

King's Quest VII: The Princeless Bride

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

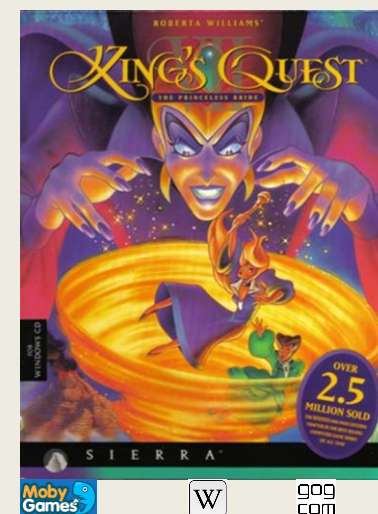
Designer(s): **Roberta Williams / Lorelei Shannon**

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

Release: November 22, 1994

Main credits: Producers: **Mark Seibert, Craig Alexander**
 Programmers: **Oliver Brelsford, Tom DeSalvo, Henry Yu**
 Art Designers: **Andy Hoyos, Marc Hudgins**
 Music: **Neal Grandstaff, Dan Kehler, Jay D. Usher**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (5 parts, 325 mins.)



Basic Overview

The best thing I could probably say about *King's Quest VII* is that it loyally upholds the classic Sierra tradition — no two *King's Quest* games should feel perfectly alike, and each new *King's Quest* has to announce the beginning of something completely different. In this case, though, the «something» in question began on an entirely personal level: *King's Quest VII* was the first game in the series where the involvement of Roberta Williams was almost purely nominal. She'd already shared the designer's seat with Jane Jensen for the sixth title two years earlier, but at least that experience still took form of active collaboration, where the two ladies would regularly toss ideas off each other, even if the technical routine of designing and writing was largely handled by Jensen. By the time *King's Quest VII* came along, though, Roberta was clearly more interested in horror than fantasy, and, being far too busy with Sierra's new spearhead project of *Phantasmagoria*, she more or less transferred *all* control over the game into the hands of Lorelei Shannon, an aspiring young writer of supernatural and horror fiction whose previous experience at Sierra had mainly consisted of writing hintbooks for *King's Quest* — so, clearly, no



stranger to the franchise. She also had done some writing for *The Dagger Of Amon Ra* (Roberta's second mystery title in the *Laura Bow* series), and later, she would also go on to carry Roberta's torch for the second *Phantasmagoria* game — and, frankly speaking, the writing in *Phantasmagoria II* blows the quality of the original out of the water, so the trust in the new designer was clearly well-funded.

Transfer of power into the hands of Shannon ensured that the game would both be similar in spirit to Roberta's vision, given Lorelei's previous experience with the franchise, *and* different from it, reflecting her deeper obsession with all things morbid and creepy (while still making sure that the game could be playable by children). It also had the potential of continuing to bring the *King's Quest* series into a more modern age, with deeper and more complex plots and dialog than Roberta was capable of — not because Roberta was intellectually incapable of such a thing, but rather because a decade of working on the simple-and-stupid model of the early games had made it difficult for her style to evolve (sort of the same problem we see with, for instance, Fifties' rockers trying to stay relevant in the post-Beatles era). Whether Shannon did or did not succeed in following in the footsteps of Jane Jensen's *King's Quest VI* will be made clear shortly; but first, a few words on things that went far and beyond Shannon's zone of control and/or responsibility.

Because on the surface, the *most* noticeable changes concerned not the game's leading writer, but the game's visual style and interface. Dissatisfied, perhaps, by failing to achieve properly realistic standards with Sierra's regular models of 2D graphics, Ken Williams was pushing the studio into two completely different new directions — one of them being FMV (full-motion video), which he and Roberta were testing on *Phantasmagoria*, and the other being cartoon-style animation, something that had just worked admirably well with *Day Of The Tentacle*, Sierra's major competitor in the adventure game genre. But if LucasArts, with their comedic flair, copied their visual style from old-school Looney Tunes, Ken rather found himself looking at something more dramatic, gracious, and, uh, commercial: Disney. With the Disney Renaissance in full bloom, what with *Beauty And The Beast* and *Aladdin* both being the talk of the town, Ken's idea was to begin releasing Sierra adventure games that would work like interactive Disney movies.

In all honesty, this was not the most creative idea he ever had — somewhat symbolically, it was the second time that Sierra agreed to become a follower of somebody else's model rather than a leader (the first time, of course, happened when they abandoned the parser for the point-and-click system), and from some points of view, the beginning of the studio's downfall. Eight years earlier, with Al Lowe working on the game adaptation of Disney's *The Black Cauldron*, the studio specifically made it a point to *not* make a game that would look, feel, and play out as a carbon copy of the movie (though, admittedly, at the time they simply lacked the technical capacity to give it the same look) — they even contested their right to make various

changes to the plotline where it made sense in the context of the game. Now, even if they were not borrowing any actual storylines from Disney, their next *King's Quest* would still be explicitly targeted at fans of Agrabah and Villeneuve — a bit of a cold shower for those old-school fans who still thought they knew the meaning of the word «sell-out».

