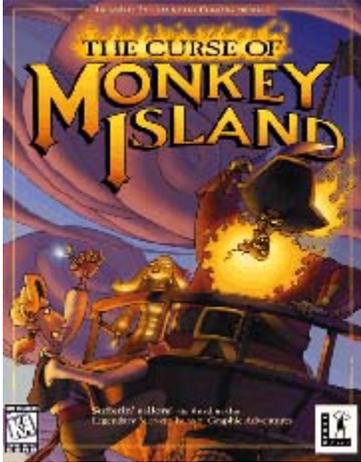


# Cruddy Sketches and a Red Pen:

## Pre-Production on *The Curse of Monkey Island* at LucasArts

by Russell Bekins



© LucasArts.

In the world of interactive game makers, where companies disappear and reorganize with the speed of particles in a linear accelerator, LucasArts Entertainment stands out as a model of stability and productivity. Though the gaming world admires their *StarWars*-inspired action games, I have long admired their pioneering cartoon work in adventure-animation games.

With *Maniac Mansion* in the 1980s, LucasArts established a new form of the cartoon interactive game. Followed by the acclaimed *Day Of The Tentacle*, the hilarious *Sam And Max Hit The Road*, and the dark humor-tinged *Full Throttle*, this company has been raising the standards in this art form for years. They have successfully made the transition in technology from the very limited possibilities of early adventure gaming platforms to something that looks very much like feature, or at least television, animation. Their

products are known for their sharp-edged wit, funny visual gags and cool artistic style.

Such unfettered creativity in a collective art form is mighty suspicious. Are the rumors true of roller-skating wunderkinds with their genius spilling onto the pavement outside their San Rafael headquarters? Or are darker forces at work, such as a team of Malaysian programmers chained to Silicon Graphics workstations somewhere deep in a basement? Determined to get to the bottom of the matter, I set out to investigate.

### The Dominion of The Hyphenates

Actually, I was disappointed on both accounts. What I encountered was a company where creativity is fostered within a surprisingly conventional structure. The strength of the organization rests instead with a rigorous peer review system, a culture of mentoring that gives credit where it is due, a stable senior staff, a roaring production department, and a commitment not to release a product before the artists involved are satisfied.

Most of all, LucasArts differs in the way they select and treat their senior team leaders. The senior team leaders are the artistic core of the project and are treated as such. While most start as programmers, they soon become hyphenates: programmer-writers, writer-animators and so on. The cultivation of these hybrids makes it possible to move ahead with projects with only a slender [production book](#) to guide them. The actual writing of dialogue occurs on the fly as programming, artwork and animation move ahead in tandem. This method may sound like heresy in the feature animation world, but this company somehow gets it right.

Writer- animator Larry Ahern and programmer-writer Jonathan Ackley are exemplary hyphenates. They were the co-team leaders for the recent pirate-themed satirical release *The Curse Of Monkey Island*. Universally acclaimed by reviewers and game players alike, this sequel to two earlier LucasArts games, again stretches the bounds of artistry in the genre of interactive animation games. A little over two years ago, Ahern and Ackley took the idea of this project to management.

Though their office is crammed with toys, LucasArts writer-animator Larry Ahern and programmer-writer Jonathan Ackley are hardly the image of goofy post-adolescent wunderkinds. © LucasArts.

### The Wrong Credentials

Though their office is crammed with toys (including a borrowed Rock `em Sock `em



Robot set) Ahern and Ackley are hardly the image of goofy post-adolescent wunderkinds. They exude professionalism and pride in their product, though the self-effacing wit that suffuses *Monkey Island* slips out at times. As Larry Ahern admits, they 'have all the wrong credentials' to find themselves as senior team leaders, but there they are, ensconced in their own office, separated from the cubicles that predominate LucasArts' production floor.

A fine arts graduate from U.C. Davis, Larry Ahern designed T-shirts and coffee mugs before arriving at the right place at the right time. Interviewed ("the guy just flipped through my design book") and hired, he joined LucasArts during the production of the second *Monkey Island* game. "I got lucky in that the technology curve of games coincided with my learning curve of animation," he admits. The animation was so limited at the time, Larry laughs, that it was possible to learn the craft on the job. He did animation on *Day Of The Tentacle* and *Sam And Max Hit The Road*, and then graduated to lead animator on *Full Throttle*.

