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STS 145 – History of Computer Game Design

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Case History of The King's Quest Series

Sierra Online's *King's Quest* series' games are among the most popular, prolific, and significant works in the relatively short history of the computer game industry. Arguably it was these games that brought the genre of the adventure game to never before seen recognition in the computer gaming world, coupling intricately-woven, detailed storylines with the latest and greatest in computing technology. *King's Quest* did not found the genre, of course; that distinction goes to the perennially revered *Adventure* and *Zork*, the staples and ancestors of the genre [Ne99, LBA79]. However, many consider Roberta Williams and her creation, *King's Quest*, to be equally significant if not merely more profitable. As significant as the series' rise to the top is its fall from grace. The adventure game as a genre is no longer demanded, with the advent of even better graphics cards, high-performance CPUs, and the like. Even though one of the indispensable keys to *King's Quest*'s success was the introduction of key technologies in its games, ironically the technology has leapt past the genre, moving on to found new genres such as first-person shooters and real-time strategy which have supplanted adventure games at the top of sales lists. Nonetheless, as proof that a good plot can never be overvalued, we will see that the significance and spirit of *King's Quest* and the adventure game lives on even in today's world of high-powered 3D graphics cards.

The significance of adventure games cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, it was one of the first genres that could be even considered a genre, its inception so firmly planted in the seeds of computing gaming. Text-adventure games such as *Adventure* and *Zork* had already firmly established the genre, as “deterministic, intellectual problem solving [games] in the context of a story.” [Ta99] Roberta Williams merely added on a graphical element, evolving the text-adventure game to a ‘sophisticated’ graphical world. Despite the simplicity of this conception, the evolution to a graphical universe would change the

industry. “Text-only adventure games had already invaded the home computer, and while games such as *Colossal Cave*, *Adventure*, and *Zork* were enjoying much success, game players were growing antsy for some graphics to compliment the beautifully complex stories ... With the prospect of giving the computer game industry a shot in the arm, Roberta Williams and her husband Ken began creating software that far eclipsed even the wildest of dreams.” [Dr97]

The juxtaposing of graphics and complex stories is only part of what makes an adventure game whole. Another important facet that the series kept from its text-adventure beginnings was the challenging puzzles the player had to solve. This problem-solving aspect of the games characterized the intellectual side of the genre. Certain puzzles often defined a particular game, and were instrumental into making the series such a success. Roberta Williams states, “Designing good puzzles is an art. To jog the player’s mind without giving it all away or making it so tough that they give up – that perfect balance is a very fine line ... it’s how you give messages, arrange your clues, dialogue, inventory, and environment.” [Sa00]

Mystery House was Roberta Williams’ first endeavor into the graphical adventure game, and in fact, the first well-known endeavor of its kind, period.

With Roberta in creative control and her husband Ken at the programming helm, *Mystery House* was released Apple II in 1980 [Dr97], setting the stage for the first *King’s Quest* game a few years later. This



was definitely a big step up from the text-adventure game, but it definitely retained all the elements of a *Zork*; with prompts such as “You are in the front yard of a large abandoned Victorian house. Stone steps lead up to a wide porch. Enter command?” What was decidedly missing, however, was movement. There was the visualization of the text in static forms, but no animation. The subsequent

breakthrough in this animation aspect keyed the revolution that was *King's Quest I: Quest for the Crown*. Using the arrow keys on the keyboard, the player could actually control the main character's locomotion, guiding him over drawbridges or into a corner of a room. This was known as "object blocking," allowing movement of a character on screen to go behind and in front of objects.

King's Quest I was originally released on a platform made by IBM called the PCjr. This new platform was a redesign of the IBM PC aimed at the home market. Among the significant design enhancements that separated the PCjr from its predecessors was the increased graphics and sound capabilities. "In addition to CGA's normal 320 by 200 by 4 [colors] and 640 by 200 by 2 limited-color and monochrome graphics modes, the PCjr was also able to produce 160 by 100 by 16, 160 by 200 by 16, 320 by 200 by 16, and 640 by 200 by 4 color graphics modes – the 16-color modes used the same color palette as color text mode. The sound enhancement came from the addition of a Texas Instruments SN76496 chip, a three-voice tone generator. This increased the number of voices from one to three, with 16 volume levels for each channel, and noise-generation for sound effects." [Le99] The release date of the PCjr in 1984 coincides with the release date of *King's Quest I*, which is actually not a coincidence at all. IBM hired Roberta Williams and her company specifically to make a revolutionary PCjr game that would utilize these increased multimedia capabilities. These efforts led to the "genre-creating" [Le99] *King's Quest*, and also explains why many games created in the 1980's by Sierra used a resolution of 160 by 200, even when higher resolutions became available. 160 by 200 by 16 colors was the PCjr resolution for *King's Quest*, so even though the games were



