

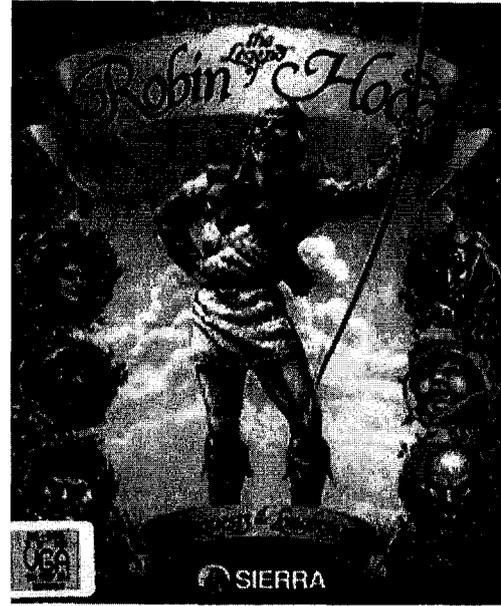
Sierra Online's
**Conquests of the Longbow:
The Legend of Robin Hood**

A REVIEW

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Introduction

Conquests of the Longbow: The Legend of Robin Hood is one of the most innovative adventure games from Sierra Online. *Conquests of the Longbow* was released for DOS in 1991 during the “golden era” of Sierra adventure games. During this period of time, several of the classic VGA adventure games were released, including *King’s Quest*, *Quest for Glory*, and *Space Quest*. *Conquests of the Longbow* was the second Sierra game designed by Christy Marx after *Conquests of Camelot: The Search for the Grail*, which was released in 1990. *Conquests of the Longbow* was widely acclaimed by the critics and was voted “Best Adventure Game of 1992” by *Computer Game Review*.¹ Assisting Christy Marx was an outstanding design team, including Ken Williams. Below is a list of the major contributors:



Original box art for *Robin Hood*

Executive Producer	Ken Williams
Creative Director	Bill Davis
Director	Christy Marx
Producer	Guruka Singh Khalsa
Game Designer	Christy Marx
Music Director	Mark Seibert
Lead Programming	Richard Aronson
Art Designer	Kenn Nishiuye

Conquests of the Longbow was originally released on floppy disks, but it was re-released in 1993 on CD-ROM with speaking characters. The game included a small manual with background on the story of Robin Hood and information useful in various “copy-protection” puzzles. As a courtesy for registering the product, Sierra would send the user a subscription of *InterAction*, a magazine devoted to product reviews, hints, and previews of Sierra games. *Conquests of the Longbow* is a blend of brilliant storytelling, stunning artwork, and immersive gameplay.

¹ Christy Marx, *Christy Marx: Writer, Story Editor, Series Developer, Show Runner*; available from <http://www.tminet.com/moonfire/>; accessed 10 February 2001.

The Story

Conquests of the Longbow was released at the same time as Kevin Costner's blockbuster hit *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. The timing was coincidental, but it couldn't have been better. After watching the thoroughly motivating and inspiring portrayal by Kevin Costner, kids and adults could play *Conquests of the Longbow* and be Robin Hood. The story line of Robin Hood is quite compelling to young adults because it is about everything that the modern city-kid cannot experience.



The game begins with Robin Hood in his cave.

King Richard the Lionheart goes off to fight in the crusades with high hopes, but he is captured by Austrian soldiers. Back in England, the corrupt Prince John conspires with the infamous Sheriff of Nottingham, and they exploit the common people through heavy taxation and other abuses of power. Robin Hood and his merry men try to restore justice by raising money for the King's ransom and by feeding and clothing the poor. He is ultimately successful, and in the end the King returns and everyone lives happily ever after.

Christy Marx brings this story to life with her own variations on the standard theme. While there is a rather lengthy animated introduction that provides the suitable background, the game begins with Robin in his cave. He goes outside to his camp and meets Will Scarlet, Little John, Friar Tuck, Much, and Alan the minstrel. These five companions help you through the game and are a source of much merriment. The game is partitioned into thirteen "days," and every night, Robin retires to his camp and the men recount the events of the day and discuss what is to be done the next day. Christy Marx uses these nightly discussions to develop the characters and story.

After retiring to bed the first night, Robin has a dream about the mysterious Maid Marian and he receives an emerald heart. The next day Robin saves Marian from being attacked by one of the Sheriff's men, and she gives him a slipper. A romance eventually develops between Robin and Marian, as she helps him through various puzzles in the adventure. At one point, Robin saves her from being burnt at the stake, and in the end they get married.



Robin Hood and his merry men discuss the day's events at their camp.

The rest of the game consists of solving various puzzles, putting on disguises, giving money to the poor, and outwitting the enemy. During the progress of the game, Robin explores many beautifully rendered environments, including the forest, Nottingham, a monastery, and an entire medieval-style faire. Robin must interact with dozens of characters during his path to the end-game. Although certain things need to happen each day,

the player does not get a sense that the story is linear. There may many different paths that one may take in this adventure, and there are several different endings depending on the decisions that Robin makes.

The story line guides the player in making good decisions. Dialogue is perhaps the most important component in Christy Marx's game, and the player must pay close attention to the details that are revealed to figure out what to do next. While this may appear to compromise the interactivity of the game, it allows a deep and meaningful story to develop.

Game-Play

Conquests of the Longbow falls within the adventure game genre. The game owes its heritage to the early text based adventures such as *Adventure* and *Zork*, as well as to the text and graphics based games such as *Mystery House* and *King's Quest*. The point-and-click interface is entirely icon-based, however. The player interacts with the environment through walking, talking, looking, shooting, and using various objects in Robin's inventory. The icons reduce the frustration that many early adventure gamers experienced with the text-based parsers.

