

The Black Cauldron

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Al Lowe**

Part of series: **[stand-alone title]**

Release: 1986

Main credits: Game design: **Al Lowe, Roberta Williams**
Programmers: **Scott Murphy, Sol Ackerman, Chris Iden, Al Lowe**
Graphics: **Mark Crowe**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (91 mins.)



Basic Overview

Unlike Sierra's better-known early AGI titles such as *King's Quest 1-3*, *Space Quest 1-2*, or *Leisure Suit Larry In The Land Of The Lounge Lizards*, *The Black Cauldron* is one of those games to which I have no nostalgic attachment whatsoever. As an adventure designed specifically for children, it did not get much promotion back in 1986, and I first played it probably already well into the Internet age, as part of *George's Quest* to get acquainted with each and every one of Sierra's adventure titles. It was an interesting experience, however, in that I had never seen the Disney movie on which it was based (or, for that matter, read the books on which the Disney movie was based) — and found out that I was still able to form a mild attachment to the game on its own, despite the understandable confusion with its lore and internal logic. In spite of its shortness and simplicity, and in spite of being more tightly restricted by its source material than any of those other early Sierra games, *The Black Cauldron* still preserves its own charm, though, admittedly, it is much easier appreciated in the context of 1986 than any later year in video game history.

While at a certain point in time following up a commercial blockbuster with one or more video games based on its universe became a common practice — everything from James Bond to Harry Potter has been sucked up by the interactive medium —



back in the mid-Eighties this was certainly not the case yet, and those few movie franchises that did put out a tentacle into the world of digital gaming usually remained contented with simple arcade products, e.g. Broderbund's early *Star Wars* games where you just had to shoot up stuff. To the best of my knowledge, *The Black Cauldron* was not just a unique cooperation between Sierra and Disney, but, in fact, the very first graphic adventure game to be explicitly based on a movie (and, as it would turn out, Sierra's first and last such experience). This fact alone deserves that the game be at least enshrined in a museum or something; but there's actually quite a bit more to be said!

One reason why the game was so quickly forgotten is that *The Black Cauldron* itself — the animated movie, I mean — was received fairly poorly in its time. Based upon Lloyd Alexander's acclaimed fantasy series (*Chronicles Of Prydain*), it boasted Disney's hugest budget expenses to-date, featured the studio's first use of digital technologies, and had a generally darker tone than most of the stuff from Disney's post-war years; but either because of this latter circumstance, or because the movie was gruesomely cut up by Jeffrey Katzenberg (in the first of his many crimes against humanity), it flopped both critically and commercially, and even today remains more of a cult favorite than a properly revived survivor. Personally, I think that, with a few reservations, it's mostly fabulous — much darker and scarier indeed than anything from the «Disney Renaissance» that followed Katzenberg's arrival on the scene, not to mention being one of the very few Disney movies without a single Disney song in it (that alone should turn it into a sacred cow). But I guess this is not quite what «family entertainment» was all about in 1985, certainly not for those who'd previously feasted themselves on the likes of *The Fox And The Hound*.

I am not sure if the Disney people contacted Al Lowe because they were really thrilled with the idea of turning a movie into a video game, or out of financial desperation — with the studio losing money at a tremendous rate, they might have thought they could at least cut some losses by lending its soul to a different body. In any case, as [Al himself recollects](#), "*they gave me complete access to the original hand-painted backgrounds, the original Elmer Bernstein score, even the original animation cells, which were still literally lying in heaps, before being sent off to the dump!*" Amusingly, I also remember reading in some other interview with him which I cannot locate at the moment that the Disney guys were apparently confused when they learned that some of the player's choices could result in consequences different from the movie — the first documented case of a lack of proper understanding between the «linear» and «non-linear» medium, if you wish. Fortunately, Al was able to prove the rightness of his ways, or else the game would have been nothing but a pale shadow of the cartoon.

