Game Noir
A Case History of LucasArts’s *Grim Fandango*
LucasArts’s *Grim Fandango* served as a strong revitalizing force for the adventure game genre in 1998. It has been widely recognized for its strong narrative and engaging interface, winning “Adventure Game of the Year 1998” awards from *PC Gamer, Gamespot, Computer Gaming World*, and *Computer Games Strategy Plus* and Game of the Year from *Gamespot*. Tim Schafer – the game’s lead designer, responsible for the narrative and its dialogue – made a concerted effort to put the story first and to adhere to an overarching goal of immersing the player in a rich virtual environment. And what better narrative to immerse the player than that of the noir film? I wish to approach my case history by first summarizing the plot of *Grim Fandango*, then moving on to discuss the game’s design and gameplay, finishing with an analysis of the game’s strengths and weaknesses with a critical eye towards its strong noir themes.

**The Plot**

*Grim Fandango*’s plot, like any other game’s plot, is difficult to summarize succinctly and still encapsulate its breadth and depth. After all, games are meant to be played, not watched, which implies an extended period of interaction; while it may take only two hours to watch a film, exploring the entirety of a game narrative may take weeks or even months.

The player steps into the shoes of Manuel Calavera, a travel agent in the land of the dead. His job is to ferry the newly-dead from the land of the living and offer them lucrative travel packages to ease their way across the Land of the Dead towards the Ninth Underworld, the place of eternal rest. With enough premium sales (i.e. sales on the Number Nine train, which offers a four-minute journey instead of the usual four years, offered only to souls whose lives were lived saintly) Manny can work off the time to the powers that be. Apparently he has done something in his life for which, in his death, he must atone.
The game starts with Manny’s career on the decline, having received no premium clients – only deadbeats and swindlers. He does what any savvy salesman would – steals a client from his evil colleague Domino. Mercedes Colomar turns out to be the perfect client – she didn’t even litter during her lifetime. Manny’s computer will not allow him to purchase a ticket for her, however, and when he leaves, frustrated, to see what’s going on, Meche (Mercedes’s nickname) mistakes his frustration at the situation for frustration with her and she leaves, despite her deserving quick, safe passage through the dangerous Land of the Dead.

Manny’s life (or death, in this case) is consumed by his desire to find Meche after being fired by the DoD (Department of Death). Along the way he uncovers pieces of a sinister plot – a crime boss in El Marrow, Hector Lemans, is stealing souls’ tickets to the Number Nine and selling them to the highest bidders. He also befriends a gentle, if enormous, demon named Glottis, who becomes his closest friend.

Before leaving the concrete jungles of El Marrow where the DoD is located, Manny becomes a member of an underground resistance called the Lost Souls Alliance – initially a small organization cognizant of the DoD’s corruption – headed by a charismatic rebel named Salvador Limones. Manny arrives in the small port town of Rubacava and, thinking he has gotten ahead of Meche, opens a nightclub and casino, waiting a full year for her arrival. She shows up, exactly one year later, but evades Manny and leaves on a boat.

Manny gets on the next boat, and in the course of his yearlong pursuit becomes captain. Two of Hector Lemans’s agents sneak on board to kill Manny and Glottis, but they escape and eventually make it to the edge of the world where Domino holds Meche prisoner. After killing Domino, Manny escapes with Glottis and Meche and they eventually return to El Marrow to strike at the source of the corruption – Hector Lemans himself.
The game bases itself on the Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead (and the player plays every year – all four of them – on the Day of the Dead). El Día de los Muertos has a complex history tracing back to the Aztec month of Miccaihuitonli dedicated to children and the dead. Usually this fell towards the end of July or the beginning of August, but with the Christianization of Mexico the date was changed to coincide with the celebration of All Hollows Eve; now Mexicans celebrate the Day of the Dead on the first two days of November, and the celebration combines elements of both Christianity and Aztec aboriginalism. It is fundamentally a celebration: families decorate the graves of their deceased and congregate for elaborate meals and festive celebration.