In the short term, it probably looked like Sierra had made the right decision. Sales were allegedly good (though precise statistics are hard to find), and early reviews were seduced by the prettiness of the visuals. However, after the original enthusiasm had settled, and after further advances in graphic resolution and both 2D and 3D textures had inevitably made the game look antiquated, history pretty much kicked the game in the balls. Together with the even more universally despised *King's Quest VIII* (Sierra's one and only clumsy attempt to bring the franchise into the 3D era), these two typically find themselves at the bottom of every Sierra-related list, and while the eighth game is usually berated for its godawful graphics and its betrayal of the core values of the adventure genre, the seventh is more commonly criticized for its Disney looks and, perhaps more importantly, for its Disney *feels*, as a serious step backwards from the maturity and wittiness of *King's Quest VI*. Let us, then, quickly run through each particular aspect of the game and then try to conclude whether the game in general is way past saving, or if it still deserves a pass at rehabilitation.

Content evaluation

Plotline

True to its story roots at least, *King's Quest VII* continues the story of the royal family of Daventry, brushing the dust off the character of Princess Rosella, whom we last had the chance to play as way back in *King's Quest IV*; however, this time around Rosella also receives active support from her mother, Queen Valanice, whom King Graham had married at the end of *King's Quest II* and who had, up until now, always been strictly an NPC. So — for the first time in *King's Quest* history, *two* different playable characters, and *both* of them female — chalk up one for innovation, and one for girl power.



The story itself is probably the most convoluted in the entire franchise, making me wonder if Lorelei Shannon had not played

one too many JRPGs while looking for inspiration. To be as brief as possible, Princess Rosella is lured from Daventry into the Troll Kingdom, where she is turned into a troll herself and is then betrothed to the Troll King. The King, however, is a fake one, substituted from the real one by the evil sorceress Malicia, who plans to use her decoy in order to awaken a dormant volcano and destroy the entire kingdom, if not the entire universe (*why* exactly she wants to do that is never explicitly stated, I think, but isn't that sort of thing just typical of your average evil sorceress?). Now Valanice has to find the abducted Rosella, while the abducted Rosella has to de-trollify herself, expose the impostor, save the world, and punish the bad guys. This main quest takes both ladies through a whole series of sub-quests, involving travel to the undead-populated Land of Ooga Booga, the nonsensical gingerbread town of Falderol, the Land of Dreams, some deserts, some pastoral areas inhabited by Olympian gods, and the Place Between Worlds. Eventually, all ends predictably well (though it is possible to trigger bad endings), and Rosella even gets a chance to emotionally, if not altogether intimately, reconnect with an old acquaintance from the days of *King's Quest IV*.

This basic plot — you can find more details and spoilers on Wikipedia or elsewhere, if you so desire — is not really that much better or worse than the average plot of any *King's Quest* game: it is simply more complex and twisted than most, which makes sense since this is a longer game as well (though, admittedly, in my detailed playthrough it runs shorter than *King's Quest VI* — for the simple reason that the latter had much more dialog relating to possible interactions with the environment). Unfortunately, *complexity* of the plot is not the equal to *intelligence* of the plot. If at least Valanice's motives through much of the game are easily understood — she is just a caring mother looking to find her daughter — then Rosella, at least once she manages to regain her human form, seems stuck for way too much time looking for I-don't-know-what to save I-don't-know-whom. The motives and personalities of both the good and the bad guys remain vague and poorly defined, and their behaviour is notoriously erratic.

A good case in point is the main antagonist, Malicia, clearly written as a classic eccentric Disney villainess, somewhere in between the Evil Queen from *Snow White* (visually) and Cruella de Vil (in terms of behavior). She harbors an almost irrational hatred toward Rosella (without even consulting the mirror beforehand or anything like that), whom she can ignore, lock up, or exterminate fairly randomly throughout the game. Her being pissed off at just about everybody is never given a good explanation; her clichéd repartees barely amount to the level of average Disney clichéd repartees; and her choice of household pets frankly sucks. *King's Quest* has never been famous for particularly memorable baddies, of course, but Malicia is the first baddie in a *King's Quest* game who keeps popping up at fairly regular intervals, and for that reason alone she could have used much better writing.