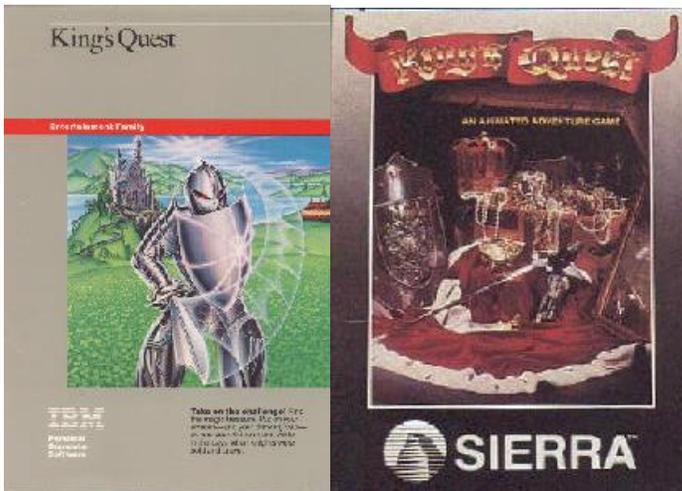
The PCjr.

ported to other platforms after the quick demise of the PCjr, Sierra games such as *King's Quest* retained the same graphics engine and thus used the same resolution.

The co-evolutional bridge between technology and game evolution is never more apparent than this union between IBM and *King's Quest*. *Mystery House* had explored new realms of graphical possibility, but the ground-breaking graphics

capabilities of the PCjr directly resulted in Roberta Williams actualizing her vision in *King's Quest*. She states in an interview from 1984, "IBM came to me a long time ago and asked me to write an adventure-type game for the forthcoming PCjr. They said it couldn't be like any other adventure game that had been done and it had to be replayable. And my type of game, usually, when you solve it once, that's it. There's no reason to play it again ... Ultima or Wizardry you can replay because you have a character generator and you can make different things happen. But that's not my style. In effect, IBM was asking me to go against my style. And I couldn't think of any way to make my kind of game replayable without having a character generator. I thought a long time about this. I'd always wanted to have an animated adventure game, but the game I foresaw really couldn't be done on a computer that existed up to that point in time. Then I found out what the PCjr was capable of. I was really happy when I found out that this computer could do things other computers could not do. I could finally have my animated adventure game ... It has sixteen solid colors. It's hard to do animation with artifacted colors [using patterns to simulate different colors], but with solid colors things are much easier. Also, it has more memory – 128K – and it takes a lot of memory to do animation. My game will be available on the PCjr only until other computers come up to the game's requirements ... The graphics are great. Your character is full color and the game has sound going most of the time. You hear little birds singing and doors creaking open and other things like that." [Le99]

The first three titles in the series used the same game engine developed by Sierra, known as the AGI (Adventure Game Interpreter). All the graphics used a 160 by 200 resolution, and the sound processor of the AGI was capable of playing three voices simultaneously. Because the PCjr was such a dismal failure, this advanced game interpreter of the time and its creator *Sierra* seemed destined to suffer a dot-com-like demise. Fortunately for the company, new technology and a welcoming profit were found in the Tandy 1000. This new platform had all the graphics capabilities that the PCjr had but unlike the PCjr, it was successful in the market. The Tandy 1000 would save Sierra and spurn on a wave of innovative game creation.