U.C. Santa Cruz alum Jonathan Ackley taught himself to program on his Atari, and came to work for the company when his girlfriend's boss became angry that he was calling her all the time at LucasArts educational division. "If he's got nothing better to do," the disgruntled chief reportedly complained, "maybe he can come up here and do clerical work." Moving into programming, Jonathan did lip sync ("a real pain to program" in the days before automated voice synchronization) and programming on *Day Of The Tentacle*, as well as programming and the wild sound effects on *Sam And Max*. He also programmed on *Full Throttle* and *The Dig*.

By 1995, both Larry and Jonathan had accrued enough experience to become senior team leaders. They began lunch time brainstorming sessions that summer as Jonathan was finishing up with *The Dig*. Since no one had done a sequel to the *Monkey Island* series for several years, it seemed a natural. Now they had to get the idea accepted.

### **The Gauntlet**

Team leaders at LucasArts are grateful that the management is not burdened with a lot of wanna-be creative executives. "They're excellent businessmen, not closet game designers," says Jonathan Ackley, in the highest praise a creative type can give a manager. Though a proposal for a new product goes first to the director of development, head of marketing, and the president of the company, the really scary step is the peer review process.

Senior team leaders of the 20-25 projects in development get together and scrutinize the proposal. "These meetings are usually spirited discussions about what is good and not so good about a proposal," says director of development Steve Dauterman, in what is probably an understatement. With such a heavy development slate, the company is now adding only one or two projects a year.

In Larry and Jonathan's case, management was understandably sanguine about a sequel to one of their franchises. At Christmas, they took three weeks to consolidate their brainstorming sessions and presented a 15-page summary to the team leaders. They were given the go-ahead, with the proviso that they consult with Tim Shaffer, a programmer-writer on the original *Monkey Island* series, for the sake of continuity.

There was only one problem. The original *Monkey Island* games, while clever, funny and imaginative, were designed to play on computers with limited graphics capabilities and looked more like Super Nintendo graphics; they were shrimpy and pixilated. This new addition to the series was to be designed to play on far more advanced machines, capable of delivering far more sophisticated animation. The cover art on the previous games had led fans to expect a handsome Guybrush Threepwood, the pirate wanna-be lead character. The artistic struggle to nail down a new look for the central characters would turn out to be one of the biggest challenges of the production.

Concept drawings and preliminary designs are tacked on the wall during development. © LucasArts.



### **The Map**

Both Larry and Jonathan are forceful in their assertion that careful pre-production is vital to a successful game production. Working together over the next two months, they laid out a full story outline, a game outline, a prop list (critical to adventure gaming) and a full [list of 'rooms'](#) (the environments, whether indoors or outdoors). Out of this slender design document, the entire CD-ROM was to emerge. "We had the entire game

on paper before we started," notes Jonathan.

This process is harder than it sounds. Each obstacle in the story is accompanied by a puzzle element that involves the lead character in moving around, talking to the right people, saying the right things, picking up the right stuff and combining props. This makes for a monstrously big story, and it's easy to get lost. Their method of tracking this was to outline the series of actions required to reach the next level. The particular form of this outline is a LucasArts secret, though the author of this article has glimpsed that carefully guarded format. What is fascinating is that it turns what is considered a non-linear storytelling form into a very linear process. The game outline also details quite a number of the visual and verbal gags in the story.

Note, however, that there was no actual script, nor was the key art for the lead characters approved yet. That was to come.

### **A Very Large Yellow Legal Pad and Some Cruddy Sketches**

Map in hand, Jonathan, along with fellow writer-programmers Chris Purvis and Chuck Jordan, built the basic game using crude programmer art to mark their places. Using LucasArts' patented SCUMM (Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion) game engine, they had the bare bones of the programming together within a month.

Larry meanwhile, was wandering around with a large yellow legal pad, writing up cost estimates for the art involved. He confesses, in retrospect, that not all the figures were right. "This was the first time I had done a production where we did all the animation on paper, scanned it in, and inked and painted digitally," he admits ruefully. A few elements of the original design, including a 'cool alligator game' got nixed from the start due to cost. It was nip and tuck as to whether a shipwreck transition animation would make it in.

It was now time for the team to grow. "Has anyone read the script yet?" Larry recalls someone inquiring.

