

King's Quest V: Absence Makes The Heart Go Yonder

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Roberta Williams**

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

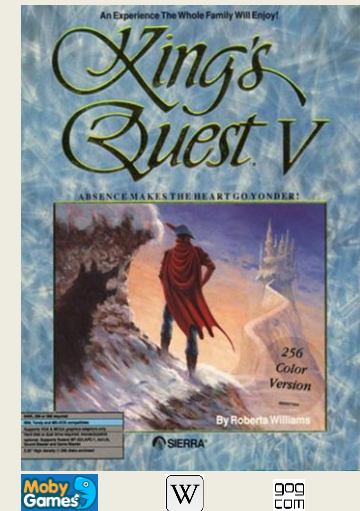
Release: November 9, 1990

Main credits: Lead Programmer: **Chris Iden**
Music: **Ken Allen, Mark Seibert**

Art Designer: **Andy Hoyos**

Development System: **Pablo Ghenis, Jeff Stephenson et al.**

Useful links: Playthrough: [Part 1](#) (62 mins.) [Part 2](#) (65 mins.) [Part 3](#) (68 mins.)



Basic Overview

Few games were more revolutionary in the history of Sierra On-Line than *King's Quest V* — perhaps *King's Quest I...* maybe *King's Quest IV...* could be *King's Quest III...* well, you get the drift: whatever huge changes the world at large commandeered from Sierra, in those years you could always count on Roberta Williams to step forward as their flagwoman. (Well, then again, she *was* the boss' wife, after all.) That said, «revolutionary» does not necessarily mean «best», be it politics, music, or video games, and there is hardly a better example of «revolutionary done wrong» than this game, which has always elicited very mixed reactions from me.



As the Nineties brought along further advances in processing power, graphic resolutions, and digital sound technologies, Sierra did its best to adapt: with increasing competition from younger, bolder players on the scene (LucasArts, in particular, had firmly established itself as a strong force to be reckoned with), Ken Williams was clearly determined to remain on the cutting edge. *King's Quest V* was the first in what could be called the «third generation» of Sierra games, clearly distinguished

from the previous one by three important changes: (a) new and improved VGA graphics, with background images now typically painted and scanned in; (b) new and improved sound technologies, finally allowing for full-on voice acting to replace (or complement) text boxes; and, most importantly, (c) complete removal of the text parser in favor of a new point-and-click interface. The latter decision was clearly influenced by the competition (e.g. such LucasArts games as *Loom*, which had completely dropped the verbal aspects of earlier games like *Maniac Mansion* and introduced the quintessential point-and-click experience) — and, in my humble opinion, was the single most devastating choice in the history of plot-based video games, but more on that below.

Along with all these massive changes came a good story — King Graham was brought back from the near-dead for such a monumental occasion, and sent in pursuit of the evil wizard Mordack who had just kidnapped his entire family *and* his castle, for no apparent reason. The narrative and dialog, still mainly controlled by Roberta Williams, were rather old-fashioned for 1990, but tolerable. The changes to the graphic system and the interface, fresh and dazzling, were also received warmly — but when two years later, in 1992, the floppy disc edition was followed by the fully voiced CD-ROM version, critical reaction was a bit more reserved, largely due to the lack of professional actors involved (all the voicing was done by Sierra staff). As time went by and what was once novel became the norm, the attitude towards *King's Quest V* cooled down significantly, to the extent that today it is generally remembered as one of the weakest games in the series, or, at the very least, a serious misstep caught in between two masterpieces (*IV* and *VI*). How much of that negativity reflects historical justice, and how much constitutes revisionist injustice? Read on to find out.

Content evaluation

Plotline

King's Quest V was the last game in the series for which Roberta Williams was credited as sole designer — meaning that she actually wrote all the plot and dialog, unlike later games, where she acted more like a mentor while the actual job was done by other writers (Jane Jensen, Lorelei Shannon). This signifies another old-fashioned, traditionally-stylized experience, a story of noble rescue and a plotline peppered with randomly written characters from all over the world of European folklore... and, in theory at least, there is nothing wrong with that.