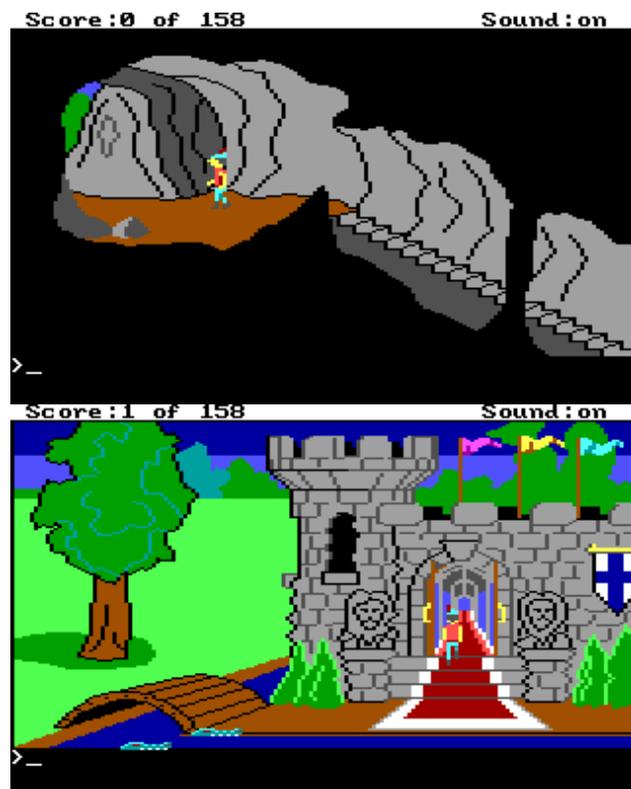


The storyline for the first game, *King's Quest: Quest for the Crown*, was your typical regal plotline – the player takes on the persona of Sir Graham, a knight in the land of Daventry who is sent on a mission by the ailing ruler of Daventry, King Edward. The player then delves through a world

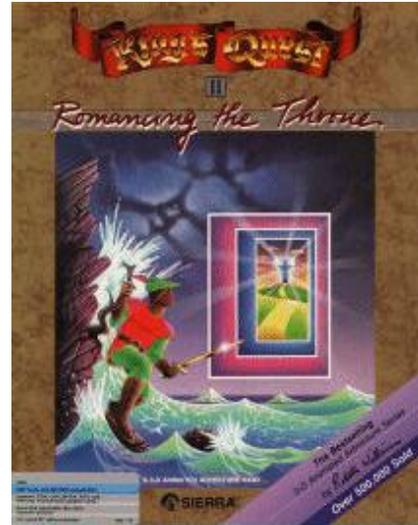
of castles, countryside, and caves in order to retrieve three lost treasures, of which successful retrieval would deem Sir Graham the heir to the throne. The stock plotline did

not prevent the game from becoming an unparalleled success, primarily due to its medium.

Game players now could visualize and direct movements, directly manipulating their Sir Graham through an intricate visual environment. The game was released for IBM PCjr in 1984, followed by versions for the Amiga, Apple II, Apple IIGS, Atari ST, Macintosh, PC, and Tandy [Me98].

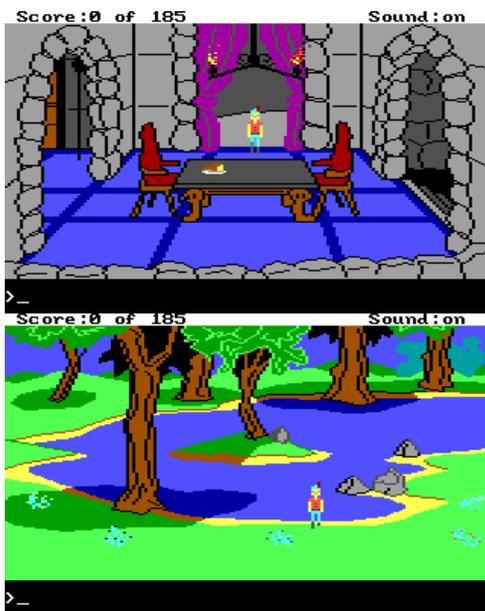


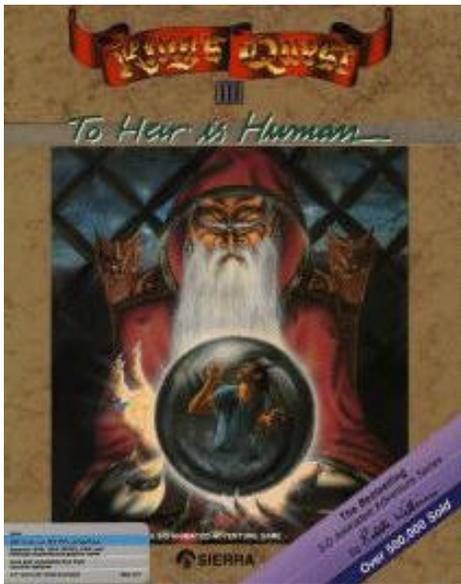
The second game in the series is *King's Quest II: Romancing the Throne*, also a huge success for Sierra. Sir Graham is now King Graham of Daventry, and the primary objective of this game is to find a queen and gain an heir to the throne. King Graham searches through the land of Kolyma for the keys that will unlock the path to the maiden Valanice, held captive in a tower. Another very standard plotline, another huge success. Fan base was starting to grow significantly, and the characters in both games



