

**LucasArts and the Design of Successful Adventure Games:**

*The True Secret of Monkey Island*

by Cameron Warren

5056794

for STS 145

Winter 2003

March 18, 2003

The history of computer adventure gaming is a long one, dating back to the first visits of Will Crowther to the Mammoth Caves back in the 1960s and 1970s (Jerz). How then did a wannabe pirate with a preposterous name manage to hijack the original computer game genre, starring in some of the most memorable adventures ever to grace the personal computer? Is it the yearning of game players to participate in swashbuckling adventures? The allure of life as a pirate? A craving to be on the high seas? Strangely enough, the *Monkey Island* series of games by LucasArts satisfies none of these desires; it manages to keep the attention of gamers through an admirable mix of humorous dialogue and inventive puzzles. The strength of this formula has allowed the *Monkey Island* series, along with the other varied adventure game offerings from LucasArts, to remain a viable alternative in a computer game marketplace increasingly filled with big-budget first-person shooters and real-time strategy games. Indeed, the LucasArts adventure games are the last stronghold of adventure gaming in America.

What has allowed LucasArts to create games that continue to be successful in a genre that has floundered so much in recent years? The solution to this problem is found through examining the history of *Monkey Island*. LucasArts' secret to success is the combination of tradition and evolution. With each successive title, *Monkey Island* has made significant strides in technology, while at the same time staying true to a basic gameplay formula. Likewise, the staff presiding over the series has changed between incarnations; successive production teams have brought something new to the series while remaining true to the vision of the previous team. It is this combination of change and stability that allows LucasArts to be consistently successful in the adventure genre.

## From ADVENT to SCUMM

An examination of the evolution of *Monkey Island* is impossible without first looking at the evolution of adventure games up until the release of the first *Monkey Island* game. The creation of the adventure genre is generally credited to Will Crowther with his game *ADVENT*, written circa 1975 (by Crowther's best estimation) (Jerz). *ADVENT*'s interface was simple: text was displayed describing the current location of the player. The player would then decide what action to take, and would tell the computer what to do by entering a line of text in somewhat natural language (e.g., "take bottle" or "east") (Lowood, 1/30/02). Crowther's idea of a text parser for entering commands was revolutionary; indeed, the entire concept of an adventure game was revolutionary as well. Although his parser was somewhat crude (leading to awkward exchanges such as ">go in"; "What do you want to go in?"; ">building"; "That's not something you can enter.") (Jerz), Crowther had the right idea; his text parser was copied and improved upon in such classic adventure titles as *Adventure* (an improved version of *ADVENT*) and *Zork*.

Although text adventure games were popular, by the time these games reached the home market, consumers found that something was missing. Roberta and Ken Williams discovered and fixed this omission with their title *Mystery House* (1980). The game is much like any previous text adventure with one exception: *Mystery House* included graphics ("Roberta Williams Anthology Review"). The images in *Mystery House* simply



**Mystery House (1980)**

served to assist the player's imagination; no clues were to be found in the pictures, commands had to be entered via a text parser like in *ADVENT*, and if it was not the very first adventure game to include graphics, *Mystery House* would be wholly forgettable. Her next major title, *King's Quest* (1984), would prove slightly more important to the grand scheme of adventure games; it added direct keyboard control of the avatar (albeit still requiring text commands for other actions, such as opening doors), as well as sixteen-color graphics ("Roberta Williams").

At approximately the same point in time, George Lucas decided that video games deserved the touch of LucasFilm, as games of the time "were relatively primitive, usually consisting of blocky objects that players manipulated against a black backdrop" ("The History of LucasArts"). In 1982, Lucas hired a team of designers and moved them next door to Industrial Light and Magic, his special effects company. Their goal was simple: "to find the best way to bring the 'LucasFilm touch' to video games and help advance the state of the video game art" ("History"). With that, the LucasFilm Games division was formed.

