

“Only one legacy remains of the civilization known throughout the Fertile Crescent before the Sumerians. People of extraordinary intellect, their pursuits were of the mind instead of conquering and fighting. They built a secret complex to train and practice their skills of logic and reason.... This structure, lost to the archaeological record, has been sought for millennia, but never found...until now.”

So begins *Jewels of the Oracle*, the first game release from Discis Entertainment and Eloi Productions. It is a successful fusion of the exploratory aspects of *Myst* and the straightforward “puzzle room” structure of *The 7th Guest*. Like both of these games, *Jewels* also features stunningly realistic graphics. The temple of intellect left behind by those pre-Sumerians is full of fascinating devices of stone, metal and wood, plus a little anti-gravity magic thrown in.

At the game’s start, you have stumbled upon this hall of knowledge, flashlight in hand. You make your way through rough-hewn caverns to a well-lit room. In the center of this sanctuary is an altar, and levitating above that altar is a beautiful sculpture made from multicolored jewels. It oscillates and turns faster and faster, until it finally scatters the individual gems with a burst of light.

Eventually you make your way to a room with a well in the center. As you press on different stones in the well, you find different puzzles reflected in the water (30 of them, to be exact.) If you lean in to look at one more closely, you find yourself transported to that location. If you manage to solve the mystery of the device in question, you recover one of the scattered jewels. If you can return all of the gems to the altar room, you will restore the ancient civilization to its former glory.

Once you stop being dazzled by the graphics (and this will take a while), you’ll notice that many of the puzzles are familiar. Why, look, here’s one based on the island game of *Mankala*. And here’s the old wolf-sheep-raft conundrum turned into a device with black and white stones and a sliding piece. And didn’t I do this one with pennies and dimes back in grade school? Well, there’s no doubting that several of the devices will ring a bell, but that’s actually deliberate. I mean, how many new and innovative games can you expect from a culture that died out thousands of years ago?

The familiarity of the puzzles may occasionally be frustrating to the purist looking for wholly original challenges, but this is somewhat balanced by the fact that you are never given straightforward “instructions” for the games. You have to figure out for yourself what the rules are as well as what the solution is. The only help you are given is from the ever-present stone triangle in the upper center of the screen. That’s the Oracle of the title. If you click on him, he will give you some advice relevant to the task at hand. Or at least moderately relevant. If you know anything about oracles in general, you know that one of the things they are famous for is being deliberately obscure. It’s hard to know what to do with advice like, “Do not displace strategy with spirituality.”

One aspect of the game that gets annoying after a while is all the “traveling” you have to do. This doesn’t bother the player in *Myst* because there are so many new and interesting places to visit, but *Jewels* does not have that advantage. Sure, every puzzle room is different, but they all have to be visited via the well room, and the jewels all have to be put in the altar room, which you also get to via the well room. A little variety here could have worked wonders, but every time you open a door you are greeted with the same psychedelic transition sequence and sound, and you can’t just click ahead to the destination. Maybe Discis will improve this aspect if and when they do a sequel.

But the little bit of repetition doesn’t really spoil what is essentially a very solid game. *Jewels of the Oracle* is certainly not for everyone. There are some folks who will be turned off by the lack of danger or timers. This will probably be snatched up by the non-gamers who have multimedia computers and want to do something, but get frustrated at the high tension level of a lot of the products on the market. They will not be disappointed. If you like puzzles, but find the cute humor of *Lemmings* grating, this is the game for you.