

Broken Sword 5: The Serpent's Curse REVIEW



The Good:

Intricate story that meshes real historic events with legends; flawless hand-drawn 2D scenery; George's cheerful, practical personality; several outstanding supporting characters; excellent voice acting; engaging puzzles.

The Bad:

Repeatedly using Nico as a sexy diversion; some technical glitches; slow and expository first quarter; poorly-clued main puzzle.

Our Verdict:

Eminently playable, cheekily characterised and delectably artistic, *The Serpent's Curse* rekindles the romance of the much-loved *Broken Sword* series.



Scoring System - Editorial Policies

Written by **Shuva Raha** — April 25, 2014

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The preface to Revolution's tale of the serpent is as beautiful as it is bloody. A sweeping cinematic follows an eagle as it swoops off a rugged mountain top and flies over the verdant plains of Catalonia towards a sprawling estate. It's 1937 and Spain is in the grips of the Civil War, and like the nation, the villa too is under siege. As fascists rain bullets on the mansion, inside the Marques family scrambles to save some books and a painting. This painting, "La Maledicció" – which literally means "the curse" – eventually resurfaces in a present day Parisian exhibition, and continues to wreak havoc in its wake when it's stolen in a violent daylight robbery that leaves the gallery owner dead. The event fortuitously reunites George Stobbart, the insurer's representative, with ex-girlfriend and partner

in crimefighting, journalist Nicole Collard. He must recover the painting to avoid the fat payout; she is still chasing the story that will get her a front page byline in the local paper. Racing against both the bad guys and the bureaucratic French police, the two are soon embroiled in a life-threatening international thriller dating back to the religious persecution of heretics by the Roman Catholic Church in the 1300s.

The fifth installment of one of the adventure genre's most accomplished series, *Broken Sword 5: The Serpent's Curse* returns the franchise to its roots, trading in technological experimentation for visual excellence and smooth gameplay. It boasts stylish hand-drawn scenes populated by nicely animated comic book-style characters; simple point-and-click mechanics and a smart hint system; easy but engaging tasks; an interesting supporting cast, and above all, a multilayered mystery that meshes real history with myths and legends and embellishes it with intrigue and emotion. The enchanting artwork and carefully crafted simplicity of the game make it easy to get immersed in its narrative, but while it has no potent negatives, some aspects could have been better. The adventure is slow off the blocks – the first quarter is bloated with idle talk, and I was also distracted by the momentary lag between responses, which robbed the dialogues (particularly the snappy ones) of spontaneity. Towards the end, a lengthy segment in a monastery suffers from poorly clued puzzles and glitchy triggers. And while George has evolved into a powerhouse of ingenuity, Nico is repeatedly used as a sexy diversion for lecherous males, which is not only irreverent but disappointing as she has little else to do. All's well that ends well, though, and the game wraps up in about ten hours with all loose ends neatly tied.

Largely financed by more than 14,000 backers through Kickstarter and released in two distinct parts, this game has wisely followed the formula of its predecessors' success: it weaves elements from Europe's strife-riddled politico-religious past into a modern day crisis replete with conspiracies, secret societies, explosions and dead bodies, and sets it against super-attractive backdrops that make even the grungiest locations feel inviting. George and Nico trade witty banter with cops and criminals as they shuttle between Paris, London, Spain and Iraq. Series regulars like the upright gendarme Moue, lascivious socialite Lady Piermont, Fleur the psychic florist, and the irrepressible American tourists, the Hendersons, bring on the warm fuzzies, as does revisiting Nico's apartment, which now has a swanky computer instead of her '90s hi-fi system.

While the blasts from the past are sure to delight longtime fans, the case itself is new and unrelated to previous games. The absence of baggage – even George and Nico have been out of touch for a while and are almost starting afresh – is welcome as it allows you to get right into the story and enjoy it on its own merit. The theft of “La Maledicció” seems straightforward at the outset: an expensive painting stolen for its monetary value, with an unfortunate, unintended victim. But when George's inquiries lead to a shady Russian oligarch, and the Marques heir, Tiago – now aged and ornery – appears at Nico's door to explain the significance of the serpent Ouroboros to his religious sect, it's clear that a more sinister game is afoot. The painting's secret, if decoded, could lead to the rise of the Devil himself and jeopardize the very existence of humanity, so it becomes imperative to recover it ASAP.