As could probably the entire game, for that matter. It becomes clear fairly quickly that when it comes to clever dialog, Shannon is no Jensen. Not only do the characters speak in platitudes *way* too often for a game whose age already made bland dialog less forgivable than it was several years before, but the game script constantly makes the characters look like idiots. One example will suffice:

Matilda the Troll (*pissed-off as hell*): "Baloney, little girl! You're trying to steal our throne! Usurper, usurper!"

Rosella (*begins crying*): "BOO-HOO-HOO!"

Matilda the Troll (*calmly and with sympathy*): "Why, you're no usurper, you poor little thing! Don't cry! I didn't mean to be cross!"

Things like that crop up all over the place: characters seem to have very little idea about how to interact with each other in ways that make logical and emotional sense. Rosella herself seems lost between different psychological states, sometimes acting more like the old-fashioned damsel in distress and sometimes breaking out a defying feminist attitude — and she, I have to say, is probably the best defined character in the game, certainly more fun to play for than her mother, who spends *way* too much randomly allocated time drowning in her own tears.

Most of the principal locations in the game and the main plot elements associated with them are hardly tremendously interesting or original — the underground Troll Kingdom is predictably thick on gross troll humor and magic potions made of all sorts of disgusting things, while the Olympian god paradise in the last part of the game somehow manages to be flat-out boring, with lots of obligatory backtracking, not a lot of humor, and stiff characters whose personalities do not really go much deeper than their predecessors in the EGA-era *King's Quest* games, something that was naturally forgivable in 1986 but not in 1994.

The game does become a bit more exciting when we get to spend time in the less easily predictable spaces. The quaint little town of Falderol, for instance, is like a distilled-for-kids version of the Isle of Wonder from *King's Quest VI* — populated with vain aristocratic poodles, bull owners of china shops, mock-turtles, odd-looking rat-type city guards extorting ridiculous gifts, and a mocking bird who actually mocks you with an incessant torrent of jokes carried over directly from Carlos the Concierge in *Leisure Suit Larry VI* (yes, at least it should warm our hearts to realize that Sierra On-Line was still one big happy family at the time). It is a very silly place which advertises itself exactly for what it is, and while most of what goes on there has no relevance at all for the main story, it will very likely stay with you for a much longer time than the main story.

Even better is the «Land of Ooga-Booga», in which Shannon really let herself go — *this* is one part of the story which would probably never make it to any Disney Renaissance movie. It represents an alternative version of the Land of the Dead from the previous game, and a fairly original one — it is essentially the Land of the Dead as seen from the perspective of bedtime horror

stories by and for mischievous kids (two of which are actually important characters in Ooga-Booga itself). Full of gruesomely comic elements, like a dead gravedigger using a rat to power his gravedigging machine, the Bogeyman prowling around for fresh meat and hitting on ghost ladies at night, a *literally* spineless doctor who can send you to the Land of Dreams by putting you to sleep in a coffin, piles of predator bones, man-eating plants and what-not, Ooga-Booga is a solid combination of morbid fun, tragic storytelling (one of your tasks is to help reunite a betrayed husband, a grieving wife, and their loyal dog in life after death), and, of course, mortal danger — you can die much more easily in Ooga-Booga than almost anywhere else.

In other words, *King's Quest VII* is not a complete waste; it has its moments which deserve to be treasured among other fine memories of the franchise. But on the whole, it does feel like the entire game was built around several exciting locations, which were really fun to design and populate by the writers... oh, and *then* they had to come up with, uh, something to bind it all together. It does not work — certainly not in the «climactic» final battle scene between Malicia and the good guys, which is seriously an insult to all the previous climactic battles of *King's Quest*. (Maybe blame it on the animators, though: there is one moment there when the main combatant, instead of fighting, suddenly begins to slowly and deliberately turn his back on Malicia for no other reason than *wanting* to get zapped — and, honestly, nothing in the game up to that moment predicted that he would want to go out like Wagner's Tristan. Anyway, that entire scene was so poorly choreographed that Disney clearly had nothing to fear).

On top of it all is the clichéd exposition which Roberta and Lorelei nabbed straight from the recent Disney movies: Rebellious Young Girl Proving That She Can Take Care Of (a.k.a. Mess Up) Her Own Life. Suddenly Princess Rosella, who kinda sorta looked like a serious and capable young adventurer in her own right back in 1988, is presented to us from a very corny side ("Mother, but I don't want to wed Prince so-and-so, he's so boooooooring...!") — the introduction to the game *really* makes you feel inside a *Little Mermaid* or an *Aladdin* style movie, and I can imagine how painful this must have seemed to those who took their previous *King's Quests* just a tad more seriously. This here Rosella has quite a few solid moments, but on the whole, it does feel a little sad when a certain character from a certain adventure game franchise produced a more wholesome and serious impression way back in 1988 than she does in 1994.

