King's Quest III: To Heir Is Human

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Roberta Williams**

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

Release: October 1986

Main credits: Programming: **Robert E. Heitman, Al Lowe, Bob Kernaghan**
Music: **Margaret Lowe**
Development System: **Jeff Stephenson, Chris Iden**
Graphics: **Doug MacNeill, Mark Crowe**

Useful links: Playthrough: Part 1 (*57 mins.*)   Part 2 (6*3 mins.*)   Part 3 (*56 mins.*)

Basic Overview

By almost all accounts, *King's Quest III* gave quite a shock when it was released onto the unsuspecting fans of King Graham, innocently grazing in the green CGA pastures of Daventry. The opening «fanfares» were familiar, as was the logo, but their ruler and benefactor did not walk onscreen to greet them. What appeared instead was the grim, unsmiling, and — for that time — somewhat scary face of a bearded magician sending lightning bolts from his fingers. Then came the intro, and, again, no Graham, no Valanice, in fact, no kingdom of Daventry whatsoever. You had the story of a slave boy named Gwydion, forced to live in the service of the evil wizard with the lightning bolts, and there was no evidence whatsoever that this slave boy had anything to do with anything in the previous two games. Legend says that there was no limit to the fans' indignation — not to mention that in those pre-neolithic days, there was no Internet to help answer your questions and dissipate your doubts right on the spot.

As the game progressed, the gamer would slowly begin to understand that, in some way, Gwydion's fate *would* be tied in with that of Daventry and King Graham, and about halfway through it would become totally clear that this was *not* a «franchise reloading», but rather an intriguing and controversial move to perk up one's interest. But there was another catch: it took *ages* to GET «halfway through». The game was much enhanced, for sure, but so was the difficulty. Even today's experienced

gamers, if forced to play through *King's Quest III* without a hintbook, would have a hard time cracking some of the twisted puzzles, and I am *not* even talking of the convoluted copy protection system, also a first (and, alas, not the last) in the Sierra canon.

And yet, all of the frustration would eventually pay off. The aim of *King's Quest III* was to grip you tight, not relax you. The first two thirds of the game are among the tensest experience one can get from Sierra On-Line: as Gwydion, you are involved in a life-and-death struggle with your evil master, in which only a supreme combination of intellect, speed, and agility can make you gain the upper hand. The last third, where you can actually catch your breath, is nevertheless also fraught with dangers at every step. But hard as it is, it also gives an incomparable feeling of satisfaction once you overcome the wizard, or when you finally make it to the end and restore peace and order in your long-forgotten homeland. And however frustrated fans might have been, this did not prevent them from making yet another sales hit of the game, or from earning it rave reviews. To this day, it is one of the fans' favorite instalments in the series.

Content evaluation

Plotline

Many elements of the plot are incorporated in strict accordance with the classic Roberta Williams scheme: take a fairy tale / mythological motif that you have not used up yet and stick it in when the player least expects it. There is really nothing to equal the silliness of having just scaled the dangerous, precipitous cliffs on which rests the evil home of your evil master, and find yourself straight in front of... the house of the Three Bears, who have just decided to take an innocent stroll in the forest. Why the Three Bears? God only knows. And only a few screens to the left, you will find Medusa from the tale of Perseus. And a few screens to the

right, the Cave of the Oracle. How they all manage to coexist in the same universe is something that only Roberta manages to understand. But then again, do you really *need* to understand it? Just suck it in, and suck it up.

In other respects, though, *To Heir Is Human* is a radical departure from the previous two instalments. First, you are now given an explicit antagonist, an anti-hero with whom you are locked in a concealed struggle for survival. This adds such dramatic tension to the game as has never been experienced before — and works so well that from now on, no *King's Quest*

would be without an explicit bad guy (or gal). This particular bad guy, the evil wizard controlling your destiny, is worked over very carefully; when he appears, he is not just running silly all over the screen, like the bad guys in Daventry and Kolyma, but materializes and vaporizes in puffs of smoke, and each of his appearances makes sense — he is either there to silently watch over you, or to make an announcement, or to order you around (and woe to you if the orders are not carried out immediately). You REALLY get to hate him. REALLY. God, how I hated him back in the day.

Second, you have the already mentioned intrigue of how all this ties in with the prequels. For about half of the game, you have virtually no idea how it's gonna end — well, obviously, you know right from the start that you *have* to get rid of the wizard, but it's rather clear that this is more of a technical duty than the true essence of your quest. The most important question is not, 'how do I get out of here?', but 'who AM I and what am I doing here?' (And what have the Three Bears got to do with it?).

Third, the plot happens to unravel in *real time* — with a clock mapping your progress and giving you explicit (but approximate) indication of when is a good time to hide from danger and when is a good time to head into it, the plot seriously gains in realism. (It can get somewhat annoying when you replay the game, though — second time around, you are most likely able to perform all the tasks quickly, which leaves you twiddling your thumbs for a good while).