The majority of tasks in the first half involve gleaning information from dodgy individuals and their possessions, while the second focuses on using those clues to decrypt “La Maledicció”. Most quests are inventory-based, interspersed with a few basic tasks like reassembling torn letters and decoding simple ciphers. While a clever sign-fixing puzzle warrants a pause-and-think, another involving musical notes forced me to peek at the hints by neglecting to provide a reference. Genuine frustration, however, was encountered while decoding an important ancient thingamajig: despite being warned that ‘lateral thought’ would be needed, I could not logically extrapolate half the answer via the ambiguous clues.

Inventory solutions are of the practical sort and generally use items found in the vicinity. This, combined with the smart art design, makes useful things easy to identify without pixel hunting. Some objects become usable only after a trigger sequence, so it's important to pay attention to their descriptions, which may indicate their future utility. This trigger system is painfully buggy in the Spanish monastery of Montserrat, where a large number of tasks have to be done in a precise order. The inventory holds about two dozen items, which may be deconstructed, combined with each other or onscreen hotspots, or presented to people, often to humorous effect. Intra-inventory matches are somewhat restricted by fading out unviable options, leaving only five or six possibilities to experiment with. Items range from genre staples like crowbars, coins and cellphones to more exotic elements like a peeing

Cupid statue, a cookie that never crumbles and Trevor the pet cockroach. Some items are removed from inventory after use, but others persist till the end.

Progress is linear, and all activities in a particular segment must be completed to proceed. An optional tutorial introduces the gameplay mechanics – left-click to move and interact; right-click for observations. Some scenes can be zoomed in to inspect in greater detail. Characters don't run, though double-clicking exits transitions instantly to the next screen. Conversations have preset dialogues, but on occasion you get the option to broach a topic gently or play hardball. While there are no major consequences of either route, some dialogues and reactions are altered according to your choices. In the latter half, many dialogues persist even after the related quests have been completed. Overall the game is simple and intuitive, but if you're stuck, the comprehensive hint system provides several levels of help, starting with a reminder of the objective, moving up to a couple of nudges, and finally blurring out the solution. You also earn fancily-named achievements for finishing certain tasks. My game crashed a couple of times even after patching, though the auto-save feature let me resume from the point just before the crash.

Continuing the trend of the series, George does most of the work. Nico handles only a few brief tasks, though they do visit many locations together and frequently discuss the case. Despite not being in a romantic relationship anymore, they share palpable chemistry, and more importantly, an easy rapport and deep trust that make their partnership believable and enjoyable. We also meet some remarkable new characters like Inspector Navet, Moue's new boss. Belligerently bureaucratic, butcher of English idioms, quick to take credit and quicker to assign blame, he is a one-man entertainment centre. Then there's Bijou, the grief-stricken, guilt-ridden hippie widow of Henri, the slain gallery owner. She can't stop weeping and drinking champagne while lounging in a lush boudoir with her husband's corpse and large *au naturel* paintings of herself, but her broken heart conceals a rather sordid tale. Cranky old Tiago settles into Nico's neighbour's home and cribs about his material discomforts while arguing the persecution of the ascetic Gnostics. Also notable are Hector Laine, an obese, lecherous art critic; Shears, the right hand goon of shady Russian billionaire Medovsky; and Hobbs, a prolific art restorer who counts Lady Piermont among his nude models. Utterly disappointing are Eva, introduced in the second half as Tiago's daughter (suffice to say that Trevor the cockroach sees more action), and the surprisingly underwhelming ultimate villain.

The action shuffles between a multitude of locations, like the Parisian art gallery, a lavish London mansion, a rundown studio, the Marques villa and the town of Montserrat. Most places are revisited several times, but never without reason. Every scene is perfectly illustrated, with gorgeous, mellow colouring and flowing, artistic lines. Despite the series returning to its 2D roots, the backgrounds have a striking sense of depth, like the picture window of the gallery and Bijou's street. Numerous details enrich each set – realistic in places, like the view of the Basilica of Sacré-Cœur from a street café and the mess of clothes and papers in busy Nico's home, and preposterous elsewhere, like the life-sized, David-esque replica of Henri in his office. The peaceful, ruined beauty of the sun-dappled, bullet-riddled Marques villa is almost hypnotic, and Montserrat's funicular railway, cable cars, mountainside monasteries and the Black Madonna of Santa Cova are presented with fabulous accuracy. An ancient tapestry depicting the history of the Cathars deserves a special mention for its exquisite detailing. Lighting is used judiciously to set moods and showcase architecture, and day/night variations of places like Hobbs's seedy neighbourhood are fantastic. The inventory and menu icons appear only on rollover, which allows the high resolution artwork to grace the entire screen while exploring. The effect, especially of wide angle cityscapes, is breathtaking.

