

Gold Rush!

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Ken & Doug MacNeill**

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

Release: 1988

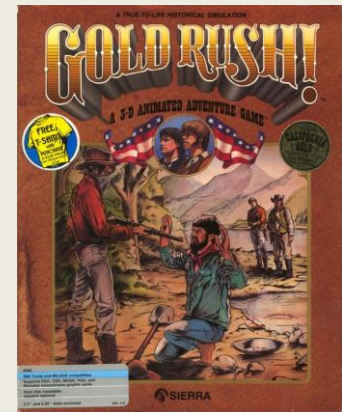
Main credits: Programmers: **Ken MacNeill**
 Graphics: **Robert Eric Heitman, Doug MacNeill**
 Music: **Anita Scott**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (322 mins.)

Basic Overview

For quite a solid chunk of its history, Sierra On-Line liked to present itself as a pioneering force in the field of digital «edutainment», apparently believing — quite sincerely, not just as a marketing gimmick — that they had a moral obligation to not only tickle their customers' emotional fancy, but also to help them expand their minds, broaden their knowledge base, and (eventually) even improve their social conscience. Unlike their sarcastic-nihilistic competitors at LucasArts, people at Sierra took their jobs *seriously*. They were the responsible parents who made sure you were safely tucked away in bed at the appropriate evening hours, while LucasArts were rather your mischievous drunken uncle who'd wake you up in the middle of the night slinging apple cores and banana peels at your window.

In a general sense, already the very first **King's Quest** that put Sierra on the map was «edutainment» — it introduced you to the world of classic, time-honored fairy tales in which *you* were an active character yourself; so much more fun, apparently, than just reading the books. Still, in its essence the **King's Quest** series was not so much about education as it was about overcoming the limits of Roberta Williams' artistic fantasy: unable to come up with a fantasy universe of her own, she instead



relied on the tried and true to achieve her goals. Subsequent series could all be said to contain a certain amount of educational value — **Space Quest** taught you some rudiments of science fiction, **Police Quest** trained you to be a cop, and **Leisure Suit Larry**, er, uhm, well, you know... — but Sierra yet had to design an actual title that could lay a proper claim to being able to replace an actual school textbook for the player, while at the same time not losing the advantages of involvement, excitement, and basic fun delivered by a computer game.

Enter brothers Ken and Doug MacNeill, two experienced Sierra employees who had proven their worth to the company as early as the original **King's Quest** (Ken was in charge of programming, Doug was working as a graphic artist) but so far had no credits for actual game design behind their belts. Information on how exactly they got the idea about making a game based on 19th century American history, and how they managed to sell it to Ken Williams, is not easy to come by: Williams does not even mention the game in his book, and the MacNeills pretty much seem to have vanished off the surface of this Earth after shipping the title — apparently, soon afterwards they left not just Sierra, but the digital industries altogether. Which is a bit surprising, given the exceptionally warm reaction received by **Gold Rush!** upon its original release. Perhaps (I also have no information here) it was a commercial disappointment, but in any case it certainly did not stop Sierra from further delving in the «edutainment» department.

The brothers chose the California gold rush of 1848 as the game's main theme, which gave the studio a tremendous challenge: come up with a vaguely credible simulation of mid-19th century America, contrasting its urbanized environments with the Great Wilderness without embarrassing themselves too much over the pitifully limited capacity of the AGI engine. With any previous Sierra title, you could always work around any encountered obstacle by bending and twisting your imaginary universe whichever way you'd like, but the challenge set here was to ensure close-to-100% historical, cultural, and stylistic accuracy; to that effect, the game was even accompanied with a special edition of the small 1980 paperback *California Gold: Story Of The Rush To Riches* (by Phyllis and Lou Zauner), more a collection of (not always verified) historical anecdotes about the Gold Rush than a serious study but still certainly a more useful and detailed source than any regular school textbook — and also, as it happens, an excellent way of ensuring copy protection, so the player had absolutely no choice but to open it on a new page every time he/she booted up the game.