were starting to be endearing and memorable to these fans. Sierra took this success and ran with it, as around this time they used the same AGI game engine and created spinoffs such as *Space Quest* and *Leisure Suit Larry*. The PC version of *King's Quest II* was

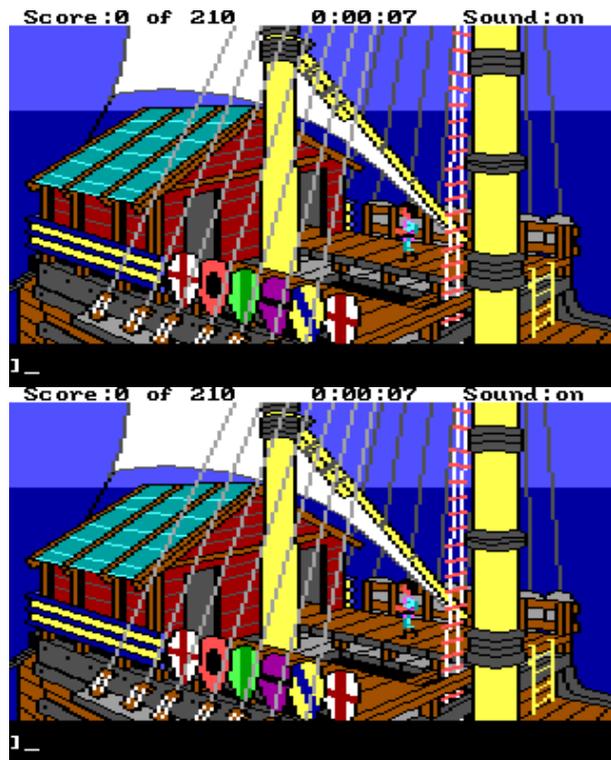
released on two 5 ¼” disks and one 3 ½” disk [Me98], in 1985.



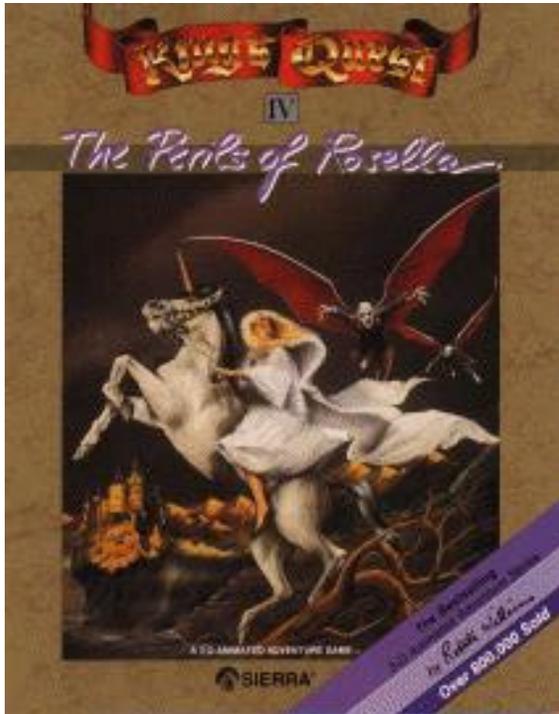


The last game in the series to solely be based on AGI game interpreter was *King's Quest III: To Heir is Human*, released in 1986. There were minor improvements in the graphics and sounds of the game, but it essentially retained the feel of its predecessors. In this title, the player assumes the role of a slave named Gwydion, trying to find a way to escape the captivity by the evil wizard Manannan. Initially this plotline was met with some resistance from players: Where was King

