Reviews: Mindscape Game

James Chambers

From father to son...

Knightmare is the true underdog of the Dungeon Master family tree. Since its creation at the height of the Amiga 500's popularity, I have found only one favourable review of it since. Even the understanding folks on a popular web site devoted to its ancient precursor have a hard time liking it.

The problem cannot be with the game's graphics. Knightmare is a veritable feast for the eyes. Not since the eerie dungeons in Ishar: The Legend of Fortress have I been so effectively excited, frightened, and awed at the same time. Knightmare is a shock to the system, from its blood-stained dungeon corridors, to its grimacing evil elves, Knightmare is a knockout of a game.

I suppose the problem comes in when fans of Dungeon Master try to translate Knightmare as another Dungeon Master. While this ancient forefather began the tradition, Knightmare is a game that stretches the genre. Knightmare seeks to redefine the idea of the dungeon crawl by adding layers of dark atmospherics based upon the engine of fairy tale types. This combined with a fevered hack and slash approach makes for one challenging game.

"All ye who enter here..."

As the player boots up Knightmare for the first time, fond memories of Dungeon Master float about like heather upon the wind. However, these memories quickly fade as the game screen loads up. In the labour to integrate mythic atmosphere with a twinge of the present, the player is re-introduced to an old construct of the theatre, namely the simple use of curtains. Curtains are the simplest artefacts of creative strivings...

It is the curtain at the opera that separates the mythic stories of Wagner from the hum-drum mediocrities of the world; when the curtain rises, all disbelief sinks to submission, and the viewer becomes a part of the drama. As the player clicks the mouse and the curtain draws aside, one is drawn completely into a world different from Dungeon Master's and our own. I cannot think of a better cue, a better way in which to invite the player into the drama of the game; however, as we submit to the game world, we must remember that Captive is the blood that Knightmare thrives upon. This one constructive difference is the making of the game, and the flavour of its soul.

Though it is true that Knightmare (and Captive) owes its physical appearance to Dungeon Master, it is the soul of the game that differs vastly. Knightmare's approach was cut from the archetypal cloth of old folk tales. This cloth is wonderfully stitched through with the modern spirit of dry humour and the odd collapse of historical time into that of a believable `once upon a time' so popular in fantasy stories of our day.

It is here that the differences between Dungeon Master and Crowther's brainchild are most obvious. Monsters are a good example. Knightmare's induction of creature types are smooth lifts from the bestiaries of our oral fairy tale cultures. Thus, the old problem of covering the question "Hey, what's a wasp doing down here in the dungeon without a nest?" is answered quietly, so quietly that the question never occurs.

Dungeon Master occasionally suffered from its illogical usage of beasties in unlikely dungeon areas. This small interruption between interface and player causes for a small forgetting of the game's driving plot. However, in fairness, Dungeon Master obviously grew from the old memories of dedicated pen and paper role playing enthusiasts where the bestiary was often mixed. This proved to be a solid bedrock for the old father. The holes of "What's a wasp doing deep underground" were occasionally answered and patched by the commonality of the eclectic spirit of the Dungeon and Dragons monster folio experience in the player's background. The giant wasps, the mummies, and the large arachnids all flow from our AD&D daydreams like honey from a beehive. This miasma of horrors was pulled together by believable monster routines, gorgeous sounds, and fun character portraits.

However, none of this interruption between player and interface is found in Knightmare (at least to my mind). The evil elves, bumbling trolls, and the tomb clothed Lord Fear all hail directly from the soil of the European past (of course the TV show processed this material in a gamey atmosphere, the game reprises the full moody nature of these types); the other monsters are very Captive-like renderings of Greek Mythology beasts. This makes for a tantalizing palette of strange enemies to defeat; coupled with the gorgeous hedge mazes, stormy Highland mountains, and heavy moody clouds, Knightmare rolls into one large atmospheric punch, which offers no escape once you begin.

The use of dreary colour renderings seeps over into the character selection menu and clearly recalls the wonderful eclectic stem of the Dungeon Master tradition. However, there are one or two things underdone in this department. The Dungeon Master enthusiast will miss the hall of heroes; for in Knightmare we are treated to a less than interactive experience in choosing our personas. Yet, there is a silver lining to this problematic cloud. From among the roster of possibilities one may pick from in the Knightmare world, the mundane human class (male and female) is the least of the sum of possibilities available. The player may choose from the smallish goblin as a character, a large ogre, or an ugly troll. The ephemeral characters of the Wraith, magical Genie, and earthy Insectoid are also up for grabs.

The strange character races reflect the wonderfully odd colour palette of the game. Each character is depicted in an eerie blend of minimalism and dark shadings. One cannot help but feel out of place as you decide the profession of each; whether to be a gladiator or a mage are the important choices one will have to weigh carefully. The old adage of choosing two fighters, one mage, and one cleric type are still advisable here (though later the game will commit the player to a complete reversal of fortune). The world of Knightmare will continually test and re-test all initial decisions made early in the game;

thus, the engines of Fate and Fortune (alike in Dungeon Master) are also heavily relied upon here to create the grim realism of the game.