Puzzles

So much for the disappointment over the game's story; now, onward to the disappointment over the game's challenges. The first thing to be mentioned is a technical one, to which we shall later return in the «Interface» section: *King's Quest VII* really takes the point-and-click principle to its absolute extreme, since most of the time this is exactly and literally what you are

going to do — *point* and *click*. In an almost Spartan fit of minimalistic attitude, the designers have eliminated any choice of icons, leaving only one fully neutralized option: Interact (with one of the hotspots on the screen). With your wand cursor, you click on people to talk to them, click on small objects to pick them up, and click on large objects to open or move them. At best, you can select an object out of your inventory to operate it on a hotspot. Genius, right?

The result of this strategy is that the entire game really has only two types of issues that could cause you a minimal amount of trouble. One is actually identifying the hotspots — which can get tricky, considering that some are fairly tiny *and* the only way to identify them is wave your wand cursor over them and see it change color... actually, no, not change color, but rather begin to light up and shine, and when a white-and-gray wand cursor begins to emit small white-and-gray rays of light over a space of three square pixels, it can take quite a sharp eye to notice (I got hopelessly stuck a bunch of times that way). Of all the pixel hunt problems in Sierra games, *King's Quest VII's* are a strong contender for worst ever.

The second issue are the «extra» rebus-type and constructor-type puzzles which are supposed to break up the monotonousness of point-and-click interaction... except that you get most of them already in the very first chapter of the game, trying to break Valanice out of her desert prison. They are not particularly frustrating, but deciphering the «hieroglyphs» on the grotesque pagan statue in order to learn how to turn salt water into sweet can be tricky for those whose imagination cannot properly handle the semantics of pictograms, and it may well be that you will have to rely on the good old trial-and-error instead. Also, closer to the end of the game you have to play a little *Loom*-style memory game with a magic harp in order to get the necessary clues from the three Fates, which quickly gets annoying since you have to do the exact same thing on more than one occasion (bad, bad, *bad* design!).

That said, mind-breakers like these are quite scarce on the whole in *King's Quest VII*, as are action sequences (as usual, though, there are some timed sequences which would become a major pain in the ass on faster PCs; in particular, one sequence where you had to blow up a crypt door with a dynamite stick would render the game practically unwinnable and required a user-made patch to get through). The regular puzzles, on the other hand, are typically quite simple and logical —



even in Falderol, whose absurdist environment, one might think, would require you to think in more of a *Monkey Island / Day Of The Tentacle* type of way, but no dice: Valanice assuredly behaves like the only grown-up and rational person in a world populated exclusively by little children (I do like the possibly subtle jab at LucasArts in which Valanice actually *has* to use a rubber chicken — albeit with no pulley in the middle — in order to put the moon back in the sky).

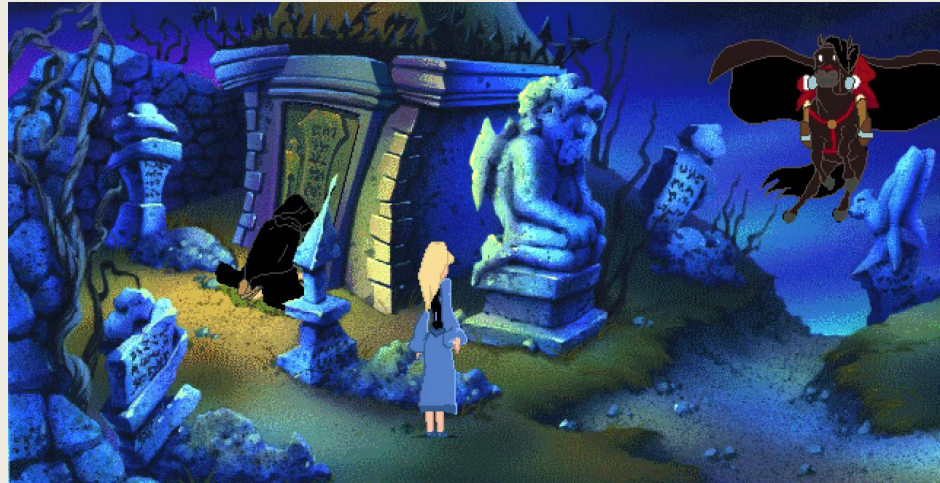
On the whole, other than pixel hunting, the single most encumbering thing about the game is that you will have to do a *lot* of backtracking. As the game begins, Valanice and Rosella operate in relatively small and closed spaces (the Desert for Valanice, the Troll Kingdom for Rosella), but as it progresses, more and more areas open up for each of the two characters, while previous ones, except for the Troll Kingdom, remain accessible as well. Eventually, mother and daughter even become able to traverse each other's areas, without being able to meet up face to face (e.g. Rosella finds evidence of her mother's stay in Falderol, while Valanice tracks her in Ooga-Booga) — it is actually fun to investigate the same locations from different characters' perspectives. But it also means that sometimes, in order to solve a particular puzzle, you have to trudge all the way back to a fairly distant place, which most players might simply be too lazy to do (e.g. in order to solve a simple puzzle in Falderol, you have to go all the way back to the desert to make another trade with the Rhyming Mole, though absolutely nothing in the game hints at this necessity). Again, some will see this as bad design, while others will argue that «laziness» is not a word that should ever be uttered in the setting of a classic adventure game. Who knows who's right and who's wrong?

