

I <3 Fandango

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“What’s your favorite game?” is probably the question I’m asked most often when people find out I’m a game professor. Of course, it’s an impossible question to answer without qualifications; too many games of too many types to have just one. I have many favorites across many genres (and of course, I’m old) so the list encompasses original arcade games like *Tempest*, *Joust* and *Dig Dug*, “mainframe” games like *Adventure* and *Star Trek*, early Personal Computer games like *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, *Prince of Persia*, *Lode Runner* (Apple IIe) and *Defender of the Crown*, *Rocket Ranger*, *Sim City*, and *Tetris* (Amiga) Not many of my favorites are on consoles, as I didn’t own one til the PS2. That said, as someone who’s always had a soft spot for story-driven, adventure games, there’s one that leapt to mind when I had a chance to write a chapter for this series.

Grim Fandango (GF) has always held a soft spot in my heart. What could be better than a “Film Noir”-Style game played out by Calicas; the Mexican “Day of the Dead” skeleton figures? Nor am I the only one who holds it in high esteem. Though it’s over 11 years old (released on 10/30/1998, just before the Day of the Dead that year[96]) GF stands out as a jewel in the history of computer games; one that has continually charted on numerous “Top Games of All Time” lists since its release, most recently as # 20 in IGN’s Top 25 PC Games of All Time in 2009. [97]

While much of the attraction of the game is it’s content, several technical advances contribute to its high ratings as well. GF was groundbreaking for Lucas Arts on several levels. It used 3D objects and characters rendered in front of static backgrounds for the first time in a Lucas Arts game. The comparatively low graphic fidelity of the 3D at the time matched perfectly with the art direction of a world filled with papier-mâché skeletons, and it still works today even in an age of photo-realistic 3D. In another technical advance, GF players knew when something in the environment was “interactive” because the head of the game’s main character/player avatar, Manny, would move in the direction of the object. The engine also supported synching of dialogue and body movements. This made the game’s interface more natural and immersive than the previous practice of having the player move a cursor over the entire scene to search for items that could be interacted with.[98]

For an adventure game to succeed, it needs to have rich story and characters, balanced with challenging (perhaps in some cases demonic) puzzles, and be set in a lush and detailed world that supports them both. All the elements need to be balanced to provide a rewarding experience worthy of replay. Tim Schaffer, *Grim Fandango*'s lead, and a writer and creator of numerous, witty, well-crafted adventure games, is a master of each of these elements.

"Replay?!" I hear the adventure game haters in the audience cry, "how can some point and click, hopelessly locked to rails adventure game be worthy of replay?"

"Keep reading," I answer.

Story and Character in *Grim Fandango*

Adventure games like GF are often manifestations of the "Hero's Journey," Joseph Campbell's "Monomyth"[99] path of trials, setbacks and successes influenced by Freud, Jung and Aristotle's "Poetics." Most genre tales and Hollywood feature films also make their way down this well-beaten path.[100] Many, like GF, even lead the player through an afterlife, or on a trek to paradise. But never before, or since, has there been a journey through the afterlife to paradise like the one in GF.

For settings, adventure games often draw on myth, legend, fiction or film genres as well as other games. As briefly mentioned above, GF is first and foremost a "film noir" flavored video game. These dark crime dramas, characterized by cynical, world-weary characters living two-bit existences in darkly-lit, archly-framed films, first emerged during World War II.

The opening screen and cinematic of GF solidly set this period tone and style of the game. First it starts with ominous music and a screen that shows an ashtray with a smoking cigarette in the foreground, and a calaca Mariachi quartet knick-knack behind it as the title fades in and out. Cut to a long shot of a dimly-lit office space with a dejected figure in a forties suit and hat sitting at a table. An opening door creaks behind the camera, light spills into the office from the hallway.

Manny: "Sorry to keep you waiting Mr. Flores I'm ready to take you now."

Flores: "Take me, take me where?"

Cut to a close up of Flores' foot nervously tapping beneath the table

Manny: "Now, now, there's no need to be nervous."

Flores: "Nervous.. No..."

Cut to close up of Flores, his head tracking as he follows Manny across the room

Flores: "...just your appearance, it's a little intimidating."

