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EXPLOITS

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PENNYWISE

**PHANTASMAGORIA •
HANNIBAL • WEEZER'S TEAL ALBUM •
1984 • BAD HORROR MOVIES**



PHANTASMAGORIA – Revisiting Sierra Entertainment’s *Phantasmagoria* after 24 years is an exercise in cheese and posterity. As one of the earliest full motion videogames, it became a pillar of nightly entertainment at home, as I was allowed to play through it (on seven CD-ROMs!) with my dad. This was a bad idea for a ten-year-old; since this was an Adult Game, my dad would send me out of the room for certain cutscenes, including its infamous rape scene.

With its surreal architecture, arcane UI and what was then the groundbreaking realism of FMV, *Phantasmagoria* became a disjointed spectre of my childhood. Even with these tucked away as memories, playing it again as an adult was horrifying in ways I didn’t anticipate.

Adrienne Delaney is a novelist who moves into a cursed mansion – a strange, sprawling estate once owned by a sadistic magician with a Bluebeard-style habit of marrying women who kept dying. An evil spirit possesses Adrienne’s husband and she must keep her shit together to get out alive. While the plot is uninspired, writer Roberta Williams lined it with a surprising amount of feminist subtext for its time, presenting Adrienne as a resilient alternative to a popular male archetype at the time – the protagonist as novelist. Like Stephen King’s Jack Torrance (*The Shining*) and

Thad Beaumont (*The Dark Half*), these men become one with the horror in their environments, painting a romanticized picture of derangement and loss of control. Many critiques of *Phantasmagoria* deride its thinly-veiled cribbing of *The Shining*, in which Jack’s wife, Wendy, is terrorized by her husband. Unlike the women paired with these men, Adrienne has far more agency to escape the cyclical terror that permeates the house’s history, uncovering its secrets at her own pace.

Williams **once said** *Phantasmagoria* best represents her career as a game designer. It’s curious that the woman known for co-founding Sierra On-Line would choose arguably her campiest work. And with the benefit of hindsight, it’s hard not to read *Phantasmagoria* as an allegory for abuse. Perhaps the real horror is how well *Phantasmagoria* played into the hackneyed fantasies of a male audience, as Williams openly said that Adrienne needed to be “very empathetic to most people; most women would relate to her, and most men would want to protect her.” But even with its corny acting, dated graphics, and lacklustre narrative, *Phantasmagoria* managed to reveal something rare: a glimpse at the stress, isolation and torment of abusive cycles – telling a story that shouldn’t be told, by someone who shouldn’t be alive to share it.

– ALEXIS ONG