

## King's Quest II: Romancing The Throne

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Roberta Williams**

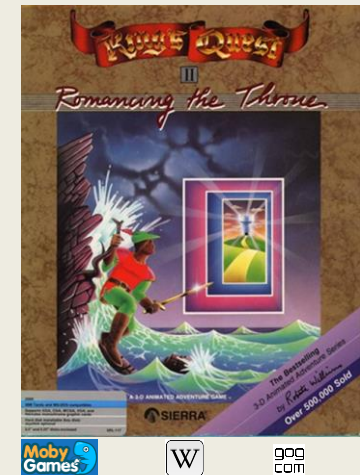
Part of series: **King's Quest**

Release: May 1985

Main credits: Development System: **Jeff Stephenson, Chris Iden, Robert E. Heitman**  
 Game Logic: **Ken Williams, Sol Ackerman, Chris Iden, Scott Murphy, Dale Carson**

Graphics: **Doug MacNeill, Mark Crowe**; Music: **Al Lowe**

Useful links: [Playthrough pt. 1](#) (54 mins.) [Playthrough pt. 2](#) (38 mins.)



### Basic Overview

It is hard to say whether Roberta Williams' vision of the whole King's Quest franchise was already in place when the first game was being sketched, or if it was only with the huge success of the original game that she started to perceive this as merely the first element in something really big. The fact is that King's Quest II had a point to make — we are here, and we are not going away, and from this moment on we are only going to get bigger and bigger. If the first game merely made a hint at a gaming universe to come, the second game established that universe as a matter of fact. After all, you cannot create a universe out of a single unit. It takes at least two to tango.

Not that back in 1985 Sierra people were already drowning in creative ideas. In many respects, King's Quest II is a carbon copy of its predecessor. Once again, you play as King Graham, it's just that now your task is not to get yourself a kingdom (that already having been procured — you *are* called King now, after all), but to get yourself a wife. So, after experiencing the obligatory damsel-in-distress vision in your Magic Mirror, you are obliged to travel to the faraway land of Kolyma, where you will have to locate the entrance to the magic world in which the lady is imprisoned behind three closed doors. (Fun side note: I sure would like to try some of the mushrooms Roberta Williams was on to have named her fictional realm *Kolyma* — yeah, maybe the name has a nice ring to it, but most people should know that it is really the name of the barren sub-Arctic region



famous primarily for hosting multiple GULAG prison camps under Stalin's regime. Which means that a phrase like 'King Graham's adventures in Kolyma' must have made many a Russian gamer laugh his ass off when the King's Quest series first got to Russia). Anyway, about 90% of the game is spent in search of the keys, and then just a couple more puzzles await you on your direct way to your future bride's heart.

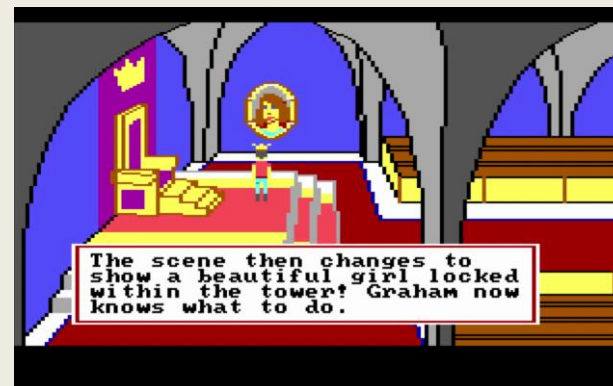
Popular consensus today seems to be that there were too few departures from the first game in order for anyone to consider this one an equal classic. Yet in many ways, too, I would say that King's Quest II is generally more playable and even accessible to the gamer of today than its predecessor; where *Quest for the Crown* certainly gains in historical importance, *Romancing the Throne* is arguably closer to my intuitive understanding of what a *regular* Sierra On-Line game should look like. In any case, Williams' alleged lack of imagination for this sequel certainly did not hurt the sales — the game was as much of a hit as its predecessor, even more so, maybe, and it is actually to Sierra's credit that its commercial success did not prevent the creative minds behind the company from exploring further and further ideas.

## Content evaluation

### Plotline

In general terms, the plot is almost exactly the same as it was before: get closer to your goal by successively uncovering the locations of three magical objects (this time, the three keys to the door that will lead you out of Kolyma). You play as the same Graham character of the previous game, meet and interact with multiple characters in very similar ways, evade many of the same dangers (sometimes, in fact, absolutely the same — the mischievous dwarf and the evil sorcerer, for instance, have been transplanted from *King's Quest I* fully intact, as if their main goal in life were stalking King Graham wherever he went), and die in many of the same ways. Likewise, you still get loopholes and unexplained events a-plenty: you might be able to find the three keys, for sure, but you shall never for the life of you be able to understand why you were so lucky as to find them in their respective locations.

And yet, at the same time, the plot certainly feels much more elaborate than first time around. For starters, it is longer — the game now features even more twists, turns, and minor subplots, and does not convey the feeling of an instantaneous toss-off.



