

TALES OF MONKEY ISLAND™

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Tales of Monkey Island

Platform: Windows, PC, Wii

Genre: Graphic Adventure

Release Date: 2009

Developer: Telltale Games
(in collaboration with LucasArts)

Publisher: Telltale Games

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All images taken from lup.com.

Overview

In this, the fifth installment of the well-loved *Monkey Island* series, the intrepid Guy Threepwood sets sail for more wacky piratical adventure. The scene opens on the high seas, as Threepwood battles his arch-nemesis, the ghost pirate LeChuck, who has once again kidnapped Threepwood's wife Elaine. Having used sub-standard root beer, Threepwood botches a voodoo ritual to make a Cursed Cutlass of Cthulu. In the subsequent explosion, he loses Elaine, changes LeChuck into a human being, and unleashes a terrible disease upon the local pirate community.

Over the five distinct game chapters, Threepwood searches the Bay of Melange for his wife and for a cure. Guided by the ever-mysterious Voodoo Lady, he outwits mad scientists, sweet-talks manatees, and gains street cred with a tribe of androgynous merfolk. True to the *Monkey Island* tradition, the game's many micro-stories brim over with this light-hearted silliness. Under the humor, however, an unexpectedly dark monomyth unfolds. The final chapter includes a trip to the Underworld pulled straight from Greek legend; it culminates in a battle with a dark god, self-sacrifice, and the bittersweet triumph of love.



Characters

- **GUYBRUSH THREEPWOOD:** When the world first met Guybrush Threepwood in 1990, he was just a wannabe pirate in love, a lanky towheaded youth with a silly name and a knack for getting into trouble. Now happily married and moderately famous, Guybrush has gained maturity without losing his easy-going humor. Recent events have shaken his self-confidence, however. For one thing, he finds the newly human LeChuck bafflingly un-evil. In the meantime, Elaine

seems to be making time with his ex-nemesis, the Voodoo Lady is acting even creepier than usual, and his own left hand, infected by the Pirate Pox, has turned against him. Happily, confusion has never stopped him before. Cost what it might, Guybrush Threepwood, mighty pirate, will never rest until he has won back his wife and set the world to right.

- **ELAINE MARLEY-THREEPWOOD:** Marriage has cost Elaine neither her sharp tongue nor her buccaneer skills. While no longer Governor of Melee Island, the beautiful redhead remains the voice of Guybrush's conscience. While he only wants to find her and keep her safe, she insists that they stay to find a cure for the pox. Always independent, she often pursues her own course of action without consulting her husband. Though worried and a little hurt by her secrecy, Guybrush trusts her enough to abide by her judgment.
- **LECHUCK:** As the game begins, Threepwood's perennial enemy has concocted yet another wacky supernatural grand heist. However, Guybrush's bungling robs the LeChuck of his powers, leaving him human once more. Free from all that bad mojo, LeChuck turns out to be a stand-up guy – handsome, charming, and not too bright. He vows to make amends for his past misdeeds, and even Guybrush eventually admits that the zombie pirate king has genuinely reformed.

.... or has he?

- **THE VOODOO LADY:** This Voodoo priestess has mentored Guybrush through his many strange adventures, and he has come to look upon her as a friend: a nameless, overweight friend with an enormous collection of creepy magic artifacts. In this chapter of his story, Threepwood learns more about his mysterious guide than he had ever expected, and in some cases – the details of her past love life, for example – more than he had wanted to know. Worst still, he discovers that she has never given entirely disinterested help. Has the Voodoo Lady's invisible hand moved both Threepwood and LeChuck over the years? Has she orchestrated their rivalry from the beginning?
- **MARQUIS de SINGE:** A foppish mad scientist from pre-revolutionary France, the Marquis de Singe acts as a "doctor" for pirates marooned on Flotsam Island. Sporting a long Louis XIV powdered wig, lipstick and a beauty spot, the Marquis actually uses the hapless mariners as fodder for his insane experiments. Ever since he arrived on the island, he has been searching for a formula to rejuvenate human flesh. Small wonder, then, that he cannot stop thinking about Guybrush's infected zombie hand. Not a man to take "please don't hurt me" for an answer, de Singe stops at nothing to get Threepwood on his operating table.



the Marquis de Singe

- **MORGAN LEFLAY:** Maddened by Threepwood's escape from Flotsam Island, de Singe hires a beautiful young mercenary to bring him back. Dressed like a female Errol Flynn and fighting as if she means it, Morgan has dedicated her life to hunting pirates. Her excellence stems from her inspiration: from her youngest days, she has admired the exploits of one Guybrush Threepwood. A consummate professional, however, she cannot let her personal feelings interfere with her job, and right now her job requires her to find Threepwood and maybe kill him a little.

