

Secret Files: Sam Peters

REVIEW



The Good:

Plausible, tightly-knit plot; streamlined gameplay mechanics with multiple help aids; superb art and animation; a smart, competent heroine; excellent voice acting for Sam.

The Bad:

Very short (less than three hours of gameplay); quests are unoriginal and may be too easy for experienced players; almost non-existent secondary cast; abrupt, over-simplified conclusion.

Our Verdict:

Sassy journalist Sam Peters makes the most of her moment in the sun in this neat little *Secret Files* spin-off, reclaiming some of the series' former glory by demystifying an ancient African legend.



Scoring System - Editorial Policies

Written by **Shuva Raha** — November 13, 2013

Intrepid journalist Samantha 'Sam' Peters was last seen on an Indonesian island in 2009. She'd escaped the clutches of some local terrorists with a bit of help from her archaeologist friend Max Gruber, and was racing away from a gushing volcano. Turns out her spirited cameo in *Secret Files 2: Puritas Cordis* was received well enough to earn her a spin-off of her own, the simply-titled *Secret Files: Sam Peters*. This short but reasonably satisfying episode leverages the series' trademark high quality graphics and streamlined gameplay mechanics to update us on how Sam returned home from the burning island, and follows it up with a short, paranormal-ish adventure in a Ghanaian jungle. While there's nothing unique or complex on offer in terms of story or puzzles, Sam's brief case is polished and engaging, and should entertain players who enjoy inventory-driven adventures and are willing to approach this one with suitably modest expectations.

Speaking of expectations, here's one to keep in mind before embarking on this case: it takes only a couple of hours to complete – three at most – even without consulting the various in-game help tools. The quests are logical but easy, and surely won't challenge those weaned on the heavy-duty classics. Sam is a modern, career-oriented girl, self-centred but competent, and unlike Nina Kalenkov, the heroine of the original trilogy, she is motivated not by personal reasons but professional gain. To her, a case is just that: a part of her job as a reporter for the magazine *Uncharted*, which she describes as 'Playboy for scientists, (with) fewer naked women'. Over the short course of this investigation, though, she displays surprising empathy for complicated cultural situations and a strong moral compass, and whether she evolves personally to a level that can weigh short term gains against the big picture depends on the final choice you make on her behalf at the end of the game.

Sam's escape from the Indonesian island introduces you to the gameplay, and links her story to the main series. Presented as a potential romantic alternative for Max in *Puritas Cordis*, here she's reconciled to just being his friend. The new case is all her own, and starts off innocuously when she flies to Berlin's Humboldt University to interview a scientist who has made a sensational genetic discovery about a strain of algae found in a meteoritic crater lake in the forests of Ghana. But by the time she arrives, he has already left for his African encampment. Sam isn't ready to let go of her story and doggedly pursues him to Ghana, but her chase through the dense tropical forest imperils her to a host of threats, from ordinary opponents like irate warhogs to more sinister ones like the red-eyed ghosts – the Asanbosam – of local Ashanti legends. The story, based on supernatural elements drawn from West African folklore but grounded in plausible scientific theory, is tightly plotted, and Animation Arts does well to keep the quests focused on Sam's situations rather than throw in esoteric challenges for the heck of it.

The spin-off does all it can to keep things simple even for novice adventurers. Important milestones are tracked in Sam's journal, which also lists the playing instructions: left-click hotspots to move around and interact with objects, right-click them to get verbal descriptions from Sam, laced with her formidable supply of snark. A hotspot revealer momentarily shows all interactive areas, while a 'task help' button prompts you about your current objective without overtly spoiling it. Double-clicking the exits shifts instantly to the next area, and right-clicking dialogues allows you to skip ahead. Sam's progress is strictly linear, and she must complete all tasks in a particular location – each of which is composed of three or four screens – to proceed to the next. Cordoning off areas where quests have been completed streamlines navigation and eliminates needless backtracking, but also limits the scope of Sam's activities by paring down the number of usable objects, puzzles and places per segment to almost a bare minimum.

The inventory at the base of the screen usually contains about a dozen items ranging in complexity from letters and keys to large open bowls of liquid and modified grappling hooks, to be used with other inventory objects or in-game hotspots. While some items are discarded once they serve their purpose, most are not. A few practical things are re-used often, which saves you from repeatedly looking for essential tools like knives and lighters, but unnecessary objects like emptied containers also linger, creating confusion with their persistence. The excess baggage overworks the mouse in the default setting, which horizontally scrolls through your inventory item-by-item, but there's an option to scroll the list in sets of nine items instead. Meaningless or out-of-sequence object combinations aren't allowed, which reduces negative feedback and keeps you from getting mired in meddling with the clutter in Sam's backpack. Even better, sensible but incorrect matching attempts are rejected with valid reasons – which often hold clues to the right options.

While none of the puzzles are truly challenging or groundbreaking, they are well-integrated into the plot scenarios and are therefore interesting. The practicality of the objects, further aided by winks and nudges contained in dialogues and documents, makes the mixing-and-matching intuitive. Inventory-based obstacles are the mainstay here, but there are a handful of facile standalone puzzles as well, including a jigsaw, some pattern matches, a couple of object assemblies, and a bug-squashing exercise that warrants a bit of dexterity. A couple of elaborate quests employ enjoyable medleys of inventory and standalone elements – one in which Sam installs a series of sensors around her tent, and another where she explores a set of caves to decipher cryptic primitive wall art. Also fun, despite its lack of originality, is Sam's quest to brew a mystical potion with makeshift ingredients.

