

## King's Quest IV: The Perils Of Rosella

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Roberta Williams**

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

Release: September 1988

Main credits: Programming: **Chane Fullmer, Ken Koch**

Music: **William Goldstein**

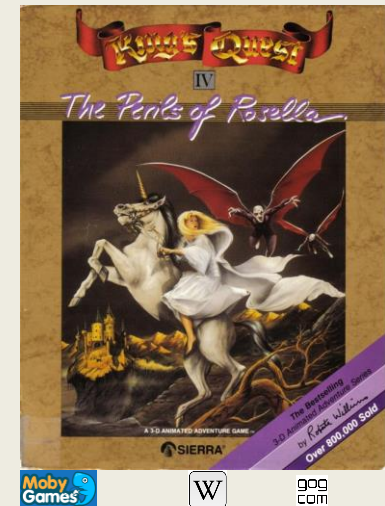
Development System: **Pablo Ghenis, Jeff Stephenson, Chris Iden, Stuart Goldstein**

Graphics: **William D. Skirvin**

Useful links: Playthrough: [Part 1](#) (60 mins.)

[Part 2](#) (61 mins.)

[Part 3](#) (69 mins.)



### Basic Overview

*King's Quest IV* came into my own life relatively late — I distinctly remember playing both *Space Quest III* and *Leisure Suit Larry II* much later than *The Perils Of Rosella* — meaning that I never lived on my own through the life-changing experience it provided gamers back in the fall of 1988. But I was still impressed when playing it for the first time, and I still remain impressed even today, dusting it off for this nostalgic review. Back then, it was every bit as revolutionary (perhaps even more so) than the first King's Quest game, but there is a difference: *King's Quest IV* remains a beautiful game even *today*. Its graphics look respectably ancient rather than humiliatingly «dated»; its music sounds as fresh and wonderful as ever; its perfectly constructed storyline still forms a smoothly flowing fairy-tale narrative; and in its darkest moments, I dare say it can still terrify a young player's heart.



Of course, the tremendous artistic success of the game was largely due to the huge progress of the computing industry in the mid-1980's. Advances in processing and storing power, transition to VGA, development of the first proper sound cards — Sierra was one of the first game developers to make good use of all of that (somewhat to the detriment of fans who could not afford this richness: I remember well how much frickin' time it would take to load a new screen or restore a game after

Rosella's umpteenth demise, and I only heard the game's music properly, rather than through my trusty PC Speaker, some time in the mid-1990's). But the marvel of the game is that it is still a gas to play even in its minimalistic, AGI-based early variant, with inferior graphics and no proper music. The reason is that *King's Quest IV* also represented a major step forward in adventure game storytelling. It featured a strong and resourceful female protagonist (yes, contrary to religious rumors that strong playable female characters are still lacking in video games, they actually go all the way back to Rosella in 1988); it took place in real time, with a day-to-night cycle realised in stunning graphic detail; it featured several interconnected subplots which you could take on in any order; it improved upon the dialog and the text parser; it had a wonderful mix of humor and terror; it made you actually care about the characters — and rejoice in its happy ending (provided you'd actually achieved it, because there was actually an alternate tragic ending).

Along with *The Colonel's Bequest*, the game represented Roberta Williams at the height of her powers — her talents may have been insufficient to properly establish her as a creator in the more modern age of computing (remember *Phantasmagoria?*), but she was just all right for that crazy little period in 1988-89 when adventure gaming was just entering adulthood. *King's Quest III* had already proven that she was capable of creating a truly gripping experience, but the sequel went even further with its humanization of the title character and deepening of suspense and intrigue. In retrospect, it still remains a fairly naïve narrative, crudely concocted out of a bunch of familiar fairy-tale motives, but the extra detalization, added emotionality, and occasionally unexpected plot twists are all juicy enough to overlook the simplicity of it all — something that is harder to do for *King's Quest III*, and absolutely impossible for the first two games in the series. Small wonder, then, that the game became both a major critical *and* commercial hit upon release — solidifying Sierra's status and laying the groundwork for what I still consider the truly golden period of the company (1988-1990).