Playing

Knightmare demands a quick mastery of the Captive desktop. The combat is timed so that if you miss a beat, you had better back-step very quickly or lose your first line of characters in seconds. I call this realism, as combative realism in this game genre is best related to the player by the threat of character death. In contrast, the grand old father Dungeon Master allows the player to ease into its system enjoyably. This is of course a big part of the Dungeon Master method; however, Knightmare was sculpted from a different mould.

In the first few days of gameplay (and this depends largely upon your gaming habits) your characters will be armed with the likes of baseballs, peashooters, rocks, and perhaps a shovel if you are lucky. These weapons don't often make for comfortable steppingstones from the daggers, short swords, and bows of the Dungeon Master game. Thus, early in the game, timing is the player's true weapon of choice (that and the use of doors).

The demands of nutrition are also present as you stalk the dim halls of the quest dungeons. This is where timing and planning also come in, for not all the dungeons contain food; in fact, most of the quest dungeons have one way doors that trap the player within, effectively entombing you in the depths of the earth until the quest is fulfilled.

The first level is a conglomeration of all the perils of the later dungeons. There you experience the pains of looking for the right keys, operating the pressure pads to reveal doorways (beware, for some are fallacious), riding the mining car to a different part of the map (watch out for the rails) and hunting for food in the form of rabbits and apples.

The dungeons contrast fiercely with those of Dungeon Master. Knightmare has within its nook and crannies lakes (you can drown in them), boats, islands, roller walls, and devious wall buttons (with hateful fireball portals nearby).

Knightmare features an "above ground" playing field. As stated earlier, this level of the game is a beautiful hedge maze/forest level with a splendid view of cloud clad mountains in the background. However, the players must not linger here indefinitely. They must search carefully in the hedge maze, for many items can be found in the grass.

Rabbits also abound in the hedges, both for food and general experience points. It is said that apples are available (they are also part of a well-known cheat) in the forest; however, you will need to find a special tool to collect them. Careful planning and progression of skills early on is suggested by most veterans.

In structure, Knightmare resembles Bloodwych more than Dungeon Master. The small plot teasers and plentiful puzzles combined with nice dungeon decor (evil moose heads on the walls, odd shield crests, the familiar name plaques, and occasional resurrection plants) add

an odd atmosphere to the game (which was Bloodwych's true call to fame; for in its oddness we excused the scrunched player world). This sincere brand of oddness when combined with a game design like Crowther's makes for one dark horse of a game that will embrace only the most sadistic of fantasy role playing enthusiasts.

In conclusion, Knightmare is often framed as a game that has poor graphics. I for one do not see how this is the case. The graphics are shaded oddly by a dark palette choice, but we must remember - Knightmare is not an interpretation of Dungeon Master, but of a dark fairy tale culture (non-Tolkien at that). Though this culture is poured through the Captive lens (which can be very challenging to some), it is nevertheless the only game program (counting both the PC, Atari, and other current console systems) that has ever attempted a serious interpretation of this difficult genre. Buy this game only if you long to experience the dark heart of a difficult but sincerely enjoyable quest.

Paul Dale

Review is based on 20+ hours of play and completion of 2 of 4 quests.

Machine setup: A500+512K trapdoor expansion+A590(2MB populated) WB 1.3.

- Check the packaging for other machines.
- Disk based copy protection.
- Games saved to a separate preformatted floppy.

The Plot

4 youngsters trot off to some Castle to meet a Dungeon master who tells them of a Quest to collect 4 objects and beat the "insert generic bad guy name" at the end. If you're very interested there is a short story in the manual. Its only real use is to give the quest order and hint at some of the bad guys you'll fight.

The Manual

The production is ok. It's thin and gives you the bare bone mechanics of how to play the game. What you won't get is much info (well none actually) on how spells work. You get to work that out yourself and is IMHO a *GOOD THING*. This extends to many mechanics of the game. A free hint is that there is a lot of difference between bumping into a wall and pushing a wall.

The Game

- ### Characters

Characters can be M/F, left-handed/right-handed, human/elf/ghost/troll/insectoid ..., adventurer/gladiator/samurai/wizard/priest/genie ...

Everyone can use all things in the game and gain experience in different classes, it's just that you will progress quicker in your natural art.

- ### Interface

The view is of the dungeon setting on the left, characters to the right, straight from Dungeon Master and Eye of the Beholder. No compass which makes things tricky (there is a reason though).

All the standard stuff is there. Movement has the additions of up and down which become highlighted when relevant. The interface is mouse driven with a few keyboard presses for

things like sleep and other shortcuts. One feature worth mentioning is the ability to have all 4 character's backpacks displayed at once. This makes moving things around very easy.