### **A Funny Phone Book**

Both Larry and Jonathan are quick to praise the imagination of writer-programmers Jordan and Purvis. The fact that the game itself was outlined so early in the process meant that creativity could reign. Within the structure Purvis and Jordan could "experiment and improvise." Meetings expanded to include background artist Bill Tiller and animator Marc Overney. More gags were added as they laid out the story elements with bad sketches on note cards.

"The writing process is a back and forth thing," Larry waxes philosophically after the fact. "A lot of the bad stuff that comes out of animation, the Saturday morning cartoon model, is often: we have a script writer, he writes a script, they hand it over, and people just try to make the visuals for it. Whereas some of the great old Warner Bros. cartoons were a visual gag-story process that went back and forth."

In practice, the team would use place-holder dialogue as well as art as the product evolved. "We'd get a red pen and write, 'Arrgh, I hate you;' then we'd go back and expand on that to [something like], 'I want you to die a thousand deaths,'" Larry notes. "The scope and the size dictate that it has to be written as it is programmed, so that it is an organic process."

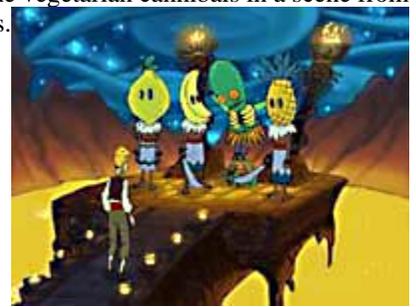
Suggestions for gags and ideas came from literally everyone in the producing team, including the test department. The script, when finally written through this process, grew to a hefty 8,357 lines. "It's like a funny phone book," quips Jonathan. "A single writer makes for an emptier product."

All of this creativity is a wonderful thing, but the acid test comes when production begins.

### **Enter The Bad Cops**

At LucasArts, the team leaders normally concentrate on the creative aspects, leaving such drudgery as scheduling and budgeting to the production department. The

The vegetarian cannibals in a scene from  
*The Curse of Monkey Island*. © LucasArts.



production manager for *The Curse Of Monkey Island* was Camela Boswell, who works on as many as five productions at a time. "I think it's hard for the team to understand that we're not able to focus on one production," she sighs. "We have to play the bad cop and that's fine. We know that's our role." Actually, she wasn't concerned that there wasn't a script. "That's not the way we work," she asserts. The dialogue was not locked until over a year into the production process.

Up to the point where the design document was finished, Boswell's task was mainly to provide support and research for Larry and Jonathan. She has high praise for the preparation work that they put in. "They were better organized than almost any project I've ever worked on," Camela reports. "It was one of the smoothest projects as well." The ramp-up to full production began four months into the process. At that point, a core team that eventually grew to 50 people was assembled, a very large project by any measure.

It's not like it was all smooth sailing, however. According to one source within the production, the energetic lead and extensive planning that Larry and Jonathan gave to the project sometimes led to interpersonal conflicts. Unused to having team leaders who were so hands-on, some of the creative types complained that they were not given enough artistic latitude.

In Boswell's view, however, the key obstacle in the production was the debate over the look of Guybrush Threepwood and the other lead characters. "We struggled with designing the characters," Larry acknowledges. Inspired by *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, he eventually drew Guybrush as a pencil-necked beanpole with a flounce of eighteenth-century hair and a nose as vertical as the face of Half Dome. Larry insists that the extra time and deliberation was worth it, even though the animation staff was chomping at the bit to get started.

There were also technology struggles. Coming up to speed on the ink-and-paint process of the US Animation System created bottlenecks in the production pipeline. "The animators came in for a lot of crunch time at the end," Larry confesses. Going through three different production coordinators didn't help matters either. Vaguely scheduled on the chalkboard to be finished by the summer of '97, *The Curse Of Monkey Island* hit the shelves in the fall of that year instead.

"What a lot of people don't understand is that dates are more nebulous in this medium," Jonathan clarifies. "Interactivity cannot always be scheduled precisely. We probably could have finished by then, but without feedback from the testers." They both credit the company with the patience to let them put the finishing touches on the product.

