



Roger Wilco Takes The Fifth



Space Quest V

by Charles Ardai

Some people have a soft spot in their hearts for Abbott and Costello movies, some for *Mad* magazine. I have a soft spot for the *Space Quest* games. Such guilty pleasures all have at least this much in common: once one has built up a taste for their brand of silliness, nothing but repeated exposure can sate the appetite. So, no one could be happier than I to see a new Roman numeral tacked onto a *Space Quest* box.

Space Quest V, the latest in the improbable exploits of Roger Wilco: Janitor-to-the-Stars, is more of the same...only more so. What does this mean? It means "more" in both senses: "another helping of" and "a larger helping of." There are more pratfalls and misadventures, more skin-of-the-teeth escapes from the slaving jaws of death (and boy do some of those jaws slaver!), and more sly asides that tweak every science fiction icon from *The Fly* to *Alien* to *Star Wars*, with stops in between at *Star Trek*, *Star Trek*, and, well, *Star Trek*.

Yes, if one has to identify a target that gets hit more often than any other, it would be the late Gene Roddenberry's brainchild. The subtitle of this latest adventure, "The Next Mutation," is a near-pun on "The Next Generation," and when we first see our gallant hero he is performing the much-noted "Picard Maneuver" (tugging down his tunic to get a better fit) to the strains of a barely modified version of the theme music from the original TV series. From there on, there is almost no scene that goes by without a *Star Trek* reference, including a bit where Roger's crusty chief engineer refuses a request to provide medical assistance. "I'm an engineer," he exclaims, "not a doctor!"

Also on board Roger's first starship command is an Uhura-esque communications officer named Flo; a mildly Sulu-ish helmsman named Droole; and, eventually, a science officer, but I am not going to give away any surprises here. Roger's nemesis this time is a square-jawed heavy named Captain Quirk (no, this is not subtle humor) who is involved in a nefarious plot to pollute the heavens by illegally dumping toxic waste.

Roger's mission, initially, is simply to take his ship to three galactic garbage pick-up points and return to Starcon with the refuse. Things go wrong, of course, almost from the

very beginning, and by the time Roger gets to the third planet it is clear that something fishy is afoot. He investigates, discovers a program of genetic engineering as ugly as anything Dr. Moreau ever concocted, and decides to put an end to it. The last third of the game consists of Roger's game of cat-and-mouse with the turncoat crew of the U.S.S. Goliath, Cpt. Quirk, and the garbage monster their actions unleash.

Roger and crew also make a stopover at an R&R station (the "Spacebar") during which the player gets to challenge Quirk to a game that is basically a 23rd Century version of *Battleship*. Later on, a set of access tunnels on board the Goliath function as the obligatory irritating maze sequence, and a trip into an asteroid field leads to an exasperating real-time "docking" game. In other words, *Space Quest V* even has the little games-within-a-game that fans of the series have come to know and dread.

People with long memories will recall that every Abbott and Costello movie had an obligatory, boring romantic subplot that engendered a couple of obligatory, endless musical numbers. No one in the audience cared

about these scenes — they just wanted to get back to the comedy — but the studio said that the romance had to go in. So, in it went. This is the downside to "more of the same" — the bad stuff gets repeated, too.

For the most part, though, the stuff that gets repeated here is good stuff: the endless stream of gags, the high-adventure plot, and the first-rate graphics and sound. There are also innovations introduced in *Space Quest V*, including a refined interface and a longer, less-linear storyline. Another innovation, unfortunately, is the game's unprecedented number of typos ("ther" for "there," "pods" for "pod's," "your doomed is sealed"); but, then, what can you do? Not every change can be an improvement.

Make It So

Among the revisions to the interface are some changes in the icon bar at the top of the screen. Gone are the useless nose and tongue icons. (How many things were there to smell and taste in *Space Quest IV*? That's right, none.) Instead, there are two versions of the "Talk" icon: the ordinary one and one that contains an exclamation point. The latter is used to issue a command.

This handy icon enables Roger to take control of his ship and fly it to all corners of the galaxy. While there is a best order in which to visit the available planets, the player is allowed a certain amount of leeway to come and go as he chooses. Similarly, while there are only certain situations in which such commands as "Cloak ship," "Fire," and "Hail planet" make sense, the player has access to them any time Roger sits in the captain's chair. This gives the player the feeling of being much more in control than in any of the previous *Space Quest* games. Roger is not fate's plaything anymore. He and the player are in command.

There are also specialized icons that appear in certain unusual situations (such as the "fly" icon when Roger is turned into a guess-what) and menus of dialogue choices that pop up now and then so that Roger can have conversations with members of his crew. This variety of interfaces keeps the gameplay lively. It is good to see that the folks at Sierra (actually, Dynamix) have not gotten so used to the way things have always been that they are unable to try something new.



TITLE: Space Quest V: The Next Mutation
SYSTEM: IBM (386/16 MHz recommended)
PRICE: \$69.95
PROTECTION: Documentation Look-up
GRAPHICS: VGA
DESIGNER: Mark Crowe
PUBLISHER: Sierra/Dynamix
Coarsegold, CA
(209) 683-4468

Unlike the interface, not a whole lot is new about the game's puzzles. This is not very surprising, nor particularly disappointing; the puzzles have always been secondary in the *Space Quest* series. There is plenty of the usual: Roger finds a roll of antacids and a creature who is spewing acid all over the ship; Roger finds a glass of liquor and a packet of dehydrated aliens with a "don't expose to alcohol" warning; Roger finds a laser torch and later comes up against a thick metal bulkhead. At one point, Roger has to use a cryo-freeze chamber, but not to worry, there are instructions printed on the side. The designers have not gone out of their way to tease the player's brain.

