

# Game Narrative Review

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| Game Title:           | The Secret of Monkey Island   | Ryan Durand      |
| Platform:             | PC  | ENG410-B         |
| Genre:                | Graphic Adventure   | Narrative Review |
| Initial Release Date: | October 1990  |                  |
| Developer:            | Lucasfilm Games   |                  |
| Publisher:            | Lucasfilm Games   |                  |
| Designers:            | Ron Gilbert, Tim Schafer, Dave Grossman   |                  |
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## Overview

The Secret of Monkey Island is a graphic adventure game that puts the player in control of Guybrush Threepwood on a humorous journey to become a pirate, rescue the woman he loves, and defeat an evil ghost pirate. The narrative is separated into four chapters, each showing the progression of Guybrush from wanna-be to swashbuckling savior, from the three trials of piratehood, through his journey to Monkey Island, and his eventual confrontation with his nemesis as he tries to rescue the woman he loves.

While the game is laced heavily with jokes, the core narrative is strong, following Guybrush on the hero's journey. The humor of the plot draws people in but the symbolism used in the narrative makes the game memorable. The coherence of the narrative architecture of the game as can be seen throughout the game. For instance, the environments tie nicely to the alchemical elements of air, water, fire, and earth and their correspondence, respectively, to mind, emotion, spirit, and body, and many of the supporting cast fall easily into archetypal roles.

People who believe that a strong narrative cannot be built on a comedic plot and comedic characters may be turned off by how much of the narrative is abstracted to the level of caricature for the sake of humor, but there are elements of strong narrative in spite of its emphasis on farce. Therefore, like adding sugar to medicine to make it easier to stomach, for many players wrapping a strong narrative in humor makes it easier to absorb and more accessible. Because of this, while some of the power of the game's narrative might be lost due to erring on the side of levity, it is easier for someone to pick up, play, and enjoy than if it had been presented as a gritty, serious, intensely dramatic plot based game.

## Characters

Though there are many secondary characters there are only three primary characters.

- **Guybrush Threepwood:** The wanna-be pirate protagonist of the game, Guybrush is a young, impulsive scallywag hell-bent on becoming a scourge of the seas. Somewhat bumbling, the player controls him as he attempts to reach his goals, which eventually include saving Elaine from his nemesis, LeChuck. Though the character is a caricature he is used to tell a coming-of-age tale that is easily to relate to at the core, such as overcoming the tests or initiation into adulthood, finding love or a mate, and facing one's demons, or in his case, ghosts. His premise initially is to discover what it means to be a pirate, and later becomes about discovering how far he'll go for love. All the while he is dogged by

psychological shortcomings such as hesitance, passivity, and the inability to cope with fear, which he must overcome, and eventually does, to achieve his goals.

- **LeChuck:** Once a feared pirate, LeChuck became obsessed with Elaine, who told him to "drop dead". Deciding to impress her by finding Monkey Island, he sets sail, only to be sunk by a terrible storm. He and his crew came back as ghost pirates, and became more feared than ever. He acts as the key antagonist of the game, dead set, no pun intended, on having Elaine for his bride. He acts in many ways as the shadow archetype to Guybrush, as he is decisive where Guybrush is hesitant, aggressive instead of passive. In the end Guybrush defeats LeChuck by overcoming these psychological shortcomings.
- **Elaine Marley:** The beautiful governor of Mêlée Island, Elaine becomes Guybrush's love interest when she meets Guybrush in her mansion, attempting to steal the Idol of Many Hands. She is kidnapped while Guybrush attempts to finish the trials of piratehood, and though he sets off to rescue her she ends up freeing herself. She fits only loosely into the damsel-in-distress role as she is shown to be confident and capable. She is representative of Guybrush's anima as well as acting as the expression of one of the trials of adulthood, finding a mate.

