



Scorpion's View

When Is a Sequel More Than a Sequel? Sierra's King's Quest V

Scorpla is an experienced and respected adventure game expert. CGW is pleased to be able to provide this forum for her distinctive and, often, controversial perspective.

Deep in the crystal, the clouds begin to disperse. A ray of light burgeons into a dazzling array of colors, surmounted by a golden crown. There is no doubt about it: the king has returned, in a blaze of rainbows.

Without question, *King's Quest V* is a graphic tour-de-force. This is the game to boot up when you want to show off your VGA system. Rich in color and lavish in detail, scene after scene unfolds in gorgeous glory, enough to brighten the most jaded eye, including mine! I don't usually get very excited over graphics, but these are something special. Over twenty people are listed under the art credits and they should all stand up and take a bow.

One of the most outstanding features of the graphics is how they sustain mood. *King's Quest V* is, essentially, a fairy tale and this delicate atmosphere is maintained throughout the game, in spite of one jarring element (more on that later). You really have the feeling of being in some magical realm, where anything can happen.

In spite of the detail, the animation was very quick. Only in the most crowded scenes was there any noticeable slowness, and even that is acceptable. Do keep in mind, though, that the game was reviewed on a 386 with a fast clock; on a slower system, there is likely to be more delay.

Those who have a sound card can enjoy the additional enhancement of excellent music. There is a wide variety of tunes in the game, each very well done and carefully matched to the scene. The scoring may be the best ever in any Sierra game. It sounded quite good on my Soundblaster and those with Roland cards claim that it is superb.



Unlike previous adventures, *King's Quest V* features a totally non-typing interface, vaguely reminiscent of the one in the *Manhunter* series. Everything is controlled via icons from a menu bar at the top of the screen. The cursor itself changes shape to indicate which type of icon is active: movement (a striding figure), examination (an eye), manipulation (a hand) and so on.

Once you get the hang of this system, it is simple to use and eliminates a great deal of the repetition ordinarily found in most games of this kind. Instead of typing "look at this" or "look at that", you need only position the "eye" on something and click the mouse button. If there is anything special about the object, you see a message; if not, the icon changes briefly to a red X.

Movement is handled better here than

ever before through the use of the "travel" icon. This allows Graham to walk anywhere you click on the screen without having to maneuver past obstacles. Instead, the on-screen character will avoid them automatically and go directly to the designated spot.

In a similar vein, picking up or manipulating objects is accomplished by clicking on them with the "hand" icon. Graham does not have to be next to the item first (unless reaching it is part of a puzzle). This does away with all the "you're not close enough" silliness that has been the bane of gamers for a long time. You won't ever see that message here.

On the other hand, this also creates something of a drawback (just as it did in the *Manhunter* games). Many of the puzzles, which are already easy, are made more so by simply running through the inventory and trying everything you have. Most of the time, you don't even need to figure out how to use something. Instead, the program will perform the correct actions just by "point and click" alone.

Conversations (there are many people and creatures to talk to) are handled in the same fashion. You simply click the "talk" icon on someone (or something), and the rest is completely automatic. This is certainly a boon for those who are never sure what to ask about, or who rapidly become tired of running through a series of "keywords" with everyone they meet. For those gamers who enjoy directing everything, however, it might be a little frustrating, even though Graham's chats are always to the point.

Inventory is simple. Graham picks up whatever he can, and never drops anything. There is no drop command, therefore nothing can be lost. If an object has no function in a situation, nothing happens, and the item does not get used up. However, there are a couple of tricky instances where an item can be used incorrectly, so some caution is necessary. Usually, correct use of an object is heralded by the sound of a bell



and an increase in score. The absence of these is often an indicator that you made a mistake.

In a way, *King's Quest V* brings the series full circle. The first two games centered on Graham's trials in becoming king of Coventry and finding a wife. The next two focused on his son and daughter. Now, we return again to Graham, a bit older, a little grayer of hair, but still fit and trim and ready to take on a quest, even if it isn't quite by choice.

Out picking posies (literally) one day, Graham returns home to find he has none: both his castle and his family have vanished without a trace. The only witness to this gargantuan removal is an owl, sitting on a nearby branch. Unfortunately, aside from telling Graham what happened, the bird (Cedric by name) can provide little information. However, he can transport Graham to the wizard Crispin, who may be able to help.

Thus begins Graham's quest to find out the who and why of this amazing theft, as well as how to get back his home and family again. Much of the action takes place in and around the country of Serenia, since Crispin is able to determine that this is the land that holds the answers. Graham, however, must find those answers on his own.

