

The Colonel's Bequest

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Roberta Williams**

Part of series: **Laura Bow Mysteries**

Release: October 1989

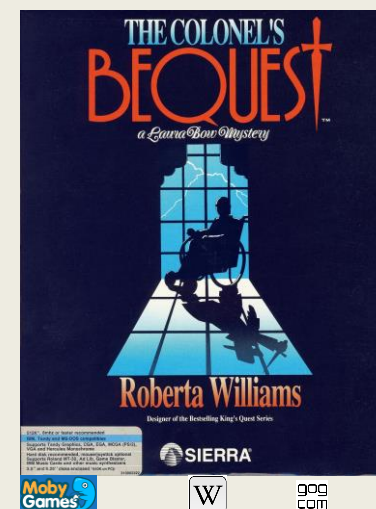
Main credits: Programming: **Chris Hoyt, Chris Iden**

Music: **Ken Allen**

Graphics: **Douglas Herring, Gerald Moore**

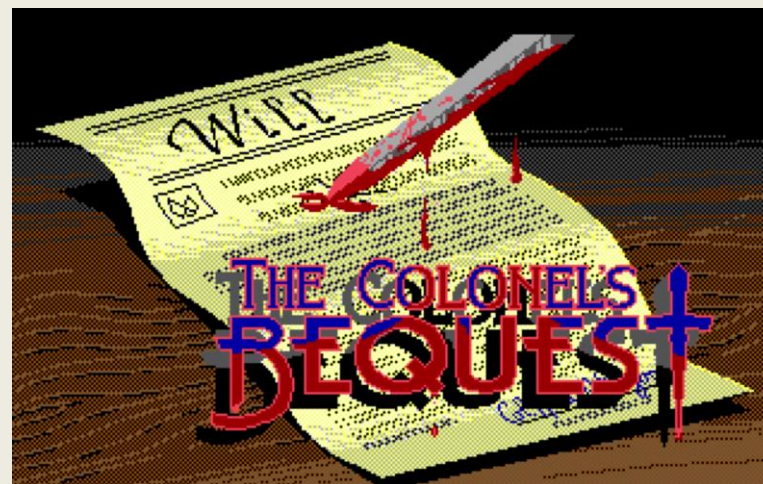
Development System: **Corinna Abdul, Pablo Ghenis, Jeff Stephenson, Stuart Goldstein**

Useful links: Playthrough: [Complete Playlist Parts 1-7](#) (422 mins.)



Basic Overview

The Colonel's Bequest holds a certain amount of nostalgic value for me — the way I remember it, I think it must have been my very first «unboxing» experience, way back in an era when second- and third-hand pirate copies of videogames, transmitted through friends and colleagues, were still the norm in faraway Soviet Russia. Back then, it all looked like a miracle — an actual *box*! Colorful art on the front and back! Serial numbers! Manual! A cleverly designed copy protection system that comes with its own magnifying glass! And, of course, all those carefully numbered and marked floppies — I think I still only had a 5-inch drive at the time, so these funny little square 3.5-inch diskettes had to just lie around for a while. Even if the game were to suck in all sorts of terrible ways, I knew I had no goddamn right to dislike it. (Honestly, looking at digital copies of all that memorabilia even today, I think that the packaging was quite outstanding for its time, and can still serve as a good example of how to serve your product to the customer).



Fortunately, the substance turned out to be quite on par with the packaging. Combining a decent – and even somewhat disturbing – mystery plot with the atmosphere of both a Gothic novel and the exuberance of the Roaring Twenties, *The*

Colonel's Bequest once again expanded the borders and technical potential of the Sierraverse in ways that few people thought possible in 1989; and although most of the veteran players today prefer to gush about its sequel, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra*, the original Laura Bow mystery as envisaged by Roberta Williams continues to retain that exclusive bit of «silent-movie charm» that is naturally lacking from the sequel.

As was already established with her *King's Quest* games, Roberta Williams was never as much a talented «video game storyteller» as she was an awe-inspiring «video game mother figure». Her games never featured much creative dialog (because she was never an outstanding writer) or challenging, unpredictable plot twists (because she was a traditionalist at the core, and seems to have always operated on a «far wiser people than us have already invented all the good stories» basis). But she had a great knack for transferring humanity's accumulated artistic baggage into the medium of video games, providing classic fairy tales with a new kind of digital life, showing great love and admiration for the genre and — this is going to be particularly important to us — never shying away from their gruesome and gory elements. Thousands of mentally traumatized gamers probably still remember all the jump scares they got from Evil Wizard Manannan or that pesky cave troll in *King's Quest IV*...

Gruesomeness and gore was actually the way things started out with Sierra and Roberta Williams way back in 1980, when they were releasing their very first graphical adventure game — *Mystery House*. Incidentally, thrillers and mysteries were the real love of Roberta Williams, and even after Sierra struck gold with *King's Quest*, leaving Roberta with the necessity to continue upgrading that fairy-tale formula, her craving for detective stories never subsided. Finally, after *King's Quest IV* gave the lady her biggest hit yet, she decided that the time had finally come to diversify her line of production, and that implied going back to the spirit of *Mystery House* and fully upgrading it for the next generation of video gaming. *The Colonel's Bequest* does indeed share the premise of that game — the protagonist being locked up in a large mansion with bodies piling up all around, an idea itself borrowed from the concept of Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians* — but puts it in a much larger, multi-level context, where the surrounding atmosphere matters just as much — actually, matters much *more* than — the mystery itself.

