

**Auteurship and Narrative Modulation
in Eric Chahi's *Another World***



1991 was a watershed year for video games in many ways. Nintendo released their much-anticipated second generation console machine, the SNES, late that year. On the PC front, Russell Kay's *Lemmings* and Sid Meyer's *Civilization* were redefining the god-game/resource management genre. In a small French development house, the software branch of the French media company Delphine, a subtler revolution was brewing. A lone visionary programmer was preparing for release on the Amiga platform a computer action game that posed a radical departure from the objective, monotone perspectives of earlier games; a game that for all its violence maintained a poetic aura of unreality and emphasized exploratory thinking as codependent with sure reflex as a skill necessary to complete the game.

The game, published in Europe and Australia as *Another World*, (cornily rechristened *Out of this World* by Interplay for its US release) brought phenomenal success for an European software product but spawned no empire: a sequel flopped starkly, and Eric Chahi went on to found his own company and release a game that partially elaborated on the innovations of his breakthrough, before disappearing from the software scene for the past four years. Yet the impact of *Another World* cannot be measured easily. Though unassuming in its advertising and only mildly successful commercially, *Another World* represents a minor turning point in the evolution of video game narration, by marrying great interactivity with a relentlessly episodic, varied presentation that forced the player to perpetually adjust her perspective on the action, without breaking the continuity of the story. This comes as a surprisingly practical answer to a question that has been plaguing interactive media theorists since the nascent

days of the technology. That question is: can narrative and interaction coexist, or must one always work to undermine the other?

The Narrative Conundrum

Busy as Chahi and his collaborators at Delphine must have been with the day-to-day of designing an offbeat game, it is unlikely that they ever discussed or fully appreciated the theoretical implications of their product. *Another World* to deconstruct the duality often invoked by video game theorists between the active, open-ended ideal of gaming and the passive, closed structure of literary reading. This duality, first elaborated by William Crowther, who saw structured narrative as antithetical to the exploratory spirit of gaming. This conflict, as befits its proponents, harks back to the prehistory of video games, and especially to the Dungeons & Dragons genre of interactive role-playing, where narrative was subject to certain rules of combat and resource management, but beyond that lay at the discretion of the “dungeon master”, an omnipotent non-player who orchestrated the group adventures (Eric Roberts lecture, Jan 17th *History of Computer Games*).

Computer games have usually taken more effort to develop (if only because of the programming involved) than oral sword-and-sorcery scenarios, and particularly in the past ten years, with the rapid ascent of multimedia, both the expense and effort required by the construction of a technically competent video game have militated against freewheeling player control on the story. The usual solution (shall we call it the *Final Fantasy* Fallacy?) is to funnel player choice through several branching points in the story—whether or not the player returns to explore alternate paths (Murray, 155) the gimmick of

player decision adds some spice to what may otherwise seem like an elaborately scripted spectacle. However, in such cases, it is not clear that a richly immersive experience can be equated with player freedom. Steven Poole impulsively declares any game successful that allows the player to encounter the greatest “semantic richness” in its content, but semantic richness can be found more amply in noninteractive media like written fiction and film than in purely interactive media. To reduce the argument ad absurdum, consider *Space Invaders*. Within the constraints of the game’s symbolic elements (a scrolling turret, impermanent shields, advancing ranks of aliens), the player has the freedom to craft any story: a dazzling conquest, an ambivalent hard-won reprieve, or a shattering defeat are all possible, but in terms of aesthetic or intellectual or emotional impact on the player these varieties in outcome account to almost nothing. You are blasting aliens with a gun and nothing more. The power to shock into thinking, to alienate, to call into question established beliefs—characteristics of art as it has been understood for centuries—cannot be recreated exclusively through control over the storyline.