Graham and Queen Valanice, the engaging characters from the previous game? Since this was before the advent of Internet walk-thrus and “Insider Guides”, it took several months for gamers to complete the game. The protests heard months before were in vain when it was revealed that the slave Gwydion is actually Prince Alexander. At the end of the game, King Graham and Queen Valanice make a “cameo appearance” [Ko98]. The game was released on three 5 ¼” disks and two 3 ½” disks [Me98]. The fan base now was



steadily growing with each new release, not just for the most recent title, but also for the original. In 1987, Sierra re-released *King's Quest I*, re-rendering the graphics and making it fully VGA with mouse and sound card support. However, it was met with reaction like over something as serious as defacing a historical relic. “Players compared it to colorizing a black and white film ... this notion was *wrong*.” [Ko98]



King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella was the title that vaulted Sierra into the top of sales charts for years and years after its initial release in 1988. This game and the titles immediately following sold 300,000 to 400,000 copies per game, according to PC Data [Og00]. There was an AGI version created of the game, but it was soon discarded as people flocked to purchase the SCI (Sierra Creative Interpreter) version instead, yet another revolutionary game engine created by Sierra programmers. The Sierra Creative Interpreter featured 16-

color EGA graphics later upgraded to 256-color VGA, sound card support, and mouse input options which helped broaden the game's appeal. It was the first game to show that PCs could indeed rival the graphics of platforms such as the Commodore 64. All the graphics backgrounds were hand-drawn to best take advantage of the PCs graphical capabilities, and those who were fortunate to have Roland or Sound Blaster sound cards enjoyed MIDI music composed by well-known composer William Goldstein. Truly the series was coming in to its own, and there were throngs of fans to back it up. GameSpot named *King's Quest IV* as one of the fifteen most influential games of all time [Og00].

During the two years prior to its release, there were many rumors spread about the fate of the *King's Quest* series and that of King Graham. “At the end of *King's Quest III*, we notice that King Graham is no longer the young man that we played in *King's Quest I* and *King's Quest II*. Instead, he is an older king who is ready to ‘retire’ by passing his adventurer hat to younger blood. One of the more popular rumors was that King Graham would die of a heart attack in *King's Quest IV*. Roberta Williams used the ‘heart attack story,’ and she introduced us to a female hero for the first time ever. In [*King's Quest IV*], you have twenty-four hours (game time) to complete your quest; otherwise, the

Score: 0 of 230 KQIV The Perils of Rosella



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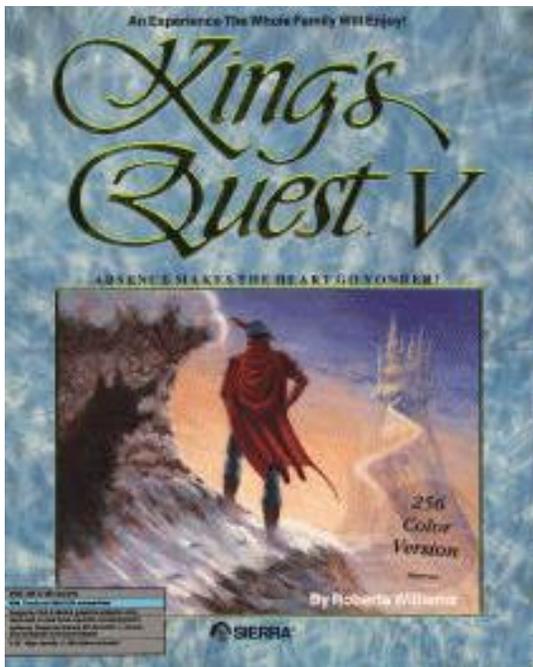
rumor would come true.” [Ko98]

Introducing the female protagonist was a significant step forward. The fact that the creator of this game and the accompanying series is also female adds a great deal of intrigue and import. Roberta Williams was one of the first women in the gaming industry, and brought a sense of balance to the otherwise heavily male world. In her own words, Williams states,

“Obviously, I worked in the adventure game category, which was very popular with women – as well as men. While the adventure game genre was popular, women were getting a toehold in the industry.” [WM00] At the time, having a female protagonist was

considered a huge risk, but Roberta Williams followed through with the idea without a hitch. Williams writes, “Not only did it work, but using a female protagonist actually increased the sales of *King's Quest* overall – obviously, by bringing in more female game players. My male fans didn't mind at all. They just expected a good game, which I gave them.” [WM00]

