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Review:King's Quest: Quest for the Crown

1980 was a benchmark in the history of computer gaming, when a small company called Infocom

released a game called <u>Zork</u>. The game was completely command-line-driven, but gamers spent hour after

hour trying to figure out its puzzles. In the next two years, Infocom released two more <u>Zork</u> titles, each as

successful as the first. However, despite the popularity of these text-based games, they still were just that

– text based games. Home computers were becoming more complex, and had such features as a 16-color

palette, multi-channel sound, and a enormous (!) 128K of memory. It only made sense to utilize these

new resources in all aspects of computer use, including games. In 1983, a company called Sierra On-Line

did just that, with the release of <u>King's Quest: Quest for the Crown.</u>

<u>King's Quest</u> grew out of the mind of Roberta Williams, who, with her husband Ken Williams,

founded Sierra On-Line. In the late 1970's, Roberta Williams, herself an avid gamer, grew tired of

playing text-only games on her family's Apple II computer, and decided to try her own hand at making

games. The first game they released was called <u>Mystery House</u> and implemented only simple black-and-

white graphics. Soon after, Roberta Williams released <u>King's Quest</u>. The core production team consisted

only of Roberta, three programmers, and two graphic designers. And although the game seems simple, it

is significant in that it marked the birth of a new genre of gaming.

Roberta Williams was quoted as saying, "When I was a child, I read a lot of fairy tales, and would

tell stories to friends. Now, I have the computer to help me tell stories, and the King's Quest saga is a

story I want to share with everyone." The story of King's Quest is not particularly complex, but it is a

satisfying fairy tale, complete with happy ending. The hero of the game is Sir Graham, a knight in the

fictional Kingdom of Daventry. On the request of the ailing King Edwarad, Graham must recover the three stolen treasures of the Kingdom - a magic mirror, a shield, and a treasure chest filled with riches. In order to achieve his goal, he must fight a giant and a fire-breathing dragon, outwit a dwarf, and even interact with leprechauns. In the end, Graham returns the treasures and is subsequently proclaimed the new King.

The play of King's Quest can best be described as a combination of Infocom games such as Zork and side scrolling graphics-based games such as Pitfall. At the top of the screen is a menu bar that consists of information such as the player's score. At the bottom of the screen, there is a prompt where the player types in commands. The commands can range from "Lift rock" to "Show the carrot to the goat." The main part of the screen presents the player with an exact visual view of the world, one screen at a time from a single perspective. (Fig. 2) The player uses the arrow keys to move Graham around the world. When he reaches the edge of the screen, there is a brief pause, and a new screen loads. The player uses text commands to interact with the world, and moves Graham around to explore the world.

When attempting to classify King's Quest into a particular genre, it is tempting to place it into adventure games, which would put it together with text-based games. However, many people believe that King's Quest marked the birth of a new genre, 3D adventure games. The simple fact that the player has a graphical view of the world changes many aspects of game play, thus justifying this new classification. For example, if a player wishes Graham to interact with an object in the world, the player must move Graham so that he is in close physical proximity with the object. This is contrasted with Zork, for example, in which all the objects in the rooms are for the most part within your reach. In addition, since the user must control Graham's movements around the world, the 3D adventure game gave rise to a new type of adventure game puzzle – the maneuvering puzzle. (Fig. 3) In this type of puzzle, the player must physically move the hero in a particular way to solve a puzzle. This often involved traversing a winding

mountain pass or solving a maze. While these types of puzzles were often annoyingly difficult, they did

represent a new type of puzzle in adventure gaming.

Like the game itself, the technology of King's Quest was a combination of old and new. The text

parser was certainly not new technology, and probably not even up to the level of Infocom's text parser.

For example, while some commands were relatively complex, most were only two or three words. So

while Zork players could try a sentence like "Swing the axe at the Troll" and get a cogent response,

entering the same command in King's Quest would elicit a "Huh?" or at best, "I don't understand the word

'swing.'" However, the selling point of the game was certainly not the text parser, but the graphics. While

the look of the game is primitive by today's standard, it was state of the art at the time. King's Quest

introduced a new type of animation into the computer gaming world. Graham had full freedom to move

about, he had a walk cycle to increase the realism of the game, and there were even parts of the

environment that were animated as well. In addition, it is significant that the game is pseudo-3D, not just

2D. Unlike most early side-scrolling games, Graham could move left and right, as well as in and out of

the screen, and even behind objects. Furthermore, as mentioned above, King's Quest made full use of the

resources offered by the home computer by adding sound to the game as well as exploiting the large

amounts of RAM.