On the other hand, there are a few sequences that rise above the norm. The chase between Roger and a sexy robot Terminatrix across the landscape of Kiz Urazgubi is intricate and inspired. The ploy Roger uses to win his command is clever and takes a bit of thought to figure out (unless one sees the solution in the partial walk-through printed in the documentation). The final moments of the game, in which Roger has to find a way to deal with a giant garbage blob, require quick thinking and a few leaps of logic. Even the easy puzzles are fun, if one goes into the game knowing what to expect.

Souls more jaded than I might wonder why there are still laughs to be mined from a character in a sci-fi spoof saying, "Captain, she cannot take much more of this!" Still, the fact is that there are. Satirists have been going back to this particular well for a quarter of a century, and it hasn't run dry yet. *Space Quest V* may not be for everyone, but people who find this sort of thing funny will find this variant very funny indeed.

Energize!

Part of what makes *Space Quest V* so enjoyable is that it's not just funny. It's also exciting and suspenseful, due in large part to its movie-quality score, its atmosphere-enhancing sound effects, and its remarkable visuals.

The soundtrack is calculated to pull all the right strings, from the "Now it's time to panic" string that gets plucked just before Roger is attacked, to the "Your true love is dying and you may never find another" string over which composer Chris Stevens lightly runs his bow after Roger's beloved Ambassador Wankmeister is infected with the highly mutagenic "Primordial Soup." It's not Mozart, but it is better than most of what passes for scoring on network television. Stevens has a marvelous ear for musical wit and reference and his contribution to the game is no less substantial than designer Mark Crowe's.

"Wit" might not be the best term to describe Tim Clarke's sound effects; certainly, he is appealing to a baser set of responses when he places the sound-effects equivalent of a

whoopie cushion in the seat of Roger's command chair. This gag wears thin after a while, especially given that it is repeated every single time Roger sits down.

However, the effect is realistic, as is every other sound in the game. Doors hiss open and clank shut, transporters hum and twitter, the controls on the various control panels give off highly suitable blips and bleeps. Maybe most satisfying of all is Roger's loud "Duhhh!" whenever he becomes the victim of his own



stupidity. (If they ever make a movie out of *Space Quest V*, they'll have to cast Homer Simpson in the lead.) The sound effects give the game a richness and a texture it would not otherwise have and are largely responsible for creating the sense that the player really is interacting with, and having an effect on, the simulated environments he visits.

As for the visuals, while it would not be accurate to say that they are the best yet seen in the series, they are certainly up to snuff, which I mean as high praise. One interesting point is that more close-ups are used than in previous games to supplement the standard side-view and medium-range perspective. This may sound like a good thing, but it is and it isn't. In close-up, the artists clearly draw (no pun intended) from a comic book sensibility. As styles go, this is fine—perfectly workmanlike—but while the results are nice enough, they are usually something short of stunning.



In the standard scenes, however, one finds the combination of gorgeous painted backgrounds and detailed, well-animated foreground action for which Sierra has become known. The result is that this game, like most of Sierra's, is worth playing if only to see each new setting as it appears.

The fourth element, which clicks just as

neatly into place as the music, graphics, and sound effects, is the writing. It's not so much that the story is great—there barely is any story, just the flimsiest pretext for a series of adventures—as it is that the dialogue and narration are written with a dry wit and a sense of character that makes them a pleasure to read. The banter between Flo, Droole and Roger is, for lack of a better term to describe it, a hoot. Even if one takes away the comic references to everything from Bugs Bunny to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to Dana Carvey's George Bush, the text of the game is great fun on its own merits.

Where *Space Quest V* is something of a letdown is in the gameplay. For one thing, the game demands cursor placement so precise that one can click the "Command" icon on Flo or Droole and get a "You are trying to order the wall around" response just because the icon isn't placed exactly where the computer wants it to be. Along the same lines, one can position an oxygen mask entirely over Roger's head only to discover that the computer will only accept it if clicked on Roger's torso.

At one point, I assumed that the game would not let me transport off a planet because when I placed the communicator icon on Roger and clicked, it didn't work. As it turned out, I had just chosen the wrong portion of Roger's anatomy to click on. This kind of problem would seem to be easily corrected and I am surprised that Sierra let it get through to the final version of the game. Of course, typos are easily corrected, too—but only if one bothers to catch them.

Other nagging annoyances include the fact that trips from planet to planet start to seem interminable after a while (even at "lite speed"), and that Sierra's decision to render all icons in black-and-white, as opposed to full color in previous chapters of the saga, makes them hard to see against some of the backgrounds.

However, the bulk of *Space Quest V* is very good and, like the silly jokes and excellent graphics, the occasionally irritating gameplay is part of the package. It's what people expect when they buy a *Space Quest* game. They might even miss it if they were gone.

When you think about it, it's the same way with the musical numbers in those old movies. No one really wanted to see them, but some of them weren't half bad: "My Dreams Are Getting Better All The Time," "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," "Let's Play House." If nothing else, they gave you a chance to catch your breath before you started to laugh again.

Space Quest V, too, is fine just the way it is. It certainly has its share of quirks (Captains included) but it's got more than its share of laughs, thrills and delicious scenery, too. I think even the most demanding Wilcophiles will be pleased. **CGW**