In the game Princess Rosella, daughter of King Graham and Queen Valanice, travels to the land of Tamir in search of the magic fruit that will ail her dying father. According to many fans, this was their favorite title in the series, winning over future titles that contained better graphics and sound. “The story and music to this game were so powerful that they reduced many people to tears.” [Ko98]



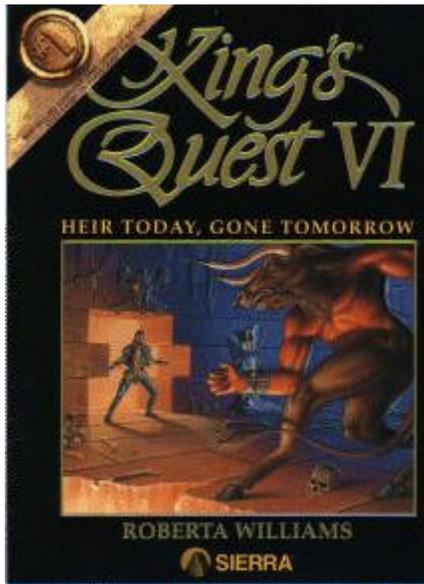
The next title was equally, if not more, revolutionary in its conception. *King's Quest V: Absence Makes the Heart go Yonder* was completed in 1990, and was the first major game ever to be released on CD-ROM. It was the first game to feature the now famous mouse/icon system of performing player commands, freeing the user from one of the last vestiges of the text-adventure game, the keyboard, “revolutionizing the interactive entertainment industry.” [SO98] The

point and click interface utilized a toolbar at the top of the screen which allowed the player to select one of four functions; walk, look, action, and talk. “... all these advancements [graphics and sound] pale in comparison to the debut of an icon based interface and the abandonment of the typing interface – an interface that has previously been a fundamental part of any adventure game. This dramatic change in game design allows more emphasis to be placed on puzzle design and avoids the dreaded pitfall of

inadequate vocabulary that plagues all text parsers. Although some gamers have criticized that the icon based interface cheapens the difficulty of the puzzles, this interface has proven to prevail over time and is now used in most, if not all, adventure games” [HJ99] It was a much larger game than previous *King’s Quests*, with more than 100 scenes that took up over 10 megabytes [SO98]. It was the first title to cost over one million US dollars to produce [HJ99]. The CD-ROM version included digitized speech and sound effects as well.



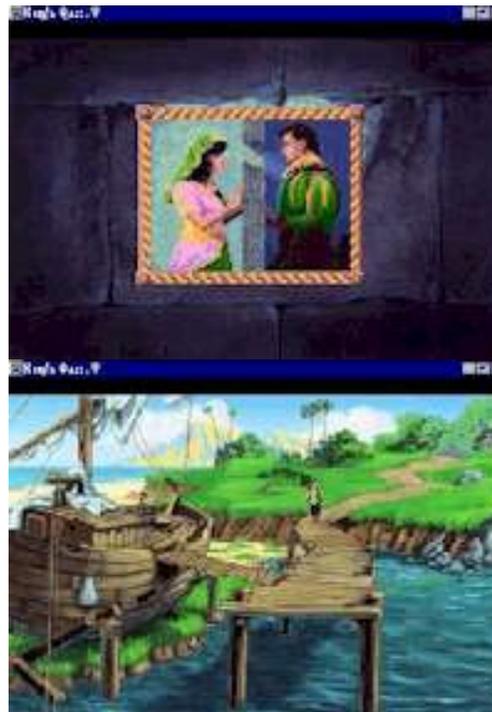
In the game, King Graham himself would undertake a new adventure, the player’s first role of him since *King’s Quest II*. The evil wizard Mordack has kidnapped Queen Valanice, Princess Rosella, and Prince Alexander, leaving only old King Graham behind. The mission, of course, is to travel through treacherous lands to rescue them. The game soared to the top of sales charts and won *Best Adventure Game of the Year* from both the Software Publishers Association as well as Computer Gaming World Magazine [SO98].