Atmosphere

Given all that was said above, I think that our two main questions for this section shall be as follows: (a) does *King's Quest VII* actually *feel* like an interactive Disney experience? and (b) if it does, is this a good or a bad thing? — at least, in the sense of whether or not this reimagining of the *King's Quest* universe goes against the spirit of the franchise in general, or something like that. The answer to the first question is, surprisingly, a *no* with a faint shadow of a *yes* (so as not to make the second question irrelevant). The biggest difference between the game and the typical Disney movie is that the latter constitutes «family entertainment» which is supposed to be accessible for little kids; *King's Quest VII* is way too complex and creepy to be an adequate experience for anybody under the age of, say, 10 years or so. No Disney movie has anything even remotely approaching the uneasy spookiness of the Land of Ooga-Booga, and no Disney movie would dare to depict the same degree of random absurdity as the town of Falderol. All of which makes *King's Quest VII* an even more frustrating ball of contradictions — a game that jumps almost unpredictably between non-trivial adult-oriented humor (sometimes *black* humor at that) and corny kiddie tropes that wouldn't be seen as acceptable even at the dawn of the age of video games. *King's Quest VII* is not

Sierra's equivalent of *Aladdin*; rather, it is the equivalent of stuffing *Aladdin* in the same mixer with, say, *Beetlejuice* and *Alice In Wonderland* and proudly framing the results.

And do these results actually work? One thing is for sure: *King's Quest VII* takes more risks with setting seriously different atmospheric impressions throughout different parts of the game than any previous title in the series. In *King's Quest VI*, perhaps, it looked like you were taken to a completely different game when you entered the Land of the Dead, but this was just one small sub-section. Here,



you alternate between a grim and lonely survivalist vibe (Valanice in the desert), a Muppets vibe (Rosella in the Troll Kingdom), a Tim Burton vibe (Ooga-Booga), a Roald Dahl vibe (Falderol), and a «Greek Mythology For Junior School» vibe (most of everything else). Not all of these are completely dissimilar, but they do require some emotional adjustment, and at the very least, there are high chances that you might absolutely love parts of this game while at the same time absolutely despise others — a situation that is much less likely to arise while sharing the plight of King Graham or Prince Alexander.

My personal support goes out first and foremost to the Ooga-Booga setting: I think there is something unique about the design and dynamics of that place, at least in the world of computer games — I have never seen a better attempt to make the Land of the Dead feel *funnier* (almost to the point where it begins to come across as a really cozy and welcoming place to be) while at the same time retaining the sense of mortal danger: it is quite a good thing that Rosella and Valanice are very much allowed, if not *welcome*, to die in semi-gruesome ways on almost every screen in that place, as it keeps you on your toes, sharp, alert, and tense, even as you're laughing all the way to the bank while reading hilarious tombstone inscriptions or watching the shenanigans of the young undead hoodlums.

On the other hand, the lush, flowery, and blissful landscapes inhabited by all sorts of deities and spirits whose help is required by Valanice to help defeat Malicia's evil plans — *that* section of the game, I am afraid to say, turned out fairly boring in terms of atmospheric excitement. Perhaps it is the result of having to do too much backtracking through the exact same set pieces. Perhaps it is the fault of the graphic design, which makes you feel stunted and restricted to narrow walking paths when making your way from Point A to Point B. Perhaps it is the intentionally emotionless, mechanistic personalities of all those

supernatural characters that you encounter — intended to stress their superiority over all of us flesh-and-blood mortals, but coming off as bland and lifeless in the process. In any case, I'd much rather walk once more all over the lush and freedom-loving spaces of *King's Quest IV's* graphically inferior Tamir than again set Valanice on her straightjacketed journey towards the Dreamweaver's Cave.

