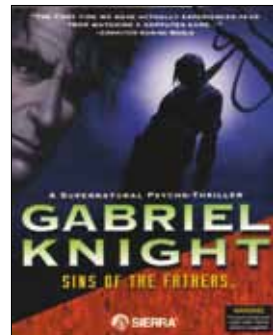




BEHIND THE SCENES

THE GABRIEL KNIGHT TRILOGY

With Jane Jensen's Gray Matter finally released this month, games™ looks back at the writer's finest hour, and the zenith in Sierra's enormous point-and-click catalogue



Released: 1993-1999

Format: Mac, PC

Publisher: Sierra On-Line

Developer: Sierra On-Line

KEY STAFF:

Jane Jensen
Game designer/writer

Robert Holmes
Composer, *Sins Of The Fathers* producer

Sabine Duvall
The Beast Within producer

Steven Hill
Blood Of The Sacred, Blood Of The Damned producer

THE LAUNCH OF *Gabriel Knight 3: Blood Of The Sacred, Blood Of The Damned* in 1999 marked the end of an era. Sierra On-Line, whose quest-style story games had been its bread and butter for nearly 20 years, had recently shut down its adventure division in a high-profile fit of "housecleaning". *Gabriel Knight 3* would be its final adventure game. In the decade since, series designer Jane Jensen has stayed busy as a novelist, and one of the co-founders of casual game company Oberon Media. She has also worked persistently to get a new adventure series, *Gray Matter*, off the ground. But her greatest gift to gamers remains the celebrated *Gabriel Knight*, a trilogy of supernatural mysteries that introduced new levels of depth and maturity to point-and-click adventures.

An adventure and puzzle game fan with a penchant for storytelling, Jensen was working as a programmer for Hewlett-Packard when she applied for a job at Sierra. "I was a big fan of their games, so I sent them a resume and short story," she explains. "I heard nothing for a year, then one day they called. They were starting a writer's block and had found my story in a file. I was thrilled." Her early work included writing for *Police Quest 3: The Kindred* and co-designing a children's game, *EcoQuest: The Search For Cetus*, both of which released in 1991. Then came her big break – she teamed up with veteran designer Roberta Williams for the sixth instalment of Sierra's flagship franchise *King's Quest*. Soon after, Jensen was offered the chance to develop her own series.

Drawing on interests in mystery stories, historical settings and paranormal phenomena, Jensen came up with *Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers*, a supernatural psycho-thriller intended for an adult audience. The title character – a **CONTINUED >**



■ Much of GK's music was composed by Jensen's husband Robert Holmes, including *The Beast Within's* ambitious opera, which Jane cites as a favourite. "Robert wrote so many good pieces and now neither one of us remembers them!" she says. "We play some of the old CDs sometimes and I go, 'Wow, that was really good, honey!'"



I WANTED GABRIEL TO BE A KIND OF MODERN DAY KNIGHT OF THE ROUND TABLE



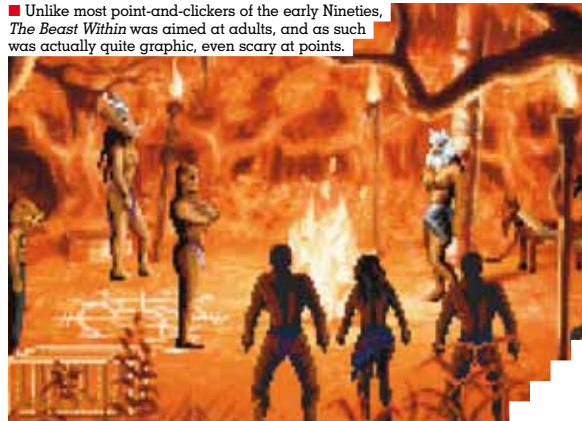
BEHIND THE SCENES THE GABRIEL KNIGHT TRILOGY



"Spiritual path, huh? Well, you're welcome to stay, Grace. Just as long as you don't expect me to know what I'm doing."



