# [Playing Detective: Black Dahlia and Ripper](#)

written by Chris Holly | March 14, 2015



*Black Dahlia* and *Ripper*
Take-Two Interactive, 1998 and 1996
No Longer in Print

**The Facts of the Case:**

As alluded to in previous installations, I have a soft spot for those derided **full motion video** (FMV) PC games from the '90s. In fact, when considering these two games—*Black Dahlia* and *Ripper*, both from Take-Two Interactive—I realized that "soft spot" may be too gentle a term. **"Stockholm Syndrome"** may be more appropriate. These point-and-click adventure games occupied a different space than their better-known brethren from the likes of Sierra and LucasArts; rather than confuse you with **impenetrable inventory puzzles** or invite you to explore hilarious conversation branches, the Take-Two games followed more in the path of puzzle-centric adventures like *Myst* or *The 7th Guest* while adding a "cinematic" approach via FMV.

(**Side Note:** And by "cinematic," I mean "just a shade below summer stock theater tryouts-level acting." I'm not kidding, folks; generally speaking, this stuff is dire.)

And yet! Both games sit in permanent residence on my hard drive, and any time I get a new machine, one of the tasks I look forward to most is following the laborious instructions to install and configure these **8-discs-apiece** (!) 20-year-old headaches. Possibly because I'm insane. But! Are they good detective games? Oh my, yes, for the right kind of person, these games do a lot right. Grab a walkthrough and let's find out!

**The Devil and a Serial Killer Are in the Details**

In the game *Ripper* (a title that will, incidentally, make Googling "Ripper CD-ROM game" in an attempt to find a used copy about a **bazillion times more difficult** than it should be), you play Jake Quinlan, a reporter for a New York paper who's been receiving letters from a serial killer going by the name of the **Ripper**. Your erstwhile colleague/friend with benefits quickly becomes the next victim, and so NOW IT GETS PERSONAL and you embark on a personal quest to bring the madman/woman to justice. Oh, and the **year is 2040**, and cyberspace is HILARIOUS.

So you'll point and click your way between ~~too many freaking disc swaps~~ various **Future New York** locations, like the Metacognitive Center (which is a

**fancy name** for a brain hospital OF THE FUTURE), or a Future New York police station (bizarrely architected like the **tractor beam walkway** of the Death Star), or the newsroom at the Virtual Herald (ugh). Some times (too many times, frankly), you'll visit various "Virtual Wells," which today we would call websites.

(**Side Note:** Remember, kids, this was the mid-'90s. Prepending the word "Virtual" to anything was a blazing neon sign that said LOOKIT CYBERSPACE-Y THINGS AND ALSO COOLNESS. Hence, in the game we get things like the Virtual Herald, the New York Public Library Virtual Information Desk, and the Virtual Cafe.)

Eventually, you'll chase down the killer in a **Virtual Victorian London**, and in a nice nod to replayability (which was **virtually nil** in most other adventure games), each time you started a new game of *Ripper*, the **identity of the killer was changed** to be someone different than the last game. (It is always one of the same four people, but still!)

At no time will you be wanting for a soundtrack, though; a minimalist, vaguely futuristic background score accompanies you everywhere you go, and after a while, it begins to **worm its way into your subconscious** (mainly because it restarts every time you visit a new location).

And for all its faults (which we'll get to shortly), this is **by far what *Ripper* does best**, even with mid-'90s graphics: it creates an **atmosphere**. Not an open world by any means, but the environments—as crazily conceptualized and ridiculously dressed as they are—are insanely realized with world-building details, and that spooky, **isolating** music that drifts along with you every time you click somewhere becomes ominous for no good reason.

For example, the MetaCog is a three-story future brain hospital but runs on an old-timey elevator, is in a dilapidated building that looks like an insane asylum, and has a ton of space in which to move around that gets you absolutely **nowhere**. But the sound effects like the **clanging of the elevator doors** and a monkey's whimper (don't ask) stand out all the more because the place is so *empty*. Your newsroom? It's a dark gray room with a bunch of desks with **nobody ever at them**, while your editor sits in his glass office alone.

The general mood of the piece is **isolating and paranoid**, and sure, the plot helps foster that kind of feeling, but since almost every location is either empty or sparsely populated (only people you can actually **talk** to are in the game, and generally only **one** of those per location), there's a real sense of loneliness and creepiness that grows on you. The whole game world feels **vaguely post-apocalyptic**, like there just **aren't enough people left to go around**—and when there's a serial killer eliminating the ones who are still around, it heightens the sense of urgency.