The narrative/interaction duality is unstable in that the conflict is grounded in a naïve notion of reading. Recent theories in literary criticism (though in fact all of them predate Crowther and the video game theorists) view the role of the reader as an active synthesizer and conductor of the fragmented linguistic substrate that is the written text (cf. Umberto Eco, Introduction to *The Role of the Reader*). In this sense, the reader’s imagination may respond quite differently to, but be equally active in interpreting, a punctilious historical romance and a minimalist mood experiment. What matters, then is not so much whether a text is a “narrative” or not, since a reader can construct a story out

of almost any set of facts, however disjointed, but the stylistic devices and strategies the author uses to subtly influence and deflect the reader's imagination down various paths.

This reception theory of reading, whether or not one accepts it, implies the quite commonsensical observation that a text can have an infinite number of meanings, one for each reader, or even multiple meanings for the same reader under different circumstances. Applying this truism to Crowther's description of a simultaneously interactive and narrative video game, one of which he despairs as implausible (it would require an almost infinite number of screens in a text-game format), a practical question can be posed: why not make a game with a well-told, linear storyline, and allow the user enough control over the advancement of that storyline so that she will feel at once like spectator and star, or reader and author? That is an effect that the early Infocom mystery games accomplished quite effortlessly, as did the pre-Playstation *Final Fantasy* titles with their in-game integration of cut scenes. It is an effect that *Another World* also creates with remarkable results. If an illusion of narrative autonomy is outside the reach of these games, there is still room within the plurality of electronic gaming world for stories in a singular pronoun, besides the "coherent systems of interrelated actions" (Murray, 181) of more kaleidoscopic games like *SimCity*. How this fusion of story and action came to be embodied in a 5 and ½ inch floppy disk is a story worth charting.

Enter Eric Chahi

Eric Chahi became enamored of the idea of making video games for a living at an early age, and to that end he taught himself electronics. His grade school math teacher ran a computer club, and under his tutelage Eric wrote some little programs. In 1983, still in

middle school, he sold his very first games, “Carnival” and “Frog”, to the French importer of the Oric personal computer; a year later came “Sceptre de Anubis” and “Doggy”, a dog obstacle course game written in assembly and published by French software vendor Loricel. While working on his next game, “Le Pacte” for the Amstrad PC, Eric left high school to concentrate on programming. A professional and personal turning point emerged in his life: he fell in love with drawing, and became so proficient at graphic design (particularly computer-aided) that Delphine Software hired him as a freelance artist to oversee the rendition of its first entry into the game business, *Future Wars*, a graphical adventure game in the *Space Quest* vein (Schlund web biography).

It was while working on *Future Wars* at Delphine that Chahi made some of his most rewarding professional contacts in the game world. He befriended Daniel Morais, who tirelessly worked on the Windows and DOS port of *Another World* before embarking with Chahi on the latter’s last project, the much-anticipated *Heart of Darkness*, which was finally released in 1998, after six years in development (Schlund). Chahi also met Jean Francois Freitas, a musician whose knack for ominous, minimalist tones would serve Chahi well as the aural manifestation of *Another World*’s hallucinatory alien vistas. Just as importantly, Chahi’s work ethic and resourcefulness impressed Delphine’s senior designer Paul Cuisset, who willingly ceded the reins to Chahi when the latter proposed that Delphine fund his project, *Another World*.

“It Took Six Days to Create the Earth...

...Another World took two years”, trumpeted the game’s packaging, latching on an eccentricity of the design process that was somewhat inconceivable in the videogame

industry of ten years ago. *Another World* was released by Delphine Software on the DOS and Windows 3.x platforms on 1991, and on SNES, Genesis, Sega CD in 1993. The game was published by Interplay, a savvy company that maintained a long working relationship with Delphine. How Delphine tolerated this snail's pace of production is not hard to imagine: they paid Chahi a pittance for the duration of development, and needed a second staff member only for several months—Freitas wrote the music, Chahi tested it and integrated it with the game code, and the product was ready. As for the issue of *why Another World* took so long to realize, the question is tightly bound up with the game's originality.