Breakdown

Of the various game types, graphic adventures offer the most straightforward vehicle for traditional storytelling. The player has no significant choices, so the plot can progress completely linearly. Puzzle-based gameplay sets a leisurely pace, which allows for complex character development and detailed, multi-layered plots. *Tales of Monkey Island* takes full advantage of the graphic adventure format, and even adds some innovations to its traditional narrative structure.

Narrative as reward

Story cannot depend too heavily on gameplay, nor can the gameplay depend on story, even in graphic adventures. At best, the two dimensions complement each other. Fun, not interest, must inform gameplay. At the same time, designing a plot around a fight system or puzzles constrains a writer in truly unacceptable ways.

While graphic adventures cannot substitute story for gameplay, they can more explicitly use gameplay to advance the plot. An RPG primarily rewards grinding with level-ups,

just as an FPS rewards good shooting with gory deaths. In the adventure genre, the game rewards successful gameplay with narrative; by solving puzzles, the player in essence unlocks the story. In other words, adventure games reverse the conventional game paradigm. In most games, one sits through the story in order to play the next level. In an adventure game, one plays the game for the story.

Some of *Monkey Island's* less successful puzzles – navigating the jungle maze, for example – relate only cosmetically to the plot. The game designers could easily cut and paste this gameplay into an entirely different franchise, say, *Sam and Twitch*. The other game would not stumble over the addition, nor would *Monkey Island* suffer from the loss. The player puts up with the maze in order to find out what happens next.

Tales of Monkey Island really shines, however, when it subtly integrates the narrative with the play. Well-designed puzzles deepen characterizations, relationships and themes. For example, Guybrush's personality really emerges when he engages in Insult Fighting or the Silly Face-Off. In one excellent scene, Guybrush physically and verbally spars with two opponents at once: Morgan and the Fencing Master. The player must choose his words carefully, finding double-edged phrases to encourage Morgan and demoralize the Fencing Master at the same. This encounter cements Guybrush's and Morgan's relationship, laying the groundwork for her sacrifice on his account.

Narrative pacing

Viewed in this light, graphic adventure gameplay acts as a simple vector for the game narrative. This being the case, the gameplay exerts disproportional influence over the story's pacing. When a player inevitably gets stuck on a puzzle, the plot grinds to a halt. One might not notice such a slowdown in a less story-rich environment, but in games like *Monkey Island*, the player cannot while away the time on raids or side-quests. Guybrush must wander around the manatee's belly until he finds that final clue.

Tales of Monkey Island addresses this problem by throwing in hints if the player goes too long without making progress. These take the form of Guybrush's internal monologue: "I don't think I can do anything here. Maybe I should look around some more." Unfortunately, the writers assign only one hint for each problem. The player either benefits from the advice or does not. If not, the same hint repeats until the player figures it out, and that can quickly become irritating.



Narrative structure

Telltale Games also made a significant decision in deciding to break the game into five distinct episodes, each one released one month after the last. This lent the game the flavor of a serial magazine thriller, giving a player a period of pleasant anticipation while waiting for the next chapter.

More importantly, the episodic format forced the writers into a strict narrative structure. Each chapter had to follow a limited story arc with a beginning, middle and end. Therefore, each chapter tackles a subplot, develops it, and brings it to a climax by the end of the chapter. These minor conflicts all advance the main storyline, leading to a multi-layered and satisfying narrative structure.

In addition, the structure imposes a pleasant rhythm to the overall project. Each chapter intensifies the action, usually towards a cliffhanger ending. The next chapter opens by backing off a little, then builds towards its own climax. This reflects a traditional and very successful storytelling technique: generally presenting the story in waves that build towards the grand finale.