Most of LucasFilm Games' early projects were tests of technology. *Rescue on Fractalus!* (1984), for example, was the first game to use fractals for randomly generated landscapes ("History"). Many of the technologies honed in these games were used to advance LucasFilm Games' flight simulation titles. Yet there was something lurking below the surface at LucasFilm Games that was dying to get out.

That something was *Maniac Mansion*. Released in October 1987 for IBM, *Maniac Mansion* was the very first adventure title to come from the company, created by designer Ron Gilbert. According to LucasArts, "[*Maniac Mansion*] faithfully captured

the group's clever sense of humor and paved the way for future adventure games”



### Maniac Mansion

Upon entering the mansion, players discover a green tentacle with an appetite for wax fruit, a mummy “living” in the bathtub and an Edsel equipped for interstellar travel, among other things. Coupled with these seemingly random elements is a script packed from top to bottom with entertaining and sometimes nonsensical lines. Despite how this conglomeration may seem to the outsider, every element in the funhouse works together to create a cohesive and engrossing story.

At the heart of *Maniac Mansion* is SCUMM, or “Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion.” Created by Aric Wilmunder and Ron Gilbert, SCUMM is arguably one of the first game engines ever developed (Rodman). The SCUMM engine takes the place of the text parser common to all adventure games until *Maniac Mansion*. The user selects which action he would like to perform from an onscreen list by using the mouse (see the above picture of *Maniac Mansion* for an example). After selecting an action, he selects the object that should receive the action by clicking on the game graphics. This is in direct contrast to *Mystery House* or even *King’s Quest*, in which the graphics served as a guide rather than an interface. *SCUMM* works upon exactly the same idiom as the text parsers from *ADVENT* onward; it performs the task of sentence building. Whereas the user was left to determine exactly what words were valid in games with a parser, in *SCUMM* games, the user is presented visually with all possible options. This

(“History”). The game revolves around a group of high school students who break into the titular mansion in order to rescue their cheerleader friend from mad Dr. Fred.

Upon entering the mansion, players discover

advancement made adventure games more accessible to players of all ages and skill levels; in the days of text adventures, novice players would often become so frustrated with the parser that they would give up early in the adventure.

SCUMM also simplified the game from the developers' side. At its most basic (as shown by its acronym), SCUMM is not a game engine, but a "script creation utility." This means that it allowed processes called scripts to be written in a special form that would make the programming of the game easier to accomplish. Thanks to scripting, *Maniac Mansion* was able to feature multiple player-controlled characters; each could be controlled separately, and would remain in their current position (unless, of course, they were captured by the mansion-dwellers). Also thanks to the simplification of programming, *Maniac Mansion* was the first game to feature cutscenes (short scenes out of the player's control in which the plot is fleshed out). This element is used in the majority of games produced today. Although cutscenes are sometimes used as a crutch to add a plot to a game in which one would not normally exist (Crawford, 1/23/03), the use of cutscenes in *Maniac Mansion* and latter LucasArts adventure games is legitimate. *Maniac Mansion* uses its cutscenes to shed light on the family in the mansion. Without the cutscenes, they are simply deranged individuals hell-bent on your destruction. With the cutscenes, they are a family in turmoil, brought to ruins by the arrival of a meteor. Ron Gilbert uses the scenes sparingly, yet admirably, to show the history of characters out of the player's direct control. He continues this tradition throughout the *Monkey Island* series.

### Creating *The Secret of Monkey Island*

With his SCUMM engine close at hand, Ron Gilbert set out to make a new adventure game in 1988. Inspired by the ride “Pirates of the Caribbean” at Disneyland, Gilbert wanted to create game in which he “could get off [of the ride] and wander around, learn more about the characters, and find a way onto those pirate ships [that populated the scenery of “Pirates of the Caribbean”]” (“Interview”, *LucasFilm Adventurer*). His vision quickly turned into *The Secret of Monkey Island*. His pirates are not the bloodthirsty type which actually existed, but instead “are swashbuckling fun-loving pirates, like the ones in the adventure stories everyone grows up with” (“Interview”). This spirit of levity was in line with the tone set by *Maniac Mansion*, which also made light of a genre normally full of gravity (horror films).