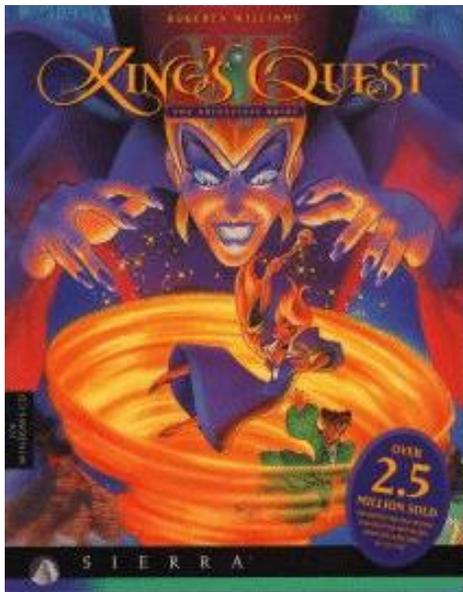
King's Quest VI: Heir Today, Gone Tomorrow upped the bar even further by introducing a long opening sequence with voiced dialogue by Robby Benson, voice of Prince Alexander (most famous for the voice of Beast in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*). The graphics are again 256 colors but are much more refined than in *King's Quest V*. The music from the game produced a well-known theme song, "The Girl in the Tower", composed by Mark Seibert. Clearly, the success of the game is unrivaled at this juncture, in 1992.

The storyline features Prince Alexander as the noble hero who sets out in his quest to seek the hand of Princess Cassima and rescue her, traveling through the four lands of the Green Isles – Isle of the Crown, Isle of the Beast, Isle of Wonder, and Isle of the Sacred Mountain.

Over thirty professional voice actors recorded the dialogue (including Benson) and garnered the game Best Adventure Game at MacWorld 1993 and later inducted to the MacWorld Game Hall of Fame [SO98]. *King's Quest VI* possessed the confluence of advanced technology with the professionally written storyline that enchanted many gamers across the country. A sample of a MobyGames review for *King's Quest VI*: "The graphics ... are stunning. I found the music lovely and so very romantic ... We females tend to like mushy love stories ... I adore plots about heroes saving damsels in

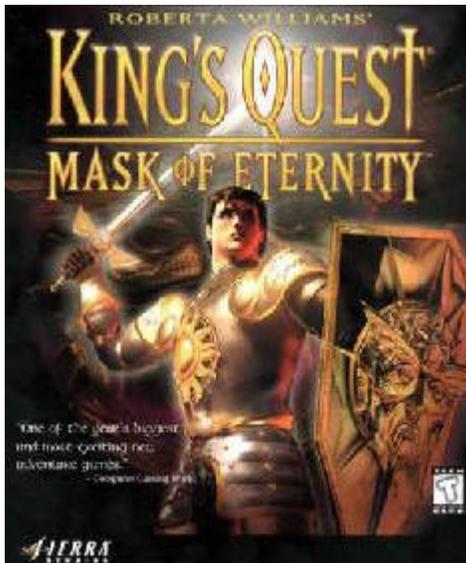


distress. This hero is handsome and the princess is beautiful ... I remember getting goose bumps watching [the ending].” [Je02] From an interview with Roberta Williams, she talk about this pinnacle title in the King’s Quest saga: “*King’s Quest V* broke a lot of ground: VGA, icon interface, and lots of acting. ... But I had to look at things from other angles for *King’s Quest VI*: we needed professional voice actors, and the plot had to be less linear. Co-designer Jane Jensen and I bounced a lot of ideas around. We needed more optional puzzles, multiple solutions to puzzles, multiple uses for the same object; and a few “red herrings” and lots of timers so things would need to be done within a certain amount of time. *King’s Quest VI* had to be harder *and* easier than *King’s Quest V* in that you can get through it on a minimal level. You’ll miss half the story, but you’ll finish. Valanice finally got some time on the screen; I knew she had to play a major part in a sequel. I wanted to get away from just putting together a jumble of puzzles in some sort of meaningless quest; you should have a clear sense of what you’re doing and why, with some emotion behind it.” [HJ99]



The fall from stardom of the adventure game genre was due in part to the release of *King’s Quest VII: The Princess Bride* in 1994. The “classic” games in the series are considered to be the first six, each one of which received wide acclaim. The seventh installment in the series was in a drastically different ilk, probably considered the biggest

failure in the series. The classical medieval art and the quaint, soft colors that presided over previous *King's Quest* games were replaced with Disney-style animation and “sappy Saturday morning cartoon fluff.” [Me98] While this may be a bit too harsh, the animation, while technically excellent, shunned away a large portion of *King's Quest* fans, most of whom simply weren't attracted to Disney-style theatrics. Another major turnoff was a new icon system designed to shorten action commands; instead of the different icons for different actions and objects you could point at, one icon would simply light up and point to where you were supposed to do something on the screen. Called the “universally hated simplified icon system” [Me98], this title did have some upsides. It was the first to feature alternate play characters. Gamers would assume the roles of both Princess Rosella and Queen Valanice. Younger players also seemed to enjoy the game more as the puzzles were dumbed down (in part due to the new icon system).