In the first chapter, “Launch of the Screaming Narwhale,” Guybrush washes ashore on Flotsom Island. The Pox of LeChuck has infected his hand, Elaine is missing, and the Flotsom’s unnatural wind patterns traps everyone on the island. The chapter tells a self-contained story: Threepwood must escape the island. In doing so, he meets many of the story’s major players (de Singe, the Voodoo Lady) and begins to see the Pox spread across the island.

The next installment, entitled “The Siege of Spinner Cay,” finds Threepwood and Elaine in the Jerkbait Islands. Elaine negotiates an ongoing political dispute between the merfolk and the pox-crazed pirate population. Threepwood skillfully navigates this subplot,

breaking the pirate barricade and saving the merpeople. All the while, the main plot continues to play out. Following the Voodoo Lady's cryptic instructions, Threepwood searches for a voodoo artifact called La Esponja Grande, LeChuck returns as a good guy, and DeSinge sends Morgan after Threepwood.

The third chapter, "Lair of the Leviathan," tells the rather minor story arc involving a giant manatee. Threepwood must escape from the creature's stomach and then must play matchmaker between it and a lonely girl manatee. In this chapter, Guybrush's relationship with Morgan deepens, Elaine spies on LeChuck, and the player catches a first glimpse into the Voodoo Lady's darker nature.

In "The Trial and Execution of Guybrush Threepwood," several of the disparate story threads begin to weave together. The action returns to Flotsam Island, where Threepwood must overcome yet another obstacle: the people of Flotsam put him on trial for releasing the Pox of LeChuck. DeSinge has murdered Morgan because she refuses to further pursue Threepwood; Elaine has fallen under the Pox's curse; LeChuck testifies in Guybrush's defense.

After escaping from his courtroom ordeal, Guybrush reluctantly follows the Voodoo Lady's guidance, even though he no longer trusts her. He assembles the necessary voodoo ingredients to activate La Esponja Grande and to rid the world of the Pox. After this, events move very quickly: Guybrush and Elaine confront and defeat DeSinge together, only to watch LeChuck betray them and stab Threepwood through the heart.

The final chapter, "Rise of the Pirate God," brings Threepwood's hero journey to a dramatic resolution. Trapped in the Underworld with Morgan, he must find a way to tear the fabric between realities, return to the mortal plane and stop LeChuck. He must also save Elaine, who has inexplicably agreed to be LeChuck's demon bride.

Morgan sacrifices her last shred of life to help Guybrush escape. This leads to a final pitched battle aboard LeChuck's ship, in the course of which Threepwood lures the zombie pirate into a crack between two dimensions. At this point both Elaine and Morgan stab LeChuck, killing him both physically and spiritually. In defeating his enemy, Guybrush dooms himself to an eternity in the Underworld; only Elaine's wedding ring has the power to draw him back.

While *Tales of Monkey Island* suffers from a few missteps along the way, the game manages to tell a robust story, with complex structure and careful timing. Other games may tell *more* story, with hundreds of side quests and characters, but few can boast better narrative construction. The graphic adventure genre, combined with *Monkey Island's* innovative chapter system, allow the writers to weave a seamless interactive novel.

Strongest Element

It comes as no surprise that *Tales of Monkey Island* is funny; it would not belong in this franchise otherwise. Strikingly, however, the game also succeeds in layering dark shades under its goofiness, especially in the characterization of the Voodoo Lady. Any player

with a well-developed sense of cliché can see that LeChuck must revert to type; when he does, it is satisfying but hardly unexpected. That same player waits patiently for the Voodoo Lady's exoneration, certain that she must prove one of the "good guys" in the end. That player waits in vain.