Cut to a medium shot of Manny in full Grim Reaper drag, scythe and all.

Manny: "Intimidating? Me? But I'm your friend. My name is Manny Calavera. I'm your new travel agent."

This is not your average film noir, as it's "mashed-up" with a variation of the Aztec afterlife. By the end of the opening cinematic we have learned that the souls of the dead must make a dangerous journey of four years' time to the Ninth Underworld, "the Land of Eternal Rest." The game's story and structure mirror the journey, as you play during four different "Days of the Dead" (when most of the souls of the dead travel to the world of the living to visit their descendents) across the four years. The game's name is taken from part of a poem cited by Olivia (the chief villainess of the game, who runs a beatnik's poetry café, the Blue Casket)

With bony hands I hold my partner
On soulless feet we cross the floor
The music stops as if to answer
An empty knocking at the door
It seems his skin was sweet as mango
When last I held him to my breast
But now we dance this grim fandango
And will four years before we rest

Manny is one of several agents who work for the Department of the Dead (DOD) as travel agents selling "packages" to the newly departed. Agents like Manny carry collapsible scythes and visit the world of the living dressed in cowled cloaks to "reap" the souls of the newly departed and bring them to their offices in the town of "El Marrow" (and Manny's Scythe is a versatile and important tool used throughout the game as a cutting tool, lever and more). Those souls who led saintly and/or frugal lives are eligible for a ticket on the Number Nine, an express train that shoots off to the Ninth Underworld in just four minutes instead of four years. For those who led less exemplary lives, there are a range of several other "travel packages" including the "Excelsior Line"; a walking stick with a heavy brass ball inset with a compass for a handle (the package that Flores ends up with) or being shipped parcel post. At the end of the

cinematic, Manny despairs of his lot and expresses a need for a lead on a “rich, dead, saint.”

So, like other Film Noir characters, Manny is an everyman; a simple guy, just wanting out of his “dead end” job at the agency. He’s not even sure what he’s done to end up there. He is, however, about to be caught between a corrupt machine and a revolution against it, and it’s all put in motion when he steals a hot lead.

As the game begins, Manny’s boss, Don Copal tells the team to “Thank their lucky stars and get in their Friggin cars.” to collect the souls of the victims of a “Code 3” mass gazpacho poisoning. After getting some information (and a lotta lip) from Evaluna, the Boss’ Bronx-accented secretary, Manny heads down to the garage to collect his car and driver. When he gets there he finds that Domino Hurley, the office bully with a hot sales streak, has gotten in his way again by telling Manny’s driver to take the rest of the day off, and all the other drivers are gone. The only being left in the garage is Glottis, the mechanic.

Manuel Calavera: Glottis... Glottis... is that a German name?

Glottis: Oh, no. My roots lie not in any Earthly nation’s soil. I am an elemental spirit summoned up from the Land of the Dead itself and given one purpose, one skill, one desire... TO DRIVE. Or, to change oil or adjust timing belts if no driving jobs are open.

Glottis is too big to get in to a standard car and can’t drive one without a work-order from the boss. Manny promises to get the work order and convinces Glottis to alter the car to fit while he’s gone.

The relationship that emerges between Manny and Glottis is a huge piece of what makes GF work. The two of them make for a Steinbeck-like, “George and Lennie” kind of pair. While all the voice acting in GF is strong, Glottis’ actor is spectacular

and really builds the George and Lennie vibe. In addition to devotion, simplicity, size and strength, Glottis brings a magic touch with any kind of vehicle and a literal “need for speed” that will be critical at points in the game.

When Manny eventually gets on the road with Glottis, he’s once again late to the party, and there’s only one victim left to collect; another loser. This failure is the one that sets Manny down the path to steal one of Domino’s leads, Mercedes “Meche” Colomar, who looks like a perfect candidate for the Double N! Manny returns to Glottis and the “Bone Wagon,” the DOD car Glottis has chopped a second time, this time for speed and style. The car now looks like it came right out of a Big Daddy Roth[101] cartoon, and in it they beat Domino to collect Meche.

