

Sam & Max

Ah Telltale, perhaps the greatest game company you've never heard of.

Founded by ex Lucasarts staff, this small outfit have managed to pull off what so many other companies have failed at. What I'm referring to is episodic gaming, that's games that run like a TV show, giving the viewer/player new episodes on a frequent basis. This is where many developers fall down (hands up those still waiting for Episode 3 of Half Life 2, the first being released back in 2006) but Telltale seem to succeed each time. The model they use is releasing an episode a month, while this might be more of a wait than next week's Doctor Who, it works well, giving gamers of all abilities a chance to spend the 4-5 hours required to complete the episode and eagerly await the next.

This season begins with cinematic, or at least televisual flair. Introducing you to the game in a style reminiscent to that of the Twilight Zone series (look it up, kids) and sets the scene in which we find our heroes. Sam, the fedora-wearing dog and Max, his psychotic lagomorphic chum find themselves incarcerated by the villainous space-gorilla Skun-ka'pe, leaving you the player to find a way out and begin your adventure. Confused? Yeah, I was too, but stay with it and things will calm down and start to make sense, or at least become clearer.

Anyone whose played any of the previous Sam & Max titles will have to adjust themselves to a brand new control scheme, which is perhaps perfect for those who predominantly play action games but is somewhat daunting for those of us used to the simplicity of the point and click interface of the earlier games. You will get to grips with it but if you're anything like me by the end of the episode you do still find it somewhat uncomfortable and that you are fighting the interface

much more than should be necessary in what is still an adventure game.

Graphically this is the best season yet, with lots of detailed textures and a much higher polygon count. Sadly, like the majority of console games produced by Telltale, the frame rate does glitch upon occasion, but nowhere near as bad as some of their earlier releases, as anyone that has played CSI: Hard Evidence on the Wii can tell. Lip sync is still not perfect but has come on leaps and bounds since Season 1 as have the expressions the characters are capable of.



(Photo courtesy of Telltale)

For those who haven't twigged, this series is a comedy and Episode One has its share of laughs however the humour is certainly lower-brow than it has been up until now and depending on your sense of humour this may be a good or bad thing. Suffice to say there are plenty of gags regarding the titular Penal Zone, for better or worse.

Gameplay is fun, once you get used to the controls, however if this is the first episode you've ever played some things might leave you feeling you're missing a gag or wondering why particular characters exist. That being said, this is part of the appeal of Sam & Max; you are thrown in to their world head first and the best thing to do is enjoy it for what it is.

From a technical standpoint this is probably the best game that Telltale has ever made, however it comes at a schizophrenic time for the company. Having found success in the console market, they are straying from the formula of earlier PC based titles. Although this may be a good business decision it is a turn off to many of their fans who prefer a simpler game interface and don't want such convoluted controls, which may make sense from a console game perspective but don't do many favours for those playing the game on OS X

or Windows. With that in mind this could be an important season for the company to see how players take to a very different control scheme.

However, more than graphics and controls make a game, and here Sam & Max shines. Once again it has brilliant voice acting, a terrific score by go-to sound guy Jared Emerson-Johnson and razor sharp writing. The puzzles in the game are a little more abstract than in previous releases, but help is given in two different ways. There are audio clues which will play if you seem to be wondering about without purpose, but these can get on your nerves if they pop up frequently so can thankfully be turned off. What works far better is Max develops a power for seeing into the future and you can use this gift to give you hints as to what needs to be done. As for story, it's rather difficult to talk about. Is it funny? For sure! Does it tell it well? It's too early to say. Previous seasons of Sam & Max have been separate adventures each episode with a vague overarching plot. This one however is telling a bigger story and Episode One is simply the introduction. From this point of view it does a good job, giving you a sense of place and gets you interacting with others in the cast.



(Photo courtesy of Telltale)

On the whole the episode does a good job of setting up the story, the characters are enjoyable and the locations well rendered. The control scheme is the biggest issue I have with the game and although I'll see this season through I can see a future where I'm not downloading the latest Telltale game the moment it's released and as much as I respect the company for its strides forward in interactive narrative gaming it may be a future that holds a little less interest for an old skool gamer like me.

You can watch the Telltale trailer [here](#)

Season 3 – The Devil's Playhouse

Episode One: The Penal Zone

Developer/Publisher: Telltale Games

Review copy: PS3 (via PSN)

Also available for: iPad, Mac and PC

Link:

<http://www.telltalegames.com/samandmax/thedevilsplayhouse>