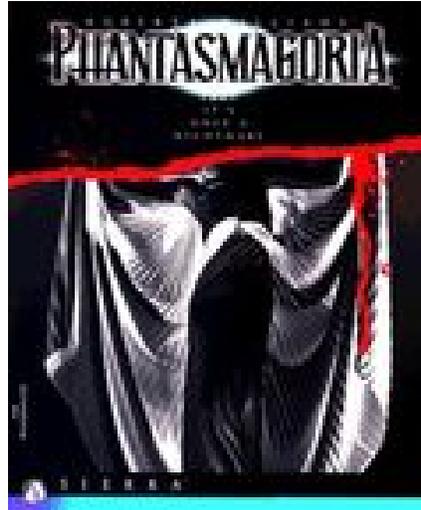# Game Review of Roberta Williams'

Phantasmagoria

Alicia Ong

History of Computer Game Design: Technology, Culture, and Business

February 22, 2001

Contents

Publication Information

Title: Phantasmagoria

Date of Release: Spring 1995

Company: Sierra Studios

Designed and Written By: Roberta Williams

Story by: Roberta Williams, Andy Hoyos

Director: Peter Maris

Producers: Mark Seibert, J.Mark Hood, Roberta Williams

Art Director: Andy Hoyos

Game Directors: Roberta Williams, Andy Hoyos, Mark Seibert, J. Mark Hood

Lead Programmer: Doug Oldfield

Musicians: Jay Usher, Mark Seibert

Movie Sequences Scored By: Mark Seibert

Opening and Closing Themes: *Consumite Furore* by Mark Seibert

performed by Mark Seibert and the CSUF Concert Choir

conducted by: Dr. Gary Unruh

Take a Stand by Mark Seibert

performed by Mark Seibert

Mike Berkowitz-Bass

Jacqueline Goodwin-Lead Vocal

Paul Thaxter-Drums

Both recorded at Maximus and Engineered by Jeff Hall

Choir on Movies: *The Esoterics*

Additional Music by: Neal Grandstaff

Quality Assurance Lead: Robin Bradley

Video Production by Sierra Studios

Video Production Supervisor: Bill Crow

Lighting and Camera: Randy Littlejohn

Assitant Lighting and Camera: Robert Ballew, Craig Denny

UltiMatte and Video Engineer: Robert Koeppel

Stage Manager: Robert Ballew

Property Master: Craig Denny

Best Boy: Chris Williams

Cinematographer: Gerold Wolfe

Video Post Production by Sierra Studios

Video Post Production and Visual Effects Supervisor: Bill Crow

Video Editing: Peter Maris

Additional Video Editing: Robert Koeppel, Ron Lawson

Video Compositing and Effects: Bill Crow

Digital Compositing and Effects: Robert Koeppel

Additional Digital Art and Effects: Linda Lubken

3-D Environments: Designed by Andy Hoyos

Modeled by Kronos, Kim White, Brandee Prugh, Brian Judy

2-D Adaptations: Dana Moody

SGI Animations, Renderings and Effects: Kronos, Kim White, Brandee Prugh, Brian Judy

Cast

Victoria Morsell as Adrienne Delaney

David Homb as Don Gordon

Robert Miano as Carno

Taylor Bernard as Marie

Steven Bailey as Cyrus

V. Joy Lee as Harriet

Stella Stevens as Lou

Hoke Howell as Harv

Douglas Seale as Old Malcolm

Devon Myers as Young Malcolm

Lillian Chauvin as Ethel

Christine Armond as Hortencia

Holly Chant as Victoria

Wanda Smith as Regina

Dana Moody as Leonora

Karl Neimiec as Mike

Greg Belemjian as Hintkeeper Voice

Kronos

Producer: Stanely Liu

Art Direction: Albert Co

Entity Modeling and Animation: Albert Co

3-D Motion Control Composites: Francis Co

CG Modelers/Animators: Stanley Liu, Albert Co, Mohammed Davoudian, Francis Co, Lisa Kim, Dallas Good, Andy Koo, Darrek Rosen

Software Support: James T. Tomasko

Art and Video Post Production: Dana Moody, Darvin Atkeson, Maria Fruehe, Desi Hartman, Robin Braze-Phanco, Travis Leonard, Ken Prugh, Daryle Smith, Frankie Powell, Richard Powell, Don Waller, Tony Hernandez

