

C O V E R S T O R Y



# SPACE QUEST





## Warp speed and warped humor characterize Space Quest III

Sierra Online's Space Quest III (\$59.95) represents everything that's right about computer games and a few things that are wrong about the MS-DOS platform.

Three things to the good: Outstanding graphics, sophisticated sound and a high level of often hilarious interactivity stamp this as one of the major gaming efforts in the history of the young industry.

On the other hand: expensive hardware is needed to get full functionality out of this game, the sound track is truncated because of sound's massive storage requirements, and the nature of interactive games themselves: the jokes just aren't as funny with repeated tellings.

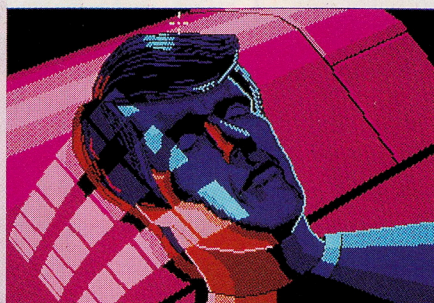
As an exercise in bravura game programming, Space Quest III, subtitled the Pirates of Pestulon, pushes the envelope for the entire industry. For those of a slightly cynical bent, SQIII's wicked sense of humor throughout is a true delight. Whether it's a smart remark, a parody of society, or the uproarious and unflinching company pitch at the end of the story, this game is guaranteed to keep you laughing all the way through. The game's designers, Mark Crowe and Scott Murphy, also know more ways to kill you than you know how to die. Dying is truly an enjoyable experience in SQIII.

To get full functionality, an 80286-based system with hard drive and VGA graphics is the minimum recommendation, and installation of a sound board is desirable. The game will play on lower-end systems, and in CGA and EGA modes, at a significant loss of speed and visual quality. The sound board, ranging in price from \$200 to \$500, is frosting on the cake.

### The Story

Space Quest III, as might be suspected from its title, is part of a continuing saga. At the end of II, our hero Roger Wilco had "narrowly escaped death aboard Sludge Vohaul's asteroid fortress," according to SQI-

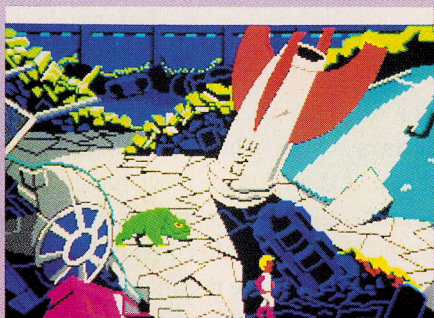
II's manual. "Entering an escape pod, he rocketed away seconds before it burned up in the Labionian atmosphere." Alas, Wilco was low on oxygen, so "making a last ditch effort to survive, he climbed into the hibernatic sleep chamber with the hope that someone would find him soon."



Yawn...What a restful sleep.

In SQIII, Wilco's vehicle is picked up by a patrolling garbage freighter, which doesn't know (or care) that there is life aboard the small pod. Wilco is jarred into consciousness in the bowels of the freighter.

The opening sequence is strictly under computer control, and is magnificent in its special visual and musical effects. The player asserts control once Wilco jumps out of the pod and hits the freighter deck with a nice "ta-ka-ta" of his boots.



There sure is a lot of garbage here.

As you manipulate Wilco through the freighter, you come upon an old Wile E. Coyote Acme missile (one of many visual jokes in the game), a lot of other seemingly useless space junk, and a few valuables: assorted pieces of wire, a ladder, a warp motivator, and a reactor. Clues to what is good among the detritus are provided by looking around, then examining areas closely.

**HOT TIP:** From the beginning, remember to save your game every step of the way.

**Then when you die, and you will die often, you don't have to go through all the beginning steps again and again. And be sure to pick up everything you can get your hands on throughout the game.**

Wilco's mission this time out is to rescue "universally famous software authors, those two guys from Andromeda" (who bear a slight resemblance to Crowe and Murphy). The two guys have been abducted by software pirates working for the disreputable software publisher ScumSoft, developer of such flops as Stuntflogger, Aquatron, and Scumword. ScumSoft president, 14-year-old Elmo Pug, is holding the two guys hostage, making them write inferior software against their will. This is really cruel!

Wilco's mission, once he's escaped the freighter, takes him to the exotic locales of Phleebut, Ortega and Pestulon. But getting off the freighter is an adventure in itself. This is a hostile, industrial environment, guaranteed to chew you to bits if you're not real careful.

**HOT TIP:** Don't get discouraged by the mugger rat on the freighter. Just go back and get the wire again.

### A Planetary Tour de Force

While cruising interplanetary space, Wilco stops for a quick munch at the ubiquitous Monolith Burger, featuring a logo reminiscent of our own golden arches.

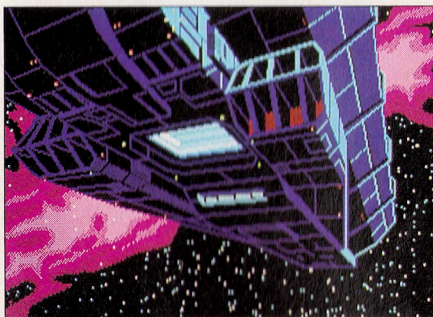
The Monolith Burger episode features everything good about playing this game. For humor, there's a nice send up of pimply-faced fast-food service. Make sure you try to throw away your own trash. For violence, don't go in the wrong airlock or Wilco gets wasted.

