   As a novice 3D modeler myself, I can practically feel my brain getting ready to explode whenever I even try to imagine creating the thousands and thousands of shapes seen in Gadget.   It is without doubt the largest, most complex virtual world I have ever viewed.   Of course, the real pride of Gadget is in its vehicles.   Gadget's got trains, trains and more trains!   To say nothing of flying machines, monorails, transforming drillmachine/rocketships, and more!

There's also a lot of really stunning animation, though oddly,   much of it has been done in only 16 shades of gray, and in some later parts of the game, 16 colors.   If you think about it, it   does make sense for a couple of reasons.   First, it means smaller file sizes, which is good, since Gadget takes up well over 500 MB on the CD as is.   Secondly, the smaller number of colors enabled the designers to work with larger than average QuickTime movies, as fewer colors means less memory and more speed.   Most of Gadget's movies are a whopping 512 x 272 pixels!   And the fact is, they've done a fine job of bringing these films down to 16 shades of gray - far better than you'd expect.   The affect achieved is a very dark, noirish look, one which I'm sure was not unintentional, and which can be quite compelling.   Nevertheless, after three hours of this, I found myself wishing for animation with a wider, lusher palette.   Colors aside, though, the animation sequences are dynamic and entrancing.   The camera never rests, swooping and panning through the virtual space. And as I said earlier, Gadget is nothing if not for train freaks, and many of these animated sequences depict a variety of trains entering and leaving tunnels and stations.   In fact, I counted no less than 25 of these sequences.   As you'd expect, it does get old after awhile, but not intolerably so.

Gadget also has non-player characters, but again, interaction is minimal.   Clicking on non-player characters rewards you with a few lines of text at the bottom of the screen - which may, or may not, be of any use.   The human figures are stiff and unbending, and never move.   The only small exception to this is their eyes.   Whenever you click on a character, their eyes shift to look at you.   It's a very spooky effect, but it doesn't make up for the lack of other character animation.

Interfaceless Interface. When you interact with Gadget, it is usually within the context of a series of still screens.   There is plenty of animation, but it is all non-interactive.   The interface is smooth and transparent, entirely mouse driven: the cursor becomes an arrow pointing in the relevant direction whenever it passes over a hot spot.   In other words, it relies on that same "interfaceless" interface used successfully in both Myst and The Seventh Guest, which has become so popular recently.   However, unlike those games, there are no transitional effects between most screens, making for sudden startling jumps.   The simple addition of some standard transitions would have made movement much less abrupt and more pleasing to the eye.

One somewhat annoying feature is Gadget's lack of Multifinder awareness.   Gadget does have a standard menu bar, but the familiar Apple menu and multifinder icons are missing from it.   The only way to switch applications is to quit the program.   There should be no reason for this, as Gadget was programmed directly for the Mac, unlike other games which were ported from the PC platform.   Fortunately, there's at least a decent save feature.   Opening up a saved game puts you right back in exactly the same spot you left off from, even down to the direction you were originally facing.

Also on the positive side, Gadget runs smoothly and entirely off the CD-ROM   -- no installing 50 megs worth of game files to your hard drive, as one other recent game suggests.   The many QuickTime movies run quickly and error free, with no hitches or waiting for the next frame to load from the CD-ROM.

Bottom Line. It all sounds very nice, doesn't it?   Well, here's the rub.   Gadget only takes about 3 hours to view in its entirety.   Priced at about sixty bucks, Gadget just isn't worth it for the average consumer.   I would think that none but the most ardent of 3D modeling and animation enthusiasts are going to want to shell out sixty bucks just to watch 3 hours of animation.   It's a pity, really, because Gadget's creators really have done a fine job, and deserve to get paid for it.   If you really want to see it, my personal recommendation is that you chip in with several friends - preferably 5 or 6 of them - and then take turns with the CD. Since it only takes 3 hours to sit through and essentially has no replay value, you should all get your chance to see it within a week, and you'd only be paying about ten bucks apiece for it - only slightly more than the cost of today's $8 movies.

Pros
• Beautiful 3D art
• Dramatic, mood-setting music and sounds
• Stunningly cinematic movies

Cons
• Only takes 3 hours to complete
• Pricey for 3 hours of entertainment
• Plot is difficult to follow
• Very little interactivity

Ordering Information:

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