Once back at the office, Manny is perplexed to see that the department computer assigns Meche to the four-year journey even though she's led an exemplary life of service. Manny goes to investigate with Copal. Copal then locks Manny in Glottis's office to await the arrival of the authorities who will decide his fate for illegal car modification, stealing a lead from another salesman and then losing her. Manny is guilt-ridden over Meche's misrouting due to his interference and is determined to get out and help her on her dangerous journey.

But our hero is not lost. Manny is rescued by Salvador "Sal" Limones. Limones is a former DOD Reaper, and now the Che Gueverraish leader of a small underground organization (literally as it's in the basement of the DOD building) the Lost Souls Alliance (LSA). Also in the basement is Eva, who's has been spying for the LSA for a year. Limones tells Manny that a conspiracy runs through the heart of the DOD to deny the saintly their tickets on the Number Nine and sell them to the undeserving. Limones tries to recruit Manny into the movement, but Manny just wants out to help Meche. They strike a deal and after Manny gets Sal and Eva what they need, Sal takes him to a tunnel that will lead him to the forest outside of El Marrow.

Meanwhile Hector LeMans has arrived. The evil mastermind of GF, LeMans is the first of numerous Casablanca inspired characters and set pieces that play throughout the game and is reminiscent of Sidney Greenstreet in size and speech. Meeting with Copal and Hurley, LeMans determines that someone must pay for losing Meche. LeMans pulls a piece, does away with Copal, and promotes Domino, making him responsible for reclaiming Meche.

When Manny exits the tunnel he discovers a despondent, recently fired Glottis, who says that firing him was like ripping the heart out of his chest and throwing it away. Being demonstrative and not too bright, Glottis then demonstrates. The player must then get Manny past a pack of large spiders that has collected around Glottis' heart and return it to him. Then the two must add some lifts to the Bone Wagon, get around some flaming beavers and make their way to Rubacava.

Rubacava is the next large town on the trek to the Ninth Underworld. Manny acquires a job mopping up in a diner and awaits Meche, as they must surely have passed her since she was on foot and they had a car. Thus endeth year one, which sets up the story and introduces us to most of the main characters.

A common characteristic of many "Hero's Journey" and film noir tales is that some event, or series of events, kicks the main character out of his

normal day-to-day life to reach new heights (or stoop to new lows) he wouldn't have reached before. Manny's obsession to find Meche has fired him to grow, deceive and succeed. The ends will justify the means as he seeks to save Meche, get her a ticket to the Number Nine and bring down the conspiracy in the process. Granted it's mostly the bad guys who suffer as Manny is being pursued by Domino and/or Don Copal throughout the game.

At the beginning of the second "Day of the Dead," Manny has transformed the diner into "Calevara's Café." A joint with a handful of roulette tables that's a nod to "Rick's Café Americain" in Casablanca (kinda rhymes with Rubecava, don't it?). Manny and Glottis are even wearing white dinner jackets and Glottis plays a piano and sings a song to a "special lady," the Bone Wagon. Rubecava itself is somewhat like Atlantic City, casinos and racetracks are side-by-side with a working shipyard.

This Horatio Alger-like ladder climbing will happen again in GF. At the end of the second Day of the Dead, Manny's pretty much back where he started at the end of the first one, only he's swabbing a deck instead of a diner. At the beginning of the third Day of the Dead, Manny's captain of the ship, as his drive to save Meche continually pushes him (and Glottis) further.

After finding and reconciling with Meche at the end of the third Day of the Dead, Manny is faced with the challenge of getting her (and others they've saved along the way) onto the train and across to the Ninth Underworld. As LeMans' criminal network has stolen the tickets from their rightful owners, Manny and Meche must get them back. In the process, a disguised Manny will have to work his way into LeMan's good graces and become the salesman he never was back at the DOD.

At the end, Manny, Meche and Glottis return to the Number Nine with the stolen tickets for Meche and the others. Manny is issued one of his own as a reward for destroying the conspiracy and returning the tickets to their rightful owners. The couple leaves Glottis at the train station (no demons allowed in the 9th Underworld, but he'll be in charge of a group of mini demon mechanics who care for the train and revere him as a God). Locked in an embrace on the train, they head off into the unknown that is the afterlife.

