

King's Quest: Quest For The Crown

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

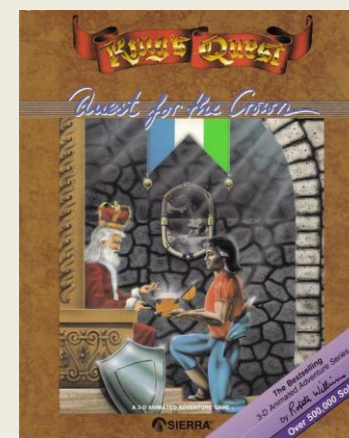
Designer(s): **Roberta Williams**

Part of series: **King's Quest**

Release: May 10, 1984 (IBM PCjr) / May 31, 1984 (IBM PC)

Main credits: Programmers: **Chris Iden, Ken MacNeil, Charles Tingley**
 New Version: **Sol Ackerman, Chris Iden, Jeff Stephenson**
 Graphics Design: **Doug MacNeill, Greg Rowland**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (75 mins.)



Basic Overview

Technically speaking, **King's Quest** was not the first game made by Sierra On-Line, who already had a solid history of text-based adventure games behind their belt by 1984. It was simply the first game where all the major Sierra trademarks came together: colorful graphic interface, linear (and occasionally choice-based) plotline advanced by puzzle solution, and, as intangible as it may seem to some, that special «Sierra feel». And although it *does* look old, due to the overall immersion factor, it is the first Sierra game where even modern gamers might end up forgetting that they are consciously involved in a «retro experience» — and just enjoy the thing for the pure fun of it.



The plot, as laid out by Roberta Williams, is extremely simple, being almost entirely structured on old English fairytales. As Sir Graham of the Kingdom of Daventry, an old magical realm which is now in a state of decline, you are commissioned by King Edward to find and reclaim three of the kingdom's long lost treasures — a magic mirror, a magic chest filled with a never ending supply of moolah, and a magic shield that makes you invincible. Your task is to scour the kingdom in search of these three objects, performing various little sub-missions along the way. Do this right and you become king; do this wrong and you have to start all over again... and again... and again...

The game was first released for IBM PCjr in 1984, with the more common PC release coming just a few weeks later. Most of its innovations stemmed from the introduction of the AGI engine (Adventure Game Interpreter), a working environment that permitted for relatively easy programming of game sequences with incorporated graphics and sound capacities. AGI remained Sierra's primary working tool until around 1988, when it was replaced by the technically superior SCI engine. (However, amateur adventure games are still being regularly made with AGI even today — many of these can be downloaded online at little or no cost, with a small, but dedicated community carrying on the torch).

Content evaluation

Plotline

Seeing as how **King's Quest** was the first game of its kind, there isn't really much of a plotline. In fact, I have to admit most of it was probably thrown together by Roberta in 15 minutes or so. Very few things are *invented*: for the most part, it is just a mishmash of popular English folk motives — goats and trolls, gingerbread houses, the giant and the beanstalk, leprechauns and fiddles, etc. etc. In her future games of the series, Roberta would learn how to manipulate these motives with more originality, even adopting a slightly post-modern touch on some issues. Here, though, the emphasis was quite clearly on everything *but* the plot. We do not have the least idea how the actual treasures came to be where Graham finds them, or how come nobody found them *before* Graham, or how come Graham manages to find them so easily. (Some of the prehistory of Daventry and its treasures is explained in more details in the accompanying booklet, but even then there are multiple loopholes and gaps).

A particularly odd thing is the idea of finding minor secondary treasures scattered all over the kingdom as a way to boost your points, but little else — not only is this befuddling per se (who the heck keeps dropping jewel pouches through the countryside?), but there is nothing useful you can actually *do* with these treasures (although in some places you can actually *lose* points by using them in the wrong way). All of this just goes to show how new this whole business really was at the time.