Unlike the other concurrent Sierra games like *King's Quest* and *Space Quest*, *The Black Cauldron* had one pre-attached condition: it was to be specifically oriented at a young kids' market, apparently including kids who still had problems with writing (but not reading). This resulted in the game being somewhat innovative (in its jettisoning the text parser), but also

limited its appeal — another reason why hardly anybody remembers it any more. It is quite telling, actually, that Sierra never tested those waters again: after *The Black Cauldron*, its only «toddler-specific» line of production was Roberta Williams' *Mixed-Up Mother Goose*, while all of its proper adventure titles, even including the «edutainment» line of *Eco Quest* and *Pepper's Adventures In Time*, were clearly family-oriented and could be enjoyed by kids and grown-ups on an almost equal level. There is no doubt in my mind that *The Black Cauldron* could have been much better, had it not been designed with a specifically pre-pubescent audience in mind — then again, I suppose Al Lowe himself suffered so much from this restriction that he just had to promise to himself that his *next* game would be decidedly oriented at a *post*-pubescent crowd. (For a good old culture shock, try beating *The Black Cauldron* and *Leisure Suit Larry In The Land Of The Lounge Lizards* one after the other, then come to terms with the fact they were written by the exact same person!).

Anyway, I don't even know if the game managed to recoup its (tiny) budget. It blipped on the PC gaming radar in a brief flash, then remained exclusively in the memory of a few 1986 kids and avid collectors. To this day, it'd be hard to find a proper review, and it is not even available for sale on GOG — though, admittedly, it does not have to be, since you can just download it for free off [Al's personal site](#). In the review below, however, I shall briefly try to demonstrate that making it was not a complete waste of time, and that even today it is quite possible for it to provide you with half an hour's worth of lightweight atmospheric fun — particularly if you're a 50-year old guy with a 12-year's old heart inside.

Content evaluation

Plotline

In general, *The Black Cauldron* sticks to the plot of the Disney cartoon, which was, in turn, condensed from several volumes of Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles Of Pridain*. Playing as Taran, «Assistant Pig-Keeper» for the old enchanter Dallben, you are supposed to employ the talents of your Oracular Pig, Hen Wen, to prevent an evil wish-granting macGuffin (the Black Cauldron in question) from falling into the hands of the Horned King — and, if it does, be ready to sacrifice your own life in order to stop the cauldron from working its magic and granting the King his own personal army of the undead. Along



the way, you meet many friends, such as the weird hungry creature Gurgi, the talentless bard Fflewddur Fflam, fairies, elves, witches, and a plethora of beautiful women, including Princess Eilonwy, to each of which you may hopelessly try to lose your virginity... oops, wrong game. Once again, Al Lowe got me confused.

Anyway, if you want to learn about the actual plot in more detail, go see the movie and / or read the books. Since it was clear that, by the standards of 1986, Sierra's game would never even begin to hope to match the beauty and the terror of Disney's animated visuals, Al cleverly decided to compensate in another direction — alternate plot twists. Being able to solve the same puzzle in several different ways was already a staple of Sierra games from as early as the first *King's Quest*, but *The Black Cauldron* actually went further than that. From the very beginning of the game, your quest could unwrap along completely different trajectories — for instance, you could lose Hen Wen, the pig, to minions of the Horned King and have to rescue her from the King's castle (just as Taran did in the movie), but you could also *avoid* the henchmen and bring the pig safely to the proposed hideout, following two not particularly complicated, but utterly different scenarios.

The most important choices came at the end of the game, where you could also follow the movie path if you so wanted (Gurgi sacrifices himself for the sake of his friends and is later revived by the witches), but could just as well trigger a much less uncomfortable ending (by means of a magic mirror), or, on the contrary, a far creepier one (jump into the cauldron yourself). There were also additional minor variations in your final interaction with the witches, so, on the whole, the number of possible different endings was formally huge — for a game that was supposed to be just a light footnote to a Disney extravaganza.

If only the game itself were a bit more epic on the whole, this plot mechanics could have turned it into an early masterpiece for Sierra. Unfortunately, in general there was simply not that much to do. The entire playable area occupied about a third of the Kingdom of Daventry (the Horned King's Castle alone had about as many rooms as the entire territory of Caer Dalben and its surrounding areas); dialog with most of the characters was reduced to a small handful of lines of text; and there was hardly any possibility to take a close look at any of the characters' personalities. It is almost as if the thrill of «rewriting Disney history» took over Al so much that he pretty much forgot to do anything else — including his notorious sense of humor, of which there is not a single trace anywhere. (Nor, for that matter, is any of the occasional humor in the movie transferred over to the game — one could at least hope for a secondary bumbling villain like Creeper to make a few gaffes, but I think the poor guy doesn't actually have even one line of dialog to his name).