As far as I can tell, *The Colonel's Bequest* — as opposed to its sequel — is Roberta's own brainchild in its entirety, though, of course, she is not directly responsible for the game's beautiful visual art or excellent soundtrack. She would only assume such full responsibility one more time (for *King's Quest V*), with all of her other games made either in collaboration with other Sierra talents (Jane Jensen, Andy Hoyos, etc.) or being «Roberta Williams» largely in name only (most of *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* would actually be written by Josh Mandel). This makes *The Colonel's Bequest* share all the common flaws of a typical Roberta Williams game — such as the near-total lack of humor (except for all the unintentional bits), a certain rigid straightforwardness, relative absence of subtext, etc.; but all these qualities were, amusingly, just as helpful in the early days of

computer gaming as they may seem detrimental today, because the «minimalism of essence» as espoused by Roberta fits in very well with the «minimalism of style» as determined by the improving, but still quite sparse technical possibilities of the late Eighties / early Nineties.

What I'm trying to say is that Roberta Williams was really the perfect gamemaker for the years of 1988-89, and these *were* the years during which she delivered her two best games: *King's Quest IV* and *The Colonel's Bequest*. And even though the fame and appeal of the latter seems to have largely faded away with time — even when people nostalgically mention Laura Bow, they usually do it with Josh Mandel's *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* in mind — I think that this is more the result of an unfortunate combination of circumstances than of the game's actual flaws. After all, unlike *King's Quest IV*, *The Colonel's Bequest* did not trigger a revolution in the gaming world (even if it did introduce some unprecedentedly neat new features); for many players, it was just another murder mystery game, of which there were already quite plenty on the market. Well... maybe it was, yes. But it was definitely a murder mastery game done in great style, and hopefully what I plan to write below will remind us all that every once in a while, great style may happen to be even more important than great substance.

Content evaluation

Plotline

No «pure» Roberta Williams game ever made could boast a truly original plot, and when it comes to the art of murder mystery, she is about in the same proportional relation to Agatha Christie as she was to Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm in her *King's Quest* affairs. That said, it is unfair to accuse someone of lacking something that was never truly supposed to be there in the first place: *The Colonel's Bequest* is all about immersing yourself in the atmosphere of a unique environment while hunting for clues, not about admiring the ingenious twists of the story. Plot-wise and character-wise, the entire game seems to consist of nothing but tropes and clichés — the more the merrier, which is just the way Roberta's creative mind works.



That said, at least the set-up is pretty decent for an old school adventure game. The story takes place in the 1920s, with you playing as Laura Bow, a young and, as befits the «Roaring» decade, independent-minded student at Tulane University in New Orleans, who is invited by her friend, the dapper-flapper Lillian Prune, to spend the weekend at her uncle's old plantation house somewhere down in the bayou — apparently, Colonel Henri Dijon, a grumbly old veteran of the Spanish-American War, has called a large family gathering for some unknown purpose, and Lillian is loth to take the long river journey on her own. After arriving and acquainting themselves with the large crowd of people — which includes not just the Colonel's close relatives, but his personal doctors, lawyers, and staff as well — Lillian and Laura soon learn the real reason for the invitation: apparently, the Colonel has just written up his will, in which he wishes to distribute all of his impressive wealth in equal shares among everybody present (except for Laura, of course). This immediately sets off a storm of bickering — apparently, none of the guests are able to stay civil for long — and soon after dinner, as the guests retire for the evening, somebody promptly begins bumping them off, one by one...

This is, of course, not so much a set-up for a proper story as it is for a board game like *Clue*, and, try as I might, it is hard to find anything even remotely special about the plot. The stylistic combination of the «old world», represented by the slightly dilapidated plantation mansion itself, the elderly characters such as the Colonel and his sisters, the ancient ghosts in the cemetery, the antique newspapers in the attic etc., and the «new world» of the 1920s, represented by the younger guests and their habits and attitudes, works well enough, but it's more a matter of atmosphere than storyline, and will be discussed later. The plot, however, mostly just gets busy trying to suck in every single stockpile character feature from the classic pulp market. Characters include the Creepy Lecherous Old Doctor; the Ruthless Cynical Lawyer; the Silent British Butler; the Slutty French Maid; the Wise and Loyal Black Cook; the Dumb And Beautiful Blonde Hollywood Actress; the Dashing, Egotistically Evil Young Gambler With Moustache; the Drunken Old Widow Sister... have I forgotten anybody? Oh yes, there's also a parrot (who, naturally, talks and can occasionally spill some useful beans), an old warhorse and an old dog — all of whom can be suspects, too, from a certain angle, if you so desire.

The story, formally segmented into eight hour-long «Acts» that stretch out from early evening into late night (you have to complete a certain set of four «quarter-hour long» actions to trigger the next act) develops in a fairly straightforward manner: Laura wanders around the mansion and the outside grounds, interacting with the various guests for questioning and eavesdropping on some of them for extra bits of their personal stories. At the beginning of each new «Act», she can (and usually will, unless you really suck at pathfinding) run into a fresh dead body of one of the guests — which will, however, miraculously disappear as soon as she leaves the grounds, leaving her unable to prove to anybody else out there that a new

murder has just been committed. This is just a crude artificial device, of course, planted by Roberta to keep the game moving in accordance with the same pattern for all the acts — otherwise, it'd require too much extra work on the characters' reactions to the murders — unfortunately, it makes it rather hard to suspend the proverbial disbelief, reminding you over and over again that this is just a digital equivalent of a board game, rather than a true life simulation.