## Content evaluation

### Plotline

Unlike the first two games, *King's Quest III* actually ended on a cliffhanger — with King Graham flinging his adventurer's hat in the air and his two children rushing forward to pick it up, thus implying that there *will* be a sequel, come hell or high water. So for those who had already played the previous game, *King's Quest IV* confounded expectations right from the start. First, as they saw King Graham collapse on the ground from a sudden heart attack, they realized it was all going to get a lot more personal. Second, as the storyline quickly congealed not around Prince Alexander, the protagonist of the previous game, but around his sister, Princess Rosella, it would quickly dawn upon them that they would have to step in the shoes (and, uh, in the

dress) of a girl princess — who would turn out to be anything *but* a damsel in distress, like she was in *King's Quest III*.

Much has been written about Roberta Williams' fateful decision, but probably the best thing about it is that the feminine nature of Rosella is not at all flaunted in the plot — in fact, most of the time she is simply shown to be getting into the same kinds of perilous situations, and braving them with the same wit and courage as her brother Alexander. She may get a slight sexist remark or two from the rustic Seven Dwarves, and there is a tiny bit of courting involved at the very end of the game, but other than that, Rosella is just a sprite in a dress, albeit rendered as more human-like through occasional close-ups and relatively involved and emotional bits of dialog in the game's intro and outro sections.

In its essence, the plot is not that much different from *King's Quest I* or *II*. In order to save her dying father, King Graham, Rosella travels to the land of Tamir, where she has to find a magic fruit (the smaller subplot of the game), as well as aid Genesta, the local fairy, who had her magic talisman stolen by the evil witch Lolotte and is now slowly dying without its power, as well as being unable to teleport Rosella back home — this is the larger subplot, which involves passing through several distinct trials and ultimately besting the witch. What has significantly changed, though, is the level of detailization. There are more locations, more characters, more puzzles, more interactions, more suspense, and more sources of inspiration.

This time, Roberta Williams pulls all the stops and heavily borrows from all over the world. We have unicorns, Cupids, Jonah whales, ogres guarding magic hens, traveling minstrels, zombies, flesh-eating trees, the Graeae, the Seven Dwarves, and a mummy guarding Pandora's Box, all of them somehow managing to co-inhabit the couple dozen screens of the land of Tamir and making it look much more vast than it actually is. As usual, lots of questions remain unanswered — such as why, for instance, is Pandora's Box kept hidden in the crypt of a fearsome mummy which shares the same property space with a dilapidated English manor? — but somehow all these odd combinations still make more sense than having Little Red Riding Hood merrily hippity-hopping a few yards away from Count Dracula's castle; the amount of detail that goes into all these settings reduces the feeling that Roberta was simply pulling random shit out of her ass whenever it was necessary to populate the next few square inches of Daventry or Kolyma with *something*.

Most importantly, though, the story of *King's Quest IV* introduces a cohesive and well-rounded plot. There really was no such



thing to speak of in the first two games, and the idea of *King's Quest III* was to let you know why you were playing this goddamn game in the first place only when you were about two-thirds done with it. Here, you are on a clear mission of rescue — save a dying father and a terminally ill kind fairy — and you have a limited time cycle to carry it out, with each next stage more demanding and complicated than the one before it. The denouement, with one of the earlier plot twists cleverly reversed to make an instrument of love into an instrument of revenge, is quite clever and climactic, and upon completing the game, you will probably feel deep satisfaction as Rosella lays down her Herculean burdens.

### Puzzles

The puzzle design in *King's Quest IV* is relatively benevolent compared to what may be encountered in an average Sierra game. As long as you diligently explore your surroundings (which may be a daunting task due not so much to the hugeness of the land, but to the increased level of detalization), you will have your pockets bulging in no time, after which it is usually just a matter of correctly choosing the right utensil at the right opportunity. Unfortunately, the old stuck-o-rama curse does hit in a few spots, as there are locations in the game which you cannot return to after exploring (e.g. the little island in the middle of the sea), and if you have failed to rummage through them properly, you will be forever stuck in Tamir with no hope of fulfilling your mission. Wasting stuff is also severely punished — do not even think of shooting that second arrow from Cupid's bow into the air, or you will be found sorely lacking in your hour of need; likewise, your trusty spade only has a limited amount of charges before it breaks into pieces, so use it sparingly.

On the positive side, despite the complexity of some of the puzzles, most of them seem logical — arguably the strangest part of the quest takes part in a haunted mansion at night, where you have to placate the roaming spirits for no obvious reason, but even there it is rather the general setting that seems bizarre than the specific tasks you have to perform, particularly if you take the time to read the inscriptions on each of the cemetery's tombs (and you *should*, some of them are quite hilarious). This is, in fact, one of the few Sierra games which I remember being able to complete without getting seriously stuck even once: chalk it up to intelligent and merciful puzzle design throughout.

