

y Don Henson

The Aztec emperor's closest advisors plot to overthrow the kingdom. The Emperor has a dream in which a magical skull, made of pure crystal, is presented to him by a handsome youth. In the dream, images of strange and horrible creatures play within the skull. He awakens from his dream, sensing that the skull could hold the key to the future of the kingdom, and calls upon the player to retrieve the mysterious artifact." This quote from the Maxis press release concerning the theme of their new game The Crystal Skull sums up the game player's approach to the main problem to solve in completing this epic adventure (3 CD's) in the time of the great central American cultures of a 1000 years ago.

The Crystal Skull (TCS) was created by SOME Interactive for Maxis, the people that also did the Wrath of the Gods. TCS used Macromedia Director as its developmental tool, and it takes better advantage of Macromedia Director than any other production to date that this reviewer is familiar with. The graphics of the restored Aztec and other cultures are extremely well done. It reminds one that the people that inhabited the Americas before the Europeans showed up weren't exactly savages as is so often presented. In the historical references provided, there is ample documentation as to how impressed some of the Europeans were with what they found in these cities on their arrival. There were markets larger than in Rome or Constantinople, the largest markets these worldly explorers were otherwise familiar.

Your play is from the third person at times with the close encounters in the first person. This gives an interesting feeling and perspective to the game which works very well with a control panel along with a simple interface. There is the aforementioned group of Europeans that seems to be ready to end your quest in one way or another before you even get too far from the Emperor's zoo where you are the bird keeper. However, with a little experimentation, you are soon on your way to see if you can find the answer to the crystal skull.

First Things First

At first you need to figure out what is going on in the city (the guard won't let you out yet anyway.) Then you go on to the jungles, mountains, and deserts of the surrounding territory. The other areas also have people that are helpful, and of course, not so helpful.

With the Crystal Skull being the object of the game, I was disappointed with the quality of many of the problems and puzzles that confront you in the game. The major thing involved in the first town is continual re-trading of the items you find and in the market. This would be alright to get one's feet wet, but then it goes round and round re-trading many of the things several times. Surely there must have been something more interesting and original to have people try to do.

ong after one has figured out how to get out into the countryside and visit other people and cities, you are faced with the old puzzle of how to get three incompatible objects across the river, only taking one in the boat at a time. These being a jaguar that would like to eat the turkey, who in turn would like to eat the corn, if any were left together. This would be OK if the player was discovering this problem for the first time in life, but I would doubt that would be the case for most people reaching the third CD in this game. On the other hand, there are some things that are much more obtuse and will provide difficulty to the level of player that can tolerate the inventory trading and management, while remaining sane during the process.

This leaves the game at least partially in the mode of great graphics and other aspects of presentation, but the playing is very contrived and tedious in too many ways. Had the playing been on the level of the graphics and blue/green screen work, this would be not only a killer game, but very educational as well. The combination that has made MYST so attractive and for so long would be nice to see again, instead we get too much glitz, bells and whistles possible with Director, and very few interesting storyline challenges to match.

Helping Hand

People can chose at the beginning of the game to have the Shaman be available for hints with the rougher places during the game. He is played by Edward James Olmos and should end most terminal frustration at whichever style puzzle the player finds to be most troublesome. This is a well done feature, with the clues that the Shaman gives very mild at first. You can chose two other levels if that isn't sufficient, the final telling exactly what to do in most cases.

Summary

The bottom line is that the Crystal Skull will be very interesting and enjoyable to people interested in the Native American cultures in central America just before the arrival of the Europeans. In this sense, it can be quite a learning experience about what these cultures were like in their prime. The person that is really involved in fantastic art and presentation will also be very pleased. I don't think many of the puzzle seeking types will be totally pleased, as these are very erratic in nature with some seeming much too contrived in order to just take up time.

Far better than most games, but disappointing that it didn't go that little extra mile to be truly great.

Pros

- Fantastic graphics and production values, the best I have seen integrating real actors and a partially computer generated world
- The history of the Aztec and other great cultures of Mesoamerica is very well researched and presented
- Nice and thorough historical references to what the Aztec and related cultures were like

Cons

- Developed in Macromedia Director, thus the saved games aren't double clickable to start where you saved last
- Color control leaves your Mac where it set it after quitting the game
- Many puzzles are just time consuming exercises in shuffling inventory, common old puzzles and such
- Not very well thought out in relation to the awesome graphics and what one would expect

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