One significant feature of the game's plot is that it is *very* tightly tied to the previous games — *King's Quest IV* may have set the ball rolling with its plot directly continuing from the mild cliffhanger at the end of *III*, but other than a few moments in the intro, the game still functioned perfectly well as a stand-alone title. *King's Quest V*, marking the triumphant return of King Graham as the active protagonist, seems seriously preoccupied with its own mythology, and could not be easily recommended to players who had not already subscribed to the Roberta Williams fanclub years ago. At the very beginning of the game, we see a mysterious figure appearing out of thin air and apparently «pocketing» Graham's castle along with everyone who lives in it (the everyone in question, surprisingly, only including Graham's wife, son, and daughter — the servants must have all gotten bonus tickets to Disneyland). Eventually, with the aid of his friends, King Graham is able to get to the bottom of this and crack the identity of the cloaked kidnapper, but that identity will still be a bit of a puzzle to anyone who had not played *King's Quest III*, and the effect will not be quite the same.

The initial setting is, in fact, very similar to that of *King's Quest IV*. Tragedy strikes (Graham suffers a heart attack — Graham's family is kidnapped), an unexpected magical assistant materializes out of nowhere (Fairy Genesta — Cedric the Owl) and lures the protagonist out to a distant land (Tamir — Serenia) by some or other means of insta-travel (teleportation — magic dust). What expects you next is a lot of wandering through the brave new world, sorting out various people's problems and getting important gifts, until you finally encounter the archvillain (Lolotte — Mordack) and use their own strengths against them (no spoilers, sorry!). In other words, Roberta did not exactly jump sky high to bring us a fresh new plot — but she did come up with a few fresh twists on old storylines, which is more than enough for a *King's Quest* game.

Or maybe not *quite* enough, particularly for old fans of the series: too many elements seem rather lazily rehashed from past games — evil snake blocking your path from *King's Quest II*, endless deadly desert from *King's Quest III*, abominable snowman from *King's Quest III* again, and many other encounters which just substitute old characters with new while leaving the old tropes intact. If ever, for some reason, you decide to binge your way through all the series, multiple waves of déjà vu are practically guaranteed. The only principal difference is the introduction of a sidekick — Cedric the Owl, who accompanies you throughout the game for absolutely no reason other than whine and annoy you to no end (and it gets even worse if you play the voiced version, see below for more on that).

Some of Roberta's synthetic elements feel rather poorly integrated into the atmosphere of the game — namely, the desert sequence which, for some reason, features elements from *Arabian Nights*; this is at least something new, but seeing the oh-so-British King Graham suddenly transform into Aladdin for a few moments is, to put it mildly, rather inconsistent with the overall tone of *King's Quest*, though probably not catastrophic. On the positive side, the game's conclusion, with an epic magic

battle of wits between the hero and the villain, adds tension and drama — for the first time in the series, the final challenge is not a single action which you can leisurely type in on your keyboard, but an actual multi-move timed test of intelligence which actually *feels* like a challenge. Later *King's Quest* games would try to follow the same tension-building climactic rush in their finale, but this is one aspect on which *King's Quest V* has them all beat. Unfortunately, just one.

Puzzles

As Sierra's first proper point-and-click game, *King's Quest V* is not terribly imaginative. You can Look at stuff, Use / Take stuff, and Talk to people — which essentially means that most solutions to most puzzles involve taking detachable object X and using it on undetachable object / person Y, as they would in fact do in most point-and-click games from then on. The actual actions needing to be performed are fairly simple and logical; the main difficulty lies in scoping out the rather vast (for 1990) land of Serenia, since you typically need to go to one end of the world in order to pick up an object there that you need to exchange for another object in the opposite end of the world, only to return with it to the former end of the world etc. etc. — prepare yourself for quite a bit of backtracking, and never forget to save.



In fact, never forget to save in *multiple* slots, because *King's Quest V* suffers from a particularly bad case of dead-end-itis. Leave Serenia for your journey across the mountains without even a single necessary object, and you're a goner. Accidentally waste a necessary object, and you'll never see paradise. And, in perhaps the game's most maligned episode, blink once to miss a crucial event (just a cat chasing a mouse), and half an hour later you are dead without even properly understanding what it is you did wrong in the first place. Today, gamers will mercilessly label this as piss-poor game design; back in 1990, they would be more likely to just accept these things as tough challenges and keep a stiff upper lip. Who cares if there is no way to know that you absolutely *need* that custard pie for your mountain crossing? The important thing is that you *can* get that custard pie before you cross that mountain, and whatever you *can* get, you *should* get. Such is the logic of classic adventure games — and what exactly makes it less logical than any absurd actions you must take in your favorite arcade games, or the endlessly unrealistic deeds you do in your RPGs?