So, off he goes to explore this strange world. The only thing *KQ V* lacks is an auto-mapping feature, so it is necessary to make your own maps as you go along. This is particularly important in the desert, one of the few not-so-bright parts of the game.

I mapped out a hundred and thirty (!) screens of this arid wasteland and have heard it is even larger. Why so much space was given over to something that is mostly nothing is hard to understand, especially since Graham can't last very long among the sands without water. Six screens is all he has. On the seventh, he drops dead of dehydration.

There are oases along the way that can sustain him, but finding them is a matter of trial and error. All you can do is move Graham around in different directions, restoring when he dies and hoping it won't be too long in between before he finds some water. This is particularly aggravating as there are only three locations of any importance: the temple, the skeleton, and the bandit camp. Everything else is just sand and cliffs.

Also irritating are several "time dependent" situations in the game, as well as some "instant death gotchas" (the jarring element I mentioned earlier). There are occasions in the game where Graham does not have the

luxury of unlimited time to look around or think things out. He must act very quickly or the game will be lost.

The desert temple is one of these quick action sequences. Graham has only a few moves to pick up the two items he needs and get out before the door shuts, imprisoning him forever. There is really no time to look around at all and players may be in for an unpleasant surprise when they see just how little time there is to do anything in here.

The cat and mouse scene is another. Graham must save the mouse while it is being chased. Otherwise, it will be killed and the game cannot be completed. The mouse does not appear again (after all, it's kitty chow) and that critter is *very* important.

The "gotcha" instances make for intensive hair-pulling. For example, at one point Graham and Cedric go sailing in a boat. They have no idea where they are going; they have no directions and no particular goal (at least, I never found any hints in the game about this). It is mainly a "let's go see what's out there" expedition and what they keep running into much of the time is a sea serpent.

It eats them immediately, with no chance of escape. Ergo, there is much tedious res-

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toring as you try to find, by trial and error alone, the safe path past the monster. For both this and the desert, a map or other direction of some kind would have been preferable, thereby saving a lot of frustration and wasted time. Therefore, save often. Any time you think Graham may be heading into trouble or any time you feel nervous about something, save the game. Also, save it just on general principles now and then, to avoid an unexpected and unpleasant surprise that may set you far back in the game.

Cedric is sometimes an indicator of potentially dangerous situations. Any time he refuses to enter a particular area, it is a good idea to save before proceeding onward. Cedric may not have to go everywhere, but Graham certainly does.

One save you should have and be careful not to over-write is just before Graham and Cedric enter the mountains. Beyond a certain point, there is no turning back. If Graham is lacking any important objects, he can't return for them, and your only recourse is to restore the game.

As I noted previously, many of the puzzles are not very difficult. Usually, if you are stuck on something, it means you don't yet have the necessary item to overcome the obstacle. When you can't make headway in

a situation, no matter what you do, leave it and go looking elsewhere. For instance, the Forbidden Forest is best left alone until the desert is completed. The tavern should be avoided until the mouse has been saved, and so on.

Paying close attention to the screen is important. Look at everything when you arrive at a new location. I had a hard time with one puzzle because I kept missing a stick on the ground (and it is easy to miss). The "eye" makes it easy to check for critical objects; don't neglect doing that.

Above all, be kind to (most) animals. This is a constant theme throughout the game. Graham has the ability to talk to them, and doing so is crucial to success. Being nice (most of the time) is one means of making progress in the adventure.

A word of caution is necessary here in regard to the end of the game. After the villain is defeated, Graham is reunited with his family in a long, automatic sequence. For some reason, this sequence appears to require more memory than the rest of the game; there have been reports of the program crashing at this point. With that in mind, you may want to remove any memory-resident programs before entering the end game portion (in the castle) to avoid this difficulty.

In one sense, the irritations noted earlier are a shame, as they mar what might otherwise have been something close to the perfect adventure. *King's Quest V* is not outstanding for the puzzles. Those are mostly simple, but a game need not be a mindbender to be good. The flaws mentioned above aside, the fusion of elements, graphics, music, storyline, thematic concepts, interface and atmosphere make this game stand out.

For the beginner, *King's Quest V* is ideal. The interface removes much of the frustration and "learning curve" associated with the more text-oriented adventures and the majority of puzzles are not very hard. For the more advanced gamer (particularly those with VGA, fast clock speed and a sound card), it can be a pleasant diversion.

As the crystal clouds over again, remember if you need help with an adventure game, you can reach me in the following ways: On Delphi: stop by the GameSIG (under the Groups and Clubs menu). On GEnie: visit the Games RoundTable (type: Scorpio to reach the Games RT). By US Mail (enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you live in the United States): Scorpio, PO Box 338, Gracie Station, New York NY 10028. **CSW**

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