And there's a game inside the game—Astro Chicken, an arcade game developed by Scumsoft. Astro Chicken is an incredible rip-off, not much fun to play, and it requires you (as Wilco) to flap the joystick around in a manner totally unbecoming a mature adult. An inane "Turkey in the Straw" soundtrack accompanies the game, the only redeeming aspect of which



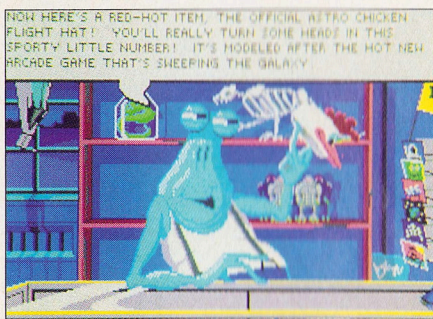
is an embedded clue about the fate of our two guys.

**HOT TIP:** You've got to eat the right food to get to the clue, and the Big Belcher combo isn't it. (But eat one sometime anyway to see how everything comes out.)



I'm in a garbage skow-in space!

While on Phleebut, not a bad place to visit, Wilco stumbles into a truly low-class tourist trap. Here, from the spotty neon signs to the tourist trapper's yellow teeth, a sense of humor imbues the scene.

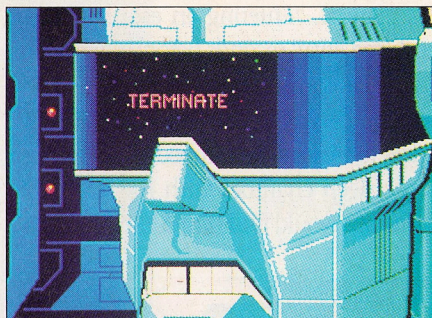


Fester Blatz makes a pitch.

**HOT TIP:** Bargain hard, but not too hard with Fester. For grins, check out the postcards. As far as the Terminator goes, remember the pulsating pods.

Ortega is a lava-filled hell that no one would even want to visit without a great motive. But Wilco must travel to Ortega as part of the plan to save the two guys. Sierra Online has done a great job of making this red orb a truly hostile place: I could feel my nerve ends singe the first time I fell into the planet's volcanic fires.

**HOT TIP:** Be patient when you encounter the bad guys. They'll leave. For a smart remark, look into the wrong end of the telescope.



Look out for Arnold Roboschwartz.

As Wilco moves to the game's conclusion on Pestulon, the jokes keep coming. Wilco discovers ScumSoft's headquarters (the company's SS logo is of course reminiscent of the Nazis), then must pose as a janitor to breach security.

**HOT TIP:** Don't miss a wastebasket, for a real janitor would never pass an empty wastebasket. And don't miss vaporizing the trash twice in a row, or it's curtains.

There are also two more games within the game on Pestulon, including a knock-down-drag-out robotic battle between Wilco and Elmo Pug. There is even a false ending, where the game seems to indicate you've almost solved it, but then, "ahah!" you're back in the deep stuff again.

## Dilemmas

The computer seizes control over greater sections of the game as SQIII nears its end(s). It looks as if the programmers were running out of either time or money, or both. Particularly after Pug is defeated, you're along for the ride in areas that you weren't before—although I must say the two guys are such classic nerds that it's a lot of fun just to sit back and listen to them babble.

The sound track, after a magnificent beginning, is not constantly present as the game progresses, either. Nor does it voice the words on the screen, either, as some players may expect. This is not a real criticism, but an observation.

The truncated sound track is probably not just a function of time and money, but most likely due to the extravagant storage demands good-quality sound makes. (CD-

quality sound, for example, requires a megabyte of storage for about 7.5 seconds of sound. The quality can be lowered significantly without bothering most listeners, but any quality sound demands a lot of room.) As it is, SQIII comes on three, 3.5-inch floppies or six 5.25-inch disks. ■

## The Case for CD-ROM

SQIII and its predecessors are a great example of games that could be delivered on CD-ROM, a medium that provides 600 megabytes of storage on a single disk. With that kind of storage, the sound track could run throughout, graphics could evolve into motion video, and interactivity could become more advanced. A CD-ROM game, of course, implies the purchase of a CD-ROM drive, a \$500 to \$1,000 investment today.

That's the rub: as the games get better, the investment spirals, and who is going to spend that kind of money to play a computer game? Very few people, obviously. This game is best suited to those whose work has already committed them to higher-end systems.

The other point regarding these interactive adventures is the rerun aspect: whereas a good arcade or sports game stands up to repeated playing, an adventure such as this wears out in a hurry. Although it will take dozens of hours for most players to find all the points in this game, once they have found them, the fun factor declines.

The real-life equivalent: You can only watch "The Wizard of Oz" so many times, no matter how much you like it, but you're always up for a good game of poker. As much as I liked SQIII (and other Sierra adventure such as SQII, King's Quest IV and Leisure Suit Larry I), I know I won't be playing any of these titles a year from now.

On the other hand, I liked the original Leisure Suit Larrys so much I know I'm going to buy LLIII, now that it's available.

So, following the movie paradigm, if Sierra can keep cranking out the hits, I'll buy them. When I tire of individual games, I'll just pass them on to my children, starting my own tradition of family heirlooms. The two guys would approve, I'm sure.