Puzzles

Generally, the puzzles are quite simple, which is not bad, since the game clearly had young kids as one of its primary target audiences. There are occasional odd lapses: for instance, the puzzle of guessing the gnome's name is quite definitely unsolvable without serious hints, meaning that very, very few of the original players could ever get to climb that beanstalk. (Fortunately, the situation was remedied in the SCI remake years later). But for the most part the puzzles conform to the standard scheme of «get object A in location B, use it on object C in location D». One thing that Sierra had from the very start was offering multiple solutions to the same puzzle, a nice move that added an extra replayability bonus to the game. Here, though, for most puzzles there is a «right» solution, where you win points, and a «wrong» one, where you can get through the sequence but will lose points in the process — as opposed to «equal value» multiple solutions in later games.



Already in this very first game we also see the downside of the general Sierra plan — mixing of puzzles with occasional inane «quasi-arcade» sequences. For a reason that I have never understood, Sierra developers thought it absolutely necessary to include at least several «navigate the keyboard» gizmos in each and every one of their games, which would almost certainly include at least one or two sets of narrow stairs which have to be climbed by an agile alternation of the Up/PgUp keys (that's «up», obviously) and the Down/PgDn keys (that's «down», respectively). In **Quest For The Crown**, the epitome of this plague is the already mentioned «climb the beanstalk» puzzle, where you simply have to grope your way up with no clues and endlessly restore your game — probably a *big* nag back in 1984, when it actually took the machine some real time to bring back your settings. I still have no clue as to how they came up with this strategy — if the idea was to somehow appeal to lovers of the arcade style, the point was, at all times, sorely missed, and from what I have read in retro-reviews and fan memoirs, there were far more people hating this stylistic merger rather than loving it.

Atmosphere

Being the first game in the series and all, there isn't *that* much immersion in the colorful, but parsimonious world of Daventry. The locations are few, the characters are even fewer and, worst of all, there is too little interaction going on: most of the people you meet either do not speak to you at all (preferring to chew you up on the spot) or confine their information to one or two lines of text. Sierra's well-known attention to detail, so much lauded for their «classic» period, is yet nowhere near

in sight. The primary character, Sir Graham, is not characterized by anything apart from fairy-tale clichés about bravery and gallantry (for all his bravery, though, he does not even get to fight anyone). And the whole thing rushes past you way too quickly in order to establish a long-lasting relationship with this world.

Still, there is no denying that this *is* a world — relatively diverse, unpredictable, and magical. You get several locations — lakes, meadows, hills — that are there just for the sake of adding extra detail, and, like in most Sierra games, you can spend time just wandering and exploring in a non-linear fashion. It is not a particularly *safe* world, either, as you will be stalked by evil wizards, witches, ogres, and wolves on many of the screens, establishing the classic King's Quest contrast between «safe and cuddly regions» and «dark and dangerous regions», albeit in a rather haphazard manner. Thus, while the game cannot really be compared in terms of mood setting to the ones that followed, it is still compatible with them in spirit.



Technical features

Graphics

Most of Sierra's AGI games conformed to the highest graphical standards of the times, painting as much and as best they could with EGA's 16 colors and low-level resolutions. As the first ball to get rolling, *Quest For The Crown*, I would say, is slightly below these standards — but only slightly. Perhaps the most significant difference is the relative lack of care in painting the backgrounds: with most of the attention directed simply towards getting the whole project realized, details did not yet matter *that* much. So, you will see fewer trees, bushes, houses, etc., than you would soon be getting used to. The ones that *are* there, though, are done nicely: I very rarely cringe at the sight of any inanimate object in the game. There are shadows, horizon lines, brief contours on trees and rocks that try to emulate 3-D, namely, everything to ensure you this is crude, but not "fake".