More length involves more chaos control, and thus it is also more linear: certain events cannot happen until you have triggered them, so that it is technically impossible for you to get the key to the second door before the first one. In fact, this is the first Sierra game where you have to directly live out the golden rule: never give up on a location for good, but keep coming back after you have scored a few points elsewhere.

Second, it is much more bizarre. In fact, it is so bizarre that this, not *King's Quest I*, should be considered the true start of Sierra's post-modern flavour. You would have to be pretty deranged to put King Neptune, Count Dracula, an Eastern-type genie, and Little Red Riding Hood in the exact same game - granted, they do not interact with each other, but still, their sort of peaceful co-existence within a few screens' walk from one another is something completely unexpected at the time, in computer games or any other type of media, for that matter. (I guess you could find some of that mythological mish-mash in comic books, but certainly not ones intended for large audiences).

Again, very few lines of the plot can be said to have been invented — mostly, it is a grab-bag of everything in sight — but with the grab-bag being so unpredictable, mixing up Western and Eastern folklore, Gothic literature, and Greek mythology, it's probably the best solution that Sierra could offer at that moment. (In fact, come to think of it, very few of Sierra's plots have ever been radically original - and I do not blame them for it).

### Puzzles

Just like in *King's Quest I*, the puzzles are rarely anything to write home about: most of the "tight spots" are being overcome by finding an object in a different location and using it on the troublemaker. So the most frequent verbs that you will be using here are "take" and "give". However, for many of the puzzles, as before, alternate solutions are possible — one "wrong", causing you to lose points, and one "right", making you gain them — and frequently, the "alternate" solution features a non-trivial move, forcing the player to find a less common command for the parser. There are also next to none of those "crazy things you have to do" which Sierra game players frequently complain about. If there is something illogical and incomprehensible, it is mostly the locations in which you find the objects, but not their functions, which are very clearly defined.

The game also introduces the concept of the red herring — if in *Quest for the Crown* all of the objects you picked either served an important purpose or at least were there to award you extra points, here you will, from time to time, fall upon things which



can be picked up and looked at (quite nice pictures, too), but have no use whatsoever – except as to serve as frustrated objects in your verbal constructions when you are stuck and try out all kinds of desperate solutions. So, if ever you discover someone who can be smothered with the pillow from Count Dracula's coffin, please let me be the first to know. In the meantime, I'm not complaining – life as we know it would be far more boring without its share of red herrings.

The game's great advantage is the near-complete lack of "arcade" sequences; at most, you get to navigate a couple relatively easy stairs, and at one point, there is a short maze of poisoned thorns that you have to walk around – but can as well avoid through a much easier way (in fact, one that will earn you more points). This earns it extra respectability points from me – unfortunately, for the first and last time. The biggest disadvantage, then, is the introduction of dead end situations, ones where you play "past the point of no return" without having done what needed to be done, and having to replay a large part of the game as a consequence. That said, today, when it takes less than half an hour to sit through the entire game, this is less of a problem, and there is only one such situation in the entire game, anyway (hint: pay proper attention to crossing that old rickety bridge!).

### Atmosphere

It is hardly to be doubted that *a lot* more care was given this time to the issue of atmosphere and believability. In the previous game, Daventry was represented by a "checkered" map of  $6 \times 8 = 48$  squares, which was practically the equal of Kolyma ( $7 \times 7 = 49$  squares), but the major difference was in that Daventry was *monotonous*, not to mention oddly rounded – whenever you went straight ahead, you would eventually end up in the same space, as if stranded on an asteroid straight out of *Le Petit Prince*. Kolyma, on the other hand, is only rounded vertically; to the east and west, your progress is respectively hindered by unpassable mountains and uncrossable (though very much drownable) sea, and this alone means that you get a set of seriously different landscapes.

Like before, the terrain is divided into "friendly" and "hostile" territory. The latter is no longer limited to isolated enemy-dominated screens; instead, what you get is vast areas constituting the "turf" of the game's baddies – the cannibalistic witch, the kleptomaniac dwarf, and the sorcerer with a frog fixation. Except for the witch, who prefers to prowl on deceptively innocent-looking territory, the other two dominate the "wilder" areas of Kolyma, which are thus better avoided unless you are





guarded with a protective spell. There is also a creepy poisonous lake which should be avoided at all costs. It is a bit unclear, of course, how Little Red Riding Hood is ever able to survive long enough, stuck in between the witch and the sorcerer, but do not expect to get answers to *all* the questions.

Particular kudos, however, go to the depiction of Dracula's castle – reflecting Roberta's double-sided passion for fantasy *and* horror. The whole segment reflects the most up-to-date, state-of-the-art computer horror for 1985: ghosts, rats, bats a-plenty and an unseen evil presence lurking around the dilapidated castle. Even I, having played this for the first time long *after* 1985, was quite happy to get out of that castle and back into the sunlight again...