Exactly how well-balanced history, entertainment, and playing mechanics turned out to be is something we shall try to figure out in the main body of this review, but, as I said, contemporary assessments were largely positive, and as far as I can tell, veteran Sierra fans still have fond memories of the game, for various reasons. **Gold Rush!** even boasts the dubious honor of being the only classic Sierra game the rights to which have managed to be salvaged from the Vivendi / Activision / Microsoft

mafia, due to Ken Williams' benevolent decision to donate the ownership back to the MacNeill brothers upon their leaving Sierra — only for them to resell them later to little-known German developer Sunlight Games, who apparently released a remake of the game in 2014 and then made a sequel in 2017; however, both of these were panned by fans and I am sure they had good reason to (I'll return to this for the conclusion). Still, it's quite a telling bit of trivia: after all these years, the game is still remembered with fondness by people who may even be willing to pay for an up-to-speed modernization.

Content evaluation

Plotline

Unlike the classic **Oregon Trail** which **Gold Rush!** was obviously inspired by, Sierra's product is not a «strategy» title, but a proper adventure game where you generally get by through solving puzzles — and which, like any adventure game, must have an actual plot based around specific game characters for the puzzles to be inserted within. Thus, the MacNeill brothers came up with the idea of Jerrod Wilson, an everyday newspaperman from Brooklyn who, like so many of his peers in 1848, gets caught up in the prospect of going to California to make his fortune. The only additional angle here, making Jerrod a tiny bit more special, is his complicated family history, including the mysterious fate of his long-lost brother Jake — who, throughout the game, acts as the unseen guiding hand to his younger sibling. Even so, the addition of the «looking for one's lost brother» motif is merely a common trope like any other: on the whole, Jerrod Wilson is there only to give you a tiny glint of individuality. Even by the standards of Sierra's earliest games, he comes across as easily the least memorable of all of the studio's protagonists (well, maybe King Graham of Daventry can offer some competition, but he at least has the justification of having been the first on the scene — meanwhile, Jerrod Wilson already had to compete with characters as colorful as Roger Wilco and Leisure Suit Larry).

Fortunately, the game is really not about the family troubles of a colorless Brooklyn newspaperman; it is about setting the Brooklyn newspaperman in the middle of a global chain of events. For the most part, all you have to do is follow the generic scenario that is already vividly described in *California Gold*: the Average Joe, disillusioned with his dreams of making it big in



the city, reads about the discovery of gold in California — the Average Joe sells off his property to buy a ticket to Sacramento — the Average Joe reaches his destination by land or by sea, braving whatever natural or human obstacles there are along the way — the Average Joe procures his equipment, claims a stake, grows a beard, and eventually finds his fortune. (Well, in the latter case the game does offer a helpful shortcut: if you do not want to spend a lifetime looking for fortune, it always helps to have a mysterious long-lost brother to find it for you).

The good news is that this is a case of life indeed being more exciting than fiction: all the MacNeills had to do was stick to the conventional historical narrative (admittedly, somewhat embellished by folklore) and lo and behold, the game is nowhere near as boring as might seem natural for a game with, at best, the tiniest sliver of an original plot. Throughout, Jerrod passes through tons and tons of «ordinary» situations (for 1848) that look anything *but* ordinary out of the comfort zone of the late 20th (let alone early 21st) century, and the sheer quantity and diversity of these situations — which the MacNeills try to get you to tackle as realistically as possible in the context of an early PC adventure game — ensures that «boredom», apart from an occasional bit of grind here and there (more on that in the next section), is not a concept that will frequently spring to mind while you're busy playing.