In short, if you haven't already gotten the point, *King's Quest VII* is all about mixed emotions. You cannot blame it for lack of trying — while it does set up Disney as a primary role model, it is *not* all about blindly following that model (as long as you live through the cheesy *Beauty And The Beast / Aladdin* rip-off song in the introduction), and it is still willing to take an occasional artistic risk or two. As a result, there are parts of that game that I'd be willing to proudly show off for anyone, *and* parts of that game I wouldn't want to be caught dead playing on my computer. Yet even the embarrassing parts may end up being memorable — in a "I really don't believe how it was possible to fuck up *that* badly!" kind of way — and, in the end, my memories of playing the game stay more on the positive than negative side, even if it takes me some time to decide about whether I am really going to say this or not.

Technical features

Graphics

If there is anything for your memory to carry out of this experience, it will almost certainly be the visuals. Directed by Andy Hoyos, a Sierra veteran with more than 15 years of experience in artistic media, the graphics of *King's Quest VII* were designed to dazzle and stun with an outstanding mix of shapes, colors, detailization, and animation — it is safe to say that no other Sierra game ever rose to the same level of quality (though at least Al Lowe's *Torin Passage* shakily tried to follow in its footsteps).

King's Quest VII was the first game in the series to boast a native VESA resolution of 640x480, which, in fully layman terms, means that it is the first *King's Quest* that will not look so horrendously grainy and pixelated on your modern hi-res screen. This meant not only increased possibilities in terms of rendering detail of immovable objects, but also meant that your characters could have slightly realistic facial and bodily details



while standing around or moving, instead of the inevitable «matchbox-on-two-sticks» effect of just about any game prior to 1994 (alas, even my beloved *Gabriel Knight*). Throw in the razzle-dazzle of as many different shades of color for their fantasy lands that the artists could think of, and there you have it — a game fit for Disney's recognition, though, of course, the overall work on animation here probably constitutes like a 100th part of the work necessary for the average Disney movie.

In terms of artistic imagination, the game is no slouch, either. Chief praise should, as you probably already guessed, go to the design of the Land of Ooga-Booga, whose dark blue eternal-twilight landscapes consist of almost nothing but twisted, contorted grotesqueries, be it the leafless trees (which look as if someone laundered and wrung them out on a daily basis, without ironing) or the oddly deformed tombstones (which look as if they were melted down into random shapes, then left to cool off in the chilly breeze). It contrasts sharpest of all with Falderol, made to look like an amusement park built off the concept of the Gingerbread House — pink, white, and yellow being the dominant colors, and all the buildings shaped and decorated like dollhouses. If anything, the variety of colors sometimes becomes extreme, as all the razzle-dazzle makes these shapes morph into a psychedelic mess, in which your moving active character is just one more blob — too much sugar in one cup can be a bad thing, you know.

One thing that does not stand up so well to the ravages of time is the opening sequence — a 4-minute intro which was essentially made to look like a proper Disney sequence. Probably to make it less taxing on the graphic cards, it was compressed into occupying just a part of the screen, and while back then it was supposed to prove to customers that the PC industry has pretty much caught on to traditional animation, today it actually shows just how far away it was at the time from doing that. In a way, that opening sequence is *the* single most Disney-worshipping bit in the entire game, and while it is not completely misleading, it still sets a very wrong impression from the start — in fact, I'm pretty sure that some older fans may have refused to buy or play the game just because they'd forced themselves to watch that "*Mother, he's so booring!...*" intro.

Sound

I do not know much about the composers who worked on the *King's Quest VII* soundtrack (apparently, at least one of them, [Neal Grandstaff](#), is an accomplished jazz musician), but the soundtrack itself is... generally okay. At least, it is much more generally okay than it would be if the music, too, tried to follow the tendency of Disneyfication throughout — as such, the only true horror you will be subjected to is the opening song ('Land Beyond Dreams'), written by our old friend Mark "Girl In The Tower" Seibert and most likely intended for us to draw a beeline from Princess Rosella to Princess Jasmine, but don't fall for that, my friends.

Other than that, the soundtrack tends to be more on the ambient side, and is quite faithful to your immediate surroundings. For instance, the Desert Theme is suitably desolate and minimalist, with melancholy-drenched woodwinds occasionally erupting over emotionless and merciless waves of quiet synths. The Troll Kingdom Theme is all about friendly folksy guitar arpeggios that would, perhaps, not sound out of place on a prog-rock album by an aspiring beginner band. Falderol is all about whimsical baroque court dancing; Ooga-Booga is suitably funereal, with a lot of moody organ; and so on. Music is everywhere in the universe of *King's Quest VII*, and it never becomes annoying since most of the various areas and characters get their own themes. But it is hardly ever memorable, either.