■ The growth of Gabriel's relationship with his assistant-turned-partner, Grace, is a highlight of Jensen's storytelling. "It's impossible to say how you develop a character," she says of her process. "Thank God, sometimes they are just there."



■ Unlike most point-and-clickers of the early Nineties, *The Beast Within* was aimed at adults, and as such was actually quite graphic, even scary at points.

FROM THE FORUM

Posted by:

SHINYMCSHINE

▲ I initially bought and played *Sins Of The Fathers* in 1996, when it was re-released on the Sierra Originals budget label. I enjoyed it up to a point, then got stuck on a bit where you had to decipher the voodoo symbols. I think the voice acting really stood out (for its time) with a pretty good cast, and excellent interaction/interchanges between the characters. I rediscovered it a couple of years ago and went through the game in its entirety – thanks in some places to a walkthrough. This gave me the bug, and I picked up *The Beast Within* and *Blood Of The Sacred*. I actually quite enjoyed both *The Beast Within* and the 3D approach of the sequel. Looking forward to new games from Jensen, as the storytelling of the *Gabriel Knight* games was immersive.

Posted by:

DANTE76

▲ The first *Gabriel Knight* is great. Good plot, perfect voice acting from Tim Curry and Mark Hamill. I went to New Orleans to check out the sites a few years later. The second one was one of those FMV rubbish ones; it was still challenging, but seemed rushed.

Posted by:

SHINYMCSHINE

▲ The convoluted solution to the moped hire/disguise puzzle in *Gabriel Knight 3* is something to behold. Perhaps this is what sounded the death knell for point-and-clickers for a good few years.



■ The ad campaign for *GK3* emphasized the game's religious themes. "Why deal with religious topics in the gaming industry at all?" Jensen mused in a 1998 developer diary. "Well... why not?"

brooding, Harley-riding 'bad boy' – owns a New Orleans bookstore and is unsuccessfully trying to cut it as a novelist. As he soon learns, he's also the last in a line of Schattenjäger ('shadow hunters') destined to serve the light by investigating supernatural evil. "I wanted a kind of modern day knight of the Round Table, and it was more interesting to start with a character who had no idea that he was supposed to be doing this," Jensen says. "Graphic novels like *Sandman* and *Hellraiser* were an inspiration. The Schattenjäger concept was my own, though I'm not sure how original it is." With help from his research assistant, history scholar Grace Nakimura, Gabriel confronts the dark forces behind a rash of brutal, voodoo-themed murders while reluctantly accepting his legacy. The gameplay is classic point-and-click, with interaction, exploration, and puzzle solving at its core.

Sins Of The Fathers and its two sequels, *The Beast Within* and *Blood Of The Sacred*, *Blood Of*

The Damned, are best known for their layered, well-researched stories. "I read a lot of weird non-fiction, so usually the idea for a story has come from something I had already read," Jensen says. "Then I try to find whatever good sources on the same subject matter I can. I tend to obsess and absorb a lot of information quickly." The plots face both outward and inward, incorporating sweeping history and legend while also carrying high emotional stakes for the main characters. In *Sins Of The Fathers*, Gabriel's investigation leads to revelations about his heritage and ultimately a crucial decision between following his heart or upholding his duty. The later games explore similar themes, as well as an evolving personal relationship between Gabriel and Grace. "They did mature and get stronger over time," Jensen acknowledges of her protagonists. "They get to be very real in your head."

■ THOUGH EACH GAME has a similar tone, their presentations are very different, with each reflecting the industry's latest and greatest at the time it was created. Released in 1993 in both floppy disk and CD-ROM versions, *Sins Of The Fathers* represented the pinnacle of Sierra's 2D point-and-click era, with hand-painted VGA graphics, stylish cut-scenes reminiscent of graphic novel illustrations, and a more complex, icon-based interface than previous games. The floppy version only had subtitles, but the 'talkie' CD release boasted a voice cast that included Mark Hamill, Michael Dorn, and Tim Curry as Gabriel. "It was thrilling to work with actors like that," says Jensen, who observed recording sessions led by a professional voice director. "Definitely a career highlight to be in that recording booth."