Arguably the best remembered thing about **Gold Rush!** is the decision that Jerrod would be able to use three different routes to get from New York to Sacramento — a land route (by means of an ox-driven cart), a lengthy sea route (across Cape Horn), or a shorter sea route interrupted by a foot trip through the Panama Isthmus, the exact same choice that real people had to make back in 1848. This threeway split was quite a novel idea, heavily exploited by the studio («three games in one!») and actually implemented much earlier than the Team / Wits / Fists paths in **Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis**, which usually get all the praise from retro-reviewers. In both cases, the «three games in one» marketing slogan was a bit of an exaggeration, since the lengthy initial and final chunks of the game would be essentially the same; however, the middle parts are indeed completely different, adding a ton of replay value, for the first time in Sierra history. Moreover, this cannot even be called a gimmick — the three-path mechanics is there simply to provide even more historical accuracy.

Historical accuracy is, in fact, probably the only key to properly assess the quality of the plot, and, predictably, it only falters in those areas of the game that have to do with puzzle-solving; e.g. (*spoiler alert!*) discovering that you have to go through a toilet hole to reach a secret gold mine sure makes for a great head-scratching conundrum, but something tells me that this was probably *not* how it used to be in 1848, even if you desperately needed to conceal a mining paradise from the jealous eyes of prying neighbor seekers. Overall, though, this is not much of a problem, and occasional puzzle-related absurdities are well compensated by the ability to simply walk around, poke your nose into everything, and get frequent (but not too lengthy)

updates on the various elements of American landscape, culture, and everyday life in the mid-19th century.

The game becomes especially text-heavy during the course of Jerrod's journey to Sacramento, with both the land and sea routes heavily peppered with enlivening details (e.g. "*The food on board is not as bad as expected... The usual fare is hard-baked biscuit, salted beef, and boiled pudding once a week. Very few get sick from eating them*"), but the MacNeills clearly take care about the game's pacing: stretches when control is wrestled from your hands, with the game unrolling on its own, are well interspersed with mini-quests that usually require you to extricate yourself and your companions out of the next hurdle (thunderstorms, famine, impassable areas, etc.), with education and entertainment mixed in generally comparable doses.

Modern players with rigidly progressive mindsets will, of course, cringe somewhat at how the game completely bypasses or bungles historically sensitive issues — such as the fact that «natives» in the storyline feature merely as one more natural disaster to be brushed off (there is actually only one hostile encounter with them in the Panama jungle, with the dialog limited to something like, "*The lead native on the shore yells, 'Hungo bungo, kram a zumba!'*") — but it would be incredibly naïve to expect a PC game from 1988 to do full historical justice in such situations. Thankfully, they are very few: while the game certainly does focus on the plight of the white American male, it never (well, *almost* never, if you forget about that native encounter) attempts to culturally elevate him above anybody else (admittedly, by means of omission). Nor does the plot really try to offer any serious morals or judgements; all the story tells to you is a stern «this is how the people used to live and act back then», and it does so credibly, even if I'm sure that history professors will easily spot hundreds of minor inaccuracies (some of them probably inherited already from the authors of *California Gold*).

Indeed, I appreciate how, on very rare occasions, the MacNeills are even able to slip in bits of genuine drama. If you take the long sea route through Cape Horn, for instance, you are introduced to the companionship of Eric, a young man like yourself, first presented as an intelligent, healthy, happy, and aspiring fortune-seeker, but then beginning to become eaten up by some unnamed illness (T.B.? malaria? leukemia? nobody really knows). He gets progressively worse as the journey continues, until one day you simply do not see him any more — without a single word of explanation from the game. (Apparently, if you think of the proper command — "*find Eric*" — the game just brushes you off with a laconic "*Eric was buried at sea*").

This is one of those situations where the laconicity of the game, technically due to the general brevity of Sierra titles at the dawn of the PC age, subconsciously turns into a grim and shocking artistic twist; I remember being quite seriously disturbed by the wordless disappearance of Eric even when I first played **Gold Rush!** in the 1990s. (Though I think I remember being aggravated by the ignominious death of the little piggie, the ship's mascot, even more — the poor guy does not even end up

saving the passengers from starvation, but actually gets spoiled and ends up quite pathetically as fish bait.) Unfortunately, the same kind of dramatic tension could not be applied by the MacNeills to Jerrod's own family history.

