

# Review - Ecstatica (DOS, 1994)

You ever have one of those days? You're innocently riding your horse up in the mountains, you run out of water, go to the nearest town, and find yourself plagued by homicidal monsters.

Okay, I've never had a day like that either, but that doesn't mean I don't like Ecstatica, the new adventure game from Psygnosis. It's actually very refreshing to see those owl guys selling something of high quality that ISN'T Lemmings.

At first glance at the graphic style, you'll probably flash back to the Alone In The Dark games, but instead of being based on polygons, all the creatures in Ecstatica are built from ellipsoids. (If you own a Sega Genesis, perhaps you'll recall a recent 3D fighting game called Ballz based on the same principle.) Because of this, the game doesn't have the hard, angular feel that emphasizes the horror so well in Dark. The characters look almost humorous and cartoony, and you'd think that would be a problem with a game billed as a scare-you-out-of-your-socks horror title.

The problem is not with the graphics. The problem is with the Psygnosis marketing department. Andrew Spencer, the game's developer, knew exactly what he was doing with the graphics. While there are some very frightening elements to Ecstatica, the overall tone of the game is not horrific. There are lots of scenes that are not just humorous, but broadly funny, like a Marx Brothers movie. The combination of these elements makes for a truly unique product, something that will appeal to anyone looking for something different. Unfortunately, people in marketing have no idea what to do with a different product except lump it in with a more common genre. So, the box makes the game look like your basic gothic, but I'm telling you right now, it's a ruse. There is nothing normal about this game.

The player character must make his way (or her way, since the unnamed character can also be female) through the remains of the invaded town, track down the source of the curse, and try to wipe it out, saving the surviving population. Along the way, you'll encounter dragons, minotaurs, giant spiders and big ugly bears, not to mention werewolves that just won't die and trolls bearing a remarkable resemblance to Winnie the Pooh's friend Piglet. You'll talk with former crusaders, cowardly knights and cloistered monks, and you'll see lots of people skewered on spikes, hanged, and crucified upside down. You yourself may be hung from your feet, dragged into a gopher hole, or turned into various small animals. Heroism isn't a pretty job.

It's these more gruesome elements that caused Psygnosis to put a warning label on the box that the game "contains subject matter which may not be appropriate for audiences under 17." This was definitely a good thing, but some of the questionable subject matter is not about violence, but scatology. The bear that guards an important diary lets out a long, resonant fart when he is killed,

and at one point the player character checks that no one is around, and then takes a leak in the woods. At least, the male one does.

The warning is also appropriate for some rather odd tasks that are required of the player. I'm sure the stodgy fundamentalist world will be delighted to hear that in order to complete this game, you have to acquire a certain relic, and the only way to get it is to slaughter a monastery full of priests. Kind of makes your heart glow, doesn't it?

The game screen is never cluttered with any elements besides the playing field. While this has been a recent trend in the industry, I think Ecstatica takes it a bit too far. Most games will at least have some sort of a pop-up window to tell you what items you are carrying and how much health you have left. Here, you can only carry two items at a time, one in each hand, and the only way you can tell how close you are to death is how much you limp when you walk. There are no special control keys to perform activities like door opening or talking with other characters. And should there be any question that the designers might have just run out of potential keys, consider that the whole row of function keys are taken up by a twelve step gradation in character speed. This control setup is eccentric, to say the least.

On the whole this is a minor complaint. If you stick with the game, you will continue to get just a little farther along every time you play, enough to keep you interested and get you hooked. If the world were a just and fair place, Ecstatica would set not just graphic, but storytelling standards in the industry for years to come. I don't know if this will happen, but it couldn't hurt if you went out and bought this game. Right now.

[Play the demo for this game directly in your browser](#)

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