

All hail the sequel king: SSI. It's pretty impressive that they've released more different RPGs than anyone else, but it's even more impressive that they've produced follow-ups to many of their RPGs and some of their other games as well. Stone Prophet is the second game in their first-person, real-time Ravenloft adventure series. The first Ravenloft game, Strahd's Possession, drew rave reviews from every critic except this one. I didn't like the icon movement system, the dark graphics, or the real-time first-person combat. Since Stone Prophet uses a nearly identical engine, why should I change my mind?

Well, this may sound unbecoming of an associate editor and reviewer, but I don't know why. I did, though ... I don't loathe Ravenloft anymore. I'm not in love with it yet either. The movement system still irritates me and the inventory system is equally annoying. However, Stone Prophet does feature crisper, sharper graphics, a neat storyline, and a new spell-management system to facilitate real-time casting. How does it all balance out?

Fairly well, actually. But let's start from the beginning. Stone Prophet is set in the Ravenloft desert world of Har' Akir, which, long ago, was ruled by the maniacal pharaoh Anhktepote. In his quest for power, he enlisted the services of the Sun God Ra to slaughter those who opposed him. Fearing for their own lives and knowing that his reign of terror had to end, a group of priests murdered Anhktepote in his sleep. Unfortunately for mankind, Anhktepote's spirit stays alive but dormant in his mummified body. It's up to you (not you PERSONALLY ... you "the player") to stop him before he awakens completely and reclaims control of the world.

Sound tough? It is, especially when the number of characters in your party is equivalent to the number of times the word "Boutros" appears in "Boutros Boutros-Ghali". You only get two adventuring dudes to start, with the ability to recruit up to two more as you play. Creating characters is easy and quite entertaining, especially the part where you get to choose your character portraits. The game artists did a great job of including mug shots for all race/gender/class combinations. You're bound to find one that suits you. Also, you can edit your character stats, so don't worry about not having enough hit points.

The main adventuring screen looks pretty much the norm for first-person RPGs. You've got your character portraits, hitpoint meters, movement arrow icons, weapon icons, and the actual view screen. Accurate perspective is kept in all lighting conditions ... the further away something is, the tougher it is to make out. Time passes at a realistic pace, and when it gets dark, the monsters tend to get hungry. Combat in Stone Prophet is also real-time, but there's no rocket launchers or BFG9000s here. You simply click on your characters' weapon icons to attack. If you hit, the damage meter will tell you how much pain you inflicted. If you miss, a pleasant (and eventually maddening) "woosh" sound is heard. Some monsters may leave behind things that you'll want to pick up, which brings us to the inventory system. Left unchanged from the first Ravenloft, this is the most user-unfriendly part of Stone Prophet. You'll need to use both mouse buttons, and there's no convenient boxes assigned to the parts of the body like you'll see in most other RPGs. It's extremely easy to click in the wrong area of the screen and accidentally ready your clothing as a weapon ("Vorpal Bathrobe +3").

The road to Anhktepote is long and arduous. In addition to hordes of nasties, your party will come face to face with a lot of puzzles ... some easy and some hard. These usually involve manipulating objects or pressing things in the right sequence or something along those lines. Should you get lost in the desert (and you will), Ravenloft's automap function will help you find your way. You can annotate maps, save them, and print them. Chances are you'll encounter a lot of harmless NPCs as well ... many of them will give you advice or even offer to join your party. Others will require a favor for their help, but you'll usually come out ahead on the deal. All in all, Stone Prophet is a quality game across the board ... it has some obvious flaws which SSI really needs to address in upcoming sequels, but it's not bad as it stands now.