- ## Graphics and sound

Not as sharp as Eye of the Beholder graphically but nevertheless good. You can choose from two default palette settings or customise one to taste. Objects on the ground are very difficult to spot until... well, it becomes easy :-)

The sound effects are good although there isn't the same sense of dread as EOB due to no footfalls. Played through a hi-fi the combats are a good mixture of grunts and cries.

Mechanics

- ## Combat

Characters start naked and weapon less, so the first job is to locate clothes (armour) and weapons (balls, penknives, kitchen knives...). As time progresses, you'll find better weapons (bows and swords) and armour (kit yourself out in black leather trousers, jacket, boots and shades to be the coolest dude around... :-).

Right clicking over a weapon will bring down a scroll with various attack options appropriate to that weapon. Right clicking on an option will select and activate that option. Left clicking will program that option for future use. This is indicated by a small red triangle under the weapon. Future right clicks on the weapon/object activates the programmed action. This works for all handheld objects (see magic below).

Weapons have different effectiveness based on character class, physical well-being, attack option, hand the weapon is held in and opponent.

The damage system is HP based. Each character has a HP bar which turns red when things get serious. In addition, a character will lose stamina as a result of fighting. A tired character is less effective.

Each body area is capable of receiving serious wounds. These can be viewed by right clicking on a character's icon. An energy bar, backpack and stats are viewed here as well. Illness is indicated by different coloured boxes around the head and normally requires magic to cure.

- ## Magic

There are three classes of magic associated with the three magic using classes of magi, priest and genie. Magic is point based and requires a suitable wand to use. Different wands giving different spell lists become available during the game.

The wands work much like weapons with a choice of spell made available. Additional spells appear as expertise increases. Pre-programming is allowed and vital for combat. In addition, the level of the spell can be set by left/right clicking over the number at the top of the scroll. Spells needn't always work. Regardless, however, you will lose magic points.

It's a good idea to know your limitations although going for a big spell is necessary. To regain magic points, you must rest. The problem is that regaining magic drains stamina. If you have no stamina, you will take damage and die. Conserving magic points/stamina is very important for magic using types.

- Difficulty

The game is well paced with a comfortable increase in monster and puzzle difficulty. There is little interaction with NPCs (as yet anyway) and the puzzles are of a the find key, press pad, perform this sequence type.

The monsters do change as the design theory seems to be to introduce new tougher monsters rather than toughen up old ones. There is the same thrill of EOB when a new critter type is encountered, and some are capable of tricks not encountered in older games. Fights quickly become very tactical and not just a slugfest. You must plan.

- Reliability

Since I started writing this review many more hours of play have gone into this game and there hasn't been a single glitch or guru visitation (apart from the spoof Mr. Crowther has inserted). The software seems robust and smooth despite frantic combinations of keypress and mouse click (no lock ups here).

Summary

If you enjoyed Dungeon Master, Chaos Strikes Back or Eye of the Beholder, you'll get on well in Knightmare. It's different enough not to be boring and has a good overall feel to it. I for one will be going toe to toe with [generic bad guy] in the end and would buy any future Tony Crowther offerings.

Richard Cobbett

Back in the 80s, the most awesome program of all time aired in the UK on CITV – a live action roleplaying game called Knightmare. Just about every kid watched it, and those who didn't were lying or locked in some kind of institution for the criminally lacking in good taste. It saw teams of four taking on a dungeon created with blue screen technology, one exploring with a horned helmet that blinded them, and the others guiding via monitors from the safety of Castle Dunshelm above. Aided by Dungeon Master Treguard and opposed by the wizard Mordred or the technomancer Lord Fear depending on the series, they had to descend from the relative safety of Level 1 to the near guaranteed doom of Level 3 to retrieve a sacred artefact, with the monsters and members of the Opposition usually playing second fiddle to the danger of bad footwork or being bad at legendary trivia.

It was wonderful. Best program ever, and so beloved that this weekend sees a full Knightmare convention taking place down in the old studios in deepest darkest Norwich. There was only one odd thing... why did it never get a computer game version for everyone to take on the challenge of the dungeon at home?
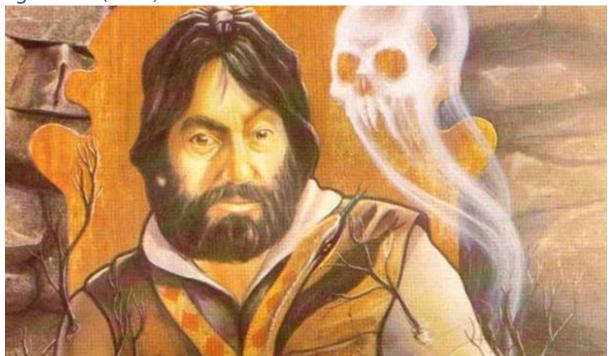
Well... it did! *Two*, in fact. Kinda. Sorta. You'll see what I mean soon enough.