As usual, the fun is occasionally marred by platform-style challenges: *King's Quest's* infamous ladders are back with a vengeance (particularly inside Lolotte's castle, where Rosella stands a much higher chance of breaking her neck by falling





down a few feet than she does being zapped by Lolotte himself), and the long track down a dark cave with a carnivorous troll on your back is quite a drag as well. Worst of the lot is the infamous whale tongue sequence, where you have to carefully navigate the large, red, slippery surface punctuated with dots which you *think* probably somehow indicate the right path to navigate, but in reality they do not — you can only proceed blindly, trying to memorize the path bit by bit before you eventually get there. For some reason, apparently, Sierra headquarters were *not* inundated by death threats after they'd tried out a similar thing with King Graham climbing up the beanstalk in the first game, so they were free to try and pull that shit on us again here — goddammit. This time around, I guess, they did get death threats after all, since the whale tongue became an internal Sierra meme which would later be lambasto-referenced by Al Lowe in *Leisure Suit Larry III*, of all places. Anyway, it's not *that* bad — it really only takes a few minutes to figure out the right path — but it is always annoying to waste time, even small amounts of it, on blatantly stupid challenges.

### Atmosphere

This is where the game truly shines, in my opinion. In *King's Quest III*, the key component of atmosphere was tension and suspense — you did not really have the inclination to stop and admire the scenery because you knew that at any time, in any place you could have your ass kicked to dust by the evil magician if you do not hurry up and gather those ingredients. *King's Quest IV* also represents a battle against time, since once the day-night cycle is over, you automatically fail in your mission; but this battle is more subtle and less easily noticeable, actually giving you plenty of time to stop and look around whenever you feel like it. And with the amount of loving detail that goes into the scenery and the little animations, you were, of course, always tempted to do just that.

For all the diversity found in the imaginary syncretized lands of Kolyma and Llewddor, the bare-bones nature of their locations was always quick to remind you that puzzles come first, beauty and feelings come second. The desert was there to make you avoid poisonous snakes, the lawn in front of the Three Bears' house was there to help you get a thimbleful of dew — very pragmatic. Tamir, however, feels like a land where you would actually be delighted (or, occasionally, terrified) to take a walk, and it is not *just* about the graphics. It is about the level of detail; it is about the sometimes radical transitions between the atmosphere of adjacent screens; it is about the subtle, but important modifications to the dialog system, both between you and



the narrator and between Rosella and the people she encounters. It is about wishing to revisit all of Tamir's areas at night, just to see whether they look at all different from the daytime (they usually do).

A key element of the earlier *King's Quest* games, starting from the second one, was to delineate «danger zones» and «safe zones», so that you would be emotionally attracted to safe places like lawns and seashores and reluctant to enter risky areas such as the poisonous lake around Dracula's castle. *King's Quest IV's* Tamir pushes that principle to its limits (later games would generally feature a set of different, more disjointed locations instead of one huge chessboard), introducing a clever areal demarcation — most of the danger zones are concentrated in the eastern part of the map, increasing as you get closer to the mountain range that blocks passage to the right, while the safest zones are all to the west, following a reasonably natural layout: The Sea > The Meadows > The Forests > The Mountains. This means that you will generally tend to stick to the sunny and green parts, with their singing minstrels and dancing fawns and grazing unicorns, while only reluctantly plunging into the shady and perilous eastern areas, controlled by ogres, evil living trees, and, of course, Lolotte herself. This clever arrangement, quickly setting up a fixed pattern of «West = Good, East = bad» in your mind, makes *King's Quest IV* a far more immersive experience than its predecessors.

Likewise, the suspense during the game's dangerous sections has also reached new heights here. Enemies that pop out of nowhere are bigger, faster, and more intimidating than the nuisances of the first three games — and if the huge ogre and his equally huge wife at least prefer to roam the forest during the daytime, the cave troll will be surprising you in the dark, because, well, he is a cave troll after all; that part where you have to make your way to the other side of the mountains is probably the creepiest moment in all of Sierra's early history. Which reminds me that Rosella is given absolutely no slack just because she is a girl — death is as frequent a guest in *King's Quest IV* as it was before, and although no gore is involved, watching an evil ogre drag your protagonist away by her golden braids was quite shocking by *King's Quest* standards (actually, looks seriously disturbing even today). Yet even the scariest moments may be intertwined with humor if you so desire — nothing truly beats the experience of reading aloud the hilarious inscriptions on the cemetery's tombstones right under the noses of bloodthirsty scavenging zombies, for instance!

