

KING'S QUEST VII

Herb Apthekar takes an early look at Sierra's upcoming fairy tale

PREVIEW



Sierra's *King's Quest* series has already proven itself to be an unusual and durable favorite in the computer gaming industry. While many fantasy adventure games tend to be derivative of the the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, the *KQs* have taken a completely different path, deriving instead from popularized and commercialized versions of a wide range of European (and, more recently, non-European) folk tales. The *KQ* games have thus stood out in a genre that, at least in its early years, has been somewhat narrowly defined. Given the more commercial approach to story, they fall much more within what some people have described as "family-oriented" entertainment (which, more often than not, boils down to "traditional conservative white middle-class suburban").

Take a step forward

The newest installment in the *Sierra* line, *King's Quest VII: The Prince-less Bride*, could prove an interesting step forward for *Sierra* (and in particular, for designer Roberta Williams). For one thing, there's scarcely a "King" to be found in the plot. Instead, the

story is divided into eight novella-like chapters, which alternate between two characters in two different places, the beautiful Princess Rosella Daventry, now of marrying age in one place, and her mother, Queen Valance in another.

Sierra has been working on the "duelling plotlines" approach to adventure gaming for some time now, with elements appearing in previous adventures such as *Dagger of Amon Ra* and *Gabriel Knight*; while most good fiction involves such intertextualities and much more, computer games have for the most part been incredibly linear in plot development. Two elements to the plotline is *some* improvement, at least, if not yet approaching the richness of the work of, say, a Turgenev (to understate the case). Perhaps with CD-ROM space available, we'll actually be able to see *three* plotlines next time around?

At the game's beginning, the two characters are having a minor spat about Rosella's matrimonial prospects. Basically, Valance thinks it's a good idea and Rosella doesn't. As the two characters walk by a reflecting pool, a magical door appears beneath it, and Rosella jumps in, eager to leave the heavy conversation (typical air-





head move!). A flustered Valance soon follows (another typical airhead move!), but the magic of the pool transports her someplace else (oh well). The player will get to move between the two characters as the story progresses.

Wondrous strange and fancy free

Before finally being reunited, Rosella and Valance will travel to six fanciful countries, including Nonsense Land, The Rubber Jungle, Ooga Booga Land and the Mountain of Winds (sound like rides in Peter Molyneux's **Theme Park**, eh?). As they travel, they will meet such interesting characters as the Troll King, (aka Harlan Ellison?) the Boogeyman (aka Stephen King?), Oberon and Titania, and the evil villainess, Malicia (not to be confused with the province in Poland), as well as various and sundry dragonettes and jackalopes (not to be confused with the melon). The events in the game borrow from Lewis Carroll, William Shakespeare, among others; final release will tell whether such a *mélange* remains coherent.

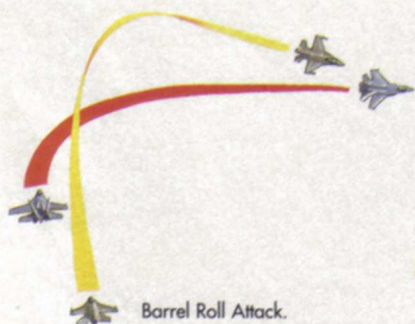
As with the previous KQ's, there will be lots of puzzles to solve along the way, but this time with an unusual twist. While there are a number of complex puzzles for the adult players, others will draw upon subject matter to be found in popular commercial children's stories, and may thus require a younger player well versed in pop child culture to figure them out. Fun for the whole family!



Computer cartoons

While such elements of the game are noteworthy enough, the thing about **KQ VII** that has everyone talking is the graphic style. As with some other recent *Sierra* work, Roberta Williams has chosen a cartoon character style — in this case more reminiscent of Disney and Bluth than Frazetta and Vallejo, however. The carefully detailed backgrounds will contrast with the more "cartoony" characters, thus creating an effect similar to Jeff Smith's "Bone" comic book. Whether or not you can track down the artistic influences in this game, you will have to admit, it could prove an interesting mixture. SVGA graphics have been combined with true film-quality animation techniques to create a look that should prove quite attrac-

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Barrel Roll Attack.



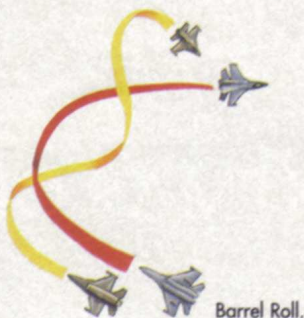
Offset Head-on Pass.



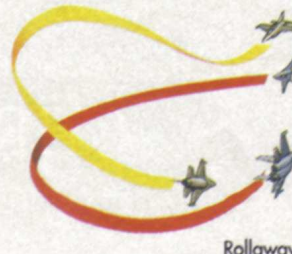
The Immelman.



Low Speed Yoyo.



Barrel Roll.



Rollaway.

tive.

There's really very little difference in the production approach to distinguish *KQ VII* from a full-length animated feature. The dialog is all in digitized speech, using the talents of numerous professional voice actors and actresses. Also present is a fully orchestrated musical score, recorded in CD audio, which includes "leitmotifs," or signature tunes, for over 20 characters. There's even an elaborate opening sequence to the game, featuring Princess Rosella singing the theme song. How cinematic can you get?

Yet, with all of this film-style influence, we are still talking about a computer game here, and even the best visuals and sound could bog down terribly if the gameplay proves repetitive, derivative, or just plain boring. As one element in the effort to cope with such dangers, the design team has made an effort to develop an interface even *simpler* than the one already present in recent *Sierra* games, with the goal being to make the gameplay accessible to wider mass market. This interface should prove virtually identical to the one also being promoted for *Phantasmagoria*.

Bye bye adventure grognards?

A hue and a cry went out across the land the first time *Sierra* went this route a few years back, and certainly a number of the more dedicated adventure gamers out there lost interest in what proved to be not only a more simplified interface but a consequently more simple-minded style of gameplay; the goal this time around seems to be to simplify even further to draw in novices, again, perhaps, at the expense of those looking for more depth of play. Time will tell. It's another one of those "let's go after the mass market" kinds of issues, in any event.

King's Quest VII could prove to be a very unusual game. Efforts are being made to remain at least somewhat fresh at the level of story, and obviously much effort is being put into the splash and mass-audience appeal side of the design. In any event there are not many games out there right now that really are "for the whole family," and if it proves a successful design, *KQVII* might well provide some interesting ideas for others in the industry to kick around when trying to address that market. □



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