*The Secret of Monkey Island*, released for the IBM in late 1990 (with other versions following shortly thereafter), follows a young man named Guybrush Threepwood in his quest to become a pirate and defeat the ghost pirate LeChuck. The first scenes of the game are quite dark visually, and there is little hint of the farce that is about to follow. Guybrush (originally a placeholder after the filename in which his artwork was saved—guy.brush; the name stuck during production) is sent on three quests by the pirate elders of the town: he must find a buried treasure, defeat the swordmaster, and steal an idol



**The Secret of Monkey Island**

from the governor, bringing back proof of completing all three. These quests seem serious enough, but when the player succeeds in the first quest, finding a buried treasure, he discovers only a t-shirt reading “I found the buried treasure of Melee Island and all that I got was this lousy t-shirt.” A similar reward comes from defeating the swordmaster, while the theft of the idol is done in full parody of Indiana Jones (a LucasFilm production; Star Wars parodies also abound). Other ridiculous events transpire throughout the game: Guybrush is threatened by cannibals, who turn out to be health-conscious vegetarians.

This contrast between seriousness and silliness is the glue that holds *The Secret of Monkey Island* and its successors together. The player is drawn into the story just enough to suspend his disbelief, and is instantly hit with a line or concept so ridiculous that he is instantly remembers that he is merely playing a game. This emphasis on artificiality is made even more apparent by the fundamental standard of LucasArts adventure gaming: “Never let the player die... This design principle became a trademark of LucasArts' classic adventures” (“History”). Although this is not always the case (when Guybrush says that he can hold his breath for ten minutes, he means it; any longer underwater and he dies), the lack of death meant that the player could simply relax and enjoy the game at his own pace, and not be rudely ripped back into reality when he walks too close to a cliff. (In another parody moment from the game, Guybrush tumbles to his “death” if he walks too close to a cliff, and the user is presented with the infamous *King's Quest* death prompt to reload his game, until Guybrush rockets back onto the screen.)

How did the LucasFilm Games team create an atmosphere in *The Secret of Monkey Island* that is full of both realism and surrealism? Outside of the “no-dying” LucasArts design principle, the key is in both the creative process and the game engine

itself. Like many games of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the design of *The Secret of Monkey Island* was the product of one man's mind. The man in question was Ron

Gilbert. He describes the beginning of his creative process:

The first thing I do when I'm designing a game is sit down and write a short story. I wrote a lot of four- or five-page stories, lots of different plots. Then I'd read each story and ask myself, is that interesting? Does that make sense? And I'd say, "Well, no." So I'd throw it out and write another. I kept writing these stories and showing them to people around the office, until I hit upon something that was really intriguing. I had put some ghosts into one of the stories, and that seemed to catch everyone's interest ("Interview").

The story now in place, Gilbert sat down with research material in order to flesh out the details of his story:

I read a lot of novels and reference books, more for the flavor of the period than for accuracy. This isn't a historically accurate game. In fact, you'll see when you play that there are a lot of anachronisms.... They're there to add humor to the game of course ("Interview").

The realism and surrealism, then, are both quite intentional. Gilbert focused first and foremost on creating a game with a compelling story.

Only after he had set the details of his plot down in stone did Gilbert worry about making it funny. Upon reaching this stage, the actual layout of the game in terms of dialogue and puzzles was a team effort; Gilbert collaborated with SCUMM programmers Tim Schafer and Dave Grossman to finalize the project. Grossman compared this stage of the design to the children's story "Stone Soup": "the characters make a huge cauldron of soup starting with just water and rocks—gradually they add all sorts of vegetables that everybody has tucked away somewhere, and they wind up with a really terrific meal by the end" (Bronstring). At the time, LucasFilm Games had the luxury of taking their time with each release; the industry was moving at a leisurely pace. "One of the reasons the games turned out as good as they did," explains Grossman, "was that several people spent

an entire year tinkering and refining the design and the script” (Bronstring). Today, releases are rushed to the point where this kind of gradual collaboration could never be duplicated. Excellent scripts, such as the one that graces *The Secret of Monkey Island*, are much rarer today.