While developing *Future Wars*, Chahi devised a graphics technique he called “Cinematique”, which used a multiplane scrolling system to generate greater realism by portraying differences in movement seen with depth as distance progresses to the horizon (Giovetti, *The Computer Show*). This preoccupation with perspective is illustrated in an anecdote told by his friend Sebastien Berthet: “I...gave him a disk containing my latest drawings. A few days later, he sent me the disk back with all the drawings corrected by himself! (I made perspective mistakes)”. It was during his work on *Future Wars* that Chahi began toying with a new way of using polygons. At the time, polygonal models (or vector graphics, as they were more commonly called) were utilized primarily in high-end flight simulators. Chahi wanted vectors to animate human beings. He realized that an efficiently programmed polygon engine would surpass in fluidity by far contemporary efforts to digitize pictures for animation: also, the polygon geometry would allow dramatic camera angles and unexpected shifts in the action that would be prohibitively costly (especially in terms of processing power and memory, both at a premium at the

turn of the decade) in any other form of motion capture. Chahi knew what he needed, but he also knew that there was no commercial software at the time to satisfy his needs.

For the first year and much of the second year of his work on *Another World*, Eric Chahi worked on an unusual vector engine: for the cut scenes, he accomplished vector compression of movies, a good nine or ten years before Macromedia Flash! (Berthet). Single-handedly he wrote a graphical editor that would allow him to design vector graphics the way he wanted to: by drawing to the screen with a mouse. At the same time, he drew the artwork for *Another World*, designed the levels, and thought up puzzles and plot twists. It may well be that the necessarily slow pace of the game development helped *Another World* become the strong story it was: Chahi spent as much time pondering the hero's motivation as the graphics. After so much energy put into the animation, it was inconceivable to him to waste it on a trivial game. The animation itself gained its lifelike bounce from Chahi's rotoscoping (the process of capturing body positions for digitization) of his brother running around in his garden (Berthet)

Chahi believed that sounds was integral to the playing experience, especially in a game like *Another World* where sonic cues could provide a naturalness not found in the visuals. Thus, he recorded the spare sounds of running, swishing, and scraping that accompany the action throughout the game. Jean-Francois Freitas contributed some tunes composed of melancholy strings and electronic sounds, going for an expansive orchestral feel only in the end sequence. The musical minimalism was intended—but also a hard requirement, since there wasn't much room for digital instrumentation on a 5 inch floppy disk. Chahi insisted also that the music be stored as instructions to the PC speaker: no one

was to be denied the *Another World* experience, even if that meant hearing the score as a series of ear-splitting beeps (Moby Games).

Control was another issue. Chahi wanted arcade-like control, simple and pure with one action button that would shoot, swat, or manipulate any switched or technology Lester might encounter. This preference stemmed from his experience with *Future Wars*, which employed a particularly pedantic adventure game mouse system in which the user often had to scour the screen with pixel precision to find necessary items (Giovetti). This style of game play, with challenge predicated on being a thorough screen “vacuum cleaner”, struck Chahi as undramatic and far inferior to a frustrating puzzle that stares the player in the face. Much of the linearity of *Another World*’s action serves to reinforce the pace, to force the player to work through a particular challenge at a particular point in the game. Despite this, there are distinctive areas in the game that have a more expansive structure, allowing the player to explore and find that the solution is not in the next logical place but somewhere else: the pacing in these segments can be compared to lakes that slow down the stream of a narrow river.

Even as Chahi began working on preliminary graphics and level design for *Another World* in late 1989, *Prince of Persia* became a runaway hit for Broderbund Software, more or less setting the standard for PC platform games: lavishly animated with realistic human motions for running, jumping, and fighting, and more mature in presentation and subject matter than Miyamoto’s fanciful platform games. A fair proportion of *Out of This World*’s game play occurs in the side-view perspective of *Prince of Persia*, and the animation of Lester and the aliens who inhabit the strange world owes its striving for fullness to *Prince of Persia*’s groundbreaking graphic style.