In the end, the game leaves behind an odd impression. For a kid to play it after having seen the movie and be able to explore the different endings must have been an interesting experience, but just how many kids actually saw the movie *and* bought the

game at the time? And for those who did not see the movie (I only saw it after playing the game, for instance), how exciting could it be to play a game which quickly introduced you to a whole bunch of characters with weird Welsh names and unclear American purposes, then came to an abrupt ending just when you were hoping to actually get to know at least some of them better? Well... like I said, there's about half an hour of genuine intrigue here.

Puzzles

Given the game's specific age orientation, one should hardly expect a *Monkey Island* level of challenge, but that does not mean *The Black Cauldron* is just a breezy walk in the park. In order to make the game «easier» for children, Al Lowe introduced a revolutionary mechanic — he abandoned Sierra's usual text parser, which could theoretically make him, rather than Ron Gilbert of LucasArts, into the father of point-and-click mechanics, except there was one small impediment: in 1986, most PCs still had no mouse support, which meant that any interaction with objects on the screen



still had to be handled via keyboard. The only solution was to have your character move as close as possible to the required hotspot, then have him press one of the function keys to interact with it (F8 to look, F6 to «operate»).

The system is not difficult to get used to in general, but figuring out specific details can be frustrating. In a regular Sierra game around that time, for instance, when coming upon a bridge across the river, you knew it always made sense to type "*look under the bridge*" even if the screen itself gave you no hint of anything valuable under it — there could always be a payoff. In *The Black Cauldron*, in order to look under the bridge you have to move into a very specific position, wading into the water, and press F8. Considering that most of the locations on the screen will give you a generic response, not a lot of people — certainly not a lot of children — will even think about such an option, and, consequently, will miss a very useful object which is not crucial to winning the game, but can make your life a hell of a lot easier throughout it.

No surprise that the most «complicated» puzzles in the game are the ones that require finding something — like the hideout to where you are supposed to bring Hen Wen, or navigating your way across the rocks at the foothills of the Horned King's Castle. (All this maze stuff is, of course, present in other Sierra games as well, but here it is at the forefront just because

everything else is so simple). The actual object-based puzzles are mostly trivial; the most difficult thing is arguably not to lock yourself out of the game's best ending by rushing too far ahead — ironically, those who would play the game *after* watching the movie are more liable to fall into that trap than those who did not, and are therefore not intuitively motivated to blindly follow the turns and twists of Disney's plot.

A few of the challenges involve action-style mechanics — for instance, there is a primitive «combat system» where you have to properly time your sword swing to knock out the Horned King's henchmen; a short climbing mini-game where you have to scale the walls of the castle while avoiding falling boulders; and, of course, plenty of agility requirements when you have to navigate your character around tiny twisting paths over moats and precipices. I hate that shit in an adventure game, and I suppose the kids who played it must have hated it as well, but Sierra would not budge on its classic principles — whether you're a kid or an adult, death is a space of equal opportunity for all of us.

An extra impediment is that Taran actually needs to eat and drink every once in a while — a notable innovation for Sierra, whose King Graham and Prince Alexander could easily roam all over Daventry or Kolyma without the need to take a bite — however, this quickly becomes an annoyance, particularly if you forgot to refill your flask before infiltrating the Castle, where you can easily avoid all the evil henchmen only to fall dead in the middle of your escape... from dehydration. This is precisely the kind of cruel discipline that ultimately cost Sierra its long-term reputation: people like to be disciplined with their video games no more than they like to be in real life.

Still, as far as 1986 goes, the quality of the challenges is not that far behind the average *King's Quest* (at least, the first two games in the series; *King's Quest III* was already on another level). Beating the game is not challenging, but beating it with the full score of 230 points without a walkthrough could take a few tries even from a grown-up; and as for kids, I cannot state with certainty that the elimination of the text parser actually makes things all that easy — unless the kid in question does not know how to write (but they still have to know how to *read*). I'd actually say that the easiest aspect of the game is how short it is — I guess that Al Lowe regarded the kids of 1986 as having the same IQ as grown-ups, but a shorter attention span... which, come to think of it, may not have been far from the truth.