The second half of the equation for success was the brilliant SCUMM engine. *The Secret of Monkey Island* was SCUMM’s fourth appearance (“History”). With each successive game, SCUMM was improved upon, and *The Secret of Monkey Island* was no exception. The file format hierarchy was improved, “simplifying the adding of sounds, rooms, and character animations” (Rodman). *The Secret of Monkey Island*, to take advantage of these advances, was made far larger than any previous SCUMM title. Whereas *Maniac Mansion* featured about twenty rooms and only a handful of characters, *The Secret of Monkey Island* contained two whole islands to explore, each the size of multiple *Maniac Mansions*, and each full of myriad island-dwellers. But even this game was tiny in comparison with what was to come.

### ***Monkey Island 2: Ron Gilbert’s Revenge***

Gilbert did not rest on his laurels after the release of *The Secret of Monkey Island*. As he revealed in a 1990 interview for the release of *The Secret of Monkey Island*, “I’m keeping that secret [most likely referring to the secret of Monkey Island, left out of the game of the same name] for the sequel” (“Interview”). Although he ultimately did not reveal the secret of Monkey Island in his next title, that did not keep it from following in the successful footsteps of its predecessor. The creative advances made during the production of *Monkey Island 2* were just as great as those made during the first *Monkey*

*Island* title. As if to help cement its place in gaming history, many advances in *Monkey Island 2* are now regular staples of video games across all genres.

*Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* was released in 1991 for the IBM, under the aegis of LucasArts (it was the first game to bear the new company name) (“History”).



### **Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge**

even more difficult, LeChuck has been brought back to life and is seeking revenge on Guybrush. The majority of the game is spent collecting the four map pieces. The collection of the pieces, in a stroke of brilliance by Gilbert, can be done in any order. Thanks to this touch, a result of the simplicity of programming for SCUMM, *Monkey Island 2* was easily the most non-linear game of its time. Today's video games attempt to emulate this freedom.

The larger advances, though, as with any SCUMM title, were with technology. *Monkey Island 2* was the first SCUMM game to use 256-color graphics (previous titles used sixteen colors). In addition, graphics were hand-drawn and then scanned into the computer (“Dave Grossman Interview”). This gave *Monkey Island 2* a refined, artistic look in an era of pixelated PC games.

Guybrush, having defeated LeChuck in his previous adventure, is now seeking out the legendary treasure Big Whoop. To do so, he must collect all four pieces of the only known map to Big Whoop. To make his quest

The single biggest leap for *Monkey Island 2* was a new feature of the SCUMM engine, the iMUSE system. iMUSE, or Interactive Music Streaming Engine, allowed SCUMM titles to change the MIDI background music on the fly as a result of player actions (Rodman). In the past, all MIDI files had to be predetermined; with iMUSE, SCUMM could script the music to do something as subtle as insert a particular character's theme underneath the current soundtrack, or something as overt as changing the track completely. All music was produced on the fly, or "streamed," from predetermined sample files included in the data archives (which were an improvement to SCUMM from *The Secret of Monkey Island*). This concept of reactive music, which was much less common than reactive animation (and impossible until the invention of iMUSE), made *Monkey Island 2* more emotionally enthralling than other games of the early 1990s.