As mentioned before, the inception of the 3D adventure game presented new types of puzzles, as

well as new ways to solve old puzzles. Therefore, the game play of King's Quest must have been quite

novel to the typical game player. However, despite the novelty of the game, the puzzles are not

particularly difficult, especially for a gamer used to the complex puzzles in Infocom games. Despite this,

one interesting feature of the game play is that since the story of King's Quest is, at its core, a fairy tale,

the solutions to some of the puzzles borrow from fairy tales and myths. For example, at one point in the

game, you kill a giant with a sling, a la David and Goliath, and at another point, you guess a gnome's

name to be Rumplestiltskin (but backwards, of course. This is an adventure game after all.) At the same time, the fairy tale storyline might be a bit mundane for the gamer used to battling Wizards of Frobozz and being eaten by grues. In all, the game is short by any standard, and does not have much replayability, as there are only a handful of puzzles which can be solved in more than one way. There is only a single ending to the game, and if you do not follow the path to reach this ending, you will lose.

However, it is important to note that the King's Quest series always adapted and renewed itself, so as to not bore gamers, and to make up for many of the shortcomings that the early King's Quests had. For example, by King's Quest V, Sierra moved away from the command-line game to an entirely mouse-driven point-and-click game. Now, instead of typing "Pick up the bowl," the player would take the hand icon and click it on the bowl. In addition, Sierra later incorporated speech into the King's Quest series, and always included advanced graphics. For example, King's Quest VIII: Mask of Enternity, the latest King's Quest title, allowed the player to move the hero in true 3D space. In addition, as computers became more advanced, this allowed Roberta Williams and her co-writers greater freedom in the stories, and they became more complex and included plot twists and multiple endings to satisfy even the most seasoned adventure gamer.

Despite the shortcomings in gameplay, King's Quest: Quest for the Crown was wildly successful upon its release, and spawned seven more games in the King's Quest series. In addition, it secured Sierra On-Line's position in the industry, and was the model for other Sierra titles such as the Police Quest, Space Quest, and Quest for Glory series. More importantly, it spawned the 3D adventure game genre and paved the way for other companies such as LucasArts to release their own successful 3D adventure game titles. In many aspects, King's Quest was something that the computer gaming world had never seen, and set a standard for games for years to come.

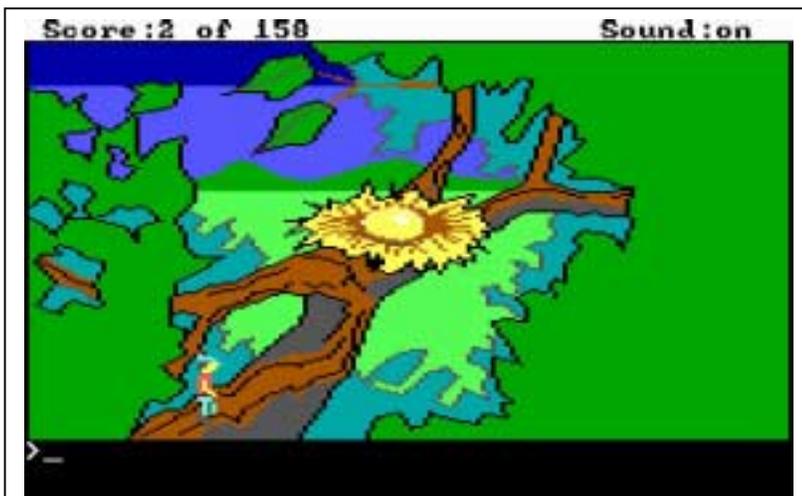Fig 1. <u>King's Quest</u> Opening Screen. Notice the fairytale-like quality.

Fig 2. Game play.

Fig 3. A simple maneuvering puzzle.