

THE MAKING OF

LES MANLEY IN: *LOST IN L.A.*™

A Conversation With Steve Cartwright And Sam Nelson

by Charlotte Taylor Skeel

In the summer of 1990, the world of entertainment software was introduced to Les Manley™. A naive yet forthright employee of a Manhattan television station, Les mustered up enough courage to embark on a Search for The King™, the world's greatest and most elusive musical entertainer.

Those of you with the *chutzpah* to help Les Manley complete his adventure know that he triumphed. Les actually found The King. He also won sole proprietorship of the television station from owners who once barely acknowledged his existence.

Now Les is about to take up a completely new adventure. Still living in New York City, he's been invited to Southern California by his old friend from *Search for The King*, Helmut Bean™. You may recall that Helmut is the World's Smallest Man. Once a freak act in a circus, he's now an ultra-famous Hollywood stunt double working on money-saving, miniaturized sets.

Tragically, before Les can get to the left coast, Helmut becomes the latest victim in a string of mysterious celebrity

disappearances. Armed only with charisma, technical training and his signature bow-tie, Les must travel to the nation's most talked-about community and find Helmut without falling victim to the temptations of the Southern California lifestyle.

Packed full of special effects, real actors and models, and driven by a completely new interface, *Lost in L.A.* promises to amuse and challenge adventurers for hours. According to Steve Cartwright, who continues his role as designer at the helm of the largest development team ever assembled on a single project at Accolade, "*Lost in L.A.* is the closest we've come to making a movie. We've managed to poke fun at the whole L.A. lifestyle, from lifeguards and beach bunnies to celebrities and talent agents."



Sam Nelson, producer of "Lost in L.A."



Steve Cartwright, designer of "Lost in L.A."

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Real People

Indeed, it's the cast of characters that ultimately sets *Lost in L.A.* apart. All major characters in the game are played by real people. According to Sam Nelson, senior producer on the project, sketches were drawn and personality profiles were created for each character. Then professional actors and models were painstakingly auditioned and cast for their parts.

"We went to talent agencies and looked hard for people whose facial and physical expressions could capture the personalities of our characters," said Nelson, who points in particular to photographs of Tracy Kibort and Allyson Beaulieu, the two models cast to play the parts of LaFonda Turner™ and Maladonna™. "Of course, we also looked for sex appeal. Some of our cast have appeared in *Playboy*®, or have held such titles as Miss Legs Hawaii, Miss Body Beautiful International and Miss Maui Sun."

Ironically, the discovery of the Les Manley character turned out to be as quirky as Les himself. An Accolade employee spotted Johnny Orason in a bar in Northern California. Noticing Orason's uncanny resemblance to the illustration of Les Manley on the package of *Search for The King*, the employee convinced him to audition for the part. Orason, a UPS delivery man and a baseball umpire, never dreamed he'd be wrestling with two gorgeous oiled women in a graphic adventure. "I've done things that were less fun," he admits.

Even staring at gorgeous bikini-clad bodies all day becomes a business after awhile. "Not that we hated it, but to videotape all the models took from three to four months," said Nelson. "Sometimes it would take all day just to get one shot." The videotaping included studio sessions as well as several on-location shoots. For

Cartwright, Nelson, and the rest of the development team, it felt very much like producing a movie.

"More than 25 actors as well as producers, programmers, a professional screenwriter, matte artists, musicians, cameramen, and lighting technicians worked on this project," said Nelson. "It's certainly the most ambitious project we've engaged in here at Accolade."



A lighting technician gives a final flip to Maladonna's (Allyson Beaulieu's) ponytail for a studio session.



Producer Sam Nelson helps direct the filming of characters "Cristy & Misty" for the Venice Beach sequence. Each live shoot had to be meticulously staged to match background paintings.



One of the project's graphic artists, Matt Davison, gives a weapons lesson to *Lost in L.A.*'s art director Justin Chin, who donned special make-up for his role.



Both painstaking auditions and quirky luck led the makers of *Lost in L.A.* to (from left) Tracy Kibort, Johnny Orason and Allyson Beaulieu, who play characters LaFonda Turner, Les Manley and Maladonna, respectively.