Sins Of The Fathers was well received and Jensen immediately got to work on the sequel, which took place a year later and was set in Gabriel's ancestral home of Bavaria, Germany. Thanks to the full-motion video trend, *The Beast Within* had a very different look than its predecessor. The interface was streamlined to use one 'smart' cursor for all interactions, and pixellated character sprites were replaced by live actors. Photorealistic backgrounds of actual Munich area locations were integrated into scenes filmed using blue screen technology, giving the feel of an epic, on-location shoot. The game launched in 1995 on six CDs, making it one of the largest adventure games of the Nineties.

PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR



■ LIKE GABRIEL, JANE Jensen is a novelist. Her first books, novelizations of *Sins Of The Fathers* and *The Beast Within*, were published in the Nineties. "I wanted to write the books in the hope of expanding the *GK* audience to non-gamers. They were packaged as game tie-

ins and put in the 'game books' section, so that never really happened," Jensen says. "I did enjoy writing them. But in order to try to reach that new audience, I decided to write books that were not related to games at all." So far, she's penned two: *Judgment Day*,

originally published as *Millennium Rising*, is an apocalyptic conspiracy thriller, while *Dante's Equation* teases out the relationship between Jewish mysticism and metaphysics. Only *Dante's Equation* is still in print, but all four are easy to find on eBay or Amazon Marketplace.



■ Since *Gabriel Knight* ended, Jensen has designed about a dozen story-centric casual games, including some based on Agatha Christie mysteries and James Patterson's *Women's Murder Club*. "It's kind of like writing a short story, versus a big novel. But many things, story and puzzle-wise, are very much the same," she says.



■ Besides his rugged good looks, a shadow hunter's most important tools are his dagger and his magic talisman. According to legend, the talisman was given to Gabriel's family by St. George, the Schattenjägers' patron saint.

WHAT THEY SAID...



Plot, puzzles, characterisation and art all lead to one of the most ambitious denouements ever in graphic adventure game history... Jane Jensen just may have become the interactive Anne Rice she's always wanted to be

Computer Gaming World, February 1996



>. A GAMING EVOLUTION



The Colonel's Bequest, one of Jensen's favourite Sierra games, inspired some of the whodunit-based gameplay of the *Gabriel Knight* series.



As in the *Gabriel Knight* sequels, player control shifts between two main characters in Jensen's latest adventure game, *Gray Matter*.



The *Gabriel Knight* trilogy moved between modes of presentation unlike any other game series before or since.



IT WAS EXCITING AS AN AUTHOR TO SEE PEOPLE PUT LIFE INTO THE CHARACTERS

the Year' awards and all-out 'Game of the Year' from Computer Gaming World.

In spite of this, *Gabriel Knight* was again reinvented visually for its third instalment, which used real-time 3D graphics. Jensen had mixed feelings about the shift: "I was sorry not to continue in FMV, but the industry is technology-driven. As a designer you want to work with the latest and greatest tools available. So it was an interesting challenge to tackle. The interactivity and puzzle possibilities were greatly enhanced, but I just have a hard time loving 3D puppets for big drama scenes."

Feeling burned out, Jensen took a break before starting work on *Blood Of The Sacred*, *Blood Of The Damned* in 1997. By this point, Sierra was struggling to keep up with tech and gameplay advances that were inhospitable to its trademark adventure game format. A burdensome 3D engine, inefficient production processes and **CONTINUED >**



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

■ EACH GAME'S setting is skilfully woven into the story, with iconic locations remaining true to their real-world counterparts. *Sins Of The Fathers* takes place primarily in New Orleans, with the famed French Quarter figuring prominently. "I was familiar with New Orleans only through fiction," Jensen says. "I have visited it since, but the research for *Gabriel Knight* was done with books." *The Beast Within* is set in the Munich area, where Jensen lived briefly, and includes an extensive sequence in Neuschwanstein, one of King Ludwig II's fairy tale castles. And in *Blood Of The Sacred*, *Blood Of The Damned*, set in southern France, Gabriel and Grace visit many Rennes-le-Château landmarks on a quest to uncover the treasure said to be hidden there. Jensen planned to set a fourth *GK* game in England or Scotland.