The Day of the Dead is celebrated throughout Mexico but varies depending on the degree of urbanization; most towns have parades involving participants dressing as skeletons, creating an interesting juxtaposition of the festivity of the celebration and the morbidity of death.¹

Hence all the characters in Grim Fandango are skeletons, which poses some interesting questions regarding the logistics of speaking, wearing clothes, and the like. Grim Fandango cleverly circumvents them, however, in its immersive environment, and in a particular dialogue Manny has with a balloon-twisting sarcastic clown:

Manny: Some festival, huh?
Clown: Yeah, yeah. My carpal tunnel syndrome is really acting up.
Manny: But you don’t have any…tendons…
Clown: Yeah well you don’t have a tongue that doesn’t seem to shut you up, now does it?

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Humorous dialogue like this is to be found in nearly all of Tim Schafer’s games (*Full Throttle* (1995), *Day of the Tentacle* (1993), and some of the dialogue from the first two *Monkey Island* games, all developed by Lucasarts).

The Mexican mythological elements help to explain the seemingly odd combination of retro-fifties American art deco and Aztec architecture we see in the game. The postwar American look allows for many stylistic elements germane to *film noir* (e.g. oblique angles, juxtaposition of light and dark, etc.), a point which I will explore later in my analysis. The voice actor who plays Manny (wonderfully) has a Mexican lilt to his voice, along with several other key characters. The music contains the varying styles of jazz, bebop, and Mariachi and synthesizes them into a coherent narrative rife with *noir* nostalgia and Mexican folklore.

What is particularly innovative about the Land of the Dead is the notion of danger. For truly what threatens a dead person? Schafer and his team cleverly came up with the idea of “sprouting”:

The idea is you can get shot with this dart that injects a kind of chlorophyll-like substance into your bones. It spreads out through the pores of the Skeleton like a fast growing vine, eventually sprouting out into wild flowers that completely consume the victim until he is just a bed of marigolds lying on the ground. It’s like getting sent back to the land of the living to start over.²

In the Land of the Dead, then, green is the color of death (life) and flowers a deadly (vivacious?) reminder.

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Design and Gameplay

_Grim Fandango_ began, as one might expect, in the head of the game’s creator Tim Schafer, during his previous LucasArts project of _Full Throttle_ (1995). Says Schafer in his designer diaries,

> I had part of the Fandango idea before I did Full Throttle. I wanted to do a game that would feature those little papier-mâché, folk art skeletons from Mexico. I was looking at their simple shapes and how the bones were just painted on the outside, and I thought, “Texture maps! 3D! The bones will be on the outside! It’ll look cool!”

Thus the premise behind the game was born mid-1995. After a three-year development cycle, the game was released in November of 1998.

Tim Schafer’s previous work on LucasArts games is worth noting. He has writing credits on four games other than _Grim Fandango – Full Throttle_ (1995), _Day of the Tentacle_ (1993), _Monkey Island 2: LeChuck’s Revenge_ (1991), and _The Secret of Monkey Island_ (1990). All can legitimately be categorized as “LucasArts adventure games”, almost a genre in and of themselves. Cris Crawford defines an adventure game as one in which “the adventurer must move through a complex world, accumulating tools and booty adequate for overcoming each obstacle, until finally the adventurer reaches the treasure or goal.” LucasArts adventure games most certainly adhere to this tradition passed down from ADVENTURE, but the philosophy of their games is slightly different: they are meant, more than anything else, to be fun, encouraging exploration and innovative solutions to puzzles. The games are not meant to whack the player over the head every time he or she makes a mistake. As a result, death is almost
impossible in LucasArts adventure games. It sometimes poses an interesting challenge to the players to see if they can kill the character. The three games until 1993 in which Schafer was involved featured humorous plotlines with hilarious dialogue, many silly puzzles, and almost no ways to die. Schafer’s first original project of his own, *Full Throttle*, had a more serious plot involving bikers and a post-apocalyptic *noir* narrative yet still possessed a taste of the Schafer/LucasArts zaniness (but did offer a few more opportunities for death than their typical adventure game).