## Technical features

### *Graphics*

Ah, the graphics of *King's Quest IV*. You know there is something to be said about the visuals of a 1988 game when they still look beautiful today — far more beautiful, in fact, than quite a few games from the 1990s, especially the ugly early 3D

experiments. Usually, this is chalked up to Sierra's transition from AGI to SCI (Sierra's Creative Interpreter), allowing for higher resolutions (320x200 pixels, no less!) and more colors (16!) — but the truth is that the game looks seriously different from the first three even in its early, barely available [AGI version](#), meaning that human artistic talent was just as much at work here as advances in hardware.

We might actually chalk this up, at least partially, to the arrival of a new Sierra talent — William D. Skirvin, who had replaced Doug MacNeill and Marc Crowe as the lead artist for *King's Quest* (he would also work on most of the *Leisure Suit Larry* games and some others as well). Under his directions, the world of *King's Quest* made the most of available colors and detail — you don't really need to go further than the comparison of the final shots of *King's Quest III* and the first shots of *King's Quest IV*, both picturing the exact same throne room of King Graham's castle in Daventry. The original still retains a bit of the austere spirit of the original ASCII-based pseudographics, emphasizing shape over pattern; the reworked image pretty much makes intelligent use of every single pixel, dazzling the brain (okay, dazzling the 1988 brain) with a colorful patchwork where every piece of furniture, every wall ornament, every item of clothing is pictured to reflect different grades of lighting and shadow. Granted, the AGI version produces a highly smudged effect due to the low resolution; but the VGA graphics rendered within SCI is perfectly distinct and holds up fine today, as long as you do not try to play the game in full screen mode on a modern screen.

A whole lot of minor creative touches was applied in the process. For the first time, we get a proper distinction between outdoor and indoor perspective: outdoor landscapes take up the whole screen and give you a smaller character sprite, while indoor locations are slightly narrowed down and feature a larger and more detailed Rosella, creating a more intimate — or, sometimes, more claustrophobic — effect. We also get occasional close-ups of the characters, usually during cutscenes in the intro and outro, also rendered in gorgeous detail (just look at that fabulous screenshot of Rosella and Genesta with her multi-colored fairy wings). Odd perspectives include looking out through a keyhole in the ogre's house, and, of course, the infamous inside of the whale's mouth with a strange perspective (Rosella has to climb all the way up to what seems to be the whale's teeth, yet is able at the same time to tickle his uvula — either our girl has got *very* long arms or somebody needs a lecture on cetacean anatomy). Finally, the most innovative touch is the already mentioned day-and-night cycle: obviously, we are a very long way from implementing that gradually on a real-time scale, but each single outside location in Tamir is indeed presented



in a daytime and a nighttime-colored version, and the nighttime version manages to be reasonably intimidating without sacrificing any daytime detail.

Of course, it is probably a futile affair to try and convince the average 21st century gamer about the aesthetic wonders of a 1988 adventure video game, but you really only need to compare it with a few other randomly chosen titles from the same era to become aware of the visual superiority — *King's Quest IV* notably suffers less from pixel-itis in the modern era than many of the later SCI-era games or, say, the pre-remake *Secret Of Monkey Island*, and, overall, of all the imaginary locations in the franchise, Tamir ends up the one in which I'd most prefer to spend my vacation, as long as it is possible to stick to the West Coast without plunging too deep into the forests or mountains.

### Sound

For all of its revolutionary qualities, arguably *the* single most overwhelming thing about *King's Quest IV* was its soundtrack. The game was the first commercial PC release to make use of the freshly developed sound cards (AdLib, Sound Blaster, etc.) and MIDI synthesizer boards such as the Roland MT-32 — and in order to emphasize this, Sierra spared no expense in hiring a professional composer, William Goldstein. This results in not only the *first* proper musical soundtrack for a Sierra adventure game, but also in one of the absolute best ones: Goldstein never worked with Sierra again, and it wasn't until Jane Jensen's encounter with Robert Holmes that the studio got itself a soundtrack composer of comparable stature.