Overall, though, it goes without saying that **Gold Rush!** is hardly an exercise in imaginative storytelling; for the most part, the «plot» is just a series of diligent illustrations to the vividly exaggerated depictions from *California Gold*. No big surprise here — in 1988, Sierra adventure games in general did not yet place much emphasis on thrill, suspense, and unpredictability. Much more important for them was to bring your brain to boiling with frustrating puzzles, while at the same time soothing it with seductive environment — so let us see how the game fares on both of these fronts.

Puzzles

The very fact itself that **Gold Rush!**, unlike any previous Sierra title, was based on stern (if, inevitably, somewhat skewed) historical reality set a special challenge for the designers — where the classic idea of an adventure game puzzle was close to «*anything goes*», with the fantasy settings of the imaginary universes allowing for any kind of twisted or absurdist logic, puzzles in **Gold Rush!** had to be as realistic as possible. I mean, if you set your game in New York around 1848 where your character needs funding for his trip to California, you can hardly expect the player to



deduce that the money is to be found in the form of gold bars hidden in a tree hollow in the cemetery that you can reach by luring an eagle with a leg of lamb and making him carry you right to the tree top. You *can*, however, read the book and learn that people used to sell their property before heading out West, so that should give you the right idea.

Unfortunately, realism in adventure games comes with a price tag: most of the genuinely realistic puzzles are just... *simple*. When your character has to behave more or less like he would behave in real life, and especially if you are also aided by a detailed manual on life in the mid-19th century, beating the game becomes a fairly simple challenge. And if you know a thing or two about the general Adventure Gamers' Code — «leave no stone unturned», «pick up everything that is not nailed down», that sort of stuff — then it hardly even begins to be a challenge. Going over all the situations from which poor Jerrod has to extricate himself, I can hardly remember any where I would have to waste hours on a solution, other than, perhaps, an

occasional conflict or two with the usual rough-hewn early Sierra text parser. Nor do I remember any particular elegance to these challenges — no textbook examples on how to concoct the perfect adventure game puzzle in this game.

One aspect of the game's realism that was always highly questionable is its reliance on random events. In order to stress just how much depended on pure luck, the MacNeills implemented a bunch of situations where Jerrod could simply die due to factors totally beyond your control — like your ship running into an iceberg, or Jerrod himself catching some deadly disease and giving up the ghost (what made things even more confusing is that *some* diseases were inevitable, but curable if you prepared for the situation in advance, but *others* were random and uncontrollable). As a reminder of just how fickle Mother Fortune can be, these little programming pitfalls were probably effective, but they also threw the fun factor out the window, and quite likely made not a few players rage-quit the game, vowing to never pick up another Sierra title again. But think about it from today's perspective — how many games are out there where your character can just... *randomly* drop dead at any given point? As the Reverend Gary Davis predicted decades earlier, *death don't have no mercy in this game*.

Another side of **Gold Rush!**'s realism is the heavy use of realtime strategies: this was not the first time for Sierra to rely on actual passing of time (**King's Quest III** already set the bar high enough), but in **Gold Rush!**, you find yourself constantly working against the clock — particularly in the Brooklyn part of the game, where you have to figure out what is going on and get yourself a nice ticket to the West Coast *before* the Gold Rush is officially announced, causing a sharp decline in property value and closing off the sea routes. Later on, there will be all kinds of deadly situations that require quick responses, again, potentially causing quite a bit of nervous distress, although this is fairly typical of most Sierra games. Finally, to dispense with the realistic approach once and for all, let us also mention a couple of very annoying «grinding» moments when you simply have to perform the same digging operation over and over again to find all the required gold to let you buy your supplies or receive the full amount of experience points. Realistic? It might seem so, on one hand. But on the other, I seriously doubt that Californian treasure-seekers would blindly pan their gold-carrying sand at *any* random spot down the Sacramento River; there must have been *some* clues at least — clues that would have required much more effort to incorporate in the game, so instead you just have to shuffle around the screen like an idiot, poking your shovel or your gold pan around and praying for mercy to your soulless random number generator.