*Grim Fandango* was LucasArts’s first venture into 3D graphics, with characters being fully modeled and the backgrounds remaining two-dimensional; at the current state of technology when *Grim Fandango* was in development an attempt to make the entire world 3D – with the level of detail that the 2D background possessed – invariably would have created a “*Doom* clone.” This 3D system unfortunately meant eschewing the traditional, successful, and much-emulated scripting tool system SCUMM (Script Creating Utility for Maniac Mansion). (Aric Wilmunder, the primary creator of the SCUMM

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system, was reportedly quoted as saying, “Ahh, this 3D stuff is a fad.”) After the press release of Schafer’s decision to go 3D, players, fans, and designers became tense at the notion. Many computer games, with the advent of new graphics and sound technology, tended (and still tend) to shift their focuses towards a showcase of technology rather than on narrative immersion. The storage innovation of CD-Rom was a particular warning sign to the gaming community:

Pseudo movie people masquerading as game developers, fees at the ‘star’ performers and increasingly high production costs meant that many publishers became so worried the player wouldn’t see every frame of their digital magnum opus they removed any semblance of challenge from the game. Consequently, although continually appeased with fancy eye candy, you became less involved with the proceedings, often being relegated to little more than a passive audience member, occasionally getting to play a game of Tic-Tac-Toe or Simon Says.

With the decline in quality of adventure games in the early nineties, technological innovation in computer games was looked upon skeptically with respect to narrative unity and interactivity.

Schafer asserts that while the story doesn’t change with 3D environments, the gameplay necessarily does:

When the player is moving a character through a 3-dimensional space, they tend to re-orient themselves to the perspective of the character, rather than the 2D perspective of the screen. They think of the attacking monster as being ‘to the left of me’ as opposed to “in the left-hand corner of the screen.” And the thing that’s desirable about that change in perspective lies in their next thought, which would be something like, “turn and shoot it!” instead of just “click on it with the mouse, FAST!” That’s why I think a 3D game is a more immersive experience.

So despite the inherent cinematic quality of the stationary camera, Schafer believes that this 3D experience is more immersive and engaging. Manny can get very far away from the camera and

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get rather close to it as well. It provides an interesting dialectic between subjective alignment with the protagonist and a distanced and seemingly objective spectatorship. In short, *Grim Fandango* successfully integrates the 3D models into its gripping story: movements are fluid, precise, and realistic. As Cindy Yans says in her article on *Grim Fandango* and *Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine*, *Grim Fandango* proves that “Lucas has embraced 3D technology, fully establishing that adventure games are not in demise…at least not within their walls.”

The narrative itself within *Grim Fandango* is linear, in the sense that the game does not allow for multiple endings or separate paths to multiple endings. Schafer considers the game to be at least partially nonlinear, however, in its allowing the player to complete multiple puzzles and plot points simultaneously. He explicitly designed to prevent against a massive amount of nonlinearity, however, which would make the plot difficult to assemble.

The good thing about linearity is that it focuses game play in one area, and the moves you to the next. But if all of the puzzles are linear, and you get stuck on one, you can’t do anything else until you solve it. So what we tried with Grim is to have short, linear strands of puzzles, grouped side by side so that the strands can all be worked on at once, and then link those non-linear strand collections into a linear chain. So you have linearity, wrapped inside a ball of non-linearity, connected with ligaments of linearity again.

Many of the puzzles in the game require incomplete solutions to other problems. As such, the puzzles are intimately linked, yet independent enough to allow the player further exploration and gameplay in case he or she gets stuck. As Janet Murray suggests, nonlinear narratives are “pushing past linear formats not out of mere playfulness but in an effort to give expression to the characteristically twentieth-century perception of life as composed of parallel possibilities.”

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They address a distinctly postmodern ontology, one that is reflected very clearly in the thematic characteristics of *noir*. We will discuss this more later.