Programmers: Doug Oldfield, Dave Artis, Vana Baker, Adam Bentley, Chris Carr, Carlos Escobar, Bryan Waters

Additional Programming: Sean Mooney, Steve Conrad, Michael Lytoon, Kerry Sergent, J. Mark Hood

QA Configuration Testing: Michael D. Jones, Steve Deckert, John Cunney, Sharon Simmons, Douglas Wheeler, John Trauger, Lynne Dayton, John Ratcliffe, Bill Davis Jr., Roger Clendenning, Scott Howell, Mike Pickhinke, Jillian Leonard

Additional QA: Robin Bradley, Dan Woolard, Mike Brosius, Joe Carper, Marsha McCarty, Cindy Romero, Paul Trowe

Off Site QA (Dynamix): PCTest Incorporated Dave Steele, Gary Stevens, Andrew Binder, Scott Gilbert, Dan Hinds, John Wolf

Beta Test and Coordination

Technical Support/Beta: Gary Brown, Beth Quintana

Foley/Sound Effects: Rick Spurgeon, Kelli Spurgeon, Mark Seibert

Latin Translations: Bruce Thornton

Audio DNR: Maximus Studios

Movie Special Effect: The Character Shop

Animals Handled by World Wide Movie Animals

Motion Control: McCloud Productions

Makeup Artist: Cindy Jordan

Movie Audio: MacDonald Recording

Systems Programmers: Larry Scott, Ed Critchlow, Dan Foy, Mark Wilden, Ken Koch, Terry McHenry, Chris Smith, Greg Tomko-Pavia

Additional QA: Dan Woolard, Michael Brosius, Joe Carper, Jon Meek, Leonard Salas, Susan Frisher

Casting Agencies: Rothfield Ryan and Roth, Bressler and Associates

Casting Directors: Peter Maris, Mark Seibert

Special Thanks to Chris Braymen, Steve Conrad, Neil Matz, Sean Mooney, Robin Kleeman, Sunny Maris, Fresno Flats Historical Society, Micrografx Picture Publisher

Documentation Design

Design: Julie Collinge, Lori Lucia

Copy: Susan Frischer, Aimee Macdonald

Story and Gameplay

Renown and successful photographer Don Gordon was tired of urban life. So, when he discovered the Carno estate, a secluded, rustic island off a sparsely inhabited region of the New England coastline, it came as no surprise to his wife, writer Adrienne Delaney, that he insisted on purchasing the property and moving there especially since the estate, replete with a three story Gothic mansion, came at an incredible price. But as Adrienne soon discovers, there is a reason why no one wants the estate. There is something evil in the house, something that longs to be free once again, and little by little it infects Don, possessing him, driving him slowly towards insanity. In order to save her husband, Adrienne must unearth the mysteries surrounding the house and its last owner, the dark magician Carno, but she must beware or else she may end up mysteriously murdered...like every other woman who lived there before her.

 In *Phantasmagoria*, the player takes up the role of Adrienne for the duration of the game. In order to piece together the story of Carno, a story that took place over a hundred years ago, the player must explore the grounds and talk to the townspeople in the small village near the island. Initially, most of the townspeople are reticent and a good number of rooms in the mansion are inaccessible but slowly the townspeople warm up to her and tell her what they know of the Carno family, and as the player finds clues--newspaper articles, letters written by the inhabitants of the house--and obtains various items and tools, she is able to access the mysterious, inner sanctums of the house where

she is able to mysteriously witness disturbing visions of the past. These visions are not for the light-hearted as one may suspect. This is a horror game, and the player never forgets that fact.