Another piece of bad news is that, for all of her alleged independence and astuteness, Laura Bow is not much of a character herself — not in *this* game, at least. Regardless of how many private conversations you have overheard, of how much evidence you have gathered, of how many bodies you have located, you are essentially unable to fit yourself into any of this story — other than getting killed, that is, if you do something that you weren't supposed to be doing (like... taking a shower!). You cannot prevent any of the murders; you cannot properly warn any of the guests; you cannot call the police or make anybody leave the plantation island before dawn. All you can do is hop around, talk, pick up objects that don't make sense to anybody other than yourself (even if it's a blooded poker or an actual weapon), and wait for the next turn of events. There is only one serious choice of action made available to you at the very end — and you'd have to be *very* dumb, or, actually, more like «maliciously curious», to take the Bad Ending choice out there. All in all, when it comes to Roberta Williams' famous list of Intrepid Female Protagonists, Laura Bow loses to Princess Rosella hands down. (Although it would take Adrienne Delaney from *Phantasmagoria* to fully complete the «Helpless Damsel Watches As World Burns» trope).

The game's dialogue somewhat inverts Woody Allen's classic «the food is so terrible, and such small portions!» joke by being, in fact, quite terrible, but coming in VERY large portions for compensation. If you aim for a truly thorough exploration of the game, you shall soon find yourself doing almost nothing but talking to the various characters — particularly in the first two or three acts, when most of them are still alive. You can ask *or* tell just about anybody about just about anybody else, or *anything* else, including the Colonel's pets and each single item in the ever-increasing inventory of your evidence — moreover, in an absolutely head-spinning twist you can expect to get *different* answers in *each new act*, which, altogether, makes up for hundreds, if not thousands of lines of dialogue: the hugest ever amount of text in a Sierra game up to that moment. The down side is that approximately 90% of that dialogue is either completely useless, or totally boring, or both (the most common case). E.g.: «Ask the Colonel about the monocle» — ‘*so it's a monocle, what do I care?*’ (Act I), ‘*leave me alone with your monocle!*’ (Act II), ‘*I don't know anything about a monocle!*’ (Act III), ‘*stop pestering me about monocles, young lady!*’ (Act IV), ‘*monocles? we don't need no stinking monocles!*’ (Act V). (I actually made all these up on the spot, but I think I got the spirit largely right). Getting a useful clue from all this talk is a needle-in-a-haystack kind of thing. And don't even begin to hope for anything humorous to come out of it — as we all know, Roberta Williams simply does not have a sense of humor,

period. I don't think any single character drops even a single joke throughout the entire game; it would take Josh Mandel and *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* to teach them Roaring Twenties' people to actually talk funny.

Although pretty much each character has their own backstory and their own skeleton in the closet (including the Plantation itself, which has its own mysteries dating all the way back to the Civil War), they are all board game clichés. Some have problems with alcohol, some with gambling, some have secret or semi-secret romances or painful breakups going on, some are victims of circumstances and some are schemers and predators... it's all in the line of duty. Everyone is just a cardboard figure, voicing predictable issues and behaving in predictable patterns. The dirty doctor makes vain passes at you, the nasty lawyer keeps on insulting you, the flirty French maid gets it on with whoever she lays her eye upon, the silent English butler keeps silent, and only the Loyal Black Cook feels lonely enough to regale you with a few lengthy stories about the Plantation and its former and present owners after you gain her trust (*if* you get her trust — this is something you must work for), but even the Loyal Black Cook, as expected, is a church-going Voodoo practitioner with a sixth sense about things.

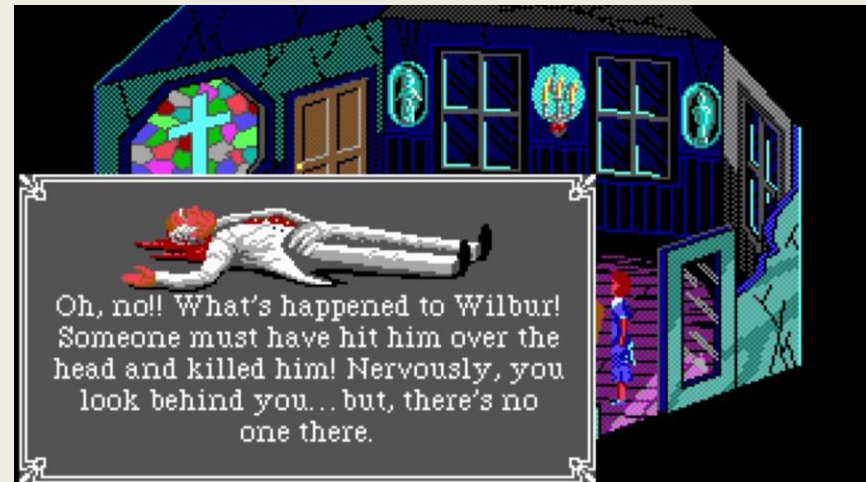
Pretty much the only character with a curious case of split personality is Laura's best friend Lillian, who starts out as a snarky, life-savvy flapper, but soon emerges as an actually deeply psychologically disturbed victim of a childhood trauma, with bipolar disorder just around the corner. Of course, she is not given much space to evolve and thrill you as a character, but at least she is somewhat memorable, unlike any other character in the game; I do remember the original strange feeling I got upon watching her transform from a character who felt fun to be around to a character who felt dangerous to be around, and I guess this motive is something that holds a special meaning for Roberta as well, as she would later continue to explore it with *Phantasmagoria*.