While on the subject of narrative, though, it is important to note that by far the strongest feature of *Grim Fandango* is its story. It cuts a complex path through the Land of the Dead and encourages – even demands – active engagement with the material in order to put together pieces to solve not only the individual puzzles but also the mystery of the corruption that Manny is attempting to eliminate. The dialogue (roughly 7000 lines in total) has a sober *film noir* hard-boiledness about it yet occasionally relaxes to inject Schafer’s clever – and often hilarious – wit. Without taking us out of our immersive experience, he reminds us of the game’s gaminess and encourages us to approach the game not only with innovation but also with a sense of humor.

The inspiration for the game has varying sources. Starting with the excitement generated from the papier-mâché skeletons, Schafer also cites *Chinatown* as a locus of insight from its real-estate scandal. Tim Burton’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, although not explicitly cited by Schafer, is also considered to be a graphical motivation for the game, as it features simple skeletal characters within an amusing and unified plot. Schafer, in the typical style of his interviews, cites four primary sources of game ideas: “1) Fear of losing your job, 2) People telling you it’s not cool enough yet, 3) A good idea about how to do art for cheap (which will turn out to be wrong later, of course),
and 4) A lot of coffee.” He similarly gives advice to future designers on how to pitch the idea to a computer game design company:

This game will be a huge, huge hit and it will bring so much money raining down upon this company that some people will be crushed by the enormous sacks of cash that are going to fall on us every day after this game’s released, and, in fact, we are going to need to build a gigantic incinerator just to burn the extra bills that we just don’t have room for or don’t have time to count because every day the unstoppable flood of moola will just keep getting bigger and bigger until we are all down on our knees, begging, “Please, no more money! We just can’t take any more money!”

Despite the computer game industry’s capitalistic focus on profit emblematized by Tim Schafer’s wit above, his achievements prove that creative power still exists despite Marxist protestations. *Grim Fandango* demonstrates Schafer’s creative power in its inventive interface. No cursor is visible or available – the arrow keys guide Manny and if approaches an object of interest he will look at it and crane his neck as he walks past it. He has three options with objects – use, examine, or pick up (“U”, “E”, or “P” on the keyboard). The player can also press “I” to enter Manny’s inventory, and here is the best piece of innovation. Instead of bringing the player to a disjunctive “inventory” screen, instead the game cuts to a close up of Manny’s jacket. The player can cycle through Manny’s inventory by pressing the left and right buttons while Manny pulls the various objects from his breast pocket. This helps to complete the illusion of an invisible interface – it makes *Manny* the interface. In SharkyExtreme.com’s words, “By having the inventory screen entwined so closely with the actual gameplay, it serves to retain the heightened level of believability (not to be confused with realism) that *Grim Fandango* captures.

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The same way other games used their 3D engines for the cut scenes in order to maintain fluidity, Grim’s unique inventory serves to keep the player ‘in’ the game as well.”

As Graham Nelson suggests, “you could say that there is a [Will] Crowther and a [Don] Woods in every designer, the one intent on recreating an experienced world, the other with a really neat puzzle which ought to fit somewhere.” Tim Schafer has demonstrated that he has both a Crowther and a Woods with both in full and equal force in the creative half of his brain.

**Analysis**

As has been repeatedly implied, *Grim Fandango* is a fantastic game with powerful stylistic elements taken from *film noir*. This characteristic is perhaps the greatest in making it interactive and engaging. Let us examine the elements that comprise its *noir*-ness.

*Film noir* is a genre whose status as such is contested by film theorists. Often *noir* is approached from an “I know it when I see it” perspective. The varying nature of the plots within characteristically “*noir*” films confounds the search for a simple common definition, especially since *film noir* tends to overlap fairly seamlessly with other “distinct” genres, such as the Western or the shoot-em-up action film.

In his attempt to address the complexity of noir, says Paul Schrader, “[Noir] is not defined as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather

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by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood.”

J.P. Telotte, however, finds this explanation unsatisfying, as “it only hides an unexplained predetermination of what films are truly noir.”

There are narratival elements that are common to many (if not all) noir films, and Telotte takes a broadly inclusive approach to noir, which is the same one that I will take.

