

neak Peek: **Flashback**

by Richard Rouse III

NOTE: Screen shots and information presented in this article are based on a pre-release version of Flashback and are subject to change before final release. This article is not a review.

For some time, many in the computer entertainment industry have been ballyhooing the upcoming crossover between video games and movies. Many see this as coming about through the CD-ROM games which feature live actors in their QuickTime files: basically, you progress through the game by moving from movie to movie. But most of these products are not truly "interactive" games at all, offering you limited playability and a small number of actions to perform. After all, they can only pre-produce so many alternate film clips without running up an immense budget. In the end, these products are more movies on CD-ROM than games.

On the bright side, however, what the computer game industry can learn from cinema is how to effectively tell a story. But at the same time, developers must remember to keep the product a game in which the player decides what happens, not the designer. Some of the most truly cinematic products have come from the mind of Jordan Mechner: his Prince of Persia and Karateka effectively merged Hollywood-style storytelling with excellent game play, causing his games to build suspense and hold the interest of gamers like few others.

[Flashback to the Past](#). Eric Chahi and Delphine Software, with their game Out of this World, utilized many cinematic aspects in a style very similar to Mechner's. An excellent though somewhat flawed product, Out of this World's biggest failing was that it was too short. Many gamers were also discouraged by the blocky look of the game, a result of their using filled polygons for the characters instead of the carefully rendered bitmaps gamers are used to. The game did gain popularity based on its interesting story, its realistic animation and game-play, and its vast array of cinematic cut-aways.

With Delphine's subsequent product, the upcoming Flashback soon to be published for the Macintosh by MacPlay, the designers have created a longer, more complex game which also includes some of the most stunning roto-scoped graphics ever seen in a computer game. From the looks of the preview copy I received, Flashback surpasses even the graphical beauty and character movement fluidity of Prince of Persia: an amazing accomplishment indeed.

[lash-Forward](#). Instead of the filled-polygon character graphics of Out of this World, Flashback offers roto-scoped bitmaps. Though said bitmaps take a good deal longer to create than filled-polygons, the payoff is extraordinary. The player character can fluidly and realistically run, jump, climb, descend, and roll, as well as being able to whip out his gun, flip it from hand to hand, and fire mercilessly at oncoming enemies. As opposed to the strange expressionistic backgrounds found in Out of this World, Flashback has excellently rendered, finely detailed backgrounds, designed specifically for Macintosh screen resolution.

But technology is only technology. Any truly good game needs a good story-line to back it up, something which Flashback certainly has. The story has been integrated into gameplay to the point where the story is more than just something tacked on to the game as a mere afterthought: the story is vital to the game, and the game could not exist without it. The story at first seems to be a case of classic adventure game *deja vu*, but soon the player finds out that they were responsible for erasing their own memory so that the aliens who have infiltrated the human population could not find out the secrets the player holds. Bits of the story are revealed as the game progresses, many told in cinematic cut-aways created in an interesting manga-like art style. To make it to the end, the player will have to progress through a jungle, survive a deadly television game-show, engineer a fast-paced escape from prison, succeed at several "Mission Impossible" like scenarios, and infiltrate a bizarre bio-mechanical complex.

ameplay borrows a lot more from Prince of Persia than it does from Out of this World. Players will recognize the "three-level" screen layout. The Flashback character also climbs platforms, makes running jumps, and grabs onto ledges in a fluid Prince-like fashion. One could almost think of it as Prince of Persia with guns. Thankfully, Delphine software know that no game enthusiast actually likes games where one runs out of ammunition, so here one can fire away to one's heart's content with empty cartridges flying left and right. Shoot-outs can grow quite complex with the introduction of personal force-fields. Enemies surrounding the player on both sides, one will often have to leap down a level, fire off several shots in each direction and then quickly roll off to the right to avoid a falling grenade. Particularly humorous is shooting an enemy at the same instant he shoots you: both of you go flying in opposite directions.

The enemies in Flashback are quite varied; from the simple mutant guard with a cannon-sized gun, to the little robotic nasties which crawl along the ground, to the jet-pack guards who fly up and attack you from above, to the disappearing guards who become invisible so they can quickly sneak up on you, to the polymorphs that turn into blobs of Jello and crawl along the ceiling towards you. Combat in Flashback is some of the best I've ever seen in an arcade game.

[Flashback vs. The Prince](#). Comparisons between gameplay in Flashback and Prince of Persia are particularly ironic, since the former has been ported to the Macintosh by Presage Software and in particular Scott Shumway, who was responsible for the brilliant Macintosh version of Prince. With most of the draw routines coded in assembly, Flashback runs smooth as silk especially on 68040 Macs, probably even better than on Intel machines. Flashback may be the last port Presage will do for a while since the group has now moved on to developing original games such as Lode Runner: The Legend Returns. But what a final port it is for the premiere Macintosh game conversion company: along with Prince, it may well be the best thing they've done.

What's extremely impressive about Flashback is the consistent feel the whole game has to it. Watching your character run across the screen, duck down into a roll and come out of it with gun a'blazing is truly thrilling to watch. It almost seems as if one is the star player in a Quentin Tarrantino film set in outer space, the crucial difference being that in Flashback one controls the cool ways in which the bad guys get blasted to hell. And that's what great video-games are all about: allowing the player to control exactly what happens. At the same time, Flashback tells a gripping story, with cinematic flourishes and a distinctive, consistent feel to all the art. If movies and computer games are truly to crossover, if video games are to progress to the storytelling and emotional power of film, Flashback seems to be, finally, a step in the right direction.