



In Space, Now Everyone Can Hear You Scream

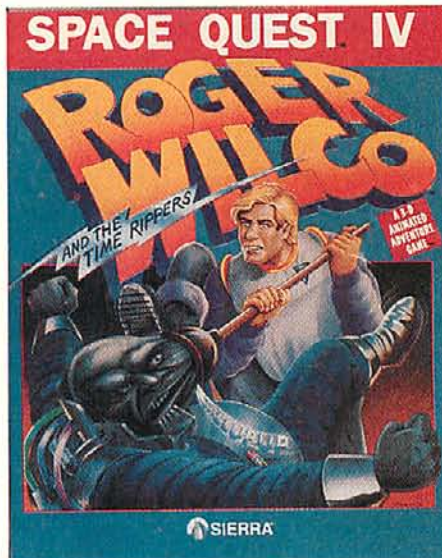
Sierra's CD-ROM Edition of *Space Quest IV*

by Charles Ardai

TITLE:	Space Quest IV
SYSTEM:	IBM with CD-ROM
GRAPHICS:	VGA
PRICE:	\$69.95
PROTECTION:	None
DESIGNERS:	Mark Crowe, Scott Murphy
PUBLISHER:	Sierra
	Coarsegold, CA
	(800) 326-6654

People love *Space Quest IV* not for its puzzles, which are all pretty simple, nor for its storyline, which is a deliberately hokey space opera, but for its gags (the best of which rival Douglas Adams for sheer silliness) and, even more, for its lavish spectacle. The animation, the movie-quality soundtrack, the exciting settings, and the imaginative visuals make *Space Quest IV* one of the most attention-grabbing games to come along in years.

To begin with, most of the game takes place against gorgeous, painted back-grounds. This raises high expectations which are amply met in the foregrounds, where one finds scenes filled with the kind of two-fisted, hold-on-to-your-hat action that used to occupy Buster Crabbe's time in the old Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers serials. Our hero, the intrepid Roger Wilco, escapes from the clutches of the dreaded Sequel Police! He's carried off to the eyrie of a giant pterodactyl! He goes mano-a-fisho with a giant sea slug! He's kidnapped by the luscious Latex Babes of



Estros! It's enough to give a guy a heart flutter.

On the gag side, people in the industry are still talking about the in-jokes the game makes at the expense of software publishers and retailers. The game also skewers many of science fiction's sacred cows and parodies arcade games mercilessly with a simulation called "Ms. Astro Chicken." Add a bit of Benny Hill (at one point Roger has to cross-dress to fool a computer), a pinch of Mel Brooks' "Spaceballs" (Roger

finds a copy of the *Space Quest IV* hint book), and a taste of "Back to the Future" (the plot has Roger traveling from one *Space Quest* sequel to another to rescue his yet-to-be-born son from arch-villain Sludge Vohaul), and one ends up with a Mulligan stew of satire, pratfalls, and nonsense that may not be *haute cuisine* but is certainly filling.

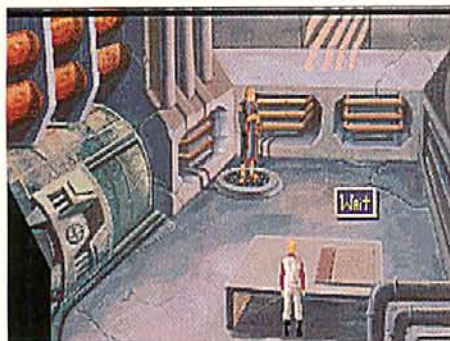
Good news: the CD-ROM edition is even more filling than the original. It accentuates and improves all of the game's strong points. The gags are funnier when read aloud; the graphics are even better without paragraphs of yellow text obscuring them; and the elimination of reading as the player's main activity gives one more freedom just to watch, listen, and get drawn into the adventure.

The Sounds of Science (Fiction)

Space Quest IV not only talks, it coos, belches, vomits, throbs, threatens, shrieks and, twice, almost curses. Every word that was displayed on the screen in the original edition is now spoken, even down to the incidental text. ("It would serve no purpose," "You can't use that here," etc.)

Of course, the big question is how good the voices are, in light of the somewhat wooden line readings for which Sierra has become known as a result of the CD-ROM edition of *King's Quest V*. The answer is that the voices Sierra chose this time are

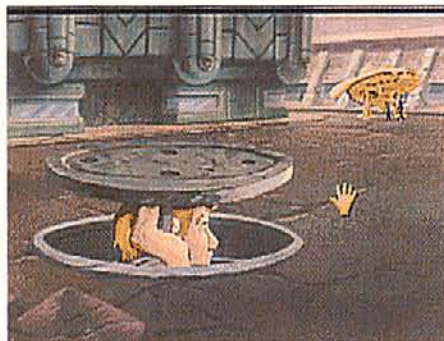
excellent — not stiff, not unpleasant — and that the readers' performances are a delight.



The character from whom one hears most often is the narrator, an unattributed performance by Gary Owens of *Laugh-In* and *The Gong Show* fame (as well as the voice of Saturday morning cartoonism's *Space Ghost*). That's excellent since Roger, appropriately enough, sounds like the hapless, nervous, bewildered lunk he is. Sludge Vohaul, looking and sounding like a Vogon refugee from *The Hitchhiker's Guide To the Galaxy*, puts in a couple of sinister, holographic appearances. The Latex Babes, arguably computer gaming's most sexist creations, squeal "Our hero!" when Roger rescues them. On top of all these there is a legion

of robots, aliens, and assorted spear carriers, all with something to say.

Normally, comic readings are harder to pull off than straight readings, but these voice actors manage it. Except for a few who try too hard to give their characters character (two of the robots sound like water-cooler impressions of Mae West and Inspector Clouseau) and the fact that the narrator stumbles once or twice over scientific doubletalk (he has trouble saying "the powerful quad-quark drives rev to life" — but who wouldn't?), the game's audio track is a complete success.



Not as clear a success is the gameplay, which still suffers from the shortcomings reviewers noted when *Space Quest IV* first came out. Being on a CD does nothing to make the game longer, for instance; there are still only seven sequences, each con-

sisting of only two to seven puzzles. There are also too many situations which depend on good timing and hand-eye coordination. I had to die and restore 43 times before I managed to navigate Roger through a zero-gravity shootout.

While this means that there are better adventure games than *Space Quest IV*, there are few games that are more entertaining. Fewer still are improved so much in the transition to CD-ROM.



In some ways, *Space Quest IV* is the perfect multimedia game: it looks and sounds great and it offers an experience one could not get from a floppy-based game. With a few more games this good on the market, CD-ROM naysayers will have to eat their words. With this game, they can already start nibbling. **CGW**

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