The efficacy of this process is in evidence everywhere in the product. At one point the lead character disguises himself in a large piece of squishy tofu with a mask carved into it and pays a visit to a tribe of 'Vegetarian Cannibals.' They sacrifice one of their members, dressed as a zucchini, into a volcano, proclaiming all the while that he is "high in fiber and low in trans-fatty acids."

The animation is smooth and fun (especially in the cut scenes) and it is a joy to walk through the environments. The game has been selected by the major review magazines *PC Gamer* and *Computer Gaming World* as adventure game of the year.

### **Getting a Life**

Larry and Jonathan both emphasize that during the pre-production process, it was critical for the production team to balance their lives and their work. With the exception of the final two months, they actually managed to work normal hours and have lives. Jonathan has since married the woman he used to call at LucasArts while unemployed. "There is a diminishing return to getting your team to work crazy hours," he asserts, an atypical attitude for a programmer. "I write bugs when I'm tired."

"I got into some bad habits because I was single," Larry agrees, recalling his late hours when he started at LucasArts. "Getting better at planning was the next step so we could have real lives." Still, he points out that Marc Overney and the animation team took a fierce pride in the product and recapitulated Larry's 'bad habits.' "I hope we're getting a handle on it," Larry sighs and pauses. "Still, if you're going to spend two years on a project, you want to be sure that it's good."

As of this writing, Larry Ahern and Jonathan Ackley are working on their next project. They have their cards close to the chest about the nature of it, not even discussing it with friends and colleagues. "If someone begins discussing a similar idea with us, we avoid going to his house," Larry smiles. "We can't even go into his neighborhood."

### **Click Your Heels Three Times**

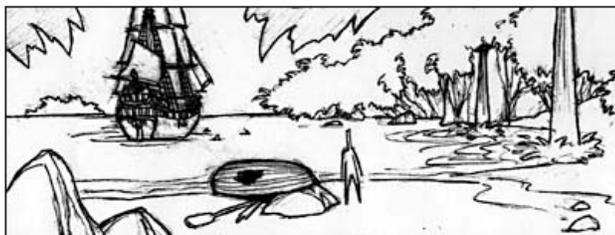
At one point in his career, Jonathan Ackley left LucasArts to go work for a firm that was once the darling of the interactive world, Rocket Science. Once there, however, it became clear that the programmers programmed and the writers wrote, and never the twain shall meet. He came back to LucasArts in short order. "I just assumed that everyone worked the way LucasArts does, because it makes sense," he shrugs. "Then, in the cold light of reality, I realized something. There is no place like LucasArts."

*Russell Bekins is a writer and media and story analyst working in Hollywood. He has worked for such film companies as MGM, Tri-Star, CAA and labored mightily (not to mention fruitlessly) as a development executive at Disney-based Tidewater Entertainment. Most recently, he has written for a satirical web site, Betacapsule.com, detailing the despair of a small high-tech company.*

*Editor's note: The following is an example of a section of a production book created in the pre-production process of an interactive game. In particular, this page describes some of the rooms and props created for The Curse of Monkey Island. The following content is the copyrighted property of LucasArts Entertainment.*

## The Curse of Monkey Island: Room list

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This is a rough breakdown of the SCUMM rooms that will be used in the game. In some cases a location will be broken up into several rooms based on puzzle requirement. However, we don't anticipate any difficulties from this process, as our room count is only at 53, and many of our previous adventure games had anywhere from 75 to over 100 rooms.

### Introduction: Night/Sunrise

Room	Description	Objects
	inventory you start with	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helium balloon</li> <li>• deflated balloons</li> <li>• string</li> </ul>
Cannon room, LeChuck's ship-	contains cannon, Wally, and door to treasure hold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ramrod</li> <li>• Wally's hook</li> </ul>
Cannon view, LeChuck's ship-	Interactive cannon operator's view- point, points toward fort and the longboats full of LeChuck's skeleton henchmen.	
Waterline,ext. LeChuck's ship-	Reverse angle of cannon view, looking back at cannon and Guybrush peering out through hole. Shows waterline and floating debris.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cutlass</li> <li>• skeleton arm</li> </ul>
Treasure hold, LeChuck's ship-	It's got all the loot, a porthole, and the cursed diamond ring that starts the whole mess. There's a glass bottom, oh, and it's upside down because the ship has flipped and sank.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• wooden nickels</li> <li>• cursed ring</li> </ul>

