

Bloody Well Right

This KING'S QUEST Is a Good Stand-alone Game, but May Alienate Longtime Fans

by Thierry Nguyen

Remember the big changes that KING'S QUEST V: ABSENCE MAKES THE HEART GO YONDER brought to both the series and the adventure genre overall? It used a new, wordless, all-icon interface; it had hand-painted backgrounds; and it was the first Sierra game to have speech. Yet even with these changes, the core game remained the same. Well, get ready for another massive change to the KING'S QUEST name, in both design and execution.

This new KING'S QUEST is not only in 3D, but it's also the first in which you're not a member of the



HOTSEAT JUMPING While there are a couple of physical jumping puzzles, most puzzles still rely on your noggin rather than your nimbleness.

Royal Family and, more significant, the first in which you must shed blood in combat. You'll be disappointed if you're expecting another family adventure, but as a fantasy game in general, MASK OF ETERNITY is actually pretty good.

Back to Simpler Times

In a year that brought adventure game after adventure game with complex plots—think SANITARIUM, REDGUARD, and GRIM FANDANGO—it's a bit of a surprise to find a game with a simpler plot. Here, you play Connor, a mild-mannered peasant who is suddenly tasked

with saving Daventry and a few other lands. The sacred Mask of Eternity (a beacon of all things good, like Truth, Light, and Order) has been shattered into five pieces and spread across the world; Connor needs to find all five pieces and reassemble the Mask.

MASK's plot plays off common fantasy and classical myth themes. Connor travels through seven worlds (eight, if you count the oh-so-brief Paradise Lost) and performs a series of Herculean tasks, such as slaying a mighty Basilisk in the Barren Region or healing the Sacred Heart in the Dimension of

even a scoring system, and your point total is displayed when you finish the game.

Thinking and Thwacking

The game's opening quickly introduces you to the first major change: the all-3D engine. Connor and the rare NPCs he runs into are rendered in full polygonal glory, and the world is now seen from either first- or third-person eyes.

The 3D engine has a huge effect on puzzle design. Object manipulation is now much more "physical." If you wanted to pull a high switch in an earlier game, for example, you probably would have typed "push box," then "get on box," and finally "pull switch." Here, you have to literally push the box, jump on top of it, and look up to pull the switch.

In general, however, the puzzles are familiar and old-school—finding and trading items, figuring out switch sequences, and so on. Don't fear that the 3D engine has turned this into a mindless action game; most of the puzzles are

Death. There are no real backstabbing or betrayals. The plot is a straightforward "unlikely hero rises up and defeats Foozle" scenario. In that regard, it is very much like previous KING'S QUEST games. Heck, there's



KILLING FOOZLE SOFTLY Combat between you and the enemies is a simple click-and-kill affair.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD



APPEAL: Fantasy fans who like a mix of combat and old-school puzzling; longtime series fans who are prepared for a darker and bloodier KING'S QUEST.



PROS: Good puzzles; easy-to-learn combat with changeable difficulty; great character animation; good voice-acting and music; it's a KING'S QUEST game.

CONS: It's a KING'S QUEST game with gore and combat; annoying load times; high system requirements; camera-control interface interrupts gameplay; environmental graphics not as good as character graphics.

DIFFICULTY: Hard.

REQUIREMENTS: Pentium 166, Windows 95, 32MB RAM, 400MB hard-drive space, 4x CD-ROM, DirectX6-compatible sound and video cards.

3D SUPPORT: Direct3D, 3Dfx Glide.

MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: None.

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Publisher: Sierra Studios
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quite cerebral. There are a few jumping puzzles, but I found only one of them to be annoying. They require decent timing skills, but nothing like what's needed in a game like TOMB RAIDER.

Okay, so the plot and the puzzle design are familiar, but now we get to the biggest new twist: combat (which is gory and plentiful). As in DIABLO, fighting boils down simply to a point-and-click matter, with no defensive measures (besides your armor) and some hot-keys for potions. Gamers put off by this can set the combat on "Easy" to make enemies pretty much roll over.

Combat does have a point, though, in that it (like questing/puzzle-solving) gives you experience. Every critter you slay ups your experience meter, and with every level-increase comes more hit points, along with higher stats in armor class, melee weapon damage, and ranged weapon damage. These stats also increase whenever you pick up new weapons or armor. Each armor change affects Connor's appearance as well. He starts with a simple tunic and ends the game decked-out in mighty Sun Armor.