## Breakdown

The game begins with Guybrush's arrival on Mêlée Island. He is greeted by the look out, a sailor with poor eyesight, foreshadowing the fact that most of the NPCs have dramatic handicaps relating to their work. This decision to downplay the cast of supporting characters for the sake of humor could weaken the narrative but is instead used to play up Guybrush, in spite of his own inadequacies. In order to have a strong protagonist that is larger than life, humor is used to give Guybrush heroic stature and show he is willing to walk-his-talk, as if integrity must be addressed humorously in these skeptical days.

In the first chapter of the game, the Three Trials, Guybrush is tasked with completing the trials of piratehood, the initiation of the hero's journey. The trials are sword fighting, treasure hunting, and thievery. The sword fighting is a trial of the body, Guybrush must overcome his weakness and defeat the best fighter on the island, Carla. The treasure hunting is a trial of mind and body, requiring Guybrush to find his way through a maze-like forest with a treasure map and then dig up, and rebury, a chest containing the legendary lost treasure. The trial of thievery, stealing the Idol of Many Hands from the governor's mansion, is a trial of the mind. Guybrush must use his cunning to get past the governor's guard dogs and overcome the mansion's interesting, and fittingly humorous, security measures to get the idol.

In the process of completing the trial of thievery, Guybrush meets the governor, Elaine Marley, when he steals from her mansion. She lets him go, but LeChuck, disguised as Sheriff Fester Shinetop, intercepts Guybrush and tries to kill him by throwing him off a pier tied to the idol. This is a resonant moment of environment and psychology, as the water, the element of emotion, is where Guybrush is trapped. This is evocative of his sudden emotions for Elaine, emotions that are revealed in the next scene after he has freed himself. Elaine arrives at the pier to save Guybrush, and they realize they've both fallen prey to love at first sight. Elaine tells Guybrush to meet her at her mansion when he has completed the trials.

But alas, as soon as Guybrush finishes the trials he discovers that LeChuck has kidnapped Elaine and sailed away with her to Monkey Island. He soon realizes what he must do: buy a ship, find a crew, and sail to Monkey Island to rescue Elaine. This takes place in the first chapter still,

giving a second meaning to The Three Trials, as it can also refer to the trials of initiation, meeting the goddess, and atonement with the father as seen in the hero's journey, the last being somewhat veiled in LeChuck's kidnapping of Elaine. Though LeChuck and Guybrush do not meet in this confrontation, it is obvious that LeChuck is the force that most strongly acts on Guybrush's journey, and LeChuck begins to stand out as being very much like Guybrush's Jungian shadow.

The second chapter, The Journey, is perhaps the weakest point in the narrative of the game. Though the setting of being at sea, lost, unsure how to get to Monkey Island with no wind to guide the way is compellingly resonant with the protagonist's psychological state. Guybrush is still wrestling with his emotions regarding Elaine and how those emotions are warring with his mental state of uncertainty with confronting LeChuck, however little else is done to drive the narrative, deepen character, or explore the premise of the character or his current quandary. Guybrush concocts a voodoo potion, on accident, that shifts the winds and causes the boat to end up at Monkey Island.

The third chapter, Under the Monkey Head, has Guybrush on Monkey Island. He meets Herman Toothrot, a shipwrecked sailor of questionable sanity after a great deal of time on the island with only monkeys and cannibals to interact with. He acts as a guide, explaining to Guybrush that LeChuck's ship rests in an underground cavern. Guybrush also learns from the local cannibals that LeChuck has stolen a mystical root from which a potion can be made that destroys ghosts. Given a magically preserved head, the Navigator's Head, to guide the way, Guybrush descends into the underworld beneath the island to retrieve the root.

The underworld is full of lava and fire, the element of the spirit. This is a resonant choice for the home of the ghost pirate LeChuck and his spectral crew. Guybrush must retrieve the ultimate boon of his hero's journey, the mystical root, which is locked away in LeChuck's ship. After obtaining the root Guybrush flees the ship to return to the cannibals so they can make him the potion with which he can defeat LeChuck and free Elaine. The potion turns out to be root beer, which weakens the symbolic punch of the root as a weapon against the undead but serves the humorous style of the narrative.