A Quick Example of What Knightmare Was

Does it look tacky? Stupid? Then you are Wrong. Cease being Wrong.

Oh, yeah. And every episode is available on YouTube. Including a special new one that was made for a thing called YouTube Geek Week, though it wasn't very good and can be very easily skipped. But hey. Onwards!

Knightmare (1987)

Oh no! Treguard! You're melting!

What… what is going on in that cover art? Why is there a tree growing out of Treguard? What's with the ghost that looks less like it's haunting him than popping into ask if he's busy for lunch? The left eyeball, bulging. The hair joining forces with his beard, with a giant spider on top and that tunic that I first thought was just a weird design but is actually a pair of snakes wrapped around him. What's he sitting on, a box of scorpions?

No wonder he has that "Why did I even get up this morning?" expression on his face.

But anyway, onto the game. The first clue that it wasn't going to be very good is obviously the date – any TV tie in that manages to hit the first year of the show can be safely assumed to be on the 'deep' side of the crapometer. Knightmare had yet to even really bed in by this point, with Treguard a total prick compared to the stern but genial authority he would become. The second was that while there *was* an Atari ST version, it was mostly targeted at the ZX Spectrum and the Commodore 64 – both popular machines at the time, but not exactly powerhouses.

And to get a refund is your quest.

Now, the version I played in the day was the Spectrum one, but let's look at the C64 edition because it (obviously) looks much nicer. They're the same game, but with a couple of odd differences – notably that the Spectrum one actually plays the soon-to-be-classic Knightmare theme, while the C64 one kicks off with some generic tune that would be as much at home in a game called Slime Monsters From Space. Or Box Quest.

Am I part garden gnome, or do I keep ice cream cones in my beard? I shall not say!

Things don't start well, though in a fairly geeky way. Along with the dodgy picture of Treguard (apparently in armour, and with the wrong hair colour), we're told "Your quest to

seek knighthood begins here." Well, not quite. As the first episode of the show made painfully clear to its first contestant, it takes more than questing through the most brutal dungeon this side of Dark Souls to become a knight. All that awaits in the dungeon are the silver spurs of a squire – a legendarily awful trophy that I'm pretty sure was knocked out over a lunch break at a local key cutting shop when the producer saw a team actually approaching the end and went "Ack! We never considered this possibility!" God only knows what you have to do to become a full Knight. Eat Jupiter, probably.

Nice to see the game has about as much detail as the bluescreen studio the show was filmed in...

The game starts off a bit... oddly. The hero has the horned helmet, but the designer took the whole 'dungeon' thing a little bit too literally. Honestly, it's like they're traditionally jails where lords and kings shove people they don't want seeing the sun any more, not huge expansive worlds of adventure and excitement and treasure.

Tsk. Whatever happened to Standards?

This is what the version I played in the day looked like. Detailed, but... urgh.

Now, the first thing that jumps out is that one of the clumsiest adventuring systems ever. Interaction is done by typing a letter to choose a verb, then another to choose a subject – T for Take for instance, then F for Food. Only you often have no idea what you're looking at in the first place, and Knightmare doesn't bother restricting your options to what's actually in the room. Far easier to just have Merlin – I assume – complain that impossible things require magic, or have Treguard declare "Warning lazy knight, this item appears not to be here."

Uh-huh. Well, turnabout is fair play. Warning, lazy programmer, this design appears to be a pox!

It also gets confusing when you have to figure out what something is called. This first room for instance has a... chicken? I think it's a chicken on the floor. But 'C' is the shortcut to 'Caspar'. Food? Well, 'F' maps to 'Fat' for some reason. Luckily the space bar will page through all of the options. Unluckily, I mean *all* the options. Oh, and did I mention that sometimes you have to do this while enemies are destroying your life bar in a matter of seconds? And that they keep doing damage while the complaining message pops up? And that usually you have no choice but to take the pounding because there's no way to actually avoid or defend against them?

Well, keep all of that in mind, and multiply it by a factor of "Aaargh!"

Then observe my raised finger, Dungeon Master.

But, onto escape! Knightmare never really went in for this 'locked in a room' type puzzle – it was more about physical obstacles or NPC interactions, with players actually hurried from room to room to keep the pace going. The whole health system only existed so that Treguard could declare "Warning, team!" if they were dragging their boots. But, never mind. A quick look at our fellow prisoner makes it clear that this is a seriously secure dungeon that nobody's simply going to walk out of. Until you try 'open door' and discover it's not locked.

Gentlemen, ladies, prepare your face palms.

It's okay though, because the next room has a locked door and no way to bypass it. The solution is to give the food in the first room to the prisoner... the prisoner who is not in any way restrained and could therefore have picked it up just fine on his own... as well as water that you can give him without actually having collected it... at which point he literally pulls a magic shovel out of his arse and says "Here. This will only work once."