However, the sparse, flat-shaded polygon graphics not only gave the game a muted film-noir look, but they allowed a fluidity of animation in scenes with drastically different perspectives, such as an episode in an alien coliseum in which the screen is split between a wide screen view of the rabid animals beating about the arena, around the protagonist's vehicle, and a close-up view of the vehicle's control panel and the character's hand hovering above it. Chahi was quite impressed with *Prince of Persia*, and was content to appeal to the same mature market of players who didn't mind doing some thinking and strategizing along with their swashbuckling. But there the similarities end. Chahi expressly designed his world in a rounded fashion, giving the player both friends and opponents but no easy goal like a princess to save. Moreover, Chahi's protagonist is no dashing prince but an antihero, as lanky and nonmythical as Chahi's brother (ClassicGaming.com review). When Lester kicks or shoots his gun, the player is certainly, and intentionally, not reminded of a martial artist or Clint Eastwood. The popularization of the protagonist became all the more effective in light of the otherworldliness of his surroundings.

The Heart of the Alien

The setup of *Another World* is skeletal enough: introduced obliquely in the introductory cut scene, we meet physicist Lester Knight Chaykin late at night on his laboratory, where a shock of electricity from his small linear accelerator teleports him to an unknown planet. Between the title screen and the end credits, there is one page from Lester's journal entry and then no text anywhere in the game, save that inscribed in the aliens' language, which is undecipherable. The story is one of perpetual danger, averted

sometimes by violence but more frequently by escape: from hostile fauna and flora, and from the planet's locals, who seem to be citizens of a police state and see no better use for Lester than as live meat for their bread-and-circus spectacles. Nevertheless, Lester befriends a fellow prisoner of the alien race, and wordlessly they form a bond as they meet unexpectedly and help each other survive at various junctures in the game. At the game's climax, the two escape both a gladiatorial combat and an attempted revolution in the alien stronghold, and the alien friend, cradling the unconscious Lester, flies off into the moon astride a pterodactyl-like creature, with few clues as to their destination.

Neither a synopsis nor a play-by-play of the entire game could do justice to the intense concentration bordering on paranoia that one experiences while playing it. I will deal with a few instances in which cinematic or narrative techniques worked to immerse the player in the action, without relinquishing either Chahi's auteurship or the player's basic autonomy. The first instance is the screenful of text that precedes beginning a new game: purporting to be an entry from Lester's diary, it does not pick up logically after the introductory cut-scene that showed up Lester's teleportation—instead, the journal entry refers to incidents and situations that are not relevant until the last third of the game. It also mentions the player's friend, but makes no reference to its species. These clues cannot but disorient the beginning player, yet depending on the player's memory and interpretation, they may serve as a vital clue as to what action to undertake later, and a warning to be open minded about a possible allegiance. That so much can be achieved with so little comes as a bit of a surprise, considering that a year or so later a game like *Myst* could compel players to click their way through tomes of text telling a background story that might have been more imaginatively incorporated into the game play.

A second example of Chahi's narrative mastery also occurs early in the action. Upon swimming frantically out of a deadly pool, Lester dries himself off and gets his first glimpse of the alien landscape. A desolate lunar terrain, a melancholy moon, and a looming city of spires meet his gaze; on a rocky outcropping, a muscular black animal regards Lester, then slinks off. A few screens later, after squashing a gaggle of alien leeches, Lester is ambushed by the black beast, which bares a mouthful of white fangs. Player attempts to deal with the beast in the usual way are thwarted. "[Eric] laughed at me when I tried (as everyone might have done) to kill the black beast in the first level. He told me: 'Everybody wants to kill aliens in videogames while, in reality, everybody would run! And actually, the solution was to run backward...'"(Berthet). The alien beast cannot be killed, only skillfully evaded. In the end, Lester is almost fodder for the beast despite his tricks—he is saved by a mysterious hooded being with a ray gun. In a cut scene, we see Lester head-on, framed by a black-cloaked shoulder, raising his hand in an uncertain greeting. A reverse shot pointing upward confronts us with the hooded figure, towering imperiously over Lester. This cinematic technique does much to establish the aliens' cold welcome before they drag Lester off. Just as importantly, the lack of control here is skillfully allied to the plot, for as Lester is being deprived of his freedom it makes no sense for the player to have any control over his movement. Thus, subtle foreshadowing, cinematic shot-reverse-shots and cut scene dynamics are deployed judiciously by the designer to concoct an absorbing first encounter with the other world, prodding the player into acting as she would in a real situation.