The use of a root as the key ingredient to a ghost-destroying potion is a powerful symbol. The root is a very earthy thing, earth being tied to the physical body, which a ghost lacks and also resonates symbolically as earth can smother flames, the element of body and the physical defeating the element of the spirit. The root, being part of a plant, is also a symbol of the circle of life, of birth, growth, death, and rebirth to continue the cycle anew. Confronting a being outside of this circle with such a symbol feels powerful and is an excellent use of symbolism.

After receiving the potion from the cannibals, Guybrush finds out that LeChuck has returned to Mêlée Island. The ghost pirate intends to force Elaine to marry him. Depending on the player's choices Guybrush will either return in his ship or be granted aid from without, as Herman Toothrot reveals that he has a raft Guybrush can use to return. While entertaining to show the player a result of their actions, the use of Herman to grant aid resonates strongly with the hero's journey, and makes it a more compelling narrative element.

The fourth and final chapter, so eloquently titled Guybrush Kicks Butt, begins with Guybrush returning to Mêlée Island and fighting his way to the chapel to confront LeChuck. As LeChuck challenges Guybrush, Elaine enters on a rope from above. To the surprise of Guybrush and the ghost pirates alike the governor has freed herself already, and the person in the wedding dress is actually two monkeys. The monkeys have Elaine's supply of root beer and run off with it causing Elaine to give chase.

This whole series of events is Guybrush crossing the return threshold on his hero's journey. His struggle to maintain what he has gained as he returns to the world he knew has begun. He fails to hold on to the boon as LeChuck uses the distraction of Elaine and the monkeys to wind up and punch him through the roof and high into the air to another part of the island. Wherever he lands LeChuck is waiting for him and continues to hit him this way until Guybrush ends up at the used boat lot, landing in a vending machine. As LeChuck pulls Guybrush out a root beer comes out as well, allowing Guybrush to regain the ultimate boon in the form of the ghost destroying root beer. After flying through the air, ending up in a scene with water and earth feels like a presentation of the protagonist finding the balance of body, mind, and emotion he needs to overcome himself, ascend, and use the boon.

Guybrush sprays LeChuck with the root beer, defeating the ghost pirate, and becoming the master of two worlds. In defeating LeChuck he has gained control over the spirit, even more so because of LeChuck acting as Guybrush's Jungian shadow. He has overcome his weaknesses and he has transcended his limitations. While he is never shown as super human, in the context of the coherent narrative of the game he has become larger than life. He has become a pirate, defeated the ghost pirate LeChuck, and won the heart of the governor. He is a hero, and his journey is complete.

## **Strongest Element**

The strongest element of the narrative is the subtle use of symbols in the characters, interactions, and environments of the game, and the fact that it falls so nicely into the pattern of the hero's journey. Guybrush undergoes initiation through the three trials in the first part of the game, heeds a call to adventure in accepting the task of rescuing Elaine, eventually entering the underworld and returning.

Environments are also very symbolic. Captain LeChuck and his ghost crew have a secret base in a lava filled cavern underneath Monkey Island. This use of fire and lava, the element of spirituality, lends a great symbolic resonance to the ghost pirates. When Guybrush finds out Elaine has been kidnapped and taken to Monkey Island he sets off to get her but ends up lost at sea. Surrounded by water with no wind to guide him to where he needs to go, this evokes a sense of his confused emotions and his inability to find a balance between his mental body and his emotional body.