(And yes, you can eat the food and render the game unwinnable instantly. But that wasn't particularly odd for this era of adventures, so is at least somewhat forgivable. It's only really notable here because a cardinal rule of Knightmare was that the player always had to eat food they found to restore their life force.)

Less forgivably, you use the shovel to dig out, ending up in this corridor.

And what's through that VERY CLEARLY OPEN door? The dungeon you just escaped from.

What's that? Why, yes, the magically opened door *does* lock behind you! And yes, this *is* clearly a bullshit trap to have you dig your way out of an unlocked cell, only to end up behind an ACTUALLY locked door in the next corridor.

Thank you, Knightmare designer. Thank you *so very much.* You total anus.

Emerging from the jail, it quickly becomes clear that the makers of this game had never seen the show and were working entirely off vague descriptions. You're escaping from a castle, when the show was about getting through three levels to retrieve a magic artefact. There are wandering guards who burn off the candle that acts as both time limit and life gauge, spells require potions rather than the show's "Spellcasting: W.H.A.T.E.V.E.R" magic system, and none of the characters put in an appearance. No Folly, no Mogdred, no Lilith. Though there is a sexy maid who can be bought off with gold for a locket of her hair, which you only know about because every time you try to look at something a face pops up and calls you a moron for trying to check out anything else in the castle. And occasionally calling you 'pheasant meal' for some reason. Talk about a poor insult.

Still, at least there IS a clue, I guess. Beats several King's Quests.

Really, the closet Knightmare gets to being Knightmare, beyond Treguard's face at the start, is the inclusion of Wall Monsters. As a kid, the Wall Monsters really scared me – their weird faces and declarations of "FALSEHOOD!" to wrong answers to trivia questions for some reason putting them up there with spiders and the monitors of switched off computers in my young brain's collection of terrifying things. Well, they're here too, though much smaller, and you get to throw rocks at them if you want. They show up out of nowhere to ask silly trivia questions on pain of eating you, then vanish for a few screens and return.

So, there's one point in Knightmare's favour, I guess. At least, they're supposed to do that, though whether bug or emulation or just not finding the right key, my emulated copy here refuses to let me actually answer the questions, so instead what happens at the first one is that it waits for a while and then summons a couple of enemies.

Sigh. At least it could actually *eat* you.

Hmm. Not really a Wall Monster. More a Brick Bully.

The actual quest only shows up near the end, when the Dungeoneer encounters "King Melvut" – coincidentally the Scandinavian word for "Who The Shit Is This?" – on a throne. Melvut bluntly states "Defeat the dragon to survive this Knightmare," in a way that really doesn't make a lot of sense, especially as the dragon is pretty much just minding its own business. Anyway, as all heroes know, being told to do something by a king automatically makes it right and proper, so it's quickly defeated, and Treguard pops up to remind us all he exists by first declaring "Congratulations, you have earned your spurs as a knight…" and then adding "My dungeons hunger for you still."

Please, Treguard. These were no more *your* dungeons than Buckingham Palace is your summer home.

Anyway, here's the full adventure thanks to someone with more patience than I have.

It's easy to be too forgiving of this kind of thing, on the grounds that games were primitive and had to be crammed onto small amounts of space, but that doesn't cut it here. This was a wretched cash-in, made all the stranger by the fact that both the Spectrum and the C64 were more than up to Knightmare's largely spatial puzzles – not all of them, no, but enough. Knightmare came out several *years* after Knight Lore and in the same year as Maniac Mansion, and there were plenty of other games both classic and contemporary that could have been borrowed from rather than coming up with this

stodgy, poorly driven adventure through an intensely dull, mostly empty castle. Even if you ignore that it has absolutely nothing to do with Knightmare beyond the wrapping, it's simply a bad game. And a short one too. If you know what you're doing, the whole thing only takes around 15 minutes to finish.

Having played it at the time though, I can attest that this didn't matter. If you got past the first few screens you were doing well, especially as this was the era where games were cheap enough to smash with a hammer if they Displeased. Knightmare most definitely Displeased. Sadly though, it was my cousin's copy, so I was reluctantly forced to let it continue to exist. But only in a box of games like Gift From The Gods and Oh Mummy!, so really it was more in a Phantom Zone of godawful 8-bit horrors. To quote Ashens: *A fitting punishment!*
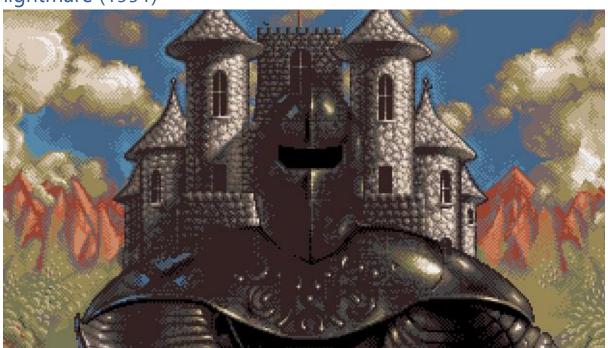
And Then...