Gremlins in the Woodwork

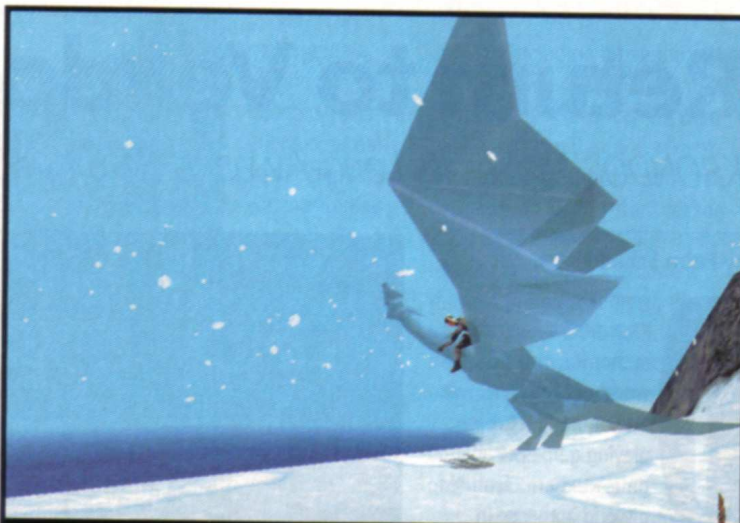
The main problem with MASK lies in its control scheme, which is a combination of keyboard and mouse control. The mouse controls the camera and interaction; the keyboard controls your movement and jumping.

I was able to remap the keys so that I could get a comfortable movement interface. What I *didn't* like was the controllable camera. You shift the camera around by holding down the right-button and then moving the mouse. That means the game never shifts camera angles for you. This gets very annoying, especially since combat often requires you to pause and then manipulate the camera to get a playable angle. Many times, I died in combat not from being outmatched but from having to pause to move the camera—and having those extra hits weaken me

enough to kill me. Sometimes, the camera even refused to move, which limited my viewing angle.

Another problem that will annoy users is the load times. Whenever you travel between worlds, the game will unload the current world and copy the new world from the CD onto your hard drive. Even on a hotrod PII/400 with lots of RAM, this took several minutes. If you play the game perfectly, you probably won't mind. But I imagine the average player will miss an item or two along the way and not realize it until later. This happened to me on occasion, and I had to jump around three worlds to locate items for a particular puzzle. One land, Paradise Lost, was so short that I spent more time loading it than being in it. I can only imagine the frustration these problems will cause for someone with a system that's closer to the minimum requirements.

Then there's some hardware goofiness. The game says it supports Direct3D, but it really wants a Voodoo2. Even if you've got a hotrod card like a RIVA TNT, you can't enable all the features like particles and shadows. If you have both a 3Dfx and a Direct3D card, it automatically selects the 3Dfx while completely graying out the Direct3D card.



UP, UP, AND AWAY This new adventure has epic-feeling events, such as riding on this Ice Dragon's back.

Thanks for giving users a choice, I guess.

While the graphics look nice enough, they have a barrenness to them. There aren't many environmental details, and the fogging distance (the point where visibility is cut off) seems a bit short. Combine that with the sparse NPCs, and the worlds feel a bit...lonesome. In most of the worlds, it's also just too dark. Finally, the particle effects for spells and flames are very underwhelming. The character details are great (especially the lip-synching and animations as characters talk), but the environmental graphics are just adequate.

Mixed Blessings

Despite these problems, I found myself playing this game a lot—

and enjoying it. There's just something appealing about thwacking monsters one moment and racking my brain with tough puzzles the next. These elements require an open mind before playing. The old-school puzzles may frustrate newbies, while the veterans may be annoyed at the jumping and the combat. If you're looking for a saccharin-sweet family adventure like the earlier games, don't go for this. But if playing an old-school adventure with lots of combat and a dash of RPG leveling seems fine for you, then get that sword and brain in gear and go save Daventry. **CGW**

Thierry "Scooter" Nguyen fondly remembers playing a fiddle in the original KING'S QUEST, but if you question his masculinity, he'll challenge you to a HALF-LIFE brawl.



INSPIRE ME, O MUSE Cut-scenes, such as speaking to this wise Archon, use the in-game engine rather than FMV filler.



DING-DONG, THE WITCH IS DEAD Even though there's shooting in the game, you'll still need a brain to figure out this musical/colorful puzzle.