Technical Aspects

Graphics -- *Phantasmagoria* was a technological masterpiece for its time, shot with live actors interacting with a blue screen set, a technique that provides digitized background scenery and eliminates, for the most part, the need to build any type of set (other than the props that the actors need to interact with). Basically, the "live actors speak their lines and go through the motions against a blue screen set. Motion-controlled cameras record camera angles and movement. The digitized information is then loaded into the Silicon Graphics computers which synchronize the relative motion of computer-generated, three-dimensional background art. Then, the live action and the backgrounds are seamlessly composited using advanced techniques controlled by an UltiMatte system" (Interaction, Holiday 1994, p. 27). The process, albeit long and time-consuming, may not sound too odious, but when the actors did need to interact with props, it complicated the process quite a bit since "the objects had to line up with what would later be digitized." For example, if the camera were placed too low, then it wouldn't shoot the right amount of steps in a staircase. In one instance, they ended up having to build a staircase which had steps six inches high but *four feet apart* from one enough in order to obtain the right effect for the camera height. However, they were immediately forced to trash it and change the camera height instead since showing a perfectly healthy-looking actress struggling up a set of stairs seemed a bit odd onscreen. (Interaction, Spring 1995, p. 14).

Control interface -- Sierra aficionados may fondly remember the era when all Sierra games had "control bars" situated at the top of the screen, featuring icons such as a figure walking, an empty speech bubble, an eye, and a hand. Clicking on the icon and then on objects on screen would allow the user to "act upon" those objects accordingly. However in *Phantasmagoria*, they have been replaced with an all-in-one cursor that turns bright red when the cursor is placed over anything the user is supposed to interact with. Although I personally find that the new interface makes the game a lot less challenging, at the same time it is inherently a more intuitive interface, and the user does not need to

learn much before he can concentrate on the game instead of on how to move around in the game.

Protection from violence – Phantasmagoria has many graphically violent deaths and two sexually explicit encounters. Although the designers did not want to candy-coat the story, they did feel an obligation to parents worried about violence in computer games, so they decided to include a password option with the game. Once *Phantasmagoria* was installed, the parent could type in a password and change the game from the default R version to a friendlier PG-13 one. Only those who knew the password could view the R rated movie sequences. However, I discovered one major fault with the system. If the minor chose to reinstall the game, he would not only have access to the R rated version but could even enact the password system himself, locking his parents out from seeing the uncut version.

Design of the game

Replay value – While Sierra claims that it is "possible to play *Phantasmagoria* from opening to close and miss fully sixty percent of what the game has to offer" (Interaction, Fall 1995, p. 30), I felt that *Phantasmagoria* had only a moderate replay value. Yes, there are multiple ways in which one can win the game, but most of the replay value lies in finding the movie sequences that one may have missed in the first or second go-around. The game is frustrating in the sense that it has a very linear plotline that the player cannot change – the evil is always unleashed, one cannot reseal the evil until Don goes completely insane, and there is no way that the player can ever choose to just abandon Don and the mansion.

Play balance – Although the horror aspect is a constant in the game, there is periodic comedic relief in the antics of the resident high-strung amateur psychic/maid Harriet and her oafish son Cyrus. The comedy actually serves as a nice break from the constant tension and "rounds" out the game, so the player is not too overwhelmed by the overall dark nature of the story.

"Success" of the game

In an interview with designer Roberta Williams about the horror genre, she mentions, "I feel it's a genre that hasn't been properly explored yet in computer games. It's been touched on--it's 'kind of' been done--there's a lot of hack and slash out there and the whole point seems to kill everyone and blow them away. That's not really horror, you know. I felt it was the right time to do it (*Phantasmagoria*), and I was determined to do it right" (Interaction, Spring 1995, p.32). And like Roberta Williams' other games (*King's Quest, Laura Bow Mysteries*), *Phantasmagoria* was a success, though its success far exceeded Sierra's expectations – more copies of *Phantasmagoria* sold than all other Sierra games combined in 1995 ("About Sierra"), not altogether surprising seeing that *Phantasmagoria* represented many milestones in the gaming industry. It was "the first horror game written for an 'adult' audience. The first to extensively use live actors as characters. The first effective use of beautifully rendered Silicon Graphics 3-D backgrounds." (Interaction, Spring 1996, p. 68), all elements that intrigued the gaming consumer at the time.

