

Woodruff and the Schnibble is the latest adventure title from Sierra, but it's not exactly the fare you've come to expect from the company that brought you King's Quest, Space Quest and every thing else with Quest in the title. This game is the brainchild of CoktelVision, the French design house best known for the Goblins puzzle series and the Inca games. That almost explains this truly bizarre product.

Many years ago, the stereotypical apocalyptic nuclear war took place, and the last humans took shelter deep underground. While they waited out the half life, a new species evolved on the surface. These were the Boozooks, and they were a lot better at running the affairs of Earth than mankind ever was. Many years went by, and the humans re-emerged and treated the Boozooks the same way they always treated anyone different: with fear and aggression.

Into this world awakes Woodruff, the player character, with no memory except the mysterious word "Schnibble." With a little investigation, he learns that the Schnibble is a creation of his adopted father, Dr. Azimuth, who has disappeared. So off goes Woodruff to find both Dr. Azimuth and the Schnibble. To accomplish this, he must learn the ways of both the Boozooks and the humans, picking up skills both in magic and money management.

The visual style is, to say the least, unique. Characters have bulging eyeballs with pupils that wander back and forth at will. There are lots of teeth in this game. Everyone is either grinning so wide that all their pearly whites are displayed, or they are frequently so distressed that their lips are spread in a grimace. There are lots of moving details on every screen. Objects and people just pop in and out, and occasionally you can interact with them. The main character is prone to very silly activity when he gets tired of waiting for you to click on something. His rubber-faced antics have caused some to compare the visual style with that of Tex Avery, but it's a bit more complicated than that. Maybe if you threw in Gary Larson for good measure...

The problems with Woodruff, in most cases, come from the game's best elements being taken a step too far. For example, the interface is extremely easy to operate; it's mostly single-click stuff. If you want to talk to someone, click on them. If you want to pick something up, click on it. No need to choose between verbs. In that sense, this is one of the best, most instinctive interfaces I've seen. However, in a few cases the design is too simple, not allowing for enough player choice. For example, all the dialog is single direction. You have no control over what Woodruff is going to say, only when he says it. When "talking" with another character, the player must continue to click on the conversing character to keep the dialog going. Sometimes important information is saved for the last sentence. Unfortunately, there's no cue to let you know which sentence is the last. When you click after the last time, you start the conversation over again, and there's no way to skip over lines you've already heard. That may seem like a small complaint, but it impacts every conversation you have.

Most adventure games have gotten past this kind of problem by allowing a subtitle option so that the player can read the information, usually faster than he can listen to it. But Woodruff has no subtitling available. I find this particularly strange for an international product.

Another example of this "too much of a good thing" problem is the antsy behavior of the main character. While there are lots of games that have made their characters react to inaction on the part of the player, Woodruff seems to be a lot more impatient than he should be. Much of the player's time is taken up in scanning the scene with the cursor, looking for "hot spots" to interact with. Unfortunately, Woodruff only registers clicks as action, and when he performs one of his diversions, it incapacitates your ability to do anything. The cursor disappears, and Woodruff throws a minor fit. Once again, this would not seem worth bringing up, except that some of the things you have to do are time sensitive, and if you miss an opportunity to act because Woodruff was executing an over-caffeinated pirouette, it can get on your nerves.

The simplicity of the interface may cause some people to mistake Woodruff for a good "beginner's" adventure, but many of the puzzles are really quite difficult, even for an experienced player. As is often the case with comedy games, the humor element allows for some pretty bizarre twists of logic in the puzzle creation that you simply would not encounter in a more straightforward game. This is not a bad thing, but it should be taken into consideration.

Woodruff and the Schnibble will provide the gamer with a very challenging and unpredictable flight of fancy. While this will certainly appeal to players of the sillier LucasArts games (Day of the Tentacle, Sam & Max), it will leave a distinctly different taste in their mouths. Not everything in the game is particularly funny, but then again, this was developed by the French. They made Jerry Lewis a national hero.