Anyway, while a small handful of puzzles here does border on the utterly absurd (particularly the one that involves getting rid

of the yeti), the majority are straightforward, and your biggest difficulties will be getting stuck in unwinnable situations because you tried to complete the challenges in the wrong order. (Hint: do the desert challenge *before* trying to whoop the evil forest witch's ass, or frustration will follow you to the end of your days). *My* biggest difficulties, the way I remember them, were getting through all the darn mazes — first, trying to figure out all the right beelines between water sources in the desert, and second, trying to find my way in the geometrically confusing dungeons underneath Mordack's castle, which almost look like an early predecessor to the disorienting jumbles of corridors in early *Elder Scrolls* games (not exactly *Daggerfall* level of confusion, but as close as you could expect of an adventure game from 1990).

Still, while much of the retro criticism of the game prefers to focus on bad memories of the yeti puzzle or of Graham dying in prison because he failed to befriend his potential savior, I prefer to fondly remember the end of the game and that climactic battle of wits with Mordack — *that* was a fun and innovative bit of design, and it yielded a very satisfactory ending to the game.

Atmosphere

For some reason, Serenia, the place where you are likely to spend about 2/3 of your playing time, fails to fully recapture the charm and horror of *King's Quest IV's* Tamir — even despite the obvious technical superiority of the graphics. Perhaps it is due to the land actually being quite small: *one* screen for an entire town, about 10 more for all the adjoining outskirts and forests, and a huge, endless, largely procedurally generated desert which literally dwarfs the country. Like Tamir and everything else, Serenia is also divided into relatively «safe» and «dangerous» zones (this time, with a literal warning sign that marks the



danger zone), but the lack of transitional areas is rather befuddling — the layout of Tamir was more convincing, with the land gradually getting darker and darker from west to east. Here, it's more like, Grandpa Dwarf takes three steps out of his cuddly home and runs into danger of being froggified by the evil witch.

All in all, the game seems to have been designed rather pragmatically: it is much easier to get lost in Mordack's boring dungeon maze than in the land of Serenia, where each screen is tightly and functionally loaded (and the game itself, by the way, is fairly short — a complete playthrough runs for about 3 hours), so there is fairly little joy in wandering around it from end to end. The diversity in atmosphere between the safe and danger zones is nice, and the danger zone itself (the evil forest)

is beautifully designed, with horrific-looking plants and red eyes blinking at you from random spots on the screen, but everything is just too small to leave a lasting impression... and that includes the mountain crossing *and* Queen Icebella's palace *and* the little beach spot *and* the island with the harpies, anyway, you get the drift.

Arguably the single most atmospheric space in the game is Mordack's castle — the beautifully eerie Gothic designs, the gloomy ambient music, and the constant feeling of danger just behind your back combine to make that last part of the game into one of the scariest segments in any *King's Quest* game, period: earlier games lacked the graphical and sonic assets to achieve that effect, and later games, even such a masterpiece as *King's Quest VI*, would feel more cuddly and family-friendly even in their darkest moments. Taken together with the already mentioned epic battle at the end, this turns the last half-hour of the game into an experience that can unsettle and impress the player even today. Too bad you have to slog through everything else in order to get around to it — but for those with patience, it's well worth it.

Technical features

Graphics

King's Quest V marked the arrival of a new graphic era for Sierra: with 256-color VGA, and the ability to actually paint the backdrops by hand and then scan them in digitally, the game differed from its predecessors like night and day. To celebrate these technical achievements, Sierra hired an actual graphic artist and illustrator with previous experience in TV animation, Andy Hoyos, and he made sure that the backdrops and cut scenes, for the first time ever, began to look like actual pictures rather than pixel-based digital art. Naturally, the resolutions (320x200 native) were still way below anything properly acceptable for a well-detailed picture, but if you do not concentrate on making out facial features of the characters and instead concentrate on the broad brush strokes, there is plenty to like, and some of the backdrops are even impressively impressionistic.



There are occasional touches of vivid imagination in the artwork — for instance, in the shapes of wild plants in the evil forest, sometimes looking like giant mutated agglomerations of bear traps; in the mish-mashed quasi-abstract bunches of crystals

within the Crystal Cave; certainly in the designs of Mordack's castle interiors, where traditional Gothic shapes mingle with an odd fascination for claw, tooth, and bone (the entire game, I might add, feels rather «toothy» and «bony»). That said, an artist's wild idiosyncratic rampage *King's Quest V* is *not*: this is still the domain of Roberta Williams, and Roberta Williams is fairly conservative when it comes to such established genres as fairy tales, fantasy, or horror. So do not expect anything particularly out of the ordinary — *Loom* or *Grim Fandango* this is not.