Covers from gamebooks.org

While the absence of a proper Knightmare game chafed, there was at least a series of books to fill the gap. They were pretty simple, but interesting – part novella, telling a story of one of Treguard's adventures before he retired to sit in a chair and be unhelpful to teams of kids, and part gamebook that challenged you – yes, YOU, even the fat kid in Labyrinth of Fear – to conquer his dungeons. The idea of Knightmare having canon is honestly quite cute, with the series never more complex than a handful of recurring characters eventually sorted into broad good and evil camps, but as a kid, this was useful. Treguard's arrogance at least nominally came from the fact that he was the only one ever to have conquered the dungeon, and these books did a decent job of making out that he really was a hero of note and worthy of respect, songs, and the adoration of assorted maidens whose costumes increasingly came from the classic Doctor Who "Something For The Dads" wardrobe. Cough.

I had the first four of these books, which were published between 1988 and 1991 – after that I'd moved on from CYOA books to proper RPGs like Ultima VII on PC and weightier fiction from Tolkein. I don't remember *too* much about the details of them, save that the split between story and adventure made for incredibly short adventures that were nowhere near the scale or quality of, say, [Lone Wolf](#), and that at one point you got killed if you didn't know that a salve was meant to be put onto a wound instead of drunk, and the book was very snarky about that fact. I can't say that it's ever helped me in my day to day life, but at least I've never forgotten it. I guess.

While they filled a bit of a gap though, they were no substitute for the actual game. Technology was shooting forwards to the point that Knightmare was now actually a pretty primitive game by modern standards, and while FMV was still out of the question, there was no reason that the basic vibe couldn't be brought to our screens. Finally, it happened... though somewhat oddly, only on Amiga and ST, despite both RPGs and adventures being very much the PC's wheelhouse at the time. And this time, it absolutely had to be great. Right? Right. (Right?)

Knightmare (1991)

I AM THE ODDLY CHUNKY KNIGHT. THE, UH, 'BLACK KNIGHT' WAS TAKEN.

I AM THE ODDLY CHUNKY KNIGHT. THE, UH, 'BLACK KNIGHT' WAS TAKEN.

The second Knightmare game had everything in its favour. It came out while the show was hitting its creative and popularity high. It had hammered out the details, now settling on a battle between the Powers That Be led by Treguard and his arch-rival Lord Fear, played by the awesomely snarky Mark Knight, allowing for a proper story and battle. It was *almost* designed for real computers – yes, I had a PC, what of it? Finally, it was programmed and 'part'-designed by Antony "Tony" Crowther, creator of the Dungeon Master type game [Captive](#) and its ludicrously ambitious sequel [Liberation](#). And, a few years later, also one of

my favourite cult games on the PC, the FPS/adventure hybrid Realms of the Haunting. Really, what could possibly go wrong this time?

...

Okay, okay, that's a little harsh. The problem with Knightmare isn't that it's a bad game, but that it makes the one on the Commodore 64 look like a gloriously faithful conversion. It's a dungeon crawler, but from the very start it feels like Crowther just had a fantasy RPG in the works and slapped on a couple of references to help it sell. And I do mean the very start, with a character creation system that asks you to create the usual four character party, despite Knightmare having exactly *one* person going into the dungeon, and bizarrely allowing them to be goblins, ogres, ghouls, elves or 'insectoles'. This is however ['fully justified' in the manual](#) thusly...

"The Quest takes many forms, as well as many different paths. None of you must go without sight, for in this case, all four of you will be handicapped. Your path is the most dangerous of all for it exists only in the machine-mind."
(Pickle the Elf) joined him at his elbow and tutted impatiently.
"They call them computers, Master. The land within the computer is called – The Cyberspace – I think, though my own people scorn it as necromancy."
Treguard nodded. "This Cyberspace is as dangerous as any land beyond the portals, it is apparently endless and limited only by the memory capacity of machinedom. The greater dungeons now lie within it, and you must seek them. This is the challenge you journeyed so far to meet. If you accept it, then seize it!"
The Dungeon Master waved his hand, and we turned to the direction indicated. Another portal had appeared in the corner of the room. It was an ebony obelisk like the rectangle on the path above Ambleside. Once again, James stepped forward without hesitation.
"Wait," I said "This time we go together"
And we did.

And that, children, is where the word 'bollocks' comes from.

Your "Knightmare" being pop-eyed Treguard, apparently. Ouch.

Seriously, Knightmare doesn't even *try* to be like the show. It's not quite a straight dump of Captive and similar RPGs into a medieval setting, but it's not far off, with the show sprinkled on as thickly as a slug salts its dinner. Cut off the title screen and the occasional familiar character like Treguard at the start and you'd never even know. The basic premise involves collecting the four classic quest objects, yes. But that's it. They're not even in the possession of Knightmare baddies, but a new set like a fey sorceress called "Badwife" (seriously, were Malice, Morganna and Mildread *all* busy that day?), a serpent called Khah-Roth, and a goblin called Haag, who would later go on to play every squeaky voiced character in every dubbed anime.