All of this only serves to prove the old adage about *realism* and *fun* being two opposite ends of the same pole — something that game designers in 1989 had not yet perfectly figured out. (Then again, most people in the world still think of Indiana Jones as the most famous archaeologist in the discipline's history). The approach chosen by the MacNeills must have been quite impressive to a lot of people back then — a small step toward making one genuinely relive history through the miracles

of the digital age — but it kind of goes without saying that the degree of such realism as achieved in, say, **Red Dead Redemption 2** sweeps the achievements of **Gold Rush!** out the window. I can see how it could be possible to lure a modern young player into the webs of an archaic **King's Quest** or **Space Quest**, but **Gold Rush!** will inevitably feel too sloggy, too grindy, and too patience-trying even if you are a fan of American history-themed games. On the other hand, at least most of those challenges make sense and are not there *just* to frustrate the player, as they are in **Codename: Iceman**; anybody who is well used to the mechanics of old school adventure games (and always remembers the hygiene of proper save-scumming) will find them easy to bypass.

The only challenges that are genuinely tough are those that have to do with the game's meager, unsatisfying original «plot», a.k.a. Jerrod's search for his long-lost brother Jake. In order to «facilitate» his discovery, Jake plants a series of clues for Jerrod whose absurd sophistication is better fit for an Indiana Jones environment than any realistic setting in mid-19th century America. One minute you are thinking like an actual person, selling your property and buying vital supplies for your journey — the next minute you are engaging in a most bizarre activity over your parents' tombstone, or exchanging messages over pigeon post, or entrusting your fate to an unusually well-trained mule. Essentially, everything plot-related that the MacNeills have *not* picked out of *California Gold*, but rather extracted from their own brains is arranged in a series of puzzles to solve which you must completely abandon «real world logic» and entrust yourself to «adventure game logic» — which would not be a crime if this whole game were a **Monkey Island**, but having to constantly switch between the realistic and the absurd may seriously overwork your neurons. And even if you *do* get used to the pattern, the back-and-forth switching still threatens to break the immersion — which is, I guess, a pretty good excuse to stop complaining about the puzzles and start talking about the game's atmospheric qualities.

Atmosphere

The main objective of **Gold Rush!** was to teach the player something about America's past by giving him a virtual time machine — so, clearly, the game's main selling point was not the super-duper engaging plot and not the generic adventure game puzzles, but the feeling of virtual reality: although **Gold Rush!** had no «open world» features to it like a proper RPG, the MacNeills really wanted you to feel like you're just living in the America of 1848, free to do whatever you wanted and go wherever you wanted — within reason, of course.

For the standards of 1989, it must have worked pretty well. As the game opens, you, as Jerrod Wilson, are standing atop a little canal bridge in Brooklyn Heights, overlooking several lively streets with people walking, gulls flying, and massive horse-driven carriages rolling around — with the (still relatively low, of course) Manhattan skyline stretching across the water. This must have been a sharp contrast for players accustomed to beginning their Sierra game with a solitary character standing inside a lonely room or on a landscape screen with nothing but waves crashing upon the beach or something like that. **Gold Rush!** clearly made use of hardware advances, taxing graphic processing power more heavily than its predecessors, but by late 1989, they could allow themselves to be generous, and it almost worked: Brooklyn Heights as depicted by the MacNeills was one of the liveliest places in PC gaming up to that date.

Naturally, the limitations of the simulation become just as immediately obvious: Brooklyn Heights consist of, at most, about 10 screens worth of exploration, and most of the people you encounter are randomly moving mannequins with, at best, 2-3 stock phrases each if you try to initiate conversation (much like in any other Sierra game; but then again, is it really *that* different from «advanced» epic RPGs like **The Witcher**, where the atmosphere of surrounding hustle-and-bustle is created much the same way, as random NPCs keep spinning the same yarn over and over?). But still, what a difference: in **King's Quest**, NPCs felt like purposeless alien dummies whose only purpose for existence was to advance your plot. These guys, on the other hand, couldn't care less about your plot — but they feel like actual townspeople running around *their* business, even if you only see them running around and never see them actually taking care of their business. (For this little important touch, we still had to wait until Revolution Software's **Lure Of The Temptress** four years later).