All in all, though, remember that if you do decide to boot up *The Colonel's Bequest*, you're not really doing it for the story — if you want top-level murder mysteries and detective romps in your adventure gaming, you're much better off with the *Nancy Drew* or *Tex Murphy* series. The genius of Sierra On-Line in its Golden Age rarely lay in the story plotting or dialog writing anyway, and the games that were personally designed by Roberta Williams are probably the best evidence of that. All that *The Colonel's Bequest* had going for itself in that respect back in 1989 was the hugeness and monumentality — such a great lot of content compared to pretty much anything that came before — and with time going on, this is obviously no longer a relevant factor, what with so many games now having so much more action and dialogue, and all of it a far higher quality. Let us take a look, then, at some other aspects of the game to see what, if anything, actually continues to make it worth the while of the Discerning Antiquarian.

Puzzles

One might suppose that, perhaps, if the plot of *The Colonel's Bequest* is largely just a board-game dummy setting, then maybe its true strength lies in the challenges laid out before the player. And there are quite a few challenges indeed — except that they are not the kind of challenges you'd expect from a genuine murder mystery. As I already said, there is practically nothing Laura Bow can do to influence the course of events; furthermore, no matter what you do or do not do over the game's eight «acts», you will always have to face the exact same final choice, and you can ace it or blow it regardless of the amount of evidence you have discovered. Worse, I'm not even sure if there is a strictly logical solution that leads to definitively proving that the «bad ending» is indeed «bad» and the «good ending» is indeed «good» — because much, if not most, of the evidence you collect and discover can really be interpreted in different ways. In the end, I believe that it all boils down to sympathy: of the two remaining characters at the end, one is the killer and the other one is innocent mostly because one has proven himself to be a general scumbag and the other one is... just grouchy, but with a heart of gold. So much for *real* detective work. I'm not implying that everything is completely predictable from the get-go, and there is at least one twist in the plot that will come as a surprise, but it is still unlikely that Roberta Williams shall ever be admitted to the Agatha Christie / Dorothy Sayers club in Heaven.

We should certainly admire Mrs. Williams for her noble effort to do something *different*, compared to Sierra's previous games. For one thing, *The Colonel's Bequest* completely dispenses with the classic point system — in this game, you do not play for points, you play for information and evidence. Unfortunately, nothing too good came out of the idea, because the essence remained the same: the game still requires you to successfully complete a large number of actions in order to achieve the best detective ranking at the end — most of these actions are optional, and many can be easily missed, and the only difference is that now the game does not explicitly let you know when you have performed a useful task. (There's a tiny encouraging beep played whenever you pick up a piece of evidence, but you have to keep your sound on all the time, and there are no such sounds when you do something useful in a different way — for instance, ask one of the characters an important question, or investigate a stationary, non-removable object).



For another thing, this is probably the first Sierra game which can be beat — technically — by doing almost *nothing*. A veteran speed-runner could technically complete the game in about 5-10 minutes; all you have to do is run around the mansion and the outside grounds, stumble into certain NPCs or groups of NPCs, and trigger the clock-advancing events, about 30 of them in total to cover the entire eight «acts». You don't *need* to discover any bodies or secret locations, you can get away without picking a single piece of evidence (other than take one key off one body at the very end), you might not want to talk to any of the guests at all (and I wouldn't blame you, as most of them really have very little to say). And you can *still* nail the killer at the end, even without knowing who exactly he has killed.

The only thing that will be different during the final reckoning is your status on a little thermometer that can, theoretically, go all the way up from «Barely Conscious» to «Super Sleuth». Both the lowest *and* the highest rankings are comparably difficult to achieve — to be «Barely Conscious», you really have to go out of your way to not see *anything* out of the ordinary during the night (like, actively avoid all the locations with dead bodies, which is itself a logistic challenge), whereas the «Super Sleuth» ranking can be achieved only if you successfully complete more than 95% or so of all the tasks marked in your notebook, some of them related not just to the main topic, but to various outside matters as well (e.g. «Person Wishing To End An Affair», «People With Gambling Habits», etc.). As the game rarely gives you any hints in the process, this is excruciatingly difficult to achieve without a walkthrough or hint book, but that's Sierra On-Line for you, nothing too surprising here, other than the lack of intermediate satisfaction because of the elimination of the point system.

In other words, beating the game in general is super-easy; beating it with the highest possible rank is super-difficult, though there are maybe only two or three challenges in all which I would consider completely unfair (for instance, a couple of things that depend upon randomized scripts running during your visits to secret rooms). Even so, *The Colonel's Bequest* is not so much a «puzzle-solving» game as a «disciplinary» game: you get most of your progress not from wrecking your brain for complex solutions to specific problems, but simply from being as meticulous and obsessive as possible. Discipline yourself to *look* at everything (not forgetting the magnifying glass!), *push*, *pull*, *open*, and tamper in various ways with everything that can be tampered with, *talk* to everybody, and you're pretty much set. There is, I think, only one multi-step puzzle that you have to solve in order to discover the plantation's ultimate historical secret, and even that one hardly requires true creativity, just a lot of snooping around to collect all the necessary paraphernalia.