“As in German expressionism, oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal” in film noir, and its effect is to “splinter a screen, making it restless and unstable”. This is fairly “easy” to accomplish with Grim Fandango’s urban settings, as the urban and the industrial tends to contrast the smooth geometry of the natural landscape. The largest chapter of Grim Fandango, Year 2, furthermore, takes place in and around the nightclub/casino that Manny has opened. It is lit for night, with artificial light providing the only illumination, which further provides oblique angles to dominate the mise-en-scène. Even during day scenes in other years, darkness tends to dominate, making streams of light an accentuation.

Another interesting stylistic quality that Grim Fandango exhibits is “an almost Freudian attachment to water”, keeping us at Rubacava (the port town) for the longest part of the narrative and then taking us underwater for much of the remaining story. This is characteristic of the film noir’s melodramatic heritage – the environment tends to reflect the psychology of the situation and the characters.

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Grim Fandango also possesses the common noir element of the femme fatale, the sexy and understated woman who often has a dark secret to hide. In Grim Fandango, the femme fatale is somewhat convoluted. Mercedes Colomar thinks that Manny is involved in the scam that Hector and Domino are pulling off to steal Number Nine tickets and when he finally finds her, she pulls a gun on him and threatens to kill him, despite her perfect record in the land of the living. During her imprisonment working for Domino also begins smoking. She impedes Manny’s quest to discover the truth, but unlike the archetypical femme fatale she must not be destroyed because of her threat to male dominance, as Telotte suggests. Grim Fandango is certainly dominated by male characters, and does fit into a masculine exploration of environment that is typical to many noir films, but Meche’s role in the narrative shows that the fundamental philosophy behind any noir narrative is experimentation.

Another significant element that Schafer pulls off wonderfully well is that of nostalgia: “a passion for the past and present, but also a fear of the future” serving to emphasize “loss, […] lack of clear priorities, [and] insecurity”.\(^\text{19}\) This is expressed in numerous ways in Grim Fandango, first and foremost through its main character, Manuel Calavera. To work in the Department of Death, apparently, one must have had done something very bad in one’s lifetime in order to have to work off the time in the Land of the Dead. Manny, unlike the other characters, does not remember what he did to deserve working in the DoD. Despite his current good-natured protagonism Manny has evil specters in his past. The visual style of the game is also nostalgic; its art deco, Aztec decoration of buildings, and postwar fashions all reminisce about an irretrievable past. The ultimate concept of the game is one of nostalgia – of the land of the living.


\(^{19}\) Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir” in Alain silver and James Ursini, eds., Film Noir Reader (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 58.
Even though there is a lot of resentment directed towards the living, the Land of the Dead is portrayed as incomplete with its skeletal characters and corrupt plots. “Love is for the living, Sal,” Manny reminds the leader of the Lost Souls Alliance. There is a similar sense of loss in one of the final exchanges between Hector and Manny:

Hector: Oh Manny…so cynical…What happened to you, Manny, that caused you to lose your sense of hope, your love of life?
Manny: I died.

Existence in the Land of the Dead, then, is fundamentally looking back on an unchangeable past that has shaped a soul’s fate – life. The Land of the Dead is a temporary place, a transitory reality merely on the way to eternal rest, painted as inferior to living life. Manny says numerous times to Glottis, the demon designed only for mechanical work, that he (Manny) does not belong in the Land of the Dead. Those who seek to stay and attempt to achieve wealth and power are looked upon as evil, corrupt, or in some way aberrant. Gaston Bachelard asks us, “Are we to remain, to quote Gérard de Nerval’s famous line, beings whose ‘towers have been destroyed’? Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are ‘housed.’ Our soul is an abode.” What Bachelard is telling us is that with the rise of urbanism – that the film noir harps on with its urban settings – the traditional locus of American values shifts from the home (reminiscing on a pastoral America in which the home was the site of extensive social engagement and a harbor of “traditional” morality – but the home has little meaning in the apartment-filled city) to the individual. And the film noir shows us that the individual is often of questionable moral value, creating an enormous amount of tension in a postmodern era that places its emphasis entirely on the individual, eliminating all other sources of truth and stability. And THAT is why film noir is an intense ontological experience: the individual, and the player of Grim Fandango more than