Similarly, the voice cast assembled for the recording sessions is also far from the best *and* far from the worst in a Sierra game. Arguably the best choice is Maureen McVerry as Rosella, who comes off as a bright, intelligent, and even occasionally sarcastic young woman — that is, whenever she is not emotionally overacting, which she just does not do very well (her "I'm a TROLL! How can I be a TROLL? I'm not a TROLL, AM I?.." is decidedly more cringey than her excited readings of the grotesque limericks on Oooga-Booga's tombstones). Carol Bach Rita as Valanice, on the other hand, comes across as *way* too motherly, though I guess she was instructed that at no time was Valanice prone to losing her stern regal countenance, not even when briefly transforming into a jackalope for safety reasons.

Of the less often heard NPC voices, 70-year old Ruth Kobart as Malicia is memorable, but her crappy dialog and hyper-stressed EVIL nature still make her into a caricature. Denny Delk, who was such a great Hoagie in *Day Of The Tentacle*, is disappointing as the Troll King, not least because they run his voice through a series of annoying distorting effects to be more «troll-like» and it kinda sucks. Actually, the gold prize for acting should probably go to the extremely skilled and versatile Roger Jackson (who voiced literally hundreds of characters in dozens and dozens of other games) for his portrayal of the Three-Headed Carnivorous Plant — *all* three heads, that is, which you would never guess were voiced by the exact same actor. Come to think of it, the Plant is probably my favorite character in the entire game, which makes me only too happy to feed it both Valanice *and* Rosella from time to time.

It should perhaps be noted that the game has no role for a Narrator — for the first time in a voiced Sierra game, all the reactions to all of your clicks are voiced by Valanice and Rosella. This, too, may be the result of Disneyfication, i.e. bringing the game ever closer towards the status of an interactive movie; but even more so, it is the result of drastically simplifying its playing interface, which is now structured in such a way that it does not even need a separate Narrator. Which logically brings us to our last, and, in some ways, most problematic section: the gameplay.

Interface

Following the usual pattern, the next *King's Quest* had to announce upcoming big changes for Sierra in everything — including the basic *modus operandi* for the upcoming games as well. The first of these changes made itself obvious right from the start, once you'd watched the introductory Disney-style sequence: Sierra had discarded the holy-of-holies — the old save-and-restore system. In its place came the possibility to play as several different users, giving each of your games a separate title, while all the saving within each single one of these games was being done automatically. This meant that you could not just go back in time and replay the game from any point you'd wish to — for instance, to rewatch a scene which you particularly liked, or to boast to your friends about how ingeniously you'd solved that particular puzzle yesterday.



Admittedly, 99% of the reasons for which people saved and restored games weren't *those* particular ones, but rather (a) fear of getting hopelessly stuck and (b) fear of dying — two problems that no longer existed in *King's Quest VII*, since (a) it was no longer possible to get hopelessly stuck and (b) any death situations immediately carried you over to the last safe space before dying. Still, *not being able to save my game* always gives me a sucky feeling, regardless, and while Roberta Williams would strictly cling to that principle in her other games from then on (most notably, in *Phantasmagoria*), it is a good thing that the other late-period Sierra games (*Quest For Glory*, *Gabriel Knight*, etc.) refused to follow suit.

Making things even more confusing was the availability of the option to begin your game — right from the start! — from the beginning of any of the six chapters into which *King's Quest VII* was divided. It is unclear what was the exact meaning of this design: either to take pity on infuriated players stuck behind some particularly tricky puzzle and let them skip ahead, or to let computer game critics, too lazy to play the game, take a quick peek at all the cutscenes and animations at the beginning of each chapter. Regardless, it gives you an odd impression, and probably takes a bit out of the general satisfaction you should feel upon completing a chapter (because you know that any lazy dork could get the same rewards without putting pressure on a single brain cell). Being able to rewind back to or skip ahead to any specific location which you have already explored is one thing, but being able to start off an adventure game right in the middle is quite another.

As the game itself begins, another major change becomes obvious, quite liable to throwing an experienced adventure game

player off balance, though possibly welcoming to a total and absolute novice — the harshly laconic nature of the overall interface. Although a rather large chunk of the screen is eaten up by the menu overlay, all it really has are three things — a large window containing all the objects in your inventory, an «eye» option which you can use to look at these objects, and a red gem, clicking upon which brings up the options menu (which does not offer you too many options, either). Meanwhile, your playable character's activities are limited to walking across the screen and interacting with persons or objects which are clickable (as indicated by the lighting up of your cursor wand). And... that's *IT*.