Since this is a soundtrack, not a musical suite on its own, I will not go into major details, except stating that the score is absolutely instrumental in supporting and enforcing the atmosphere of magic, beauty, royal pomp, grievous solemnity, and (occasionally) chilly dread of the game — and that Goldstein somehow manages to do all that without falling victim to Disney-style sappy clichés (up yours, *King's Quest VII!*), perhaps because he generally seems to look to folk and Renaissance-era music stylistics for inspiration, or Bach on occasion (yes, there *is* a clichéd use of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor in one appropriate situation, but you don't really find me complaining about that). Needless to say, in order to be properly associated, the soundtrack *has* to be heard in its full glory with proper MT-32 emulation (the playthrough links in the review provide precisely that experience), although I distinctly remember the music being impressive even when played through a PC



Speaker, the first time I heard it: after all, a first-rate composer is always a first-rate composer.

In addition to the main musical themes, the MIDI drivers provide tons of sound effects — roaring ocean waves, whistling winds, chirping birds, croaking frogs, barking dogs, neighing unicorns, everything you need to make the eco- and biodiversity of Tamir come to life. (You do have to fiddle around quite a bit with the emulation settings on modern PCs to have it all reproduced, though). Curiously, this veritable overload of audio delights was not reproduced on the same kind of scale in any other SCI-era Sierra game: it's as if they really blew all their load on *King's Quest IV* and then had to wait several years to rebuild their stamina level. But while this is regrettable in general, in the case of *King's Quest IV* it only makes the game tower even higher over most of the competition — and make it an absolute must-play even today for anybody who believes that the phrase «lasting value» is at all applicable to a video game.

### Interface

One aspect in which *King's Quest IV* still stubbornly clung to its past (and I, for one, welcome that type of conservatism) was in preserving the old text parser system. They *could* have changed that — *Maniac Mansion* had already shown the world how this could be done, and *King's Quest IV* does feature full-on mouse support, meaning that you can move Rosella around and select menu options without resorting to cursor or functional keys on the keyboard. But apparently, Ken and Roberta were not yet fully convinced that the point-and-click future was the right kind of future for adventure games, and decided to stick with the parser after all.

One major technical change from the earlier AGI interpreter is that the parser now works differently: where prior to 1988 you were typing stuff into the command line below the graphic screen «in real time», meaning that you could walk around and type at the same time, with SCI the command line is no longer a ubiquitous part of the screen but, instead, appears each time you begin to type something in, pausing the game in the process. This has two small, but nice advantages — first, you get to enjoy a larger screen, and second, you are no longer in danger of having your ass kicked by some roaming enemy while desperately paying attention to the orthography of «pour toadstool powder into thermonuclear reactor» (well, not exactly, but...). The trade-off is that, by not being able to walk and type at the same time, you slow your game down a bit, but this was really only a problem in the early days on weak PCs, when even setting game speed to fastest still made the character crawl across the screen like a snail on amphetamines.

As for the power of the parser itself, this is where things have neither significantly improved nor worsened since *King's Quest III*. I do not remember any serious fuck-ups when trying to come up with a working verbalization for any of the necessary

actions (unlike, say, some of the really silly jams in SCI-era *Leisure Suit Larry* games), but neither were there any particularly interesting extra options, other than a reply of "Not in front of the other game players!" to 'undress' or "Perhaps you need to purchase a copy of *Leisure Suit Larry*?" to any randomly used expletive. In other words, the parser, just like the overhead menu, was quite strictly functional: nothing to detract from the straightahead game experience. Which is hardly a bad thing when the experience is on such a superior level.

**Verdict:** *An encapsulation of everything great about late-Eighties gaming*

Although no game is perfect, and most certainly no Sierra On-Line game was ever perfect, it is almost impossible to imagine a better adventure game than *King's Quest IV* to have been produced in 1988. In time, technology and imagination would naturally make obsolete both the game's technical advances and simplistic/formulaic storyline. But just as we are still capable of being amazed, for instance, at the level of mastery and imagination involved in the making of the Beatles' **Sgt. Pepper**, easily giving in to its magic despite the outdated nature of its technological and musical philosophy, I think that *King's Quest IV* is one of those games that easily stands the test of time as a fully *playable* experience, not just a curious museum piece. If ever you need a fully involving, immersive experience of a good old-fashioned fairy tale, with perfectly defined black and white tiles (all-good heroes against all-evil villains and all that), simple enough while still coming up with a solid challenge, pristine yet beautiful in its visuals, and featuring one of the most immersive early video game soundtracks ever, Princess Rosella is still available as your potential alter ego.