Atmosphere

Unfortunately, this is where being based on a Disney movie — a *good*, if thoroughly underrated Disney movie — really hurts the game. When it comes to the Kingdom of Daventry, there is no single, direct prototype which it is based upon, and so you can sort of regard it as a little CGA universe in itself; the land of Prydain, however, is a straightforward projection from the

cartoon, and there was no way that the beauty and the terror of classic Disney animation could even faintly be evoked in a video game around 1986 (Sierra would remember that dream, though, and come close to finally bringing it to life with *King's Quest VII* eight years later). When your Horned King looks more like a roast chicken on two legs and your three evil witches look like a 3-year old's drawings, you gotta have one hell of a power of imagination to compensate for the distance between the game and the movie.

Still, an interactive game is an interactive game, and immersing yourself in the character always helps. In designing the map, Al clearly relies on the experience of Roberta Williams, who had already excelled in delimiting between the «safe» and the «dangerous» zones of the Kingdom of Daventry, with subtle transitional buffers in between. Here, too, you begin the game frolicking in the cozy, cuddly green meadows of *Caer Dallben*, before the need to save *Hen Wen* or kick the shit out of the Horned King brings you to the swampy and forested areas, where it can be pretty unnerving to make your way through the evil-grinning purple trees. Overall, the contrast between «safe» and «dangerous» zones works here just as fine as it does in the old *King's Quest* games – and for a game *specifically* designed for 10-year olds, I would say that the level of scariness is just alright. I know *I* felt that familiar sense of relief each time I got out of the forest / swamp and back to the green grass of *Caer Dallben*, and I played the game while being at least twice as old as its recommended age!

It is too bad that the atmosphere could not be supported by meaningful dialogue; even though it would have technically been quite possible to make the characters' interaction a bit more sophisticated than it is, Al never goes beyond the bare minimum, way below even the dialog in the movie, let alone the books. One could suggest that it was specifically due to making the game accessible to younger players, but the truth is that it actually has precisely the same level of verbal sophistication as the *King's Quest* games, which were explicitly targeted to everybody. Indeed, such was Sierra's style at the time, and while Al would soon push those boundaries forward a bit with the *Larry* games, here he was perfectly happy to take Roberta as his role model in this area as well. Alas, it's just a bit difficult to form a «bond» with «your friend» Gurgi, if pretty much the only thing you ever hear, er, read out of his mouth is "*Hi! I'm Gurgi. Do you have any munchings and crunchings for me?*"



Technical features

Graphics

In terms of visuals, *Black Cauldron* is neither bad nor outstanding for its time — the art is handled by Sierra's chief early artist, Mark Crowe, and is hardly all that different from his work on *King's Quest*. In fact, the land of Prydain looks very much like Daventry (or Kolyma), at least as far as the «safe», green zones are concerned; for the «evil» zones, Mark chose a deep purple palette which, along with the sickly green water in the moat around the Castle, gives the Evil part of this world a slightly more psychedelic flavor than anything he did for *King's Quest*. (Some of the assets, however, were blatantly recycled from that franchise — for instance, the alligators in the moat were «borrowed» directly from the moat around King Edward's Castle at the beginning of *King's Quest I*). And I may be wrong, but I think that on the whole, there is a bit more of a concentrated attempt to dazzle the young player with the dashing colors — check out the final screen, for instance, where the heroes, echoing the finale of the movie, walk into the sunset: dark and light green grass, blue mountains, purple flowers, yellow-tinged clouds reflecting the setting sun (and they're *gliding* across the screen!), and a mix of blue and purple for the sky. This kind of «CGA scenery porn» can hardly be found in any of the *King's Quest* games to that point.

The smaller details, unfortunately, remain as sketchy as always: for inevitable technical reasons, sprite models of Taran as well as various NPCs bear not the slightest resemblance to their prototypes in the movie, although at least Crowe had to design a variety of new sprites (the Horned King, Creeper, Gurgi, Hen Wen, the three witches, etc.) which had no direct precedent anywhere. And he does try relatively hard — it is cute, for instance, how the sprite of Princess Eilonwy looks just a little bit hunched, just the way she walks in the movie (for that matter, she's also strictly flat-chested, unlike, say, the sprite of Princess Rosella in *King's Quest III*), or how funnily — and how fast — Gurgi waddles across the screen. These are all, of course, just minute historical details, but it is instructive sometimes to pay attention to all the subtle graphic tricks those early artists and animators had to resort to in order to make those 320x200 pixel screens come to life.