In this newest chapter of the franchise, the Voodoo Lady transcends her character's original scope. She has traditionally served as Guybrush's mentor. Now she also acts as herald and Greek chorus, opening each chapter with spooky rhyming couplets set to Tarot cards. She remains a comic figure: too fat to squeeze out from behind her desk, she lusts after a skinny, half-mad conquistador. Nevertheless, Threepwood begins to doubt her loyalties, and his instincts prove correct. She is a Shapeshifter, speaking unnervingly from the body of a dead bird, neither a force of darkness nor an agent of good. By the end of the game, she takes on an aura of eerie menace; she adds depth and flavor to the story.



the Voodoo Lady

Unsuccessful Element

Many writers in many genres have grappled with the problem of consummated romance. Anyone can tell a good story about how Joe wooed Jane, but few people can write a compelling sequel. A happy couple lacks a conflict to resolve; they have already undertaken their quests and earned their reward.

The constrictions of game narration further exasperate this problem. For one thing, the story must generally follow one character – the hero. The hero's already-won significant other can hardly tag along throughout without becoming irritating. The game designer must therefore pursue two diametrically opposed goals: make the love interest interesting, but keep them out of the way.

There are a few well-worn methods of addressing pre-existing romantic conditions in game narrative. *Tales of Monkey Island* tries all of them. A) Separate the lovers and make them look for each other. B) Introduce a love triangle (or in this case an awkward quadrangle). C) Allow the secondary character to pursue a parallel adventure that occasionally intersects the player's path.

Of those choices, the last presents the most interesting opportunities. Unfortunately, in crafting Elaine's journey, the writers of *Monkey Island* overreach themselves. They force her to make some decisions that simply make no sense. She puts monkey rescue before husband rescue, ignores him while getting involved in mer-politics, and finally agrees to marry LeChuck. The writing constantly absolves Elaine of her seeming heartlessness, hinting that she has a deeper plan. That works well for the Voodoo Lady, but makes Mrs. Threepwood either a bad person or an utter moron.

Highlight

If players sit through the end credits of *Rise of a Pirate God*, they get to witness a marvelous final scene. The ghost of Morgan LeFlay, having heroically sacrificed herself for Threepwood, approaches the throne of the Voodoo Lady. The priestess calls her "my child" and reveals that the two have been working together the whole time. Morgan delivers the spirit of LeChuck in a jar, and the Voodoo Lady rewards her by returning her to the physical plane. Coming off a sugary denouement with Guybrush and Elaine, this scene delivers both a culmination of long-developed themes and a surprising twist. The game closes to the ghostly light fading and to the Voodoo Lady's chilling laugh.

Critical Reception

For the most part, reviewers hailed *Tales of Monkey Island* as a worthy, if imperfect, successor to a beloved series. Most acknowledge that Telltale has concentrated their efforts on humor and narrative, the elements that made the originals so successful. While many fans complained about the episodic format, some reviewers defended the choice. "Even the often criticised episodic format feels right here," writes the Guardian's Greg Howson. "The game took me about 4-5 hours to finish, and a month isn't too long to wait for the next episode."¹

Almost all reviews favorably mention the writing. IGN's Steve Butts sums up the series with: "The writing is great, the conflicts are interesting, the jokes are funny and the payoff lives up to the promise."² Justin Haywald of 1up.com in particular notes the long-term impact of the narrative. "The silly plot and horrible puns will be just as groan-inducing years from now as they are today. It may not have the immediate replay value

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2009/jul/07/games-pc>

² <http://pc.ign.com/articles/105/1053110p1.html>

of a multiplayer shooter, but like every *Monkey Island* game, after you've played through once, you'll want to revisit the game again sometime soon.”³

Lessons

- Lesson 1: When designing an adventure game, the designers should make every effort to integrate the puzzles with the game’s narrative.
- Lesson 2: A hint system can prevent players from losing interest in an adventure game’s story. However, the designers should take the time to write many hints for any given puzzle; these should become incrementally more helpful as time passes.
- Lesson 3: Breaking a game into episodic chapters can impose a strict narrative discipline, leading to complex storytelling structure.
- Lesson 4: Humor does not preclude serious storylines, complex characterization and darker themes.

Summation

Tales of Monkey Island exemplifies both the promises and pitfalls of the graphic adventure storytelling. In allowing for well-constructed narrative, the game tells a carefully organized, multi-layered story, one that no other type of game could tell as well. In doing so, *Monkey Island* revisits a game genre many had considered dead, and makes a compelling case for its resurrection.

³ <http://www.1up.com/do/reviewPage?cId=3175085>