As I already mentioned earlier, this drastic simplification of the interface leads to the predictably drastic simplification of the puzzles — in a way, being the logical, though nearly-absurd, conclusion of the path that began by eliminating the text parser and replacing it with a multi-optional point-and-click interface. Now it has been made *single*-optional — most likely, for the simple reason that Roberta wanted the game to look, feel, and act out ever more like an interactive movie, in which you would not want to break the immersion *too* often by wasting your time on useless things (like clicking «Open» on your dialog partner). Or, who really knows? maybe it was just a matter of spending all the budget on art and animations and not having enough time and money left to write up all the dialog necessary to cover those superfluous options.

Regardless, players who came to *King's Quest VII* from an already rich history of other games would almost certainly get a «completely naked» kind of experience here — almost up to the point of feeling betrayed (and not the first time in Sierra history, I should add). No scrollable or selectable options; no ability to save or restore your game; not even a bloody «About the game» option in the menu window, which had always been there for the loyal fan! Throw in the total lack of subtitles (especially uncomfortable for non-native English speakers) or even the inability to change the movement speed of your character (*particularly* awful for all those backtracking parts of the story), being forced to watch Valanice and Rosella elegantly strut their stuff at snail's paces all over the place — and, well, here is your answer to why «less» does not *always* mean «more» when it comes to daring designer decisions.

At least when you play more modern brands of adventure games, e.g. most of TellTale's products, the game kind of self-justifies such a laconic approach to player freedom by insisting that the major meat of the game lies in the player's choices in specific situations, rather than in the antiquated art of puzzle solving. *King's Quest VII*, however, offers you no freedom of choice whatsoever (except at the very end of the game, where you have the ultimate choice of fucking up or not fucking up) — you are railroaded into a single path from the beginning, and you proceed along that path by clicking your left mouse button from time to time, not needing anything else in the world. This is probably the single worst thing about *King's Quest VII* — *much* worse than its alleged «Disneyfication», and worse even than 'Land Beyond Dreams', if you can believe this.

Verdict: *A perfectly enjoyable utter catastrophe of an adventure game.*

For almost a decade, the *King's Quest* series served the important function of heralding Sierra On-Line's breakthroughs in design, mechanics, and technological progress of computer games. Other games would come along and introduce more memorable characters, better puzzles, deeper and more meaningful atmospherics, but you could always count on the next *King's Quest* to show these other games the proper road up the mountain.

It was only too logical, then, that when the time came to crash and burn, it would also be *King's Quest* to take the initiative and show all those other guys in the royal train just what it takes to set your own pants on fire. *King's Quest VII* was Sierra's first fully explicit attempt to make a game that could, perhaps, conquer the hearts of *millions* rather than dozens or even hundreds of thousands — by making it look more and more like an animated movie, and by making the gameplay so easy that most of these millions would truly feel more like being inside a movie than like playing a game. It was a gamble that tried to lure in masses of new fans at the risk of alienating, or even downright offending, quite a few old ones. And it was a gamble that, ultimately, did not pay off.

When it comes to the old question of «why did the adventure game genre die such a miserable death at the turn of the millennium?», people often bring up the issue of extremely convoluted, illogical, and nonsensical puzzles as one of their answers (e.g. the famous [Old Man Murray](#) essay on the 'Death Of Adventure Games' which I will be sure to mention quite a few times, particularly in the upcoming review of *Gabriel Knight III*). My experience, however, suggests that this issue is but an unfortunate, and often unavoidable, side effect which, moreover, has always been there from the very beginning of the adventure game genre. What had *not* been there from the very beginning, however, and what quite specifically arose in the mid-to-late 1990s, was the lack of *integrity*, as the genre began to doubt itself and make concessions to other, more popular ways of gaining mass public attention. *King's Quest VII* was, essentially, Sierra's way of admitting that the adventure game genre as it used to be — even as it used to be just one year earlier, with games such as *Gabriel Knight* — was doomed, and that the only way to save it was to dilute and compromise future titles, in vague hopes that doing this would ensure their survival.



To paraphrase Churchill, Sierra was given the choice between extinction and dishonour — it chose dishonour, and it would have extinction.

That said, on the whole I do not think that *King's Quest VII* is an altogether bad *experience*. It is, by all means, a bad game, and a dubious product of a wrong (*morally* wrong, I'd say) designer and marketing strategy. But as an immersive digital adventure, it still reflects a lot of the good things that made Sierra products so magical. The gorgeous art, the fun animations, the pretty soundtrack, the (sometimes) memorable and well-voiced characters, the cool mix of dread and humor, all of that makes the game well worth revisiting from time to time, if you can get it running in your DosBox or in your ScummVM engines (a bit of a chore these days, as with all the games from the early Windows era). Besides, if anything, it just gives you a good history lesson — by being both fairly representative of what it used to be in the mid-Nineties, *and* fairly unique against the background of everything else that was going on in the mid-Nineties. Good times!