Unfortunately, the gaming consumer is a fickle one, and as shown by the current live-action horror games out there, or rather more appropriately, the lack thereof, the genre did not have much staying power though there were other games of a similar nature later published: Sierra's *Gabriel Knight 2: The Beast Within* and *Phantasmagoria 2*, the uninspired sequel to *Phantasmagoria*. Many have blamed *Phantasmagoria 2* entirely for the death of the genre, noting that *Phantasmagoria 2* was hacked together in a mere third of the time of the original and just conveniently enough in time for the next holiday season. Needless to say, it disenchanted many a consumer. It is a reasonable explanation although I also attribute the death of the genre to the fact that the cinemagraphic venue that the live-action horror game was pursuing was ahead of its time. Many of *Phantasmagoria*'s reviews include complaints about the low difficulty of the game (Gamespot and Gamesdomain). However, at that time, it was not feasible to have a longer game and more intricate puzzles. Even after heavy editing of the full motion video sequences, the game is a hefty seven CD's long. However, compression technology has substantially improved since then, and as DVD-ROM's and the MPEG-2 format become more commonplace, a longer game may be more feasible as well as desirable, for as smooth and as expressive as computer-rendered people may become, they may never completely replace real people, for humans have "so many emotions. It would be very difficult [to express them all]...in animation -- probably even impossible" (Interaction, Spring 1995, p. 34).

Endnotes

"About Sierra," http://members.aol.com/sierrasite/about.htm

"Adventure Gamespot Review: Phantasmagoria," http://www.gamespot.com/adventure/phantasm/review.html

"Artists at Work," Interaction Spring 1995: 34-35.

Chris Williams, "Inquisition 2000," Interaction Spring 1995: 14-15.

"A First Look at Phantasmagoria," Interaction Holiday 1994: 24-27.

"Phantasmagoria," <u>Interaction</u> Spring 1996: 68-69.

"Phantasmagoria: It's Finally Here...Let's Explore," <u>Interaction</u> Fall 1995: 30-35.

"Phantasmagoria: Main Review,"
http://www.gamesdomain.com/gdreview/zones/reviews/pc/sept/phantas2.html

"The Ultimate Interactive Nightmare," <u>Interaction</u> Spring 1995: 30-33.

About Sierra
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It all started when Ken and Roberta Williams started working on their first software product. Roberta supplied the creative design and Ken did the technical work. It wasn't until they saw the finished product that they ever thought of trying to sell it. They placed a small ad in Micro Magazine and hoped for the best.

   That first software program, a game they called Mystery House, eventually sold over 10,000 copies. It was a hundred times more successful than they ever thought it would be! Believing that their little venture will allow them to afford the simple life in the mountains they always wanted, Ken and Roberta bravely launched their own start-up company, On-Line Systems. They relocated in Coarsegold, California, a rural town in the Sierra Nevada foothills where Roberta's parents (John and Nova Huver) own an apple farm. In keeping with their new location near Yosemite National Park, they adopted Half Dome as their logo and changed the company's name to Sierra On-Line.

   Sierra may mean adventure games to you, but Sierra had also released a few educational and producitivity titles in its early times. A good example would be Learning With Leeper. Leeper was a computerized teacher. He taught kids how to count and do math. Later, both IBM and Tandy selected the Learning with Leeper software as premium elarly learning software for their computers

Then And Now

Sierra Nevada , Sierra Logo in the early 80's, late 80's and early 90's, and late 90's to present