The last incident I'll focus on occurs toward the end of the game and serves as dramatic illustration of the kind of iconoclasm that Chahi confronts the player with

throughout the game. During an action sequence, Lester unwittingly disturbs an alien seraglio, complete with bathing beauties (though, to be fair to Chahi's gender sensitivity, the genders of the aliens are never elucidated); the alarm given, all hell breaks loose, and Lester is enveloped in a web of laser fire. Lester is seen in the traditional side-scrolling view, with aliens in his plane and behind him, but one thick alien arm points toward Lester almost from the player's point of view. The laser blast cuts into the frame in perspective, barely missing Lester's head. The player is allowed to see something the protagonist doesn't, and the realization is that much more alarming in that the player is forced to identify with the alien aggressor by reason of their common perspective. And the shooting alien is not a phony cut-scene threat—if he player does not make Lester move, he is as likely to be evaporated by the alien near the camera vantage point as those in his plane. This shattering of linearity in the action is made immediate by the game play functionality it performs. When, a few scenes later, a laser shot coming seemingly from the player's eyes grazes the ground Lester is running on, causing him to fall off a building, the surprise may persist but it is abundantly clear that Chahi is not merely experimenting with a novel action but employing point of view to dramatize the player's role in the action as much as the characters'.

So What Came of It?

The commercial reaction to *Another World* was immediate, at least in Europe. The game won several French video game awards for the year 1991, including Best Action Game, and Most Original Game. French and Italian players, who on average were in an older age group than American gamers of the period, raved about the title and

declared Eric Chahi “un visionnaire”; one perceptive French fan noted that “*Another World* fut l'un des premiers jeux à digérer avec succès l'intense influence du cinéma [*Another World* was one of the first games to digest with any success the intense influence of cinema]” (PolygonWeb). Stories of the game’s Odyssean production length and Chahi’s versatility as a designer mingled freely with the enjoyment and frustration players got out of playing *Another World*. The general impression was that this was a difficult title, not for everybody perhaps, but worth the effort for players looking for a truly unique gaming experience. That *Another World* at a basic level merely subverted a well-worn genre, the platform shooter, was part of its appeal. Indeed, ten years after the fact, the web is still rife with French and Italian fan sites, complete with lengthy theoretical essays in the game and worshipful interviews with Eric Chahi.

In America, *Out of This World* was just a game among many, though its impact on PC gamers in 1991 could be felt, even against the dwarfing influence of undisputed classics like *Civilization*. The console release of the game in 1993 was less touted and in fact Interplay did not move many units of the SNES or Genesis version, although the game was reviewed favorably in the era’s most widely read periodicals, including *Game Pro*, *Nintendo Power*, and *Game Players*. Of course, it is easy to see a French game about the adventures of a physicist having trouble competing against the likes of *Mortal Kombat* (released the same year), but the failure was as much one of marketing as of target audience. That the game’s US marketer didn’t have a clear idea of the game’s image or target audience can be inferred from the instruction manual: along with a full walk-through for the introductory scene (thus diluting the encounter with the beast), the game includes “hints” that try to shrug the game off as an offbeat action game in the style of

Contra (“It is not ALWAYS wise to shoot the guards”, Jesse Smith, transcript of the *SNES Instruction Booklet*).

Delphine Software itself did not rightfully know what to do with the success of *Another World*. Because they had kept costs on the project low, the profit margin was quite high. Paul Cuisset was wrapping up work on *Flashback*, a game that owed its animation style and some narrative cut-scene techniques to *Another World* but which played more like a conventional side-scrolling shooter. Chahi had gotten the go-ahead to work on a sequel to *Another World* entitled *Heart of the Alien* even before the game console versions of *Another World* had been released. The somewhat cool reception to the Sega and Nintendo releases of *Out of this World* may have motivated the company’s reluctance to market *Heart of the Alien*. This must have come as a crushing blow to Chahi, not only because of the game’s quality but because he completed the second game much more quickly than the first: the vector engine was in place. Featuring subtler graphics, a wider range of puzzles, and creatively picking up where the first game left off with Lester’s alien friend as protagonist, the game was released only on the Sega CD system in 1994, selling several thousand copies before the system was discontinued by Sega a year and a half later (this despite some very positive notices, cf. *Game Players* August 1994 issue).

