

STS 145 GAME REVIEW:



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It is a beautiful day in the desert, and you see a limousine hovering a quarter of a mile ahead of you. You feel a great deal of remorse that gravity-defying vehicles have replaced the simple grace of rubber and asphalt. That is why you love your bike so much . . . it is the only vehicle still in touch with the road. You decide it would be fun to give them a little thrill, so you rally The Polecats (your loyal biker gang) and buzz the limo. As your men race past either side of the limo, you decide that the easiest way around is not to go around at all. You lift the front tire of your bike off the road and drive straight over the roof. As you crush the cherubic hood ornament you are still unaware of the trouble you have just gotten yourself into . . .

This is Full Throttle, the heavy-metal biker adventure from the creative minds at LucasArts Entertainment Company. Originally released for the PC in 1994 and later released on the Macintosh, it is the pride and joy of writer, designer, and project leader Tim Schafer. He was joined on this project by lead programmer Stephen R. Shaw and programmers Jonathan Ackley, Mark Crowley, Dave Grossman, and Hwei-Li Tsao (for full game credits visit <http://www.mobygames.com/game/credits/gameId=940/>).

The game is set in an apocalyptic future where towns are few and far between and biker gangs rule the highways. You play Ben, the leader of the Polecats, one of the toughest gangs around. As circumstances would have it, you just drove over the limo of one Malcolm Corley, owner of Corley Motors, “makers of the last domestically produced motorcycles” (Full Throttle game manual). The aged, free-spirited, biker-at-heart Corley is accompanied by his scheming Vice President Adrian Ripburger, “pond slime in an Armani suit” as he is aptly described in the game’s manual. The two of them catch up with you at the Kickstand, the local watering hole for weary bikers. They ask if you would like to join them at their upcoming board meeting to promote the new line of Corley bikes, but you decline because you don’t want to commercialize the Polecats. It is then that Mr. Ripburger asks you to step outside with him to discuss the matter in private. After some

discussion, you change your mind and give your word that the Polecats will ride to the board meeting to honor “the last wish of a dying man (Corley)” as Ripburger put it, and then <bonk> . . . You wake up in a dumpster several hours later and notice that your keys are missing, your gang is gone, and there is an unmistakably large bump on the back of your head. You stumble into the Kickstand only to discover that you are wanted for the murder of Malcolm Corley. It is then that you realize that your life has taken a turn for the worst, and you are the only one who can clear your name and save your gang. You have only your wits and your fists to guide you, and you KNOW that is all you’ll need.

Full Throttle was a technological masterpiece when it was created, and it continues to influence game design today. The programmers and designers managed to seamlessly blend state-of-the-art facial animation techniques with a new animation style borrowed from comic books to make the characters really come to life. For one of the first times in computer game history, animated characters had voices, and their lips moved in synchronization with spoken words, making the characters that much more real. In addition to these new animation techniques, the programmers at LucasArts had to combine two different programming engines to incorporate all of the game play aspects they wanted. At the core, Full Throttle is a point-and-click adventure based on the SCUMM (Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion) engine created by LucasArts in 1988 for Maniac Mansion (for more information on SCUMM and its use in LucasArts games, visit <http://www.justadventure.com/articles/Engines/SCUMM/SCUMM.asp>). This engine allows the programmers to create very simple and fluid interactions between the characters and the items in their on-screen environment. In addition to the SCUMM engine, the programmers had to incorporate the game engine from Rebel Assault to accommodate the

fight scenes. This was a major obstacle because both engines interface with the operating system in very different ways and make conflicting calls to memory. To fix this, the programming team had to rework the SCUMM engine so that it would not interfere with the sequences utilizing the Rebel Assault engine. Another modification made to the SCUMM engine for Full Throttle was the simplified, mouse-controlled, interface menu. In most other point-and-click adventures, action and possession menus occupy a large portion of the screen. In Full Throttle, on the other hand, the entire screen is used for the story, and the menus are only brought up when called upon by the user (as seen in the screen shot below).



One last innovation involved in the production of Full Throttle is its heavy-metal soundtrack. It is the first game I have found that uses one band, the Gone Jackals in this case, to produce all of the music for the game. As well, it is the first time I have ever seen the soundtrack for a game hyped in the same way that it is done for movies. There are advertisements in the credits instructing the triumphant players on how to acquire the CD, and there is even a link on the LucasArts webpage to the Gone Jackals homepage.

In terms of game depth, Full Throttle doesn't have the same replay value as games like SimCity or Quake where the game is different each time through. Full Throttle is a linear game where the player tries to solve one puzzle after another so that he can see the

next cut scene that will help him figure out the next plot twist in the game. In this sense, the game is much more like a movie and has a replay value much more like that of a favorite VHS tape than that of another computer game. In fact, when I was replaying it to remind myself of some of my favorite scenes, my roommate and another friend were sitting back and watching me play. Together, they must have said, “Wow, this really feels like a movie” ten or more times. This praise for the game “as a movie” really points out its drawbacks as a game. As adventure games go, Full Throttle’s puzzles are easier than most, and the total length of the game is one third to one half that of its more well-known adventure counterparts such as the Monkey Island and Kings Quest series of games. The ease of the puzzles is what gives Full Throttle its fluid, motion picture feel, and it is also a great source of disappointment for anxious gamers who have just spent fifty dollars for a game they hoped would provide long hours of enjoyment and didn’t. The biggest factor making this game easier than most other adventures is the simplified interface depicted on the previous page. In this interface, there are only four available actions (talk/taste, pick up/punch, kick, and look at), whereas other point-and-click adventure games tend to have twelve or more actions. This reduction in the number of interactions between the character and his environment severely limits the creativity of the player and the complexity of the puzzles involved.

The aspect of Full Throttle that adds the most to the game experience for me is the brief combat scene in the middle of the game. In this scene the player has to learn the weaknesses of other bikers so that he can beat them up with his fists and other weapons and take certain items that he needs. This one scene always gets me excited because it reminds me that I am playing a big tougher biker who takes what he wants and leaves everyone else

in his wake. I get to be someone totally foreign to my everyday life, and I love it. That is why this game is so successful and why it feels so much like a movie to those playing and watching.

Now, as far as computer games go, Full Throttle is definitely not the most loved. In fact, I found quite a few negative reviews for the game, but almost all of them said they loved the game except for how easy it was. I thought nothing of this after reading the first couple of reviews. However, after reading six and seven similar reviews, I realized that there was something more to this. It wasn't until I heard my friends comparing the game to a movie that I realized why the game was getting the reviews it was. I discovered that the glowingly positive reviews were written by inexperienced adventure gamers who were new to the genre and loved the story and the relatively challenging puzzles (for newcomers that is). The less than flattering reports were written by experienced gamers who really liked the story but were upset that the game was not more challenging. From all of these reviews and my own experiences with the game, I realized that the true significance of Full Throttle is as a case study for the growing similarities between computer games and motion pictures. Full Throttle shows that it is possible to make a game with a story and a soundtrack that are as engrossing as most films. It also shows that if games are made to look and feel like movies, they will not please everyone. There will always be hard-core gamers who want more challenging games that will be too difficult and too time consuming to have the smooth feel of a movie. All in all, while Full Throttle shows that there is room for a crossover of ideas between games and movies, there will always be a fundamental difference between the two on account of different expectations among the target audiences.