Sound

Okay, so this section will inevitably be kept to a minimum. The entire game has but TWO very brief musical themes, dutifully adapted for PC speaker from the original Elmer Bernstein score (strangely enough, he is not actually credited in the game) — one dark (the Horned King and the Cauldron!), one light (the green pastures of Caer Dallben!), plus a few tinkly-dinkly sound effects here and there, mostly recycled from other games as well. I suppose that Al himself must have programmed the themes, being a musician and all, but given that, as he himself recognizes, the studio was given full access to the complete score, I feel he could have profited from it a bit more. That dark opening theme does sound pretty decent when transposed from PC Speaker to MIDI, anyway.



Interface

As I already mentioned in the «Puzzles» section, the *Black Cauldron* interface is pretty unique in Sierra history — this is, essentially, a parser-based game whose parser skills have been cut off, much like the tongue out of a mouth of an annoying blabberer. While I think it was an interesting decision at the time, I am not even sure if it was *really* and *sincerely* caused by the desire to save the young and innocent toddler from the need to learn how to spell the word ‘cauldron’, or if the real reason behind it was that Al and his team were pressed for time and had no desire to write even brief descriptions for the many objects on the screen that the young and innocent toddler could be curious about. In any case, the result was a system that could not have been anything but confusing for the toddler.

In this interface, you «look» at things with F8 and «operate» on them with F6 — why F8 and F6? Because F5 and F7 had traditionally been reserved for Saving and Restoring the game in the Sierra engine. F1 is Help; F2 turns the sound on and off. What about F3 and F4? These, even more confusingly, were reserved for «selecting» an object from your inventory (F3) and «using» it (F4) on yourself (if it is a food object, for instance) or your adversary (if it is a sword). So this means that if the Horned King’s henchman approaches you and you have to cut him down, instead of simply writing ‘hit guy with sword’, you have to press F3, select the Sword from the newly opened inventory window, press Enter, then wait until the henchman is in

reach and press F4. Uh... okay. You *can* get used to it. The question is, why *should* you? To add insult to injury, there are *three* different ways of handling your inventory — see a simple list of all the stuff you're carrying by pressing TAB; «see objects» by selecting this option from the menu, where you can actually scroll through the same list and bring up small pictures and descriptions of the objects; and the F3 «select object» command. Poor young and innocent toddlers.

In short, it does not take a genius to see why this approach would not be adopted by Sierra for further games, and why the elimination of the parser would have to wait until a proper point-and-click interface would be elaborated four years later. Yet there is still something to say about dead-end experiments like those — at the very least, unlike a successful, well-tested and comfortable formula repeated from game to game, they tend to stand out in memory (like the much-maligned combat systems of the first *Witcher* and *Mass Effect* games, abandoned for their inconvenience to players but still remembered with a mix of hate and curiosity for at least trying to be innovative).

Verdict: *Minor curio with a surprisingly high number of thought-provoking features.*

Only a professional video game historian (that's not me) or a nostalgic fan of Sierra On-Line (that's more like me) could ever bother these days about replaying or even remembering *The Black Cauldron*, yet this is not because it was a bad game — more because its goals were so noticeably humbler than those of the titles surrounding it. Short, highly derivative of both the movie it partially recreated and the artistry of the far superior *King's Quest* titles, replacing the text parser with an even clunkier interface, and explicitly oriented at younger audiences, it couldn't even begin to hope to compete with Sierra's main lines of production at the time. I don't think it was ever included in any of Sierra's anthologies, and even GoodOldGames does not regard it as worthy of being sold for money (so Al Lowe just gives it away for free), so why bother at all?



Still, I don't think it would be right to claim that the game does not have its own «soul». Almost any product from the dawn of PC gaming has at least a bit of it, and *The Black Cauldron* is no exception. It *was*, after all, one of the first attempts at transforming an animated movie into a video game, a task that was taken seriously and with respect to the difference in

potential of the two types of media — all those branching paths and alternate endings for which AI had to fight with the Disney people were very symbolic of the opposition between «linear» and «choice-based» approaches to storytelling in video games, and should necessarily be present in any historical account of that struggle. With a slightly larger budget and a little more respect, *The Black Cauldron* could have easily beaten *King's Quest* in terms of lore, sympathetic characters, and plot tension; unfortunately, neither Disney nor Sierra were wise enough to recognize this opportunity.