In characters this symbolic subtlety is generally portrayed in the vast supporting cast of NPCs, such as Herman Toothrot. Herman was shipwrecked on Monkey Island a long time ago and acts as a guide to Guybrush as he tries to get his bearings on Monkey Island so he can find Elaine. Herman is depicted as a haggard old sailor but his appearance resonates with the symbolic appearance of the wise old man, aiding the hero in taking the next step on his journey. Guybrush also receives guidance from a Voodoo lady who uses magic to see where he must go and what he must do, acting as an Oracle of sorts.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

The least successful element of the narrative is in the journey to Monkey Island. On his ship with a mutinous crew content to lie about and work on their tan, Guybrush has to figure out how to get to Monkey Island. While the element of being "lost at sea" resonates with Guybrush's confused emotions, the puzzles the player must complete to get to Monkey Island seem very

contrived. The player just "ends up" at Monkey Island because of a voodoo spell they accidentally invoke, making it feel very much like a Deus ex Machina situation.

## Highlight

The highlight of the game is the series of events when Guybrush visits the underworld by entering the monkey head on Monkey Island in his endeavors to save Elaine. The underworld is a labyrinth filled with lava and fire that harken back to the spiritual nature of where he is. Without a guide he would be lost but he has the Navigator, a magically preserved head that knows the way to LeChuck's ship. LeChuck has stolen a root that can be used to make a voodoo concoction that destroys ghosts, and Guybrush must retrieve it. Once Guybrush reaches LeChuck's ship he uses the Navigator's magical necklace made of eyes, which renders the wearer invisible to ghosts, to sneak aboard, get the root, and escape.

This sequence of scenes is full of strong narrative elements and symbolism. The first is the environment. The use of fire, the element of the spirit, in the environment of the underworld helps set the stage for Guybrush's mission to recover the root. Next is the Navigator's necklace, made of human eyes symbolically representing sight and vision. The necklace grants invisibility to ghosts, who have no physical body. Lastly is the introduction of the ultimate boon, the root. The root is symbolic of life, death, and rebirth and is very earthy, the element of the body. The root is used to make a ghost-destroying potion, and is a strong element because of the resonance of its symbolic relation to the circle of life and the element of the body to ghosts being outside of the natural cycle of life and lacking in a physical body. The strong narrative elements and strong symbolism makes this the highlight of the game.

## Critical Reception

Well received at the time of release, Mark Ramshaw called it "the first truly accessible adventure" in *Amiga Power* magazine. The original release holds an 84% on GameRankings ([www.gamerankings.com](http://www.gamerankings.com)), while the 2009 Special Edition release has 85.9% on PC and 87.44% on Xbox 360 on the same site. The Special Edition release also has a MetaCritic ([www.metacritic.com](http://www.metacritic.com)) score of 86/100. The Secret of Monkey Island is also in the IGN ([www.ign.com](http://www.ign.com)) Video Game Hall of Fame.

## Lessons Learned

- Even humor-driven games can have a strong narrative. The Secret of Monkey Island has a narrative that is almost entirely humor-driven but still shows strength in a presenting the hero's journey through Guybrush's adventure. Subtle symbolism adds weight and the interaction of the three key characters has psychological impact due to their symmetry with Jungian archetypes.
- Humor can make a narrative driven game more accessible. Likewise it can also drive off players looking for a serious, dramatic narrative or obscure the narrative more than intended. It can be easy to miss the symbolism of the mystical, voodoo root, a very earthy physical symbol, being used to defeat the ghosts when it is made into Root Beer.
- When a narrative has a consistent flow and style having something abruptly happen "just because" can detract a great deal and feel like a narrative hiccup. An example of this is the boat scene where the voodoo spell abruptly, and inexplicably, gets the boat to Monkey Island.

## **Summation**

The Secret of Monkey Island could be easily brushed aside as being completely devoid of narrative value, nothing but superficial imagery but the strength of the narrative is in its accessibility. I initially played this game as a child and knowing nothing of narrative architecture and symbolism I still felt resonance with a great deal of the imagery in the game, and approaching it again with the knowledge I now have makes it more obvious that underneath the veneer of superficiality is a narrative worth reviewing.