In terms of sprites and animations, the game apparently introduced special techniques based on rotoscoping live actors, borrowing the mechanics from Disney — though it probably takes a *very* trained eye in the modern world to detect that, given the crippling limitations of then-current graphic resolution. Still, there is no denying that all character sprites are now both much more detailed *and* feature a much larger and a much smoother set of motion poses, looking less and less like matchboxes on legs and more and more like figures of real people when seen through the eyes of somebody with real low visual acuity. A nice touch is that, while talking, most of the characters receive special enhanced close-ups, with well-animated facial movements; these were further enhanced in the «talkie» version of the game and smoothly synchronized with the audio (again, a truly big achievement for the early 1990s). The only regrettable thing is that there should have been many more cut-scene presentations — the most realistic and pretty shots of the game are the ones where the camera zooms in on the characters, which, unfortunately, happens only several times during the play.

Sound

The original version of the game came on floppy discs and predictably contained no talking — only a musical soundtrack and some SFX effects. The soundtrack, credited to Sierra's veteran Mark Seibert and newcomer Ken Allen, is decent, but nothing particularly special, a clear step down from the complexity and energy levels of *King's Quest IV*: much of it is just built on fairly generic functional motives (generic gypsy music for the gypsy scene, generic Eastern dance music for the Eastern scenes, generic gloom-and-doom soundscape for the Mordack Castle scenes, etc.). The sound effect work, however, is quite commendable: for most of the game, you are accompanied with lively noises (chirping birds in pretty forests, scary birds in evil forests, people hustling and bustling in busy towns, cold winds blowing in the mountains, waves crashing on the seashore, wicked brews bubbling in Mordack's



laboratory, etc.): such a dazzling variety was never to be found in even the most show-off-ey of Sierra's second-generation games.

Yet most importantly, of course, in 1992 *King's Quest V* came out on CD-ROM and became Sierra's first fully voiced title — though this is precisely where the idea of «revolutionary does not always equal good» comes out in full. With voice acting in video games still being a very fresh thing, Sierra's management was either unable or not willing to call for professional voice actors, meaning that all the voicing had to be done by the staff members themselves: thus, artist Andy Hoyos tries his best to voice the evil wizard Mordack, composer Mark Seibert voices the briefly appearing Genie, and Roberta Williams herself voices... the pip-squeaky Rat. New addition Josh Mandel, who would soon be playing a significant role in Sierra's design and writing history, does a decent enough job with King Graham (rather wooden, but then Graham himself has always been a fairly wooden character).

However, the biggest slip-up was committed with the character of Cedric the Owl, voiced by programmer Richard Aronson — for some reason, everybody thought it was a good idea to make him deliver all the lines in a shrill «hooting» falsetto, and this, coupled with Cedric's annoying and totally unnecessary presence in the first place, quickly turned poor Cedric into arguably the single most hated Sierra character of all time; if you are a veteran, too, you most certainly remember the immortal line "[Graham, watch out! A POISONOUS snake!](#)" like it were only yesterday. Then again, sometimes gruesomely inept easily translates into hilariously unforgettable, and at least Sierra's masterminds were sufficiently aware of this to allow poor Cedric to be properly grilled and lambasted, as an inside joke, in multiple future games (from Al Lowe's *Freddy Pharkas*, where you can find the poor guy being picked apart by vultures, to *Space Quest IV*, where you can shoot him down as a bonus prize in the *Astro Chicken* arcade).

Ironically, my own biggest personal gripe with the soundtrack is that, this being Sierra's first voiced title and all, there is still no way to get the voice acting *and* the text boxes to appear at the same time — which may be annoying even for native English speakers, since the sound quality of the acting is relatively lo-fi, noisy, and hard to understand whenever somebody sets a natural filter on their voice, be it Roberta's pip-squeak or Aronson's helium falsetto. Later games would correct that mistake and always let you listen and read at the same time (apart from the FMV titles in the catalog), but here it's either pick the floppy disc version with the text, or the CD version with speech (which are also slightly different in terms of available lines of dialogs and descriptions, though not by much), and, apparently, the fan community was not able or not willing to try and splice both with some fan-made patch (not that I blame them — submitting yourself to hours upon hours of testing the compatibility limits of Cedric's dialog is quite an exotic torture).

Still, an achievement is an achievement, and it does not always have to be carried out in perfect style. For a little cherry on top, *King's Quest V* even features the first ever fully instrumentated and voiced bit of singing, in the form of a [little melancholy folk ballad](#) performed by the Weeping Willow (played by Debbie Seibert, surprisingly a much better singer than her husband Mark is an actor — then again, if I am not mistaken, she does have a BA in vocal performance). It is short and nothing special either melodically or lyrically, but at least I would definitely take it over Sierra's later attempts at power balladry such as 'Girl In The Tower'.