What makes *Conquests of the Longbow* so innovative is its inclusion of other genres within the standard adventure framework. Tucked nicely into the storyline, one discovers arcade sequences and strategy games. For example, when Robin encounters a hostile monk on Watling Street, he is challenged to a quarterstaff duel. The player controls Robin's thrusts

and blows, just as in any other arcade game. The user is able to set the difficulty level of all the arcade sequences through a slider bar on the configuration screen. There is also an authentic English game called "Nine Men's Morris" that Robin must play in order to win an amethyst needed later in the game. There are also various riddles embedded in the game to challenge the minds of the players. Unlike the arcade sequences, there is no way to bypass or reduce the difficulty of these riddles, which might be annoying to some people.



Robin Hood encounters the false knight on Watling Street.

During the course of the game, Robin acquires points for doing certain things. As with other adventure games, one does not have to get the maximum number of points to "win." Robin can earn points by giving money to people, and even by purchasing gifts at the fair in Nottingham. The points are reported at the top of the screen, much like the early *Adventure* game. There are also a report of the ransom amount and the number of surviving outlaws. According to the manual, the ransom is the amount raised to save the king, and according to the manual, "Your actions and how you use your wits has a large effect on the amount you can raise." The number of outlaws is based upon "your skill, cunning and choice of strategies...which reflects upon your ability as a leader." Most players pay no attention to these numbers, although they may affect how the story ends.

Technology

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the game is its graphics. When the game was released in 1991, the screen shots alone were convincing enough for many to buy the game. The 256-color VGA artwork was beautifully rendered and created a much more realistic atmosphere compared to the typical 16-color EGA graphics. Finally, gamers could feel like they are inside another world without too much imagination. Flesh colors are much more convincing in 256-colors, and is one of the reasons why the characters could suddenly become more real. Character animation is smooth and background movement adds

significantly to the ambiance of the scene. Water has always been a difficult thing to represent in a computer game, but the programmers managed to do this successfully in the monastery scenes. While the VGA resolution looks blocky by today's standards, it was the best thing gamers had seen. The resolution was also just poor enough so that the players could project their own faces onto the characters.

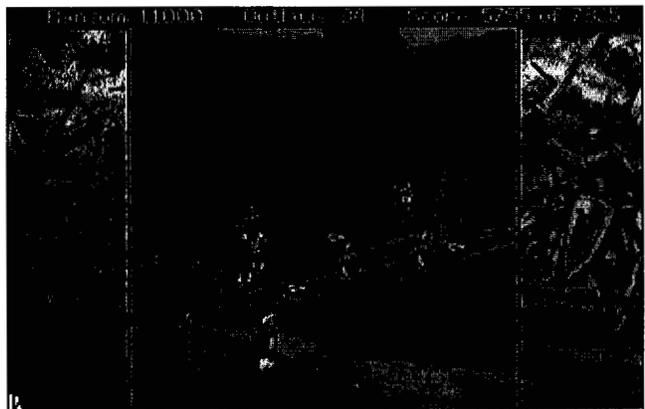
The music and sound effects are also quite impressive. *Conquests of the Longbow* added support for high quality Roland, Sound Blaster, and Pro Audio Spectrum sound systems. The medieval soundtrack adds substantially to the game and makes the player feel like he is actually in 12th century Nottingham and participating in the greatest adventure of all time. The sound effects are a little less convincing, but that is because the technology at the time was quite limited and nothing too impressive could be stored on 3.5-inch disks. The later CD-ROM version did add considerably to the sound effects.

Conclusion

Conquests of the Longbow is a brilliant game that has considerable replay value. It is quite unlikely that the first time through the game the player would accrue all of the points possible. Playing the game another time through would reveal alternative paths and different ways of solving the same puzzle. I recently replayed the game with a "walk-through" sitting before me, and it still took me five hours to get to the end!

Of course, *Conquests of the Longbow* is not without its set of flaws and frustrations. At first, the forest is very difficult to navigate.

Often, new players spend the first ten minutes wandering around aimlessly in the forest. Later a map will allow Robin to get to where he needs to go, which greatly reduces what could have been a massive navigational headache. Another frustration is that we have to wait a certain amount of time for a particular person to come along the street. New



**Robin Hood and his company
ambush the Sheriff's men.**

players don't know that they are supposed to wait at a particular screen for someone, and so they just leave. This causes a problem because often Robin must meet someone on Watling Street before the game can progress. This minor problem may be solved by simply reducing the wait time or by giving some sort of cue, perhaps audible, that would alert the player that someone is approaching. Despite these small details, *Conquests of the Longbow* is still among the best adventure games ever developed.

It is unfortunate that Christy Marx is no longer developing adventure games. She was originally going to develop another game for Sierra according to her contract, but she was disgruntled with the way the management was treating the designers. The atmosphere was degenerating quickly and one manager in particular frustrated Christy Marx so much that she decided to quit. She met with the company's lawyer to terminate her relationship with Sierra. The golden era of Sierra was over, and the company went through a long series of being sold and acquired.²

I was in middle school when I played *Conquests of the Longbow* for the first time. My friend also had the game, and we would talk about how to solve various puzzles and get around what seemed to be dead-ends. My friend actually developed a bit of a crush on the 13 by 35 pixel representation of Marian. I also formed relationships with the characters, and I was fascinated with the idea of *being* Robin Hood and using my creativity, logic, and moral judgment to become a hero.



**Robin Hood interacts with Marian
in the sacred Willow Grove.**

² Christy Marx, personal communication, 10 February 2001.