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ever, is reduced to a “permanent other in a world of others.” While “the game provides a safe way to thumb one’s nose” at social structures, the player of Grim Fandango (and perhaps other works of Game Noir) is forced to confront ethical notions in his or her engagement with a narrative that depends on moral intelligence for its comprehensibility. While Grim Fandango is a frightening, engaging, and exhilarating experience.

The game throws us into a world with only some vague referents from our own, with a distinct miasma of Mexican folklore and legend. The player plays a character with a dubious past who explores the underworld of the Land of the Dead searching for clues to solve a mystery.

What results is a constant tension between the lure of that corrupt world and his characters’ stance – one that at times seems nearly pointless, given the pervasive criminality, and at other times self-destructive, because of the dangers it involves. But that stance is finally crucial to the attraction of these tales, for the moral center it fashions reassures us that, individually, man can cling to some human values, even as he is faced by corruption on all sides.

Grim Fandango contains moral ambiguity, strong dialogue, sharp wit, and a relatively non-linear storyline. Ernest W. Adams muses after his observations on European gaming, “Nearly 300 years after the Puritans arrived, America continues to maintain a Puritan ethic with respect to its entertainment. We apply the virgin/whore dichotomy to our entertainment: it’s either ‘racy’ or it’s clean as a whistle.” Noir induces tremendous anxiety within American society because it does not fit this dichotomy; it is morally ambiguous.

How could a narrative be more engaging?

As J.P. Telotte explains, film noir in the forties was a genre of narrative experimentation and exploration. It pointed towards “a compelling urge to understand, formulate, and articulate

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the human situation at a time when our old formulations, as well as the means of expression underlying them, no longer seemed adequate.”

This is an age with a rapidly-developing storytelling medium and we find that Game Noir such as *Grim Fandango* helps explore and push past the limits of the computer game.

There is only one complaint that I came across while playing the game, having to do with the interface. At times, in controlling Manny, it is difficult to get him where you want him to be. If he comes to a dead end of some sort, sometimes he stops dead in his tracks and sometimes he turns away and keeps moving. It is easy to get into the habit of having Manny run everywhere – due to my own impatience, perhaps instilled in me by first-person shooters – and sometimes he will run clear away from the object you intend him to approach and sometimes even out of the room. This also provokes minor frustration with objects that react to Manny’s presence, like elevators, which he will get into if he is close enough. This criticism is insignificant, however, to the game’s overall achievement and is mostly the result of the novelty of the cursor-less interface.

One complaint that may come up with some players – which I do not share – is that the game does not have much replayability. But I argue that this is not the case – there are many exciting sequences in *Grim Fandango* worth repeating, and it may be fun (as I found it to be) to replay the narrative, cognizant of the solutions to the puzzles: this results in unifying the various plot threads into a more coherent whole, always conscious of the ultimate goal of finding Meche and the source of the corruption in the Land of the Dead. This does reduce the excitement and novelty but can still be fun.

**Conclusions**

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*Grim Fandango*, as previously mentioned, was seen as a revitalizing force in the computer game industry. Adventure games were considered a dying genre, falling victim to plotlessness with the growing desire by the industry to showcase technology rather than creativity.

So what this extensive case history wishes to prove, in the end, is that *Grim Fandango* contains a legitimately *noir* narrative and pulls it off wonderfully well. This is the game’s greatest strength as it fortifies the user’s engagement with the material and immersion in the virtual world. I hope to have shown that not only is the plot well-done within the *noir* context, but that *noir*, within a computer game medium, can have tremendous positive impact on narratival enjoyment and engagement. As Crawford suggests, subtlety, depth, and intensity create “extreme experiences.”

Suffice to say, *Grim Fandango* is an “extremely” designed and “extremely” playable game.

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Works Cited