It doesn't have the modern-day worldbuilding "tools" like audio logs to collect, manuscripts to read, or stuff like that in abundance—you'll find the **occasional police report**, bank records, or phone messages, but that's about it for documentation—but it lets things drop in the **details**, like an offhand remark about how **police work for bounties**, or a mention of the war that put a

man named Soap (!) in his wheelchair. It's nothing necessarily coherent—or even vaguely important, frankly—but it provides just enough supporting details about a future world that lets you **fill in the blanks with your own imagination**. And since the plot-within-a-plot is about building virtual worlds, it's almost fair to say that *Ripper* borders on being a hell of a lot smarter than it lets on.

I wouldn't want to live in the world of *Ripper*, but I definitely would like to play more games there. As long as we place a moratorium on the word "virtual."

**The Unusual Suspects**

This being FMV, in conversations with the game's characters, you'll deal primarily with a cast of real **people playing dress-up**, and oh my God, **wait** until you see this murderer's row of talent that *Ripper* manages to not entirely kill the careers of:



- Oscar-winning actor **Christopher Walken** as a possibly-murderous, definitely-corrupt police detective. I don't know if Walken just needed a boat payment or something, but every single scene he's in is sheer **play-it-to-the-rafters scene-chewing insanity**, and give the man credit—he commits fully to the bit. He chomps cigars. He hikes up his pants. He literally cuts a gash in his own forehead with a Bowie knife to frame a suspect. It. Is. Fantastic.
- Oscar-nominated actor **Paul Giamatti** as a not-technically-murderous, definitely-clown-haired brain doctor who, and I am not making this up, is named **Bud Cable**. He's sort of the "progress meter" of the game, giving updates on the state of your girlfriend in a coma (sadly, not once does he say, "I know, I know, it's serious").
- Oscar-nominated actor **Burgess Meredith** as a possibly-murdered, definitely-unaware-of-his-surroundings cranky old cybercoot (!) who plays twins (!) with a goat beard (!) and lives in a house **full of leftover puzzles from *The 7th Guest***. Look, the man played Mickey in *Rocky*, so by this point in his career, he'd had the "cranky old eccentric" role down pat, if not the "selective about choosing gigs" role.
- My heart-winning actress **Karen Allen** as possibly-murderous, definitely-attractive neurologist. **Freaking *Marion Ravenwood* is in this**, and what's more, she manages to play it straight and sincere the whole way through. Apparently nobody told her that this was a "game" and clearly beneath her considerable talents, because she's actually…acting! It's weird! But great! What I'm saying is that I might love Karen Allen.

Oh, I'm sorry, did I forget to mention that acting legends **Ossie Davis** and Allen's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* co-star **John Rhys-Davies** are also in this as your editor and a Virtual(™) Mobster (!), respectively? Shame on me! Oh, you want more? You're *killing* me here! Fine, fine, allow me to sweeten the pot

with:

- **Jimmie "J.J." Walker** as possibly-Dyn-O-Mite, definitely miscast-to-hilarious-extremes cybersecurity specialist (!) named Soap (!) Beatty. All you need to know about his character is that he's in a wheelchair and at one point he bugs his eyes out and he's **exactly what you'd expect to get** if you cast Jimmie Walker as a futuristic handicapped cybersecurity specialist.

I ask you: could anyone **ask** for a better bowl of talent soup to click through an overheated C-movie sci-fi potboiler with? I say no; in fact, I say, *"Give me seconds, this soup is delicious."*

**Killing Time (and Hobos) in Cleveland**

*Black Dahlia*, released a couple of years after *Ripper*, is cut from much of the same cloth; it's got your first-person, point-and-click scheme, it's much more heavily based around puzzles and conversation than inventory, and it's **so enamored of the shade of Foreboding** that *Ripper* chose to paint its house with that it borrowed all the swatches and used them as drapes, tablecloths, and bedsheets.

(**Side Note:** I just read that last paragraph again. I am so, so sorry.)

The difference here, of course, is the story—here it's **1941**, the U.S. is in World War II, and you're Jim Pearson, a **cockeyed optimist** who gets mixed up in the high-stakes game of world diplomacy and international intrigue. Jim's a wet-behind-the ears rookie in the Cleveland office of the COI, an agency that's vaguely like the FBI but **totally not** the FBI.

You start investigating a run-of-the-mill labor agitation complaint, which quickly turns into a **completely ridiculous B-movie potboiler** involving Nazi spies, an ancient Teutonic brotherhood of knights, the **Cleveland Torso Killer**, Eliot Ness, **Odin** (!), and the tried-and-true dramatic element of **interagency politics**! And that's just the first half of the game—at about the halfway point, you'll go on a dream quest (!), after which the action shifts to Los Angeles and, just because they haven't stuffed **enough** nonsense into the plot, the real-life Black Dahlia murder is introduced as an element.

I guess what I'm saying is this game is *insane*.