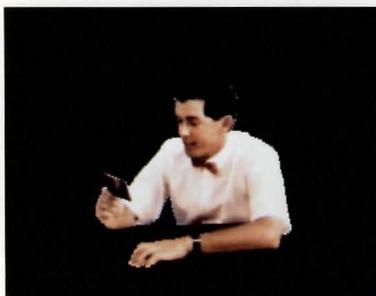
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Is It Real...Or Illusion?

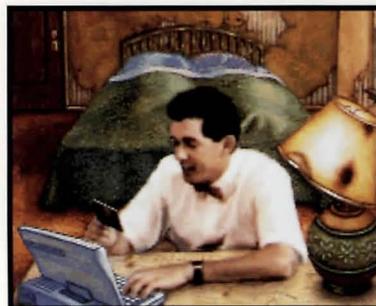
The decision to use real people rather than illustrated characters in the game was an easy choice. Cartwright contends consumers tend to prefer digitized photos over illustrated characters. "We found we could take a beautifully rendered, very detailed illustration and put it next to a digitized photograph. More often than not people will select the digitized



Creating screens for *Lost in L.A.* was a three-step process. First, an artist handpainted a background, using oils on canvas.



Next, live actors were shot in 8mm videotape, then individual frames digitized. Here, Les (Johnny Orason) is filmed "at the computer."



Finally, the two images were integrated by Accolade artists to create a seamless marriage of art and life.

photo, even if it's fuzzy and dark. The photo is more realistic, more convincing. People want realism in their games."

But the team also decided that "fuzzy and dark" photo digitization would not be acceptable for *Lost in L.A.* After testing several alternatives, Justin Chin, Accolade's art director on the project, decided to shoot the actors using

8mm videotape. Chin then devised an exclusive method for integrating digitized frames of video with matte paintings handpainted in oils.

"Justin's activities on this project were more akin to a cinematographer," says Cartwright. "The results are spectacular. The digitization is clear and detailed, and it's very difficult, if not impossible, to tell where the live video ends and the illustrations begin."

The Challenge Is In The Game, Not In The Interface

Even with great graphics, any designer knows you don't have a great game without a gripping storyline and tireless gameplay. "We've worked very hard to create a story that draws the player into the game," stressed Cartwright. With a writing team that included a published author of fiction and a screenwriter, the team made certain that every move Les Manley makes has some relation to the central storyline. "None of the puzzles are illogical, none of the clues are arbitrary," explained Cartwright.

With lessons learned from the original user interface used in *Search for The King*, and from consumer feedback about other graphic adventures on the market, an entirely new, simple point-and-click interface was developed. "You select anything on screen,

"It's very difficult, if not impossible, to tell where the live video ends and the illustrations begin."



"Lost in L.A.'s" new point & click interface alleviates frustration without sacrificing richness of gameplay.

and the computer will give you choices appropriate to that object," says Cartwright. Neither the richness nor challenge of the game is sacrificed in any way. "The game lets the player select from a number of obvious choices via text windows, but it will not plot your strategy, and it will not make your decisions for you. What it *does* do is alleviate the frustration of knowing what to do, but not knowing how to communicate it."

The Start Of Something Big

The making of *Lost in L.A.* has resulted in a beautifully “photographed” game and a gripping piece of entertainment for fans of graphic adventures. But even more so, it signals the onset of a trend that is just now beginning to make its way into computer game studios. As personal computers become more powerful, game manufacturers are given the capability to create more sophisticated games. And as computer gamers become more sophisticated, they in turn, want games that offer more and better everything.

Though more is better, it means it takes more people and more singular expertise in key areas. “The days of the one-person game are over, and these hugely collaborative efforts, as we have experienced with *Lost in L.A.*, are resulting in computer games like we’ve never seen before,” concluded Cartwright. “The future of computer games is in enormous quantities of realistic graphics, sounds and music ultimately resulting in much more cinematic experiences. As computer games get bigger, their credits will begin to resemble the credits for a motion picture.”

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