Since the game is bigger, it also makes the settings more diverse. All of *King's Quest I* took place in Daventry, and the «enchanted island» in *King's Quest II* was merely a footnote relative to all the stuff that happened in Kolyma. But here you will be taking a long and exciting journey — being taken from your original setting of Llewdor to a pirate ship, then to a high mountain range, then to your native Daventry again (one that underwent some changes, though). Another element of diversity is the ability to cast a variety of magic spells, ingredients for which you have to gather all over the place. This variety ensures that many obstacles in the game can be beaten in various ways, a major improvement over the much more linear solutions in the previous two games.

Puzzles

Not only are the puzzles in *King's Quest III* much harder than in the previous games, a few of them are, in fact, some of the hardest puzzles *ever* to feature in a Sierra game. Much of the difficulty has to do with a greatly improved and enhanced parser (see below), giving you much more choice — and costing you a lot more intellectual effort. But there is more to it than just tricky syntax. In the previous games, action was pretty much limited to (a) LOOKING at everything in sight, (b) TAKING everything that was not nailed down, (c) USING what you have taken or GIVING what have you taken to people you encountered on your way. Here, from time to time you have to perform more subtle actions.

A large number of puzzles revolve around your collecting ingredients for magic spells and then, later, performing the actual spells. Preparation of the spells, however, is not an actual puzzle; rather, it is an early and particularly twisted form of copy protection, which has raised the ire of many a *King's Quest* fan over the years. Namely, in order to produce the desired effect, you not only have to enter the number of the magical book page from the game's manual, you also have to copy — no typos, or you're dead meat! — a large set of detailed instructions, culminating in four lines of kiddie magic rhyme. Most people howl about that, and for good reason — as if merely entering an unguessable number from a page wasn't enough. But, on the other hand, my guess is that the authors of the game perceived a certain extra thrill in this mechanistic re-typing of lengthy instructions and incantations, like the players were really performing actual instructions found in an actual book of wizardry. Besides, some of us here *might* need a spelling lesson from time to time (wink wink). The most fun part, however, comes when you have your spells all prepared and you can start experimenting with them (including on yourself, which results in quite a few hilarious manners of death). Multiple solutions are the norm here rather than the exception.
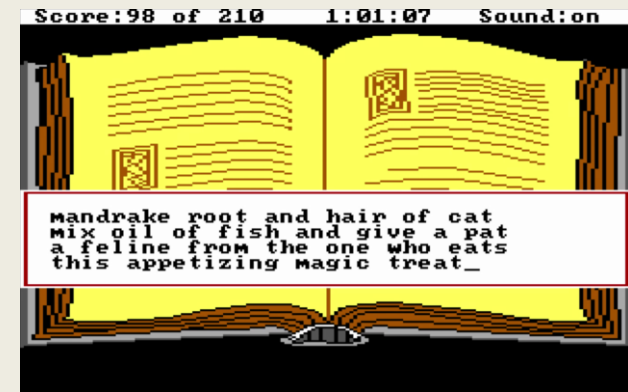
The downside of the puzzles is an overabundance of «arcade» sequences. Every single mountain path in those regions seems to have intentionally been made about three inches wide, and there seems to be a law against staircase railings or something. The road to Daventry involves even more of these twisted paths and a tricky, annoying climb on a rock surface (not nearly as dumb-planned as the beanstalk ascension in *King's Quest I*, but somewhere close to that range of dumbness). Those who secretly cheered over the lack of this stuff in *King's Quest II* can go back to their air-punching routine.

Atmosphere

As I already mentioned several times, the bulk of the atmosphere in the game is being created by the hidden presence of Manannan the wizard. Even after replaying the game several times, it is still possible to get the chills every time you start feeling the guy is about to return from his journey and zap you to ashes for carrying hidden ingredients. As long as he is active and a real threat, you never feel safe wandering about Llewdor, but are always preoccupied about performing your chores there as quickly as possible and getting back to the safety of your little room. Once he is taken care of, oof! you get to revel in the enjoyment of the beautiful countryside with renewed force, as well as a sense of profound relaxation.

Other than that, the atmosphere is now becoming rather typical of *King's Quest*: a nice fantasy world where it is fun to escape to, but little that you haven't seen yet. Maybe one minor touch is the addition of an enormous desert world that blocks your passage to the west — adding a certain sense of «inescapability» (I suppose every single player must have tried at least once to get away from Manannan «the easy way», only to die of heat and exhaustion a few screens away) as well as vastness of the surrounding world. There is also a nice take on the «scarred Daventry» world, with images that players used to remember from the first game presented in a «devastated» perspective — the well clogged with rocks, formerly beautiful meadows transformed into impassable rifts and precipices, etc. This adds a decidedly odd nostalgic flavour.