But here's the thing: it's not insane in the "just-hop-on-for-the-ride-and-enjoy-the-craziness" kind of way, it's insane in the "**the-people-responsible-for-this-very-probably-aren't-quite-right-in-the-head**" kind of way. Because even though it's arguably the same fundamental game as *Ripper*, it's got a different rhythm to it, one that stops and starts and stops then stops some more, then thinks about starting again, then **sits there contemplating the nature of starting and stopping**, all the while throwing obtuse puzzles, arcane references, hyper-detailed text, long stretches of monologues, and a

sprawling cast of characters that **still seems like something got left out somewhere**. I don't know how they did it, but Take-Two managed to make an 8-disc game feel like something **Proust's editor** might have looked at and said, *"Eh, you should probably trim it down by about a third."*

However, what keeps me replaying this tainted gem of a game every couple of years is the same thing that *Ripper* excelled at: the atmosphere. *Black Dahlia* **ups the ante on atmosphere in every way**, from the **haunting cello piece** that serves as background music, to the grainy 1930s newsreel footage that plays when you travel to a location, to the **radio news broadcast** that gives the latest on the war in Europe as you enter a dingy working-class dive bar and make your way to the back of the bar and use the payphone, upon which has been scratched vulgarities, phone numbers, and other ephemera.

It's these kind of location details that plunge me into the world, and even if some are cliched, none of them ever feel **less than lived-in**, which is what sets *BD* apart from *Ripper*. Whereas *Ripper* imparts its dread via a sense of isolation and loneliness, *BD* takes the opposite tack, arraying **a more populous world** of hidden agendas, sinister motives and mysterious machinations against you so that you're not so much alone as you are **outnumbered**. It's a fine distinction but an important one.

Between the music, the production values (the graphics and FMV are of higher quality here than in *Ripper*, mainly because I'm guessing **1940s chic was a lot easier to dress and set than 2040s chic**), and the reliance on several true-crime elements from history, *Black Dahlia* manages to create another world of macabre mystery and murder and puts you squarely in the center of it all.


**There Are No Small Parts, Just Large Mortgages**

*Black Dahlia*, however, doesn't have quite the star power that *Ripper* did, though the two biggest names here were arguably bigger at the time than anyone who appeared in *Ripper*.



Leading off here is none other than **Dennis Hopper**, who by the time the 90s rolled around was starring in darn near every single thing they offered him and was a veteran of the FMV craze (having previously featured in Take-Two's *Hell: A Cyberpunk Thriller*, which is **exactly as terrible** as you'd think it is with a name like that).

Unfortunately, Hopper is stuck with the thankless role of "crazy ex-agent" and is confined to **monologuing from a wheelchair in a nursing home** in his scenes, and it's pretty obvious he has no idea what any of his lines mean and furthermore couldn't care less. He's supposed to be racked with **madness in the Lovecraftian mold** of someone who's touched the abyss and is the worse off for it, but somewhere along the way to "haunted" he **broke down squarely** in the middle of "disinterested."

Faring somewhat better is **Teri Garr**, who, although still making it patently

obvious that she's reading her lines off a **cue card just behind the camera**, at least tries to pretend she's vaguely aware of her surroundings. Unfortunately, in a game saddled with ludicrous roles, she's got the most ludicrous of all of them, a **Cleveland psychic** who spouts boring nonsense about avatars and auras and is further marred by being tied to some of the worst parts of the game.

In another reversal from *Ripper*, it's the **off-brand actors who do the best work** here: **Darren Eliker** plays the main character Jim, and he sells it the entire time, convincingly making the transformation from by-the-book innocent to world-weary vet, even when it's clear that the people he's sharing scenes with aren't nearly as involved or talented. (And thank God he does, because as the protagonist, he's literally in every scene in what is a very long game.)

Other supporting players similarly rise to the challenge: **David Whalen** as frenemy FBI Agent Winslow, **Dan Frezza** as Pearson's COI boss Sullivan, and **Michael Bernosky** as Cleveland detective Merylo all turn in good character work that's a cut above the usual FMV shenanigans, and their efforts in no small part contribute to the immersiveness of the world of *Black Dahlia*.


**Something This Brutal Is Clearly the Work of a Madman**

By now you might be asking yourself exactly why you don't hear *Ripper* or *Black Dahlia* on the tongues of every adventure game fan everywhere, or why there hasn't been a Kickstarter to back a remaster or, somebody **catch** me because I'm fainting, a sequel to either.

And by and large, it's because of one **huge, glaring problem** with both of these games, which is that if you're going to make a puzzle-heavy adventure game, the puzzles had better not suck. And unfortunately, a lot of the puzzles—in both games—suck. Hard.