Chahi took this disappointment in stride: his sights were already set on his next project, *Heart of Darkness*, a game that was produced by a company Chahi founded, Amazing Studios. *Heart of Darkness* ended up taking three times as long as *Another World* to hit the market (Coming Soon, web issue 31). Produced by Alan Pavlish of Interplay Games, *Heart of Darkness* saw release in 1998, by which time Chahi’s

interactive story approach couldn't help coming across as charming but slightly old-fashioned. The game, aimed at a younger audience than *Another World* had been, shared with its predecessor an attention to graphical detail and clever game structure. Though he designed the game's visuals in 3D Studio, Chahi took pains to immerse the player in a fantastic world: "We didn't want our images to look like hi-tech 3D computer images, but more like natural backgrounds closer to a painting than a hyper realistic rendering" (Coming Soon). The description could well apply to *Another World*.

If the game's own creator struggled to follow up and build on his early innovations, *Another World's* influence is even harder to ascertain. The fairest judgment is probably that the influence has been subtle but insistent: besides *Flashback*, which became an action classic in its own right, *Another World* had a marked influence on *Alone in the Dark* and the *Resident Evil* games, with their subjective viewpoints and moody evocations of a fully immersive environment. These games benefited from elaborate 3D engines on the Playstation system, and sought a more explicitly horrific atmosphere—being attempts at genre horror—than *Another World's* vaguely menacing strangeness (Poole quote on *Resident Evil*). More distantly, *Metal Gear Solid* and *Zelda 64* owe some of their tricks of camera positioning and framing, or at least their inspiration, to Eric Chahi's seminal software. As technology is increasingly allowing a melding between cut-scene graphical power and real-time interactivity, the trend toward the integration of story and control is likely to grow, though probably few will remember that *Another World* was the modest augur of this revolution.

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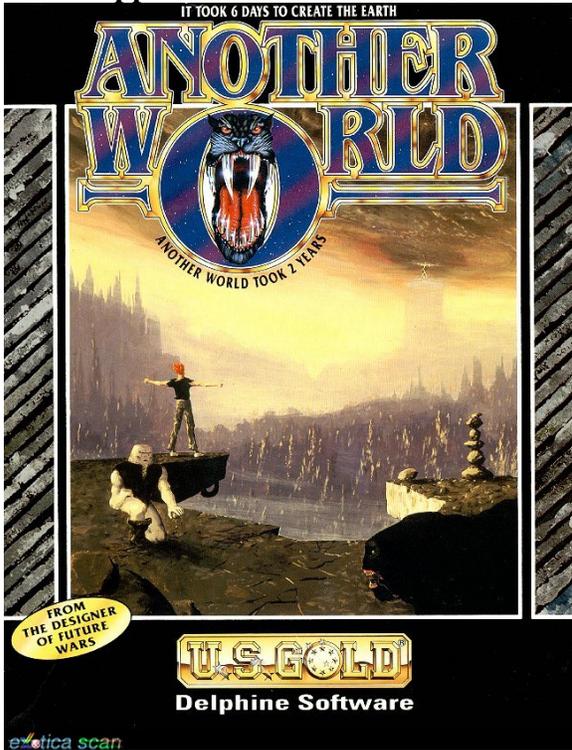
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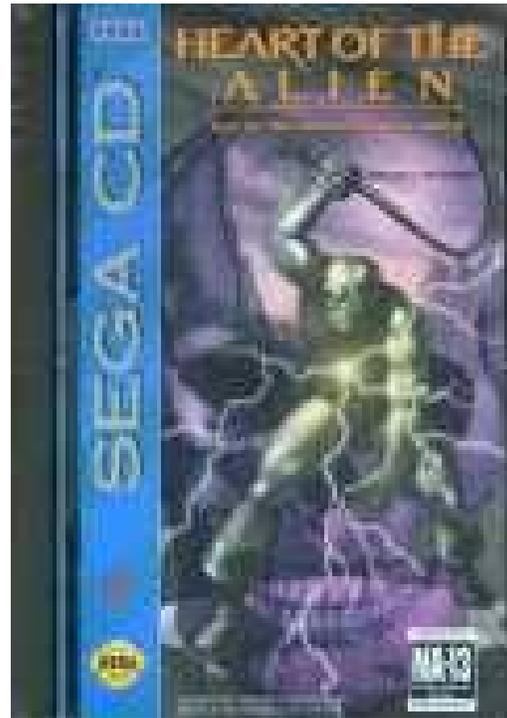
“Une histoire du jeu vidéo en tant qu'art - Part 1”.