TIME LINE

1980 - May 5th	Sierra released **Mystery House**, the first game with graphics, but still no sound, animation, or color.
1982	Sierra released **Wizard and the Princess** for the IBM PC as its first hi-res color adventure game. **Time Zone** was released for the Apple II as its largest adventure game. It took 12 disks (most games had only 1 to 4 disks).
1984	**King's Quest 1** was released. It marked a new era of adventure games.
1985	**King's Quest 2** was released.
1986	**King's Quest 3** was released.
1987	Sierra released **Police Quest 1**. It was even used by police officers for training.
1988	Sierra released **King's Quest 4** and the original **Mixed-Up Mother Goose**. Sound cards supported. Sierra was the first gaming company to support sound cards. Sierra released its first line of productivity products, **HomeWord Plus** and **Smart Money**.
1989	**Dynamix** entered the Sierra family.
1990	**King's Quest 5** floppy VGA version, **Mixed-Up Mother Goose** CD, and King's Quest 1 remark were released. Sierra was the first gaming company to support CD-Rom Technology.
1991	Sierra started its own online service, The Sierra Network.
1993	Sierra sold its online service to AT&T and became known as The Imagination Network. It's now owned by America Online and is known as Cyber Park.
1994	Sierra completed construction of its new video studio in Oakhurst, CA. **Phantasmagoria** started filming immediately.
1995	Sierra released its first full motion video game, **Phantasmagoria**. The biggest game ever created (It's on 7 CDs). It has sold more copies than all other Sierra games combined! Sierra acquired **Arion, Pixellite (Print Artist), Green Thumb, Impression (Lords of the Realm II and Caesar II), SubLogic, and Papyrus (Nascar Racing)**.
1996	Sierra acquired **Headgate** (Links 386 Pro). Sierra merged with **CUC International**, a membership services company. Sierra released its first 3-D accelerator, **Screamin' 3-D**. Sierra released **Leisure Suit Larry 7**, with a whole new point and click interface. A new development team, **KAA**, the creators of **CyberGladiators** and **Hunter Hunted**, was formed.
1997	**CUC Software**, Sierra's parent company, became the top publisher in 1997.
1998	**CUC International** merged with **HFS Incorporated**. **CUC Software** is now known as **Cedant Software.** A new sports division, **Sierra Sports**, is formed under the Sierra umbrella. **Sierra Studios, SierraFX, Sierra Attractions, Sierra Home** were formed.

 Sierra introduced its new logo design.

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ADVENTURE **gamespot review**

Phantasmagoria

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Phantasmagoria is Sierra's first attempt at a full-blown, live-action, interactive video adventure, and their ambition far outweighs the results. A four-plus-million-dollar budget and over two years in production do not necessarily translate into high quality gaming.

Much of Phantasmagoria is spent on typical adventure activities: exploring, grabbing items, and problem solving. And on that level, the game is reasonably enjoyable. In addition, the graphics are excellent, the music is emotive, and there are many pleasant surprises. But problems arise in several areas: experienced adventurers will find Phantasmagoria generally unchallenging, the characters weak, the violence over-the-top, and the script just lame. For instance, during day one Adrienne discovers a secret chapel full of bizarre items yet doesn't think it important enough to tell her husband. On day two, she barely breaks a sweat over the fact that her hubby has transformed from a loving partner to a crazed lunatic.

Many of this title's problems come from complexities inherent in taking a huge concept and trying to wring a game out of it. Somebody forgot to do some detailed planning and fine-tuning. This is clear from the character interactions, the

SpotScore

6.0

Gameplay: 5

Graphics: 7

Sound: 7

Value: 6

Reviewer's Tilt: 6

Difficulty: Easy

Learning Curve:
0 hrs

Additional Reviews
Player

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repetitive nature of some scenes, and the unrealistic puzzles--the telescope eyepiece "glints" in the sand only after you discover you need it, even though you've walked by that spot several times already.

So why is Phantasmagoria so darned popular? It's accessible to newbies, it's a new genre, and Sierra has promoted the hell out of it. The built-in hint system can turn this into a cakewalk and you'll be wowed by the occasional top notch production values. Unfortunately, the repetitive violence may turn the newcomers off just as quickly. My recommendation: Phantasmagoria is only for the gaming-challenged. Otherwise try Gabriel Knight: The Beast Within. It's Sierra's second big-time video adventure and they learned from their mistakes.

By Jeff Sengstack

Posted 05/01/96 12:00:00 AM

Help

Phantasmagoria - Main Review
Reviewer: Rob White

NOTE: This game is rated for mature audiences (17+ y/o). If you use the censor mode, it is suitable for anyone 13+ y/o (or so the box says, I played in uncensored mode and I don't have any permanent damage, besides what was already there). Be warned, this is NOT a King's Quest game.

What the game ran/played like:

First, those are the DOS requirements, it doesn't say that on the box. If you want to run it in Windows you need at least a 486/66 or better. With my 486DX4/100, windows performance was less than good. To be honest, I got several Windows lockups with my GUS, even though it (the GUS) is very stable in windows. So I played it through DOS. I still had to turn off the detail in the movies, but they did run full screen.