Cue credits.

While Manny and Glottis are the two main characters in Grim Fandango, and have the lion's share (and the lines' share) of the witty dialogue that runs throughout this game, even minor NPC's get their shining moments.

For example, at some other point during the first Day of the Dead, Manny will have to visit a street fair (The first time I played I went there as soon as I left the DOD, drawn by the music). The fair features a balloon-twisting clown. This NPC's purpose is to provide you with both fully-realized sculptures (animals or a balloon portrait of Robert Frost) and un-inflated balloons ("worms") that are key pieces in solving critical puzzles. The character itself could be a simple, run of the mill NPC but instead it's got a Jack Nicholson-like voice and bad attitude. Interaction between Manny and the clown offers numerous gems, but this is one of my favorites.

Manny: "Some festival, huh?"

Balloon Twister: "Yeah, pretty busy. My Carpal Tunnel Syndrome's acting up."

Manny: "But you don't have any... tendons."

Balloon Twister: "Yeah, well you don't have a tongue, but that doesn't seem to shut you up, now does it?"

Or take the coroner Membrillo, who Manny must trick into declaring the death of a sailor so Manny can take his place aboard a ship. One moment philosophical, as he searches a corpse for identifying information...

Manny: What exactly are you looking for?

Membrillo: I am digging for a treasure that part of me does not wish to find. For when I discover that sad doubloon that tells me who this poor soul is, my reward is not riches but the chance to make a phone call and break somebody's heart.

At another moment, not so philosophical:

Manny: How do you do this job?

Membrillo: Without becoming jaded you mean? My secret to happiness is that I have the heart of a 12 year-old boy. I keep it over here in a jar. Would you like to see it?

Manny: NO!

Membrillo: Sorry. Old coroner joke.

Puzzles in Grim Fandango

Puzzles in Grim Fandango are multi-part and extremely challenging. For the game's 10th anniversary, Schaeffer released one of the original game design docs (titled a "puzzle document" and dated April 30th, 1996) to the Internet. The document describes eighty puzzles and numerous cut scenes. Several pieces of the game described in the document weren't completed due to budget and release pressures, others were altered in production.

Mechanics in adventure games haven't changed much from the time of text adventures, to 2D point-and-clicks to the early 3D point-and-clicks like GF (and perhaps, some would argue, even to today's adventure games). Exploration of environments and collection of darn near anything clickable are two of the primary mechanics in GF, especially as there's no inventory limit. In GF the player drives Manny around the space and navigates a dialogue tree to talk to NPC's , so it's pretty straightforward.

It's this kind of limited interaction that gives some gamers a bad taste in their mouths when it comes to adventure games. But with deep dialogue trees that can be skimmed the first time and mined in later play sessions, along with some Easter eggs and other hidden content that can emerge, GF stands up to replay. What's more, after Manny meets Sal Limones, "Non-linearity rears it's repulsive, but fascinating head!" (according to the puzzle doc) The rest of the stages will have two or three chains of puzzles that can be worked on simultaneously, part by part, until the end of Day of the Dead four when the game closes in on its conclusion.

Just because there's a limited mechanics set doesn't mean that the puzzles are easy. The sequence described below is listed as three separate puzzles ("Open Tube Room," "Jam Door Open" and "Intercept Message") in the puzzle doc, but I tend to think of them as one large puzzle. They illustrate the kind of "off-the-beaten-track" thinking needed to survive a Schaffer-written adventure game.

Once Manny has resolved to steal a lead, he must hack a pneumatic message system that delivers the client assignments to the agent's offices.

To do so he must fill the "worms" acquired from the clown with two different packing solutions that create a solid foam. You've seen these solutions used earlier in the game and they'll be of use during the fourth Day of the Dead as well. The solution filled balloon must be sent down the pneumatic tube message system, forcing the janitor to open it. Manny then has to flip the deadbolt to keep the tube room open and then block the tube with a playing card from his office deck that must be perforated with Eva's hole punch so that it won't blow away. This will allow him to jam the tube long enough to read a message meant for Domino.