The atmospheric bliss of Jerrod's journey to California, regardless of the path, is not that well pronounced because all three paths are quite linear, without any pretense to an «open-world» environment, and the journeys themselves are relatively short and laconic. But the contrast between the «civilization» of Brooklyn and the «wilderness» of the surroundings of Sutter's Fort is quite well executed — the NPCs now have a much more rugged appearance (even Jerrod himself begins to sport a rough beard) and are generally more aggressive while protecting their turf, which, in itself, feels far more desolate and dangerous than the «cozy» Brooklyn environment. A somewhat questionable decision on the part of the designers, though, was to suddenly have much of the narrator dialog appear onscreen with a mock-Southern accent ("*That hammerin' fool can't hear ya over the poundin' of his hammer!*") — surely they are not implying that a New Yorker's speech pattern and personality somehow underwent a serious mutation overnight right after setting foot on the West Coast.

In any case, whatever compliments I might squeeze out of myself in relation to the game's immersiveness and realism, and no matter how much I superficially admire all the hard work that went into the graphic, animated, and verbal recreation of the era, there is only so much one could do in 1988 with the limited capacities of the AGI engine. And in such situations, old games exploring fantasy and sci-fi thematics are actually at an advantage, unlike «realistic» games whose feeble attempts at creating a replica of the real world inevitably pale as technology makes them obsolete — precisely the fate of **Gold Rush!**, which, as I already mentioned earlier, can only come across as a museum curiosity next to the immersion level achieved by the likes of **Red Dead Redemption** (if we're talking old-timey America).

Technical features

Graphics

Gold Rush! was one of the last, if not *the* last, Sierra games to be created within the AGI engine, allowing for 160x200 pixel resolution, and as far as I know, there were no attempts to port it to the much-improved SCI (320x200); however, by 1988 the studio had accumulated so much experience in putting every single pixel to good use that you can easily assess the amount of extra sophistication as compared to early titles in the **King's Quest** or **Space Quest** series. This time around, every inch seems to be brimming with detail: paved roads, tiled floors, dotted horizon lines, store shelves packed with merchandise, and a measly three-screen long steamship with each tiny compartment stocked with passengers, crew members, and / or machinery, so much so that you can get a little sense of both the camaraderie *and* the claustrophobia that must have ruled supreme over the course of the journey.



That said, there is hardly anything specific that would stand out about the graphics of **Gold Rush!** — essentially, it is just a typical AGI-era Sierra game, albeit more professionally crafted than earlier ones. Every once in a while, Doug MacNeill does go the extra mile to add tension, such as in his portrayal of the thunderstorm on the seaward journey (the rock-gray skies in combination with the snow-white icebergs and the shaking screen are mildly terrifying even today), but on the whole, I find it hard to list any particularly memorable creations. Typically of the time, there are almost no close-ups in the game, except for the opening screens, so that «artistry» is essentially limited to backdrop illustrations. Of the walkin'-talkin' sprites, the only historically notable detail is the decision to include two variants of Jerrod: a smaller one for the outdoor sequences and a much larger one for the indoor ones — a technique that would become common in Sierra's SCI-era games, starting with **King's Quest IV**, but I *think* that **Gold Rush!** is the only (and thus, the first) AGI-era title that openly employs it. Of course, it's not just «NPC inflation» — everything is bigger indoors, with a nice zooming perspective that creates a strong contrast between the vast outdoors and the cozy (or claustrophobic) indoor space, which can sometimes add a note of psychological comfort — though, to be honest, outside of Jerrod's journeys most of the outdoor space is not all that dangerous. Honestly though, I'm just digressing here with nothing to say, so let's move on.

