

BY MARTY MULROONEY | 12/10/2012 · 12:50 PM

GAME REVIEW – The Last Express (iPhone)

By Marty Mulrooney



The Last Express is an award-winning adventure game designed by Jordan Mechner, who is best known as the creator of the *Prince of Persia* franchise. Originally released on PC in 1997, the game is now being made available on iOS devices for the very first time thanks to DotEmu, a Paris-based developer and publisher that specialises in modern releases of retro titles. In *The Last Express*, the player takes control of American doctor and fugitive from the law Robert Cath, who boards the Orient Express after receiving an urgent telegram from his best friend Tyler Whitney. When he finds Tyler dead in his compartment, Cath finds himself embroiled in a plot equal parts conspiracy, politics, romance and murder.

The year is 1914 and although nobody yet knows it, it's mere days before the outbreak of World War 1. Robert Cath is late and therefore has to board the Orient Express in a rather unorthodox fashion – from the back of a speeding motorcycle. Once Cath is on board, the game begins immediately. The player is given very little direction and common sense must prevail. A telegram is read – you're here to meet your friend Tyler Witney. A passenger list is stolen – Tyler is in Compartment 1. You head to the Rear Sleeping Car and enter Compartment 1... only to discover Tyler dead upon the floor.

You don't have a ticket and you have to think fast – you're a fugitive and if Tyler is discovered, nobody will believe your story... so you throw his body out of the window (or perhaps you simply hide it somewhere in the compartment). Now your jacket is covered in blood – so that goes out the window too. You put on Tyler's jacket and before long people are mistaking you for him. You don't bother to correct them. So begins The Last Express, an adventure game that is truly like no other.



What follows is a gripping mystery that unravels via a heightened form of real-time. There is a constantly tickling clock that accompanies the train's final journey from Paris to Constantinople (modern Istanbul), starting at 7:14 pm on the 24th July 1914, and ending at 7:30 pm on the 27th July (if Cath manages to survive until the very end of the game). During this time, the player can move freely about the train and do as they wish, within reason. There are certain areas of the train that are off-limits of course – the baggage compartment, other passenger's compartments, the roofs of the carriages – yet they too can be accessed when certain circumstances are met.

There are 30 characters on board The Orient Express along with Cath and each character has their own agenda. For example, there are Serbian freedom fighters, a German arms dealer named August Schmidt who has apparently organised an arms deal with Tyler Whitney, a beautiful Austrian concert violinist named Anna Wolff, a British government agent, and a mysterious art collector named Prince Kronos who travels everywhere with his bodyguard Kahina and has his own private car at the rear end of the train. Not all characters speak English, but Cath is a man of the world – if someone speaks in a language he

understands, subtitles will display at the bottom of the screen to let you know what is being said.



The Last Express is a first-person adventure game, with cutscenes shown from a third-person perspective. There are some puzzles – and they're difficult – but the majority of the game is simply about being in the right place at the right time. Conversations can be listened to. Rooms can be broken into and explored. It isn't about the destination – it's all about the journey. Cath is a wonderful protagonist, a social outcast that is charming with the women, authoritative with the men and can throw a mean right hook. There are several fights throughout the game and they all utilise an basic form of the quick time event sequence. Failure isn't a problem – the game features a rewind ability that allows the player to go as far back in time as they wish. Exploration and risk-taking are encouraged and no two playthroughs will ever be the same – a godsend in a game where every single NPC (non-player character) goes about their business regardless of the player.

The premise of The Last Express is wonderful and even 15 years after release the game's huge scope is impressive. Yet what really stands out is the artistry and technology powering the game. The graphics were

achieved using 'rotoscoping', a process that involved filming (or photographing) live actors and then tracing over the footage frame by frame via computer to create black-and-white line drawings of the frames, which were then coloured in by hand. The result was an illustrated 'art nouveau' style that is often far more convincing than modern-day efforts to capture actors' performances in video games, such as Rockstar Games' hit-and-miss 'MotionScan' technology. The majority of the game only shows a few frames at a time – no doubt a time and money-saving measure – but occasionally an animation is rendered fully and it looks stunning. An example is when approaching passengers in the narrow corridors of the train – they make eye contact, utter apologies under their breath and move over to one side to let you pass. These are only small details but they make a massive difference to the believability and realism of the world.



The iOS port of the game by DotEmu features a number of improvements/additions to the original 1997 PC release. Hotspots are displayed permanently (although this feature can be turned off) and a hint system has been added that will give increasingly more obvious clues the more it is used. This review is specifically for the iPhone version of the game, which is played in portrait mode. The narrow corridors of the train suit

this perspective perfectly and wider views can simply be scrolled across with the swipe of a finger.

The graphics look much sharper on a small screen and the audio is clear throughout, with Elia Cmiral's violin-heavy soundtrack remaining a highlight. DotEmu kindly provided AMO with a review copy of the PC version for comparison's sake. The iPhone version is better than or at least equal to the original release in almost every way but one – the controls. Sadly, the arrow based control scheme isn't always as responsive as it should be on the iPhone. It can become infuriating when you get turned around and start heading towards the wrong end of the train. The PC version isn't perfect either when it comes to the controls, but simple mouse-based navigation still beats unreliable touchscreen-based navigation any day of the week.



The Last Express remains a stunning achievement in interactive entertainment 15 years after release. It isn't the perfect adventure game – but it never was. This game is a risky experiment that gets far more right than it does wrong. It's a wonderfully acted adventure that features one of the best stories ever told within the genre. It's a true shame that it was well-received critically but struggled to find an audience in 1997. In

2012, gamers can finally experience a cult-classic in the palm of their hand wherever they are, be it at home, in a car, on a boat... or on board a train. The Last Express works surprisingly well when experienced in smaller doses. Don't let the age of this game or the quirky controls put you off too much – this is a forgotten classic that deserves to be rediscovered.

8.5 OUT OF 10

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