http://privat.schlund.de/g/grumbel/hod/design_de.html “Daniel Morais”, “Eric Chahi”.

Photo Appendix



This game took two years to make.
Nice choice of cover too.



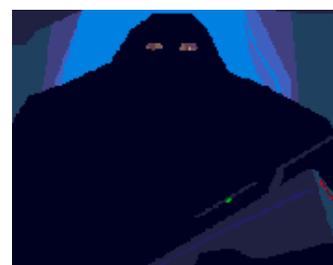
This game took no time to sink into
obscurity. What's with the cover?

FROM THE DIARY OF LESTER KNIGHT
CHAYKIN:
I AM USING A PERIOD OF REST TO
RECORD SOME INFORMATION.
I AM SEPARATED FROM MY COMPANION.
WE OWE EACH OTHER OUR LIVES.
I KNOW NOT HOW LONG I HAVE BEEN
LOST IN THIS MAZE OF UNDERGROUND
CORRIDORS. I CONSTANTLY ENCOUNTER
STREAMS THAT THREATEN TO FLOOD
THESE CORRIDORS.

The “diary” entry designed
to disorient the player.



Nice waist level shot—
Lester is timid.



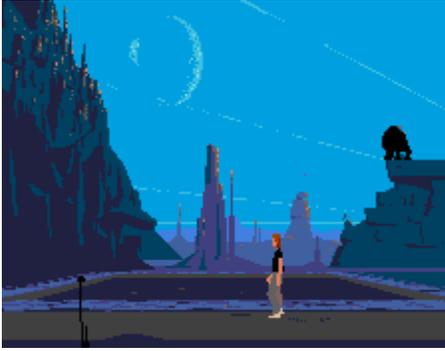
And the reverse shot—his
alien captor is unimpressed.



What are relatives for if not to be digitized?



Lester's holographic computer seems to
run Chahi's polygon editor.



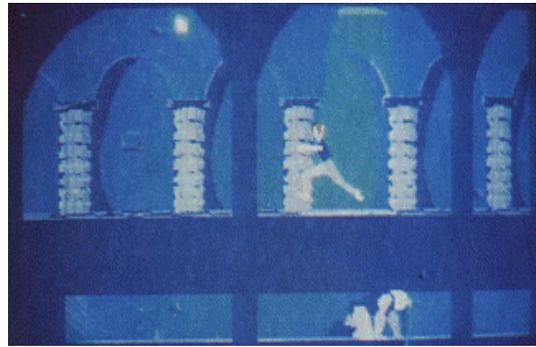
First landing: city, buttes, and a ravenous beast looking for prey.



A medium close-up reveals both Lester's new companion and the bars that imprison them.



Collaborative play: Lester defends while the alien picks the prison lock.



Collaborative play 2: Lester and his friend are forced to flee in opposite directions.



Friendship—economically rendered.



The enemy aggressor stands painfully close to the viewer.



Freedom means flying into the night. Lester is unconscious. Note the widescreen effect.