Sound

Alas, in no other respect does **Gold Rush!** suffer more from the age of its release than in the sound department. A game set in the America of 1848 literally *begs* for an appropriate soundtrack of old-timey folk and country-western tunes — which certainly could not be properly provided by means of the bleepy PC speaker. In the end, all you get is a reasonable facsimile of ‘Oh! Susanna’ as the title tune — quite appropriate, of course, as the tune’s original publication year is usually given as 1848, and it became somewhat of an anthem for the «Forty-Niners» — and maybe, at best, snippets of two or three other melodies scattered throughout the game, most notably a looped verse of ‘La Cucaracha’ accompanying your ship’s arrival at and departure from Rio de Janeiro (in a rather hilarious case of both mistaken cultural identity and chronological anachronism at the same time, but let’s not judge the MacNeills too harshly — they must have already sweated out pints of blood while digesting all the information in *California Gold*, and the book did not have enough space to teach the reader to distinguish Hispanic musical culture from Portuguese).

Other than that, there are minimal occasional sound effects (very annoying in the PC speaker version if you do not install the patch to convert them to MIDI — particularly in the sequence where you have to follow your mule to your brother’s hideout and the machine vomits out a shrill and repetitive musical phrase on every next screen) and A LOT of total silence, even compared to other contemporary Sierra games in the AGI engine. Whoever was «Anita Scott», credited for «music» in the game (this is her only credit in the entire history of video games or any other medium), she certainly did not do a very good job — for all the simplicity of the pre-sound card era, games like **Leisure Suit Larry** and **Space Quest** could already be populated with fun, catchy jingles, which is far from the case here. It also kind of forms the impression that the only musical tune the American people knew in 1848 was ‘Oh! Susanna’ (played alternately at full or half-speed), and that it was *always* played on any particularly joyful occasion. Anyway, one can only wonder about how strongly the game’s atmosphere could have been boosted had it only been delayed by one year (with the coming of **King’s Quest IV** and MIDI synthesizers).

Interface

Rather predictably, **Gold Rush!** is mostly all based on Sierra's standard AGI interface of the time, including the old version of the text parser in which the game does not pause while you are typing in commands, something that can be quite a hassle if you are playing against a rigidly timed puzzle. The «intelligence level» of the parser in this particular case I would rate as «medium» — less limited than in, say, the earliest **King's Quest** games, but far more so than in upcoming historical games like **Conquests Of Camelot**; this is rather unfortunate, because the designers missed a good chance to plunge the player into this historical setting on a truly deep, personal level, what with so many depicted objects on the screen lacking proper descriptions and being impossible to interact with. On the other hand, at the very least the parser seems to be fairly well functional and responsive, unlike, say, the ridiculously bugged command system in such soon-to-come Sierra games as **Codename: Iceman**. It would be impolite to blame the designers for not willing to go the extra mile, like Christy Marx would do in **Camelot** — the worst that can be said is that **Gold Rush!** does not produce such a clear impression of a «labor of love» for the MacNeills as **Camelot** would do for Christy.



The only atypical element in the game menu was the «Elapsed Time» option that allowed you to watch the chronology of your progress — since the game allegedly took place in pseudo-real time, this made sense, though, if I am not mistaken, the only time in the entire game where this *really* mattered was the opening sequence in Brooklyn, where, if you tarried too long, the Gold Rush would be officially announced and you would have to take a serious financial fall. After choosing your route, however, you are pretty much free to take things at your own pace, except for a bunch of obvious timed situations where you have to take quick action before something dreadful happens.

Speaking of dreadful, one good thing about **Gold Rush!** is that it is nearly 100%-free of any action sequences — in fact, other than moving around and typing commands, I think the only time when you have to do something else is the punctured-card puzzle at the cemetery, and that's not much of an action sequence. There's even a bare minimum of fall-down-the-ladder situations — plenty of ways to die in the game, but very few of them have to do with the clumsiness of your fingers, which is

always a plus in Sierra games. (Some might argue that falling off a ladder is still more reasonable than dying due to sheer bad luck — see above on the factor of random death in the game — but since save-scumming is the default way to go in just about any Sierra game, this won't be too much of an issue for the *seasoned* Sierra player).