■ low team morale contributed to *Gabriel Knight 3* shipping more than a year late, with sub-par art and awkward controls. "It was Sierra's last adventure game and management wasn't really into it, so we had a hard time getting the top resources," Jensen admits. When the game finally released in 1999, reviews were mixed. Point-and-click gameplay was becoming passé; an infamous article on OldManMurray.com even cited one of *Gabriel Knight 3*'s puzzles as proof that the genre was dead and buried.

Even with these problems, *Blood Of The Sacred*, *Blood Of The Damned* gives the series an epic send-off. The story – which relates Gabriel's lineage to the real-world mystery of Rennes-le-Château, the Holy Grail, and the bloodline of Christ – is the most complex and controversial of the three. Contrary to Old Man Murray's musings, though much of the gameplay follows the typical adventure format, several innovations set it apart. For example, the game has a bunch of supporting characters whose actions take place in real time. This means that at any given moment, Gabriel and Grace may or may not see what the suspects are up to, depending on where the player chooses to explore or where the camera happens to be pointing. "I liked it a lot," Jensen says of the real-time structure, which has appeared in only a handful of other adventure games. "I'd do it again if the game was right. I don't know why it's not used more."

■■■ A SIGNIFICANT PORTION *Gabriel Knight 3* relates to 'Le Serpent Rouge', the actual enigma that guards the location of Rennes-le-Château's hidden treasure. Grace puzzles through it with help from SIDNEY, an in-game computer system that allows for 'online' research and evidence analysis. "I loved how mysterious the real riddle was," Jensen says. "It was not easy to twist it into a puzzle sequence, but I get a kick out of stuff like that. Designing a puzzle is a lot like solving a puzzle that way." Gabriel and Grace's relationship reaches new depths as well, with their close quarters in a cramped hotel room leading to the inevitable climax of three games' worth of pent-up sexual tension. Though the game ended with their relationship on the rocks, frustrating fans, Jensen has no regrets:

■ The influence of graphic novels on the creation of *Gabriel Knight* was paid homage in each game's packaging; all three titles came bundled with a short comic book that gave some context to the mystery Gabriel and Grace would have to solve.



IT WAS SIERRA'S LAST ADVENTURE GAME AND MANAGEMENT WASN'T REALLY INTO IT

"By the end of *GK3* it was already pretty much a given there would not be a *GK4*. I wouldn't have changed anything, even knowing it was the last. It was just the right story at that time."

Gabriel Knight has recently enjoyed a resurgence thanks to Good Old Games (GOG.com), and Jensen has repeatedly stated that she would like to continue the series. She even attempted to pitch a fourth game to Sierra's new management. They weren't interested. So she got to work on *Gray Matter*, a game with many similarities to *Gabriel Knight*, which is released in English this month after a number of years in development. "I think *Gabriel Knight* fans will find it a real 'Jane Jensen' game," she says of her new venture. "I hope so. It has some casual game influence, for sure. But I don't think it falls that far from the *GK* tree." And what does she imagine Gabriel and Grace have been up to all this time? Jensen says coyly, "I can't tell. There may someday be a sequel yet, and then that would ruin it."



■ Gabriel's appearance, attitude, and accent changed somewhat from game to game. "I liked Dean [Erickson] in the role – he was physically a lot like Gabriel," Jensen says of the actor who portrayed the Schattensjäger in *The Beast Within*. "But probably in terms of personality, my favourite was Tim Curry in *GK1*."