One more innovative detail in the game was the addition of a bunch of post-game hints, issued to you on account of everything you forgot or did not figure out while playing. These are often quite vague and faint (e.g. "*look for multiple rusty objects*", "*murderers leave 'tracks', check them closely!*", etc.), but it's still better than nothing — prior to *The Colonel's Bequest*, the

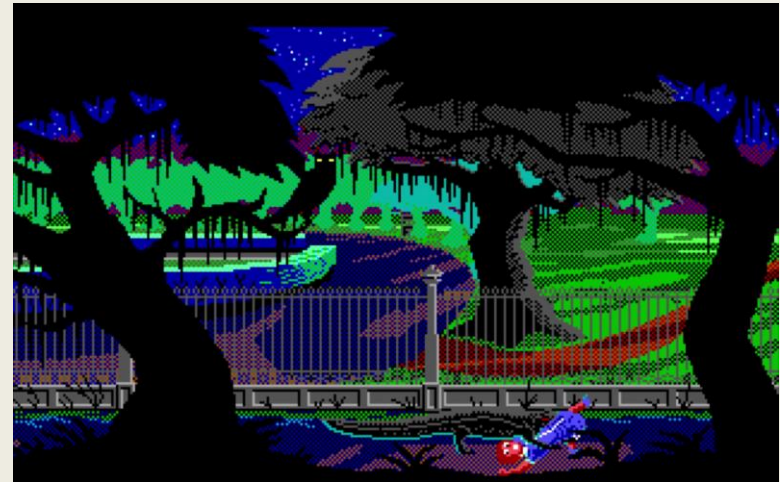
only way to get *any* hints from Sierra was to give the company more money (by calling their service or buying a hint book). The same technique was also borrowed by Al Lowe for the third game in the *Larry* series, on which he was working at the same time, but I think that ultimately it did not stick, largely because the only reason for a post-game hint series is to point out the optional tasks that you might have missed, and as time went by, the number of optional tasks with extra points in Sierra games grew progressively smaller anyway. For *this* particular game, however, where almost *any* task is optional, the hints were quite essential, as they could at least point you in some vaguely specific directions.

In any case, the puzzle system of *The Colonel's Bequest* is a classic case of Noble Intentions soiled and neutered with Dumbass Execution. The single worst thing is the total detachment of the game's finale from the protagonist's work over the eight «Acts» — none of your choices and actions have any direct bearing on the denouement, and any evidence that you may have collected is useless to the plot (it only makes an impact on your final ranking). Ultimately, this makes the game fail as a true «murder mystery challenge», in much the same way in which it just failed as a potentially involving «story». Is there *anything*, then, that in any way redeems it as a memorable playing experience?..

Atmosphere

As usual in Sierra games, when all else fails, atmosphere and ambience come to the rescue. I would all but bet my life that nobody who'd played *The Colonel's Bequest* back in its time remembers it specifically for its brilliant plot or inventively designed puzzles — but that most people probably remember how their Laura Bow ended up in the hungry jaws of a swamp alligator, or fell under the knife of the murderer while trying to take a shower, in a totally and utterly gratuitous and just as totally unforgettable stylistic nod to *Psycho*... «just because we can».

There are two main components of the game's atmosphere, and its unique stylistic charm is generated on the border of both, in a synthesis that might feel just a bit post-modern, or a touch surrealist / absurdist, but is most likely just an innocent accidental byproduct of Roberta Williams' fantasy. The first of these is the modern / progressive attitude of the Roaring Twenties: from the opening introduction shot of Laura and Lillian on the campus of Tulane University to the younger generation of guests invited to the Colonel's family reunion, all dressed up in the



latest fashions, smoking, drinking, playing pool, listening to ragtime and foxtrot records on their Victrolas, talking hip and acting cool. Also, having only recently made her move with one of the first «pro-active» female protagonists in the video game business (princess Rosella), it is hardly a surprise that Roberta chose the Twenties, rather than any other decade, for her mystery — giving her plenty of space to work with independent, resourceful lady characters, standing on their own in what was no longer an exclusively «man's world». Even the female victims in the game, before they, like everybody else, succumb to the violence of the mysterious murderer, have time to put down their self-confident male partners. It's very much a «new girls' world» here in the old Mansion, come to disturb its tranquil patriarchal state, in ways both good and evil.

Or, maybe, not so tranquil after all, because the second and even more pervasive part of the atmosphere is the Legend of the South. Where games like *Resident Evil* like to trap you inside creepy, danger-choked closed buildings, making you yearn for the wide open spaces, *The Colonel's Bequest* does the opposite — it's a game that promotes agora- rather than claustrophobia, if you get my meaning. In theory, staying outside the plantation house is not really as dangerous as staying inside it — the murderer does not seem to be interested in getting to you in the open air, and all you really have to do is avoid getting too close to the alligator-infested swamp and river. But in practice, staying outside at night, with all the eerie shadows thrown around from the Spanish moss on the trees, with all the croaks and creeks of unseen living beings, with glowing alligator eyes staring at you from nowhere, with thunder and lightning on the horizon... wandering around this place is really like a cold shower right after the warmth and coziness of the sunny spaces at Tulane.

The inside of the plantation house, especially in the first few acts while most of the people around you are still alive, is where you really want to find yourself as quickly and as much as possible. I remember this contrast vividly — one minute, you're standing in the outside darkness, with the wind howling and the frogs croaking and maybe a couple hungry alligators snappin' at your heels (it was all imagination, of course, but the game did great at instilling fear inside your heart); the next minute, you step inside the living room and there's the dashing Gloria Swanson (yes, with a hilariously brilliant final -g) sitting in her feathers and boas, listening to life-giving, relaxing bits of 'Maple Leaf Rag' or 'The Entertainer' on the Victrola. No other game at the time succeeded so well in making you run into the welcoming hands of modern civilization from the vicious, terrifying maw of Mother Nature.

Of course, modern civilization had its own drawback: a serial killer on the loose, who could crop up in the least expected places — from the bathroom to an empty closet in the hall. The plantation house had other ways to kill you as well — Laura could end her life buried under a fallen chandelier, chopped in two by a rusty axe on an old suit of armor, or, ironically, squashed to pulp under the weight of civilization's latest achievement, the electrically-powered elevator. Still, for some reason,

the plantation house was never nearly as creepy as the outside, and it was fun exploring how modern life, in one way or another, was finding its way inside something so decidedly mid-19th century. There are tons of fun artifacts, from mechanical pianos playing rolls to Murphy beds to old-fashioned doll houses to weapon collections; almost each room in the house has its own special face, even if, unfortunately, there is only a very limited amount of things you can do with them. (You *can* close and open the Murphy bed, if you so wish, provided there isn't a dead body lying on it!).