Despite the great success he enjoyed at LucasArts, Ron Gilbert left the company to start Humongous Entertainment, and its subsidiary Cavedog Software, around 1993 ("From Monkey Island to Cavedog"). Since he was its creator, he was allowed to take the SCUMM engine with him; it was put to use on such myriad children's titles as the *Putt-Putt* and *Freddi the Fish*. Why make games for children, though, when his entire career had been spent making games for adults? Gilbert can answer that with little difficulty: "Kids are very different than adults. They aren't interested in technology; they are interested in story and good puzzles. It's refreshing to make games for kids and I can learn a lot" ("From Monkey Island to Cavedog"). Because children are not interested in technology, Humongous Entertainment can afford to make rewarding and intelligent games at far lower cost than they would incur trying to cater to the innovation hungry

adult market. His company has had great success, proving that the SCUMM engine is viable today.

### **Gilbert's Ghost: *The Curse of Monkey Island***

Ron Gilbert had left LucasArts, but *Monkey Island* was still a viable franchise. What were the two parties to do? At the time of the *Monkey Island 2* release, Gilbert felt that he knew what would happen in regard to another sequel: "I doubt that I will be the one doing it if it happens, but I have no doubt that I will be involved in some way... If everything worked the way I'd like it to, then I'd be the designer... of the game" ("Ron Gilbert Interview").

The project was put on the back burner for nearly five years. Ron Gilbert was taken off of the project when LucasArts finally decided that they wanted to release a new *Monkey Island* game. The task of leading the project fell to two designers, Larry Ahern and Jonathan Akeley (the team had previously worked on another LucasArts adventure, *Day of the Tentacle*) ("Jonathan Akeley Interview"). Without



**The Curse of Monkey Island**

the watchful eye of Ron Gilbert, the team was free to do make or break the franchise with their stylistic choices. Akeley describes exactly how they went about designing the third *Monkey Island* game without dishonoring the memory that so many people still carried of the first two incarnations:

It's interesting doing a sequel because you have to walk a fine line between new and old. Too much new stuff and people complain it isn't enough like the

previous game, too much old stuff and people will say you just ripped off the first game. We decided to lean heavily toward the new because we would've been bored doing a re-make of the first two games. While many of the locations and characters were different, we decided to make the game fit the spirit, humor and atmosphere of the previous two ("Jonathan Akeley Interview").

This formula proved to be quite successful. The team brought in new creative elements while at the same time staying true to the themes set forth by Gilbert. This design ideal, although mostly employed to avoid stepping on toes, allowed old ideas to be successfully brought next to new ones, in both creativity and technology; this made *The Curse of Monkey Island* one of the most successful adventure games of all time.

*The Curse of Monkey Island* was released for the PC in 1997. In it, Guybrush must work to reverse a curse placed by LeChuck on the engagement ring that he just gave his fiancée. The writing still reeks of the influence of Ron Gilbert, but new characters, such as Murray the bitter, talkative skull, show that the new team has just as many funny and creative ideas as Gilbert ever did. The true magic of *The Curse of Monkey Island*, though, comes from the newest (and final) incarnation of the SCUMM engine.

SCUMM had come a long way in the six years between *Monkey Island 2* and *The Curse of Monkey Island*. Voice support was added to the engine with *Day of the Tentacle* (1993). This innovation was a necessity for games published after the advent of CD-ROM, as it was a good way to fill up the extra storage space, while at the same time providing a more convincing experience. The greater change to SCUMM came with *Full Throttle*, released in 1995. Instead of the old SCUMM interface, with a list of verbs and items on the bottom of the screen, *Full Throttle* allowed the user to bring up three options by holding the mouse button on a selectable item. When selected, these options allowed the main character to use his mouth, hand or eyes on the item (Rodman). This greatly

simplified the somewhat cluttered SCUMM interface; this setup is sometimes called SCUMM2. *The Curse of Monkey Island* took full advantage of these advances, while adding one of its own.

