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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 Zork. 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 Zork 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 King's Quest: Quest for the Crown.

King's Quest 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 Mystery House and implemented only simple black-and-white graphics. Soon after, Roberta Williams released King's Quest. 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 Edward, 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