One area where significant progress had yet to be made are the character sprites. Graham's mechanically moving figure, to tell the truth, is more reminiscent of Pinocchio than a brave, gallant knight, and it is even worse with many of the other characters. While Sierra's sprites truly did not become «believable» until the SCI era, their elaboration was certainly gradual, and already in the following few games the characters were more intricately pixelated and their movements were more detailed and varied. Here, it is a major flaw, because in terms of immersion, easily the most important thing is to be able to identify yourself with the character you are playing for, and it is pretty hard — if not impossible — to identify yourself with a pair of walking matches in a blue cap, especially if the plotline says you are poised to become no less than the king of Daventry.



Sound

Very little sound here, apart from the clever encoding of 'Greensleeves' into PC speaker format — one that probably ensured that for most young players of the day, the tune is now forever associated with Roberta Williams and her fantasy world. Sierra's budget was probably still too tight for them to hire someone as resident composer, so most of the time you will be playing in complete silence (for some people, this might not be so bad, given the occasionally dubious quality of PC speaker music).

However, there are already signs that Sierra was not about to *not* make use of the computer's ability to produce sonic waves, most obviously in the form of a few sound effects that are quite cleverly scattered around to punctuate significant moments. The spookiest one is the six-note «danger» signal which is thrust at you from nowhere whenever some baddie starts crossing your path — given the shrillness of the speaker and the complete unpredictability of the enemy's appearance (they only appear on certain screens, but it is always at random whether they *do* appear and, if yes, *when*), I remember them giving me quite a few jump starts. There are also some funny effects, like the one from falling down stairs or trees (or, God help me, that *beanstalk!*), or while dealing with the side effects of falling. That is all there is to say.



Interface

Here, too, we have a revolutionary start which, however, was to be greatly improved already soon afterwards. The classic Sierra parser drives most of the game, but at this moment, it is still very much underdeveloped, understanding only a few basic words and nouns and not letting you experiment. The greatest downside, which was corrected already in the second game, is that there is no command to get a general description of the location — simply typing in 'look' will get you a retort of «You need to be more specific». This is particularly harsh when you find yourself dealing with objects that are hard to identify because of the poor state of the graphics — not having a general description in which they could be included, you will just have to guess what they are. (Hint: Whenever in doubt, type 'look at the room' rather than simply 'look', probably a commonplace for text adventure game veterans in 1984).

The interface also includes a few shortcuts, such as the «swim» and «duck» options (the latter is sort of superfluous — you only need it once over the course of the entire game), with the rest more or less carried over into subsequent games.

Verdict: *Historically important*

Today's average gamers would be hard pressed to imagine all the hullabaloo caused by the release of *Quest For The Crown* in 1984, but a good advice would be to compare it not with what came *after* it, of course, but with what was *before*, even with Sierra's own titles like *Mystery House*. The thrill of seeing text adventure game style combined with actually *seeing* what was going on must have been tremendous. And let us not forget: *everything* that made up the basics of Sierra gaming for a decade and a half from then on is already here, in some form or other. Everything would be improved upon, of course, but there would not really come around a visionary breakthrough that would elevate adventure gaming on to a qualitatively different level — with the possible exception of speech audio introduction, maybe. So it is hardly possible to overestimate the historical importance of the game.

Its level of enjoyability is a different thing altogether. It is certainly too crude to be considered a classic along the same lines as, say, *King's Quest IV* or *VI*. But if one treats the Sierra universe as a cohesive and continuing entity, then, of course, *Quest For The Crown* is inexplicable as *the* introduction to the world of Daventry. It stands much better as part of the series than



all on its own, but as part of the series, it does a good job of setting the scene. And while both Sierra's own SCI remake of the game in 1990 and AGD Interactive's VGA remake in 2001 are obviously more easily playable on modern computers due to improvements in the graphic quality and gameplay interface, I think that for the wholesomeness of the experience you should still go back to the original version — it is just so pure, innocent, and minimalistic that forcing it into the age of puberty might take away its best qualities without necessarily making it feel more advanced and satisfactory.