It is all these contrasts between the old and the new, the safe and the dangerous, the creepy and the comfortable, that really make the game worth playing and its universe worth visiting. The experience is not particularly «realistic»: even in those of her games which are supposed to take place in the «real» world, Roberta Williams is still far too fascinated by Gothic novels and Hammer horror to make her environments and her characters' actions fully believable (this would reach a certain absurd peak with *Phantasmagoria* half a decade later), but does this really matter when you're going for more of an emotional punch than an intellectual appraisal? Particularly when that emotional punch is more likely to be received by simply wandering from one game screen to another, rather than by actually *doing* something?..

Technical features

Graphics

Although it is difficult to name any specific visual breakthrough achieved by the art and animation team of *The Colonel's Bequest*, on a general scale the game, upon release, probably looked more stunning than anything previously released on the SCI engine. Technically, all the parameters were the same as for any Sierra game since *King's Quest IV*, but there was far more attention to detail *and* far more work on the actual animation of Laura Bow's world done — no wonder that it took my old PC literally ages to load up each new screen, yet each new screen was well worth the wait. And I am happy to say that, with properly lowered expectations, the game *still* looks good on modern PCs, having lost none of its colorful vibrancy. While some of the last EGA-based Sierra games from 1989-1990 could go overboard with emphasizing the importance of each single pixel, creating a visual mess in the process, *The Colonel's Bequest* got the balance quite right.



Already the introduction was done in great style: a close-up of the Colonel's will, with his hand slowly tracing out the signature (*Col. Henri A. Dijon*), whereupon a bloody dagger pins it to the table, and the dripping blood gradually transforms the game's title from blue to red. This kind of detailed cinematography was never before seen in a Sierra game, and immediately created the feel that you're about to witness, and participate in, something truly special. Thereupon, the scene would change to an introduction of all the NPCs ("*Starring...*") — who were seen both in their miniaturized sprite forms *and* in animated close-ups: an excellent device that immediately drew you in closer to the «actors»; remember that up until then, Sierra was *really* skimpy on close-up graphic design for both the playable and the non-playable characters.

The backgrounds were painted with two things in mind: detail and atmosphere. The importance of the second parameter also becomes clear as early as the intro, when the opening scene of Laura and Lillian meeting on the lovely greens of the sunlit campus of Tulane University is immediately followed by the mix of black, dark blue and deep green of the plantation island at night — giving you just a quick opening glimpse of safety and comfort before landing you fair and square into the gloom and danger of «non-civilized» America. The mix of vague shapes and dark shadows as you move from one plantation screen to another is often disconcerting and confusing, and it always looks as if one of these shadows might materialize and grab you... and occasionally it does, if the shadow in question is a hungry alligator.

Detail, on the other hand, serves a more pragmatic purpose, since you are expected to be hunting for evidence, and evidence may be concealed just about anywhere. Unfortunately, about 90% of the surrounding paraphernalia are just red herrings, but then again, isn't that just like it is in real life? Almost every single room in the mansion is cluttered with stuff, and it's usually lovingly depicted stuff: bookshelves with colorful titles, mantelpieces with shiny exhibits of guns, richly upholstered chairs, globes, vases, pots, toys, you name it — apparently, the plantation's previous owners were quite compulsive hoarders in their day. Most of that stuff is depicted quite well, too, even such tiny bits as a small derringer pistol in a glass case — I do not recall ever wasting time, wrecking my brain on how to identify an object before trying to "look" at it or pick it up.

Most importantly, *The Colonel's Bequest* featured far more animation than ever before in a Sierra game (the real reason why the whole damn thing ran so slow). As you walk around the plantation, froggies are jumping around, alligators move from land to water and back again, and huge lightning flashes in the sky keep spooking you into thinking they're coming for you sooner or later. Inside the mansion, clocks are ticking, lights are flickering, the parrot is getting impatient in its cage, and the guests are busy talking, smoking, drinking, eating, reading, or snoring in their beds; nobody *ever* just stands still at their post. As a result, the world of *The Colonel's Bequest* was far more dynamic than, say, the world of *Police Quest II*, even if the latter took place on a lonely island in the swamps and the former in the supposedly hustlin'-and-bustlin' Lytton City.

The best work of all, arguably, was done for the close-up portraits of the characters and their animations. The actual sprites look about as ridiculous today as they always did — there's no escaping the sad graphic limitations — but in close-up (and you are going to see a *lot* of close-ups if you're good at sleuthing and discover all the ways to spy on the different characters early on in the game), they are all fully representative of their personalities: the gruff and grumpy Colonel, the salacious and unpleasant Doctor, the arrogant Lawyer, the dashing Hollywood actress, the sexy French maid, etc. There's even some reflection of character development in the close-ups — for instance, Lillian looks all sweet and happy while chatting up people at first, then has her expression change to all-out rage and anger in Act V during her sorting things out with «Uncle Henri», when she learns that she is apparently not nearly as «special» to him as she'd always thought.

Of course, all of these praises have to be taken with a grain of salt, as we're still talking graphic standards of 1989. But if I have any real complaints about the game, they are certainly not going to be directed at the visuals — which seem to have been produced with far more love and care than the actual plot or dialog. *The Colonel's Bequest*, like almost any Roberta Williams game, is a triumph of atmosphere and style over substance, and the game's artists, Doug Herring and Gerald Moore, seem to have invested much more personality into its characters than Roberta herself.