As an improvement on the hand-drawn scenes featured in *Monkey Island 2*, *The Curse of Monkey Island* used hand-animated cels to give the characters and backgrounds an attractive cartoony look. To show off this advancement, the SCUMM engine was bumped up to 640x470 resolution (previous titles maxed out at 320x200) (Rodman). The improvements made to SCUMM ensured that it was still a viable engine for creating beautiful and entertaining graphical adventure games. Even so, *The Curse of Monkey Island* was the final outing of SCUMM. The key to the success of the *Monkey Island* series up until this point was its sameness (keeping the SCUMM engine and the same basic thematic style) coupled with its evolution (constant improvements to SCUMM, and the new blood injected into the series with the third installment). The series was about to face its greatest turning point yet; all “sameness” would be thrown out of the window. Would *Monkey Island* be able to survive without SCUMM?

### **Welcome to GrimE: *Escape from Monkey Island***

The history of the most recent *Monkey Island* game begins with another member of *The Secret of Monkey Island*'s team: Tim Schafer. He worked tirelessly on an adventure game project for LucasArts entitled *Grim Fandango* that would not use the SCUMM engine at all. Instead, it used the open-source scripting language LUA to create a new, 3D engine known as GrimE (for “Grim Engine”) (“GrimE”, *Wikipedia*). In GrimE, the standard SCUMM interface was completely abandoned, as was all support for the mouse. The player maneuvers the avatar with the keyboard (much like in the original



**Grim Fandango**

*King's Quest* ("Grime"). When he approaches an object of interest, the avatar turns his head to look at it; the player may select an action at this point using a number of hotkeys. Characters would be represented in 3D on the screen, while

backgrounds would be pre-rendered. The

result was decried prior to its release, mostly because it represented a move away from the popular SCUMM engine. Upon its release, though, *Grim Fandango* (1998) became the most critically acclaimed LucasArts adventure of all time.

As is the tradition with LucasArts games, Grime would not simply be carted out in its same form for the next *Monkey Island* title. Improvements would be made before a new LucasArts adventure could exit production. The pre-rendered backgrounds were eliminated; all images would be rendered in real-time by the graphics processor. The inventory system was also improved upon, allowing for all items to be displayed on the screen simultaneously (Bhatt). Deep down, though, the scripting of events is still handled by a SCUMM-like script.

*Escape from Monkey Island*, released in 2000 for PC and Playstation 2, takes advantage of these improvements beautifully. Grime seems just as cut out for adventuring as SCUMM ever did. (As a tribute to the death of SCUMM, the SCUMM Bar, a location in the *Monkey Island* games, is renamed as the LUA Bar, after the scripting language behind Grime.) In this adventure, Guybrush must prevent the Tri-Island area's real estate from being bought up by a mysterious Australian land developer.

Although the plot sounds wildly different, the style is unmistakably that of a *Monkey Island* title. Producers Sean Clark and Mike Stemmler did an excellent job of maintaining the same tone that this series has carried for ten years.



**Escape from Monkey Island**

The game sold a decent number of copies (as many as any previous *Monkey Island* title, if not as many as *Grim Fandango*), thus demonstrating that the evolution of technology, even as it proceeded beyond SCUMM, is the main factor to keeping LucasArts games successful. Other game companies have made adventure games since *Escape from Monkey Island*; their games have been just as creative as anything ever put out by LucasArts (albeit not as funny), but their technology has lagged behind the curve. Their sales have been unimpressive. As a result, LucasArts is able to remain on top of the industry, thanks to its technical dominance.

What is the Secret of *Monkey Island*, then? Whatever lies at the core, the Secret of *Monkey Island* has been the key to keeping LucasArts on top of adventure gaming, even when the entire world believes the genre to be long dead. Their formula, mixing constant advances in technology with easily discerned storytelling and gameplay styles, has allowed LucasArts to make critically acclaimed games about everything from evil mansions to biker gangs to swashbuckling pirates. And in every case, the games have been visually appealing, innovative, and side-splittingly hilarious. Even if we are never

presented with the true Secret of *Monkey Island*, we will have been able to experience a great number of fun and inventive games thanks to the minds at LucasArts.

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