To have collected the items needed to accomplish this goal of stealing, the player will have to have collected the cards from Manny's office at the beginning of the game or returned to search it at some point. A visit to Eva's desk is required for the hole punch, a visit to the street fair for

the worms, a visit to the packing room for the foam fluids, a return to the office to send the balloons down to the machine room and more than one trip to the machine room. Perseverance and trial-and-error (the scientific method) is alive and well in GF. This is a game for adventure aficionados or novices with a walk-through guide grasped tightly in their hot-little hands. I cheerfully admit to having used a walk-through myself.

The Detailed World of Grim Fandango

None of this would work if the world in which the game occurs wasn't incredibly well-conceived and detailed. Many of the puzzles and the fine touches come from the basis of a world populated by skeletons.

For example, Sal Limones and Evaluna don't want to release Manny to follow after Meche. As a mere administrative assistant, Eva doesn't have the level of access to the DOD computers that Manny has. The biometric key the system uses to provide higher access is dental scans of the agents' teeth because skeletons don't have fingerprints. So, they want to keep Manny around for his pearly whites. To win his freedom, Manny will have to get Domino's mouth guard (the ex-boxer has a punching bag in his office) and Bondo from Glottis' tool shed to make a cast of his teeth. Once Eva gets the cast, Manny can leave El Marrow and go after Meche.

Another plot device that arise from the characters' unique life (or post-life) circumstances is the sprouting gun. When Don Copal eliminates Dom he doesn't "fill him full of lead." His "piece" is more like a squirt gun, spraying sprouting fluid that transforms animated skeletons to lovely, inanimate gardens. Coroners must root through the gardens to find identifying markers of the dead, florists in the Aztec afterlife are eventually driven mad by the fact that their agricultural avocation is tied to a final death, and Don Copal will eventually meet his end in his elaborate greenhouse.

Other devices and set pieces arise from the historical time period in which Film Noir flourished, the 40's and 50's. Sal Limones' character is reminiscent of Che Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary whose Marxist awakening and revolutionary career began and flourished in the late 40's and through the 50's. Many characters and environments are styled in reference to Casablanca and other period films.

Film noir isn't the only period piece referenced in the game. Manny finds poetry, Beatniks and revolutionary texts in the Blue Casket club. He'll take the texts to inspire the Sea Bees (merchant marine nautical mechanic Elementals that look like big bees) to rise up and agitate for a

union. This is part of Manny's plot to acquire tools for Glottis so they can both ship out on a freighter to pursue Meche, of course.

GF's overall architecture recalls the aforementioned Atlantic City, San Diego and Las Vegas, (depending on the specific afterlife city) mashed up with Aztec and Mayan architecture. It all feels right for the world of the game throughout. The only exception to this "look and feel" is Manny's brief visit to the land of the living to collect a soul. The city he's driven through, and the diner he enters, (the scene of the "Code 3" mass gazpacho poisoning) is a hilarious, collaged love-child of Norman Rockwell and Romare Bearden. It's a great contrast to the rest of the afterlife and it makes the living look truly bizarre.

Replay.

GF is a game I play every few years as a touchstone for story and puzzle design and just plain fun. In much the same way as with favorite books or movies I'll find new or forgotten dialogue in the game, find new ways to sequence the non-linear puzzles or discover an Easter egg. Should this inspire you to want to play GF, like many older games it can be hard to get a copy of and have it run on a modern machine. Some patches can be found at the Department of Death website[102] (a fan site that had active postings up til mid 2009) If you've got a copy running but get stumped by a puzzle, walkthrough guides still abound on the web. If you can't find a copy, or get it to work on your machine, check out one of the several sets of play-through videos on YouTube. Just be sure to experience it at least once, and ideally often.

ENDNOTES

98 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grim_fandango

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100 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grim_fandango

101 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monomyth>

102 JACOBS, S. 2007. The Basics of Narrative. In C. Bateman (Ed.), *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames* (pp. 25-42). Boston: Charles River Media

103 <http://www.bigdaddyroth.com/>

104 <http://www.grim-fandango.com/downloads.php#patch>