Most of the time, Sam explores alone. Only two other characters appear onscreen – a nun at an African convent and the scientist, Professor Hartmann – but their roles are abbreviated to basic exposition. Sam, however, is more than adept at carrying out a monologue, and flits effortlessly between practical professional and bitchy single white city girl. She takes her career as a scientific journalist seriously and is confident of her proficiency, but like all young careerists, she operates under the constant pressure of proving her mettle to her boss. She aggressively pushes her limits and frequently endangers herself for the sake of sensational bylines, but is also receptive to learning and evolving. Blonde, bold and beautiful, she introduces herself as 'comprehensively great looking' and 'highly intelligent', and is an unapologetic hedonist. Though she's essentially an Indiana Jones-esque character, addicted to the thrill of adventure, her inner diva regularly resurges to complain about her assorted crises with pointed barbs.

This duality of Sam's personality is illustrated via crisp dialogues, which balance the serious aspects of her investigation with her personal gripes. While on one hand she easily grasps the cause-and-effect of the complex genetic aberration of the much-feared Asanbosam, she also cribs uncharitably about her ex and provides a nuanced analysis of a restroom, stating that "if a dead fish and a tramp had a baby and the baby threw up into a dog's mouth, the dog's end product would smell better." Her one-woman act is ably supported by the well-emoted voice acting, which suits her age and persona, and charms with its pleasant, slightly sing-song tone. Though some documents are retained in the game's original German, spoken dialogues use colloquial English, peppered with mild profanities, and flow smoothly. The text is error free and in sync with the voiceovers.

Like its namesake, the game is a looker. The realistic art shines with sharp, high resolution graphics and brilliant colours that dazzle as you travel from the volcanic island in Indonesia to the lush tropical forest of Ghana via Hartmann's office in Berlin. Even within the all-round visual excellence, some scenes merit special mention: a view of the heavy, steaming lava coursing steadily down the volcano; a ghastly situation where Hartmann is attacked by humanoids; and a wide shot of Sam walking towards a solitary church in a forest clearing that makes you feel her hope and relief after a long night of terror. Besides the usual front-view screens, some top-down views provide graphical variety as well as map-like navigation. Environmental animation is subtle but effective, like the gently lapping waters on the Balinese shore or the lazily fluttering windsock at a sweltering field airstrip. Inventory objects are lovingly detailed, as are interface elements and journal entries, and hotspots are easy to locate even without the revealer.

Sam's lifelike 3D model is also well-animated. She holds her head a little awkwardly – straight up with her chin jutting out – but her movements and gestures are fluid and feel natural. She walks with long strides and swinging hips, and runs automatically when made to cover longer distances. Her actions when interacting with in-game objects – sitting, bending, crouching – are also impressive. Screens are stylised by varying the amount and type of lighting, and shadows are used extensively to create realism, particularly for Sam, though sometimes they give her face a grayish pallor. Of the few cutscenes that advance the story, one in which Sam is awakened in the middle of the night as predators approach her tent in the forest is genuinely chilling. Most expository segments use static slides with Sam's voiceover, but in the few scenes where she speaks in close-up, her lip sync sort of matches the spoken words.

Sam Peters has a melodic, tribal main theme, and in-game music is kept low, allowing sound effects to take precedence and create engrossing environs. The ambient sounds aren't overwhelming either, being judiciously restricted to essentials like the twitter of birds and distant animal calls when in the wild, to the low rumbling of the erupting volcano and Sam's footsteps on various surfaces. In all, the art, animation and soundtrack work in harmony to create immersive experiences during both idyllic moments and startling ones.

The main complaint about Sam's adventure is its brevity. Each location has only a few screens and quests, despite the significant potential for more given the scope of the story. It also ends abruptly, literally with a whimper, and then presents Sam with *yes* or *no* as options to a fairly obvious ethical decision. While Sam garners enough experience during the case to make an informed choice, the suddenness of the ending still feels like you unexpectedly ran out of playing tokens. Also, the question is unexpectedly popped into a conversation, and if you

haven't saved recently – an easy oversight as the game is extremely stable – you may have to replay quite a bit of it to know the aftermath of the *other* response (both are simply recited over static slideshows).

If judged on money value alone, *Sam Peters* is a hard sell. But if it's judged on whether it makes you want more, then it's a winner. The spin-off knits together modern science with genuine African folklore and easy but cogent gameplay to wrench back some of the thunder the series lost with last year's highly-anticipated but very disappointing *Secret Files 3*. By shouldering the entire assignment on her own, Sam proves that she can play in the big leagues with the super-competent Nina, and hints at working with her and Max on future cases, which means that there *may* be more secret files to dust off. It's over all too soon, but it's good to see veteran developer Animation Arts get back its mojo. The game works because it keeps its targets realistic and stays aware of its limitations, thereby achieving almost all that it sets out to do. And for this little big adventure, that is success enough.