*Black Dahlia* is by far the worst offender here, with puzzles so obtuse and maddening that even **I won't play it without cheat codes** these days. For example, one puzzle early on presents you with a miniature log cabin, various parts of which move in various ways, sliding, opening, retracting, and so forth. Of course, to solve the puzzle, you need to perform about seventeen various steps in a certain sequence; one wrong move, and the whole thing **resets back to the beginning**. Is there any clue, any hint, any in-game pointer as to what the correct sequence is? No, friend, there is not.

And while this kind of puzzle—the kind that makes you actually keep notes, write down trial-and-error solutions, recognize arcane mathematical patterns and decipher bizarro-world creator intent—may certainly **present a tougher challenge** than your standard inventory-based puzzles, it's not much fun. In fact, a lot of these puzzles are **downright unfair**, and what's even worse is that the story often stops dead in its tracks until you've figured it out, a design element that I don't miss at all.

But *Black Dahlia* is absolutely lousy with them, they're strewn everywhere, and half the time, even manipulating the puzzle itself is an **exercise in tedium**, with the mouse pointer (especially on today's machines) proving the biggest obstacle of all.

*Ripper* is slightly less frustrating in terms of quantity of these kinds of puzzles but has perhaps the **worst sequence in either game**—an extended bit in a Virtual(™) (of course) Shooting Gallery, where godawful hellish carnival music plays as you're forced into suddenly playing an agonizingly slow-moving, **muddily rendered rail shooter** (!) until you beat a certain score; failure to do so gets you the same annoying FMV taunt every time before dumping you right back into the sequence from the beginning, where you WILL complete it if you want to do anything else in the game, period. It is the **devil's** work. On the plus side, there are fewer "I-will-have-to-spend-the-next-six-days-working-out-solutions-by-trial-and-error"-type puzzles in *Ripper* (though it does have its share), but it makes up for it with more pattern-recognition-type obstacles.

Which is not to say there aren't a few **brilliant** puzzles in each game, because there are; when they're on, they're on, and they require lateral thinking, synthesis of information from several different places, and make you feel like a **goddamned Stephen Hawking** when you solve one. It's also nice that you don't have to sit there [combining syrup packets with cat fur to make fake moustaches](), as inventory puzzles for the most part are nonexistent in both games.

But overall, the puzzles do more to **interrupt the pacing and annoy the user** than they do to enhance the games or story, and given the sheer quantity of them, it's a huge strike against both if you're not already enamored with the medium or the atmosphere of either.

**Justice Is a Dish Best Served on Older Computers**

Both *Ripper* and *Black Dahlia* are artifacts of their times: the mechanical puzzle-centric nature of both game designs were made for people who had more hours in the day to spend puzzling over **abstract slider boxes**, the FMV was a lot more exciting in the pre-YouTube era when "real people moving on the computer screen" was a technological breakthrough rather than a **viable advertising channel**, and a cinematic experience in gaming was a **worthy goal** rather than a hackneyed buzzphrase used in marketing whatever brown-paletted cover-based shooter we're killing aliens in this week.

I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a great deal of **nostalgia** playing a part in my affection for these two; as I get older, I'd like to be back in a place in my life where I had hours to bang my head against these puzzles or experience the plot revelations for the first time again. More than that, though, these games made me **start to think about the way** that gaming and its technology can be used to tell stories, even if the stories here are on rails for the most part and the "game" bits are almost wholly disconnected from the story bits.

Where they may have failed as games, they succeeded in **conveying a mood** and sense of place and time, which are every bit as important—in some cases moreso—as the pointing and the clicking.



And although neither game is easy to get running on modern machines—you'll need to tinker with your OS compatibility settings and almost certainly need DOSBOX or Daemon tools, and **even then it's not a sure bet**—I'd recommend them to anyone who's never experienced them. Don't be ashamed to **dial up a walkthough or two** if you're not grokking a puzzle after the first twenty minutes or so; most of the time, the payoff isn't worth the effort, unless it's a mechanic or concept you genuinely want to puzzle out.

So by that standard, I'd give *Ripper* a solid **4 Virtual(™) top hats out of 5**, with the extra hat being given solely for the better FMV acting and commitment to the Virtual(™) bit. *Black Dahlia* gets **2 ½ unsolved murders out of 5**, with too many of those hair-pullers to edge this one up to 3.  While neither game really has you do any "detecting" outside of an occasional cryptography puzzle, they nevertheless manage to pull off making me **feel like I'm in a detective *story*** better than a lot of more modern efforts to do the same. A pair of games that, if not gold standards of either the adventure or detective genre, are a fascinating and worthwhile look into what was ultimately an evolutionary dead end in both gaming genres.

**Where To Get It:** Used gaming stores or Ebay are pretty much your only options at this point, and cheap copies of both (like, less than five bucks) pop up regularly.