Sound

It goes without saying that the soundtrack for the game, especially its MIDI version, had to be an even more integral part of the atmosphere than the visuals — and it is here, I suppose, that my observations about the cool dichotomy of the game are particularly fully vindicated. Newcomer Ken Allen, for whom *The Colonel's Bequest* would become his first serious project with Sierra, understood perfectly well that he had to divide his efforts more or less equally between «The Jazz Age» and «Hammer Horror», and his work on the game is probably my favorite of all his soundtracks (he would also go on to be the main composer for *King's Quest V* and *Space Quest IV*, but there's just a bit less conceptualism and a bit more, let's say, «incidentalness» on both of those). Given that *The Colonel's Bequest* came out too early to be able to include voice acting (Laura Bow would have to wait until *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* to talk to us), the music is even more important.



Sound-wise, pretty much the entire game is built around the alternation of «merry» and «sinister». The opening theme is a haunted-house church organ dirge, after which the credits roll accompanied with a catchy, danceable piece of woodwind-led MIDI vaudeville. Laura Bow at Tulane University gets her invitation from Lillian to the sound of a lively foxtrot (or is that the Charleston? I confess I'm really bad at my popular 1920s dances) — but arrives at the Plantation Island immediately after to the sound of a grim cemetery tune, symbolizing not so much the upcoming murders as the overall air of death, desolation, and otherworldliness associated with her destination. All of these mood shifts are quite vivid; the themes truly set the mood rather than merely hint at it from a formal point of view.

Unfortunately, there is not really a lot of music beyond the introduction and ending sections; music that would constantly run in the background, like it did in *Leisure Suit Larry III*, for instance, would probably detract from the suspense — thus, while wandering outside the Mansion, Laura's journeys are only accompanied with sound effects (whistling winds, thunder in the sky, croaking frogs, hooting owls, splashing alligators, that sort of thing), which is still creepy enough, I guess. Inside the house, most of the music actually comes from music-playing sources — in the Billiard Room, for instance, Gloria Swanson will ceaselessly spin her Victrola tunes, which are either borrowed by Ken from 1920s' dances or composed by him in the appropriate styles; Laura, meanwhile, can wind up the mechanical piano and play a bunch of nice, brief arrangements of Scott Joplin ragtime pieces ('Maple Leaf Rag' goes off real great!). In addition, the French maid Fifi seems to have really cool musical taste, with a nice stock of classical records such as Satie's 'Gymnopédie No. 1' and Ravel's 'Bolero', adding a whole extra dimension to her stereotypical sex doll personality.

Every now and then, there is also a musical joke or outside reference included — for instance, the shower murder scene almost obligatorily alludes to the strings of *Psycho* (just like the shark theme in *King's Quest IV* had to be borrowed from *Jaws*), and the 'Drunk Ethel' theme playfully and painfully distorts, contorts, and mutilates the melody of one of the game's other themes... for no other reason than to slightly brighten up your night when you've just narrowly missed being eaten alive by an alligator, and need to be reminded of the fun side of life which involves drunken old ladies fearlessly roaming on the premises (no alligator would probably touch one of *those*).

In short, despite the laconic nature of the soundtrack (everything put together, including the rags and Satie, occupies about 40 minutes at maximum), it is extremely vital to the game — and it actually sounds not half-bad even with an old PC Speaker (which is the way I first heard it, having no sound cards or Roland synthesizers)! I also think this was the first time in Sierra history when the soundtrack included so many different MIDI rearrangements of classic musical pieces, in addition to original composing — it sure helped that most of them were already in the public domain by 1989.

Interface

Although, in general, the gameplay system in *The Colonel's Bequest* was typical of most of Sierra's second-generation golden-age titles, the stylistic and substantial changes introduced by Roberta all but required things to be at least *slightly* different in terms of the accompanying interface as well. In fact, things are quite noticeably not what they used to be right at the start of the game — featuring what is probably the single most original «copyright check» device in Sierra's history, so elegant, in fact, that it is the only copyright protection mechanism I find myself occasionally *enjoying*. Even before the title screen, you are asked to identify a fingerprint belonging to one of the game's characters (each guest has two different ones) which you have to look up in the accompanying copy protection sheet that came with the box — except that sheets like that could be xeroxed, so they are cleverly masked on the sheet so that you can only really see them with the aid of a special red-lens magnifying glass. (Naturally, since there were only 12 characters, you could theoretically take your time and reach the correct answer through a lengthy series of trials — with the initial chance of success being 1 in 24, that would not be such a tough job — but then again, I doubt people could be that patient even back in 1989).



This is original, elegant, classy, and, in a way, constitutes the most actual detective work you shall be doing throughout the game — and not much of a deterrent, since sooner or later you shall begin to memorize those nifty little prints anyway. It also prepares you to realize that this is going to be a *somewhat* different experience, and, indeed, quirky little changes from the usual style of *King's Quest* or *Space Quest* quickly follow. For one thing, since the points system has been eliminated, the overhead menu bar is typically hidden; it can be easily accessed by pressing a key, but generally, the bar never obstructs your sight, contributing to the «cinematic» experience. For another, the usual style of «black text inside a simple white box» has been replaced here with «white text inside an ornamental black box», giving the game both a bit of Art Deco flavor *and* a murder mystery one. (Unfortunately, they couldn't do this with the pulled-up menu itself).