Interface

And here we are — Sierra's most drastic change ever, a death sentence for the text parser and transition to the point-and-click interface: as I have always insisted and will continue to insist until my dying day, the single worst decision in adventure game history, and worthy at least of the Top 5 worst decisions in gaming history, period. An opinion with which few gamers will agree — in 1990, the change was welcomed by fans and critics alike, and endless retro reviews of the games always keep pointing out how wonderful it was for the simple and economic point-and-click interface to replace the clumsy and nearly always broken text parser which had caused so much frustration. Yet instead of going the difficult, but promising and intriguing route — *fixing* the parser, so that, in time, it would become more and more intelligent and give the player more and more creative freedom over one's choices — Sierra went the easy way and eliminated those choices altogether, limiting the player to the oh-so-wonderful option of searching out hotspots on the screen and poking them with the mouse cursor, which went in a whoppin' FOUR different shapes: Walk, Look, Take/Use, and Talk. Amazing!

I distinctly remember those days of the first point-and-click Sierra games, and certainly remember how disgusted I was and how this pretty much turned me off from adventure gaming for quite a long time — the only things that saved the experience for me were the continued and ever-improving degrees of storytelling and atmospheric immersion. It does not help, either, that *King Quest V's* interface is so defiantly simplistic: at least some of the better future titles from Sierra tried to introduce slightly more variety in the amount of performable actions (like the «smell» and «taste» icons of *Space Quest IV*, or the tasteless, but strangely comforting «zipper» icon in *Larry* games, or a full set of physical actions in the first *Gabriel Knight*), but here all you can do is helplessly grab at things, and so many things aren't even grabbable! Not to mention the lack of true hotspots — miss an important object by a millimeter and you will get the impression that it might not be important at all, when in fact it is.

Apparently, re-orienting the SCI engine towards a point-and-click interface first time around was such a demanding affair that

the result is extremely sparse — absolutely nothing other than the above-mentioned icons in the menu, plus the usual save-restore-restart-quit options. The only addition to the gameplay is the laconic «combat system» at the end, where you get a menu box and may select a particular shape to which you want to shift: it's fun, but hardly worth remembering as an outstanding feature. All in all, it has always been, and continues to remain for me, as prime evidence for the inferiority of the point-and-click system to a well-trained parser: I always have more fun replaying *King's Quest IV* than this game precisely for that reason.

Verdict: *A revolutionary, but ham-fisted title with far more historical than substantial value*

It might be an exaggeration to state that the slow and shameful death of Sierra On-Line began with *King's Quest V* — particularly given the abundance of stellar titles that the studio released in the 1990s — but in retrospect, the game does feel like an inauspicious first sign of the company's imminent demise. Up until that game, pretty much all of Sierra's truly innovative titles (and most of those were *King's Quest* games, too!) innovated for a good reason, and those innovations were usually a joy to behold and experience. The innovations of *King's Quest V*, however, mostly ranged from dubious and controversial to embarrassing and poorly implemented.



The revised graphics were technically stunning, but did not look nearly enough as a true labor of love like those in *King's Quest IV*. The addition of speech was a fine achievement, but the voicing itself left a hell of a lot to be desired. And the removal of the text parser in favor of a point-and-click interface was, at best, a deeply divisive move — a perfect favor for the fans, in the eyes of some, and a suck-it-up move towards the dumbification of the adventure game experience, in the eyes of others (myself included). In short, it was all a massive revision of objectively or seemingly outdated standards that was done with nowhere near the same brilliance and efficiency as it was in the past — and it was at least partially due to Sierra beginning to function more and more like a business organization and less and less as a company of idealistic nerds who were more out there for fun and excitement than to make money, even if they still made money a-plenty. Just the first small signs, mind you, nothing much to worry about — Sierra would still go on to have at least half a decade worth of artistic success — but if you ever

wanted to write a *Rise And Fall Of The Sierra Empire*, you'd probably have to use 1990 as the entry point for the *Fall* chapters.

In the meantime, want it or not, you still *have* to play *King's Quest V* if you do not want to be left without the important missing link between *IV* and *VI*. You might want to select the old floppy disc version, though — that way, you won't have to put up with Cedric the Owl too much (though you *will* have to put up with the extra hassle of Sierra's annoying copy protection), and you are certainly not missing anything if you do not get acquainted with the lovely tones of other Sierra employees, either.