The game itself starts in a forest – in fairness, slightly cool for the time, with dungeon crawlers still primarily about indoor locations and games like Dungeon Master 2: Legend of Skullkeep yet to really explore the maze potential of outdoor areas – with a plinth to return the Crown when you finally get it, some black doors I guess we can generously call elf portals (though they usually stood out in the open rather than just being black doors) and magic invisible forcefields. Well, not really. But every time you try to walk into something you get an "Ooof!" sound and sometimes a flare of red static, which is okay when it's a wall I guess, but not so much when it's a visibly empty space you're simply not meant to walk into. Cart tracks for instance, which bounce between the points they can reach and force you to guess when to jump out in a really annoying way when you just want to walk across.

Just getting out of the first location is a serious chore. Never a good start.

Just because you don't want to eat broccoli doesn't mean it'll return the favour.

There's a lot of combat too, with initial enemies including [killer rabbits](#), gnomes, and floating head things that that did appear in the real dungeon as some kind of 'hurry the hell up' spirit whose name I'm blanking on right now. Pooka? Not sure. It's a bit of a mix, really, with some generic enemies and some from the actual show, but mostly just random RPG sword-fodder who you can't just throw a big lump of gold or a ruby at to make piss off.

Design-wise, it's fairly stock Dungeon Keeper style combat, I guess. The problem is that it's *combat.* Knightmare would very, very occasionally let the player chase someone off with a spell, but fighting was banned for both practical reasons and to spare characters needing catchphrases like "I'm Sylvester Hands. Like feet, but at the other side of your-AW ME KNACKERS!" Here though, faces doth get pounded with punches and kicks, even if the first real weapon is the less than intimidating 'ball'. Even Final Fantasy X wasn't able to make that cool…

But the strangest and most disturbing part has yet to come.

Now, as anyone who watches the news will know, the UK has been having a bit of an assault on our 80s/90s nostalgia of late, thanks to the public revelations of abuses by Jimmy "Jim'll Fix It" Saville, with many variably beloved celebrities ending up in the firing line – this week for instance, the art world's equivalent of Bill Nye, Rolf Harris is on trial for various offences, and PR Nazgul Max Clifford was sentenced to eight years in jail for assorted crimes that only just managed to avoid throwing in "Being Max Clifford" for good measure. While absolutely nothing has been linked to any of the Knightmare team, I suspect most fans of the show harboured at least a slight terror that noble and wise Treguard might have had a... cough... 'special' dungeon of sorts, both stabbing the 80s in the back and fireballing it into ash. Thankfully, this has absolutely not been the case. Childhood remains happily unruined, and may it long continue to be so. Normally, I would not even bring this up, certainly not for snark purposes.

Dear god, would "Enter, stranger" take on a horrifying new meaning.

But. The *game* version of Treguard I think begs a bit of a question, as you start exploring the dungeon and collecting items. It's worth pointing out that while there is the character creation system, canonically these are kids – they talk about their schoolteachers in the manual. Got that? Right. Well, you know how in most RPGs you kill monsters to collect things like armour, helmets and robes to protect the party against enemies and the elements? Not here! In Knightmare, you start by slowly kitting the team out with... T-Shirts... and boxer shorts.

Yes, *Treguard has sent the kids into the dungeon* **naked!**

...

What the shit, Dungeon Master? What in the name of all-shitting hell?

What would a tree keep in a cup? Oh, of course. Rootbeer.

Just getting out of the opening area is a true pain in the neck, but once done, this is a massive game – the walkthrough on YouTube is a hundred parts long, through each world maze and an army of monsters that could individually have obliterated every single team in the actual show. And speaking of things that would never have happened in the show, when it's time to face Lord Fear, his castle is a huge sprawling place with walls made of screaming skeletons and embedded bones that would have given Mary Whitehouse a meltdown.

The final conflict in those would usually be him sitting on a chair or something with the quest object just out of sight, delivering snarky lines like "I don't like to gloat. What am I saying? I *love* it! I love it more than anything!" until casually humiliated by the team casting a spell they picked up in the previous room or using some item to disable him, get the prize, and desperately try not to screw things up while escaping. I'm not sure if even Knightmare would be cruel enough to yank away victory at the absolute last second, but you never know. It was the show that simply cut off its final contestants with little more than a "Series over, sucks to be you." At least, initially. Later seasons at least wrapped it in a little story so that they could save the dungeon instead of just straight-up being shown the door so the production team could hit the wrap party.