Verdict: *Historical realism undermined by technological (and inspirational) limitations.*

It goes without saying that **Gold Rush!** is far from my first choice when it comes to recommending old school adventure games trying to simulate historical or mythological reality. Less than two years after its release, Christy Marx would be showing the world how such a task should *really* be handled — and in terms of combining educational value with sheer fun, even such a poorly remembered piece of work as **Pepper's Adventures In Time** (1993) would be vastly superior. But let us give credit where credit is due: **Gold Rush!** was Sierra's very first try at a slice of «virtual historic reality», and if they tried it a little too early — not to mention, arguably, not putting their best creative talents at the helm of the project — well, they still earn points for going where no one had gone before without a safety net.

Admittedly, it is difficult today to properly appreciate the monumentality of this project — not unless you play and assess the game in the context of all the other Sierra stuff released around the same time. Most of the games took place inside a relatively small, compact environment, with no hints of a veritable Odyssey taking you from one American coast to another, let alone the idea of having three completely different routes to choose from. In the soon-to-come SCI era of Sierra, adventures that take you from civilization to wild nature and back again would become standard fare, but in a way, they all looked back to **Gold Rush!** as the original pattern to take lessons from (both positive and negative). It takes a while to visualize the game's influence in your mind, but once you get the picture, denying this influence becomes nigh impossible.

And yet I hate describing old video games as pure museum pieces, incapable of providing entertainment and emotion after a certain period of time has elapsed — and from this point of view, **Gold Rush!** really pales even in comparison with the earliest **King's Quest** or **Police Quest** games. Alas, the MacNeills were unable to give the game what every adventure title needs the most — and no, I am not talking about challenging puzzles, I'm talking about *personality*. With so much effort



invested into building up a believable historical simulation, the designers totally forgot about — or had no strength left for — bringing their actual characters to life. Predating stuff like **Red Dead Redemption** by decades, **Gold Rush!** could have been a nice psychological portrayal of its epoch, yet only a few tiny strands of plot (like Eric and his tragic fate on the seaward journey) ever try to head in that direction. (For comparison, **The Colonel's Bequest**, released but one year later, made a much stronger attempt to immerse us into the lives and troubles of American people in the 1920s — although, admittedly, it *was* a Roberta Williams game, and that always meant a much bigger budget on Sierra's part).

In routine terms, this is translated to the simple fact that replaying the game for the purposes of this review was not a very fun experience for me. Even setting aside the frustrating «realistic» random deaths, the gold-panning grinding, the mazes, the unchallenging puzzles, the game overall felt unrewarding, while its alleged «historicity» today looks rather cartoonish. It's still a cute reminder of the innocence and naivete of a past epoch, and it shares the same charm as any other Sierra product from the company's early days, but does not exactly manage to pile any *special* charm of its own on top of the regular thing. So even if it did get its share of accolades back in the day — it is hardly a wonder that nobody has ever heard from brothers Ken & Doug MacNeill ever since, except for the general knowledge that they tried to continue making money off **Gold Rush!** for quite a while.

That said, one last addition is that I did eventually watch some [game footage](#) from the 2014 *Anniversary Edition* by Sunlight Games and I do have to say that the original 1988 version looks and feels magnificent next to the dreadful remake — never mind the high resolution 3D graphics and «improved» sound, as everything in the remake feels gray, drab, and lifeless in comparison (even the pixellated character animations in the original made the NPCs move more like human beings than the colorless zombies that they are in the remake). I count this as a good experience because it did remind me that the original game still packed plenty of imagination and, most importantly, *love* of the general idea of the game. Then again, pretty much every commercial Sierra remake ever made (as opposed to certain fan-based projects), from *Leisure Suit Larry* to *Gabriel Knight*, always ended up as a total suckjob. There's just something about the spirit of that age that apparently cannot be convincingly replicated — so just let the classics alone in their time-honored shells.