Technical features

Graphics

There are no radical improvements here compared to *King's Quest II*, but the game still boasts an ever-increasing attention to detail. This is perhaps best evident in the amount of «life» on screen: where the previous game was still mostly static, Llewdor is almost Wall Street-level busy in comparison. Streams flow, waterfalls pour, birds fly, squirrels chat with each other and wag their tails, snakes and lizards crawl on the ground, and all of this looks as natural as can be with a 16-color palette and three hundred pixels on the screen. Movement is also enhanced by enlarging the number of intermediate positions for most of the sprites. And the sprites themselves are pictured more expressively — no longer are they viewable only as profiles without shuddering. In particular, the sprite of Manannan, appearing and disappearing in billows of smoke, with his beard, tall hat, and fiercely elongated eyes, is one you shall soon learn to hate on a personal level.

As for background images, here, too, what used to be rendered in a fast, sketchy way, is now elaborated on an entirely different level. Manannan's dwelling is full to the brim with objects of all kinds — pictures, maps, differently coloured books, wall decorations, tapestries — giving the player ample time to explore all the possibilities connected with this abundance (ample, that is, until Manannan gets back and starts bossing you around). The pirate ship, with its variety of shields, flags, construction details and such, is also quite a vivid place to explore. Of all the early AGI games, *King's Quest III* is easily the most colorful when it comes to graphics; only the upgrade to SCI and higher resolutions would raise the standard even higher.

Sound

There are some nifty touches here in comparison to the previous games, but also some major drawbacks. Problem number one is that by this time, Sierra people like Margaret Lowe were already quite comfortable with milking the PC speaker for all its worth and went on a creative spree, churning out as many musical themes and special effects they could. But the PC speaker hadn't changed much over the previous three years, and its capabilities were simply abused. Many of the sonic waves here are «aurally destructive» even today, when you emulate the PC speaker on your progressive sound card and are in full control of the volume; as for back in 1986, I bet most players just preferred to have the sound turned off altogether.

Sure, the grim «music» that replaces 'Greensleeves' in the introduction to the game must have been an unforgettable shock. A few of the happier themes are un-annoyingly cute and giggly, like the one that accompanies the Three Bears wherever they are. And the sounds that accompany Manannan's appearance (gloomy fanfare-like note sequence) and disappearance («whirly» sound, perfectly suitable for his billows of smoke) are a brief touch of now-outdated genius. But other than that, there are too many shrill, irky melodies relying on ugly frequencies and notes that drag out long enough to choke you. The absolute nadir is in Manannan's laboratory, where you are forced to cast your spells to the sounds of "mysterious music", which is not so much mysterious as torturous: were the real-life Gwydion truly obliged to work his magic to *that* kind of sound, he would probably end up with an atomic bomb in his pocket. Fortunately, this was the last *King's Quest* to be fully dependent on the Speaker.

Interface

King's Quest III's major blessing and curse at the same time is a radical improvement of the parser system. The game understands a vast multitude of verbs and nouns now, and even prepositions — in the previous games, most prepositions were either not recognized or discarded, but here words like 'under' and 'behind' gain a special importance, and this means that you won't just get away with barely looking *at* things whenever you are exploring a new location.

Of course, this also makes the gameplay much harder. The cruelest thing of all is that non-trivial decisions can only be helpful in a very few cases, and chances are you will encounter one of these special cases exactly by the time you have given up on

testing the limits of the parser and reverted to the old look – take – use routine. Then you find yourself stuck and frustrated. Still, it certainly boosts playing time. And so does the necessity to use the parser A LOT while dealing with preparation and performing of your spells. Here, though, there is no thinking to be done — just beware of typos.

Moving around also reveals a few interesting touches, such as the first ever «primitive physics» puzzle, where you can carry and drop objects (*one* object, to be precise) at will, although over a space of but two screens. Once you get hold of all the magic spells, there is ample room to experiment with the transformational and teleportational ones, which include some leeway and, strange as it seems, are completely bug-free (not something Sierra could easily boast in its later days). But in all other respects, there is little different about the interface and gameplay.

Verdict: *Still worth it for suspense and intrigue*

King's Quest III pushed the AGI world as far as it could ever evolve — with the possible exception of the parser (also improved, but could have been even more sophisticated), all the other aspects of the game milked the AGI engine for all it was worth. Graphics, sound, scope, length, everything was first-rate for 1986. In terms of plot intensity, it hasn't aged one single bit since its inception; I can vividly imagine new gamers drawn into the confrontation with Manannan as easily as they did at the dawn of the computer age. Only a few steps short of perfection — the story isn't quite as nicely fleshed out as in some of the sequels, and, come to think of it, the whole magic spellbook affair *could* have been done in a less annoying way; but perfection is never achieved in one step, and as good as the game is, Roberta would up the stakes once more in the sequel.