Here of course, the finale is… a knock-down battle with swords and Fear hurling fireballs until he pings out of existence and drops the final quest item – the Crown of Glory. (It's meant to be "The Crowning Glory", but never mind, I guess…) Taking it back to the start to place it on a plinth, despthite a king being more uthual, the game is won. And the exciting ending? A picture of the crown, and a gnome saying "Congratulations! You have successfully banished Lord Fear from the realm of Dunshelm forever and have gained the power of the Crown of Glory."

And then, with no shame at all, "If you enjoyed this game, you can buy CAPTIVE, Tony Crowther's award-winning adventure game; or await CAPTIVE 2: FREEDOM FIGHTERS." Grrr! Bad! Bad programmer! No!
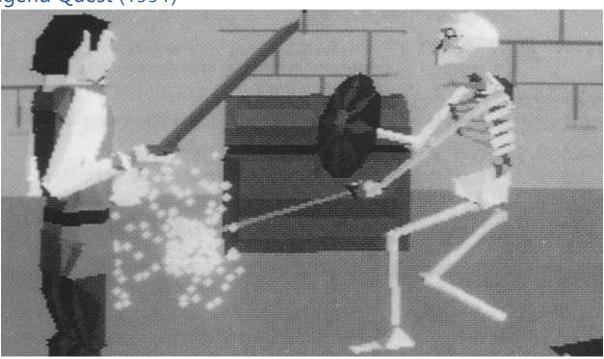
The Captive shout-out does end on a highlight of Knightmare's big problem though, that while it's fine for what it is, it's not so much a Knightmare game as a straight-up Knightmare branded one; the Garfield Cereal of dungeoneering. A few references can't hide the fact that it has absolutely none of the show's spirit, none of its style and none of its humour, and the pathetic attempt to reframe the four-man dungeon blobber as *totally* appropriate because Treguard says so is about as effective as a dyslexic spellcaster on Level 3. What a pity.

And that was it. No more attempts at a Knightmare game. Konami released a game of the same name, but it was completely unrelated. Damn it. What was an early 90s geek to do?

…

Well, there was *one* thing…

Legend Quest (1991)

It was originally in colour. Unless you're colour blind. Then, not.

It's at least a little fitting that the best Knightmare game had nothing whatsoever to do with it. Unfortunately, for a few reasons, information and pictures are very thin on the ground, so pardon if my memory is a little shaky. Legend Quest was one of the second wave of virtual reality games from Virtuality, the company that brought headsets into arcades and shopping centres with the 'crash instantly into the ground for two pounds' simulator VTOL. Forget Oculus Rift. Virtuality machines were powered by an Amiga, had a framerate that a moderately skilled artist could beat with pen and paper, and had headsets heavier than a child's newly discovered realisation of mortality.

It's not really a surprise that they didn't take off, with the state of the art seen here, in a segment from the [short-lived Click video magazine.](#) The first wave of VR didn't last much longer, honestly, being overpriced in arcades and unsuitable for the home. It got a brief burst when people realised how great VR Doom would be, but the tech was far too big and expensive for the home. Fingers cross Oculus Rift will make it work.

Legend Quest was easily the most *exciting* of the early games, to the extent that at least two dedicated stores were set up to host the machines – the one I played was in Nottingham, priced about a hundred billion pounds a go. You played a hero, with multiple able to enter the same world, and see if this seems familiar – basic computer graphics, a big helmet on your head to hide reality, clunky movement, and near guaranteed early death. Yes, this was as close to playing Knightmare as you could get without going on the show – flailing a hand to control your sword and trying to fight a skeleton, with the big surprise being when a stone statue suddenly turned into a werewolf.

Unfortunately almost none of the original wave of Virtuality games survive in any handy form. You don't see the ROMs anywhere, there's almost no footage on YouTube, and essentially no screenshots. A few incredibly dedicated collectors do have bits and pieces, but for the most part the best that can be shown are little scraps. For Legend Quest, that's literally a few seconds worth of footage, though a bit more might be in an old episode of GamesMaster or equivalent US shows in the YouTube video swamp. I don't see anyone linking them though, so this is the best I can find – skip to 10 minutes for a few seconds, before it cuts to some crappy corridor shooter.

Knightmare itself didn't last long enough for anyone else to get a crack at the real license though, and while it always stayed in fans' hearts, it was never a worldwide phenomenon that was going to spawn a big budget attempt or post-release game. Much like [The Crystal Maze](#), the potential was always on the table, but never seized… and I think we're all a little bit poorer for that. Really, it's only this very weekend that most fans will get a chance to experience things as they were meant to, with a full room to play through at the [Knightmare Convention](#). Was aiming to head down, but work commitments got in the way. Oh well. For those who are able to attend, may it be all you hoped it would be. And for the love of Christ, remember that giving directions by clock numbers is always going to beat 'sidestep left, sidestep left, OH GOD YOU COMPLETE ARSE YOU FELL INTO THE PIT.'

Actually, on second thoughts, don't. It just wouldn't be the same.