Finally, *Romancing the Throne* is the first Sierra game where the player really starts feeling him/herself part of this bigger-than-life thing, the "Sierra Universe". Most of this feeling, of course, comes here in the form of unconcealed promotion of Sierra's other products, in this case, the upcoming releases of *Space Quest* and *King's Quest III*. But they are quite cleverly done, with humor and innocence, and the idea of concealing a commercial plug for *Space Quest* in a hole in the rock (where you would rather expect to find another piece of hidden jewelry) gotta rank with some of the company's most creative ideas *ever*. In addition, we start getting Sierra's fabulous Easter eggs: do not miss the Batmobile itself, coming out of a perfectly unexpected location!

## Technical features

### Graphics

Since the game features multiple locations, each associated with a particular atmosphere, it is evident that extra care and work had to be applied, and the result is a phantasmagoric smorgasbord that is utterly over the top in places, nowhere more so than in the "enchanted isle" area where you arrive at the end of the game to get the gal. There, you have rose coloured skies, purple oceans, deep blue and yellow soil and light blue bushes in true *Yellow Submarine* fashion. The effect still looks dazzling to me. It would have been real gross to play all the game in that setting, but a few screens worth of such psychedelic bliss must have been unforgettable to players at the time. Other notable areas include the bottom of the ocean, littered with all kinds of useless, but pretty artefacts, and, of course, Dracula's castle, with its cracked walls, ghosts, and rats. However, in many other respects the



game's locations just seem like leftovers from the drawing sessions for *King's Quest I*. I, for one, would *not* have expected King Graham to take the trouble of journeying all that way to Kolyma only to find himself in an ecological twin sister to Daventry.

A major addition in terms of realism are the graphic effects, although here they are still mostly confined to brief instances of splashing water and jumping fish in the "ocean" area. Characters are also livelier, with the mermaid flapping its tail, the magic horse spreading its wings, and the poisonous snake thrusting its head back and forth. On the general sprite level, though, little has changed: Graham is still a pair of moving matches, and whenever the characters turn their face to you, they look like pale imitations of their Lego copies. A notable exception is the sprite of Count Dracula, with its pale face and bloody lips – maybe it is because he is always seen in profile.

### Sound

If the original game featured pretty little in terms of music/sound, *King's Quest II*, the first Sierra game with a separate credit for 'music' (going to Al Lowe), already has several distinct themes – in addition to 'Greensleeves', you have several merry tunes that draw you in towards the end of the game (the 'Meeting Valanice' theme and the wedding theme). This is still not much, but then again, with the limited abilities of the PC speaker, not much is needed.

What is needed is more sound effects to liven up the general proceedings, and some are done very nicely, like the spooky ooh-ooing of ghosts in front of Dracula's castle, or the roar of the lion guarding the tower, or the chirping of the bird locked in Hagatha's cage. Of course, there is nothing particularly realistic about these sounds, but remember, we are talking about an era when Sound Blaster was still something associated with little other than *Star Wars*. Still other effects, like the "danger signal", are simply carried over from the previous game.

### Interface

The parser has been vastly enhanced. You are now able to type 'look' and get a general description of the area without having to guess the true nature of its objects. Also, since the game is bigger and includes more types of activities and objects, the parser now obviously recognizes many more verbs and nouns than it used to. Expletives and suchlike are still not



incorporated, but you *can* now spend a lot of time on each screen trying to figure out the various ways you can interact with your surroundings, looking at objects in more detail, etc. My favourite pastime is trying to 'kiss' everything in sight (for lack of a, er, *stronger* type of approach) — you will get some pretty humorous lines in return. On the down side, interaction with people is still limited to the 'talk' option which you can only make use of once (which is really absurd at the end of the game, where you surely earn the right to relax a little with your newly-found love); commands like 'ask' or 'tell' are not supported.

An unhappy element carried over from the previous game is "event randomization" — on many an occasion, your ability to perform some thing or other (mainly meeting other people) is simply triggered on a random basis. In practical terms, this means that you will almost inevitably get stuck at certain points, forgetting to wait for prolonged periods of time on unpredictable screens or failing to return to these screens several times in a row. I can understand how, from a certain point of view, this would be beneficial to the player — extending the gameplay and bringing a sense of profound satisfaction when accomplished — but it certainly does little good for those who want to see some sort of replay value in the game.

### Verdict: *Historically important*

*King's Quest II* is certainly a "copy" of *King's Quest I*, but hardly a "carbon" one. Almost every aspect of the game has been enhanced, resulting in increased believability, complexity, and replay value. With better graphics and sound, more subplots, more humor, and a newly emerged sense of belonging to the "Sierra continuum", it gives out a clear indication that its authors had no intent of merely running on the proverbial spot. Therefore, if you are playing Sierra games because you enjoy playing Sierra games, not because you are writing a PhD on the history of the adventure game genre, this sequel is inevitably superior. Yet at the same time, one cannot help but admit that the game was rushed out fairly quickly, and it would take *King's Quest III* to show that the fantasy adventure game still had major unrealized potential in it.