The game's parser shares the usual flaws and benefits of a Sierra parser, recognizing quite a few commands and objects but certainly not enough to be fully adequate to the amount of detail in the pictures. The good news is that there are shortcuts:

interaction with other NPCs is made easier by allowing you to press key combinations to «Ask about...», «Tell about...», «Show...», and «Give...» (you only need to type in the object of your inquiry or transaction; the addressee will be automatically determined by the game based on your relative positioning on the screen). «Look at...» is also a shortcut, but, unfortunately, there is no specific «look at... with the magnifying glass» shortcut, which really drags after you actually *get* the magnifying glass and have to type that in repeatedly (yes, sometimes it is actually necessary).

True to its detective story mission, the game has no action or arcade sequences whatsoever, the most «action» thing about it being the need to watch your step, particularly on the outskirts of the plantation where deadly bogs and hungry alligators await, and an occasional timed sequence or two, where you have to take a quick decision in order to influence the story or get a higher ranking. This can certainly lead to a point where you simply get tired of spending most of your time «asking» or «telling» other people — but at least with people dropping dead around you at a steady pace, by the time the last acts roll around, there is hardly anybody left to ask (and the few people around you who *are* still alive typically get grumblier all the time and eventually just refuse to answer any more questions — what a relief!).

As I already mentioned above, the one bad thing about eliminating the points system is that you are never properly informed of your overall progress, except for the major events that advance time 15 minutes forward. Sometimes it is fairly obvious that you have progressed, for instance, when you pick up an object or notice something unusual about it through close scrutiny; at other times, it is much less so, e.g. when you finally accidentally ask somebody an important question or spy upon a meaningful conversation (some conversations are there only for decorum, and some actually reveal significant information, and it is not always evident which is which). I can understand Roberta's disdain for the classic points system — when people play for points, they tend to turn the entire experience into a mechanical hunt-for-achievement algorithm — but couldn't she have at least introduced, I dunno, a flashing lightbulb or something each time you make another tiny step on your long and winding road to «Super Sleuth»? And those «hints» at the end really do not help all that much.

Still, with everything pooled together, Roberta does achieve her goal which she proudly states in the «About...» section of the menu: "*The Colonel's Bequest*" is different than the so-called "normal" adventure game as it was designed around a story and characters rather than a series of puzzles..." Like these changes or not, the game was an interesting experiment in broadening and tweaking Sierra's standard formula, and while not every such experiment did work in Sierra's history (here's looking at you again, *Codename Iceman!*), the tweaks introduced to *The Colonel's Bequest* mostly worked. At the very least, the new interface certainly contributes to the overall atmosphere — and, as I said, this game is all about atmosphere.

Verdict: *When the awesomeness of a murder mystery has nothing to do with either murder OR mystery...*

As is so usual with Sierra, anybody who begins and ends their judgement of *The Colonel's Bequest* by asking the question «just how good is this game as a *game*?», will almost inevitably descend into a plethora of complaints (many of which, though probably far from all, have been tackled above) and even more inevitably start bringing up LucasArts or, in this case, some classic *Tex Murphy* game or *The Last Express* to back up the case of what a true murder mystery videogame may and should

look like. As a *game*, *The Colonel's Bequest* was not particularly good when it came out and it certainly has not improved with age. But as a multi-media *experience* in which the total sum is expected to be greater than the parts, *The Colonel's Bequest* was an inventive, inspired, and technologically creative application of the classic Sierra formula. In fact, its principal flaw was not so much the lack of serious puzzles or the stupid plot or the boring dialog, but rather the emphasis its advertising campaign took on how it was all about you, the player, being supposed to practice your logic skills in a game of wit — when, in reality, the most wit one has to exercise here is on figuring out what to do with that strange red magnifying glass in your box.

Now if only the game had advertised itself for what it really was — a trip to a slightly surrealistically-warped dimension in which you, the player, made characters from the 1920s bump into and clash with memories from the 1860s, with just a touch of Edgar Allan Poe from a more distant past and Alfred Hitchcock from a more distant future sprayed around the edges — its overall reputation might have securely solidified by now. The underlying cultural and moral implications to this «clash» are simple enough — the present held in the iron grip of the past; the greed, stupidity, and vanity of the modern age next to the eternity of nature and the briefness of human life in comparison; the «honored tombstones» silently looking down on their dishonorable descendants, etc. — but the atmosphere of the game really makes them work. And although it is true that in most respects, *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* would put *The Colonel's Bequest* on its knees (once the franchise essentially migrated from Roberta's lap under the wing of Josh Mandel), the second game in the series could never even begin to be described with the term '*haunting*' — which I seriously considered employing at the beginning of this review. But then I thought it a little too tasteless. (So I found this way to stick it at the end instead!)



Of course, given the sheer number of positive retrospective reviews and the typically warm welcome that *Colonel's Bequest*-related videos seem to receive on YouTube nowadays, it can be stated with relative safety that the game is not completely going away any time soon — and that its art style, soundtrack, atmosphere, and (not the least) educational value are still capable of attracting attention and providing inspiration, maybe even from some people born in the 21st century. There are even some indie-style tribute projects floating around (e.g. Julia Minamata's ongoing *Crimson Diamond* project), and there have been attempts to revive the game by remaking it in 3D (abandoned, I believe) — which would be a mistake, I think, since I honestly do not believe that *The Colonel's Bequest* would ever work that well in a modernized version; to do that, you'd have to vivisect its childlike soul, and that would make it into something completely different, for better or worse. Instead, let's just make sure it continues to be available and to *haunt* us people of the 2020s with its 1980s vision of a 1920s future ruined by the ghosts of the 1860s...