The eighth and final game produced by Sierra in the series in 1998 was morphed into something of a RPG/combat game, deviating sharply from the adventure-game roots that was now falling from popularity. “*King's Quest: Mask of Eternity*, the latest in the venerable series from Sierra On-Line, is a noble effort, an adventure inside an RPG wrapped in an action game.” [GS98]

Roberta Williams writes, “It's important to make a game you want to make ... but you must also know your audience, and ... know

what niches can be filled. I was getting the sense that people were growing tired of slow-paced games, or ‘plodding’ through an adventure game ... there was a need for more ‘instant gratification.’ I didn't think *King's Quest: Mask of Eternity*, if created in the same vein as past *King's Quest* titles, would fly in today's world. Therefore, I did something to spice it up – adding an action element and making it in 3D” [Sa00] An interesting side note to adventure genre's fall from grace is the fact that these types of

games were one of the very few genres that women were actively interested in; games “with more story, more character development, and more interaction with characters, games with solving puzzles, games involving the brain rather than the hand, games with a more social aspect, and, surprisingly, with hand-eye coordination games, women seem to like those types which have ‘gathering’ aspects to them, a good example being ‘Tetris’.” [Roberta Williams in WM00]



Very prominent in Roberta Williams’s desire to design *Mask of Eternity* the way she did was in fact due to the industry’s shift away from the traditional adventure game. She makes a very astute observation, that, indeed, people *were* getting “tired of ... plodding through an adventure game.” With the advent

of first-person shooter games, real-time strategy games, and the like, there was no real desire to spend time solving puzzles. When instant gratification is available through *Doom* and *Warcraft*, there is little room left for the quainter appeal of *King’s Quest*. The technology paradigm that held *King’s Quest* in such high regard for so long was orphaning it. This technology-driven game culture, as talked about in Rene Patnode’s lecture [Pa02], in fact was racing past *King’s Quest*. The demise of the *King’s Quest* series, and undeniably the adventure gaming industry along with it, stems from the forceful and anomalous juxtaposition between “the latest 3-D technology, camera control that lets you switch between first-person views and cinematic third-person views” [review of *Mask of Eternity* in 1998, GS98] and “You are in the front yard of a large abandoned Victorian house. Stone steps lead up to a wide porch. Enter command?” [*Mystery House*, 1980]. There needs to be evolution, without a doubt, but when an evolution within a genre revolts against itself so drastically, there is no saving it.

Adventure game diehards and purists live on today, despite the corporate reluctance to produce any more adventure games. For sure there are very popular games today with adventure game elements intertwined – Roberta Williams and *King's Quest* have inextricably altered the shape of computing gaming history, and those technologies and concepts Sierra pioneered during its glory years are in the recesses of every game today. Currently in some small scale developments, however, there are projects in the works to revive the adventure game genre. A major player in this revival is a company known as *Tierra Entertainment*, an obvious play on the name *Sierra*. They offer free downloads of adventure game remakes, done with modern technology but retaining the spirit of the originals. From their website biography, they write, “We believe that adventure games must not be forgotten, and this is our attempt to keep the classics alive. We strongly believe that there's still a high demand for adventure games and that people still want to play them. The sad fact is that adventure games as we knew them, are no longer being made by game companies, and everything has gone 3D ... we know for a fact that there are people who still desperately crave adventure games ... people who enjoy the intellectual challenge of puzzle solving, rather than the latest 3D graphics technology.” [Ti02]. Another prominent fan-based creation trying to prolong a defeated legacy is creating *King's Quest IX: Every Cloak Has a Silver Lining*. They are based on various websites throughout the country and is the primary candidate for a successful sequel creation, based not on the more recent titles, but of the “classics”, that of *King's Quest I* to *VI* (considered to be true “adventure” genre titles).

Adventure games have not withstood the test of time in recent years. While the legacy of *King's Quest* in adventure games is unquestioned and unparalleled, it remains to be seen whether this legacy will spawn a successful heir of its own.

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