For those of you who have played King's Quest 7, this played like it. If you didn't here's how it was: Everything was filmed on in blue screen studio. If you choose to walk across the room, you see a REAL person walk across the room, not a drawn person. Every action you perform is done by a real, living person (well, actor). So, that said, this did feel like (I'm going to say it) interactive movie. For the first time in my life, it felt like I was really playing a movie. There are problems with this though. Phantas comes on 7 CD's!! That's right, 7. Although, most of the time you are seeing repeated walking and stuff (especially things like just going up and down a hall) so most of the video on the CD-ROM's are just repeats of what is on the other CD-ROM's. It is still very impressive. They did provide a 'Fast Forward' button so that you could skip repeated animation. Despite the massive amount of video and rendered backgrounds, I beat Phantas in less than 7 hours. There are hardly any puzzles in this game, and you spend most of the time walking from one end of a house to the other looking for an item. All in all, the game play is pretty good. One other thing, there are very few characters in the game to interact with. The manual states that you can play the game, and finish it, and still miss a full 60%. There are various scenes I've seen in magazines and things that I didn't see in the game, so I know that I missed some stuff. Looking at the credits for the game, there are only 15 characters listed, so that's how many there is in the game, total. You might not even get to talk to some of them though (cut scenes).

Game play, 7/10

Graphics:

This is where the game really shines. Like I said before, everything is filmed, not drawn, so it is very realistic. The computer generated graphics (ie. Animation of thing like doors, fire place, etc) is also very well done. Everything in the game looked exactly as it should have. I ran it, through DOS on my 486DX4/100 with out any skips, but in windows, it was awful... I recommend playing in DOS, unless your sound card isn't supported (very few are, just the typical Sierra ones).

Graphics, 9/10

(Wait until you see them at the end of the game, WHOA!!!)

Official Site
Published by:
Sierra

Developed by:
In-house

Released: Aug 1995
Version: v1.0. Version dated August, 1995.
Price: $69.99 (US)

Controls: Mouse

Specification
• 386/dx25
Pentium 90 + recommended

Sounds:

Sounds, hmm. The sound effects are well done. The music that is recorded and performed by real people is great (very gothic and spooky) has a lot of static in it. The MIDI music was okay but nothing to really rave about. During the movies, there is REAL music (sung by a 135 voice choir!). It is staticy, and sometimes too loud (you can only adjust the volume of the MIDI music and the DAC sounds (which is all the sound during the movies. The music and voice during the movies can not be controlled separately). Often, you can't hear the speech well.

All in all, I'd give sound a 6/10.

Puzzles:

If you can find any, tell me where they are!! I played the whole game in about 7 hours. While I loved the game it's self, I found that most of the puzzles answers are given away. Don't get me wrong, there are some hard ones in there, but most of them are WAY to easy (I'd consider myself an advanced adventure gamer, not an expert, but not a novice).

Puzzles: 6/10

General Ramblings:

Personally, I loved this game. It could possibly be one of the best games I've played. I don't really feel comfortable recommending it to someone because of it's major flaws (ie. repetitive, puzzle-less). I didn't have any DOS conflict problems (If you have a GUS, you need a Sound Blaster to, it won't work with just a GUS in DOS, or for that matter, Windows). And it did run very well. I played it in uncensored mode, and be warned, there is a scene in there where someone gets, well,

SPOILER ALERT raped! *SPOILER ALERT OVER*.

My heart tells you to buy this game, but my head tells you not to. If you did read the spoiler on the last line, there is an option that will let you remove such a scene from the game. It is a password option that lets you 'Censor' such scenes. I played in 'Uncensored' mode, but I saw a few scenes that I know would have been removed if you had of used the censor option. Removing these scenes would not hurt the games story at all, just make the overall mood of the game different. Here are my ratings:

My opinion: 10/10

The opinion based on technical things (ie. puzzles): 6/10.
My overall opinion (this is the one to look at, it covers EVERYTHING): 9/10.

That said, I thank you for taking the time to read this. BTW, if you do get the game, looking for something scary, it's not scary at all... I did have to look away once, but that was because I was eating and

SPOILER ALERT someone was using a razor sharp garden spade to fill someone else's mouth with dirt (to kill them). *SPOILER ALERT OVER*

There are a few really sick scenes I missed on the first play (I've played it about six times so far). The replay value is really good, once you realize what you missed...

Well that's it, happy gaming everyone!

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