

The computer game industry is not exactly brimming over with product based on Celtic mythology, but ten years ago, there was a darn good one called Tir Na Nog. This is probably not going to ring a bell with American readers, because it was only available for the Spectrum computer. Nevertheless, even with such a limited market, the game moved over 35,000 units. Heck, in 1985, that was a smash. Fortunately for those of us who weren't in the right place at the right time to appreciate this game, Psygnosis is working on an updated version.

The tale begins eons ago with The Great Enemy preparing himself to go off into the world and make everybody perfectly miserable. Fortunately, the Sidhe (also known as the faerie folk) were prepared, and had forged the powerful Seal of Calum. This amulet was strong enough to keep The Great Enemy imprisoned, and the Sidhe were smart enough to keep a constant guard over the Seal. Millennia of peace and justice followed. Life was good. Then one of the last servants of The Enemy, with his last ounce of strength, made his way to the Seal. As the guard attacked the servant, he accidentally fractured the Seal himself. Oops. This, of course, I mean, of course, released the Great Enemy, creating the rather nasty world of the Dark Ages.

Into this nasty world is born our hero, Cuchulainn (pronounced koo-KUH-len). Always fascinated by myths and legends, he learned that if anyone took up arms on certain days, they would be a Hero forever after, even though they would also be condemned to a saddened and short life. Well, when Cuchullain learned of one of these days, he went for the gusto, and sure enough, he lived a pretty miserable life thereafter, left a beautiful corpse, and everyone regarded him as a great Hero.

After his death, Cuchullain walked the Earth as a shade, hearing all the people praising his name, but somehow, he just wasn't satisfied. What he needed was one more quest. So, he traveled to the Otherworld known as Tir Na Nog, where the Sidhe live, to try and rejoin the pieces of the Seal of Calum, thus returning The Great Enemy to his prison, and making the world a happier place once again. Now, of course, this particular quest has been tried before, but it was generally agreed that no mortal could accomplish it. Cuchullain figured that, being dead, he had a better shot at it.

While this may sound like a very straightforward legend-based game, the mythology only serves as a skeleton for what is, in fact, a very funny story. The writers are definitely influenced by authors like Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams. For example, here is a descriptive segment from the manual:

Lon Liath:

To illustrate the eccentric nature of this decaying northern village, I can do no better than to quote from the minutes of the Village Council:

1. The Minutes of the Last Meeting were red; to distinguish, these shall be writ in a blue crayon;
2. In the matter of Tog versus Tog, second cousins, related by carnage on their mother's side, it is adjudged that they shall share the lady and sheep in dispute;
3. The Annual fair will take place on the third day of each month, as usual. However, there will no longer be a Bore Roast, as we are running out of council members;
4. We have today banished Clive the Clever, who has but recently invented a "Weel". It may well change our lives for ever - but if there's one thing we can't abide, it's a smartass.
5. Finally, our next talk at Village Institute will be given by Amm the Time-Traveller. Note is made that, owing to his other commitments, he will be arriving last week.

Add to this the fact that Cuchullain is described as having an irreverent sense of humor, being unable to take his surroundings seriously, and it appears that the goings on within this otherwise straightforward adventure may well have a very silly edge.

Gameplay is carefully divided between hand-to-hand combat and puzzle solving, and there's quite a range of both. In his Otherworldly travels, Cuchullain will encounter any number of strange beasts. Some are able to hold discussions, but some you're just going to have to beat up. As for the puzzles, there are riddles, ciphers, spells and bad puns designed to keep the most hardened gamer occupied for hours.

Maybe you haven't noticed, but computer graphic technology has improved a smidgen over the past decade. The original Tir Na Nog featured unusually large sprites with as much detail as was possible at the time, which isn't saying much. This new version also features large characters, more than four times larger than the sprites in most other adventure games. The graphics are in SVGA mode and are handpainted for an astonishingly photorealistic effect.

The interface has also been improved from the original, and is now the standard point-and click variety. (Did computers even have mice in the mid-80's? I can't remember.) Tir Na Nog also benefits from the greatly expanded memory capacity of today's computers and the ever-present CD-ROM, which adds up to an enormous amount of terrain for the player to explore.

Cuchulainn will begin his journey through Tir Na Nog this August, and will make his way toward a final confrontation with The Great Enemy. If he succeeds, he will receive a hero's welcome. If he fails, his fate is in the hands of the Gods.