There are three main cutscenes in the game: the grim prologue in Catalonia, a rambunctious dream sequence, and the climactic finale. Other interludes are plain black screens with brief white text messages. The action continues all through the game, however, with many well-animated in-game sequences of George and Nico carrying on their investigation and managing tricky situations. The 3D characters are designed to blend in with their hand-drawn environments, and this works exceptionally well. The lifelike yet arty models favour the already attractive George and Nico the most, but also flatter the heavily made-up Bijou and the corpulent Laine in the closer shots.

Character movement varies between excellent and acceptable. There are many realistic actions like Laine struggling to get off floors, chairs and couches, Nico using her smartphone, George crouching to inspect objects, and Hobbs swaying drunkenly to music while painting. Moue squirming due to his urinary incontinence is a fine

instance of physical humour. Some inventory-based tasks are performed in detail, with visible use of objects like bottles and tools. Conversations occur in-game in the normal course of events; lip sync more or less matches the spoken dialogue, while subtle but apt facial expressions and physical gestures provide non-verbal cues. Surprisingly awkward in comparison are people's gaits: there's a skiddy feel when they walk, and the worst affected is George, who tilts uncomfortably forward in the side view while sauntering about.

Available in five languages, the script is well-written barring minor discrepancies in dates, but is not as tight or sharp as in the early games of the series. There are chunks of conversation where nothing of consequence is said either about the plot or the people. The satire is average, and other than an electric exchange between Navet and George during a crime reconstruction scene and some ribald ribbing when George stumbles across his biggest fangirl, Lady Piermont, there are no memorable moments. But anything lacking on paper is more than compensated for by the all-around outstanding voice acting. Rolf Saxon, who has voiced George since *The Shadow of the Templars* in 1996, excels in the role of a guy almost half his age, endowing George with a terrific range of emotions and reactions that often makes you forget that he is a video game character. Newcomer Emma Tate as Nico puts in a spirited performance to keep up with George's banter, and the voice talents for Moue, Navet, Hobbs, Shears and Lady Piermont define their personalities with adept use of intonation and accents.

The Serpent's Curse features subtle, mildly melancholic orchestral background music, and uses a couple of gentle flourishes to indicate success. Large portions of the game are played with only ambient sounds and activity-related noises like footsteps, creaks of doors and floors, whooshes of passing vehicles, and the tolling of bells. The best part of the soundtrack is the psychedelic rock song "Jasmine", performed by the Hairy Lobsters, Henri's band from the '70s. It's cheerful and addictive, and brings some much-needed whimsy to the otherwise grave proceedings. Vocal volume, especially George's, varies sharply at times, though overall audio is of superlative quality.

Few adventure games have been burdened with as much expectation as *Broken Sword 5*. The decision to take the franchise back to the traditional hand-drawn, 2D point-and-click format in an era of rapidly evolving gaming technology has succeeded, resoundingly well in fact. Nitpicks aside, *The Serpent's Curse* is extremely enjoyable and rekindles the magic of the series, drawing you deep into its incredibly artistic, slightly insane world. This installment has more practical – and consequently easier – tasks than its predecessors, but goes for gold on story, characterisation and production quality. The complex and credible plot intertwines centuries-old religious persecution with modern day business fraud, mixing superstitions and skepticism as dexterously as it pits the forces of good and evil against each other. George and Nico's complex relationship is handled maturely, and the assorted supporting characters are just the right degree of eccentric. Though very linear, the game takes you through many diverse locations and weaves each experience tightly into the story, taking care to close all loops by the time the credits roll. *The Serpent's Curse* has been crafted with obvious love and realistic ambition, and great care has been taken to make it both intriguing and entertaining for a wide range of players. If you're craving a smart modern classic-styled adventure, this is a case definitely worth investigating.