

Once More, Into The Breech

Roger Wilco Gets Another Crappy Job

In *SPACE QUEST 6: THE SPINAL FRONTIER*

by Charles Ardai

SIERRA ON-LINE'S *SPACE QUEST* GAMES ARE, AT THEIR BEST, BOTH A GUILTY PLEASURE AND AN ACQUIRED TASTE, a little like *Mad* magazine or Jim Carrey movies. They're very silly; they are also relentlessly preoccupied with matters related to the bowels and other topics that some people find hilarious simply because others find them embarrassing. Never has this been more true than in *SPACE QUEST 6: THE SPINAL FRONTIER*, which opens with space janitor Roger Wilco publicly being stripped to (and finally of) his jock strap, and ends with his being miniaturized *a la* "Fantastic Voyage" and inserted into someone's small intestine for an innerspace clean-up job. In between, it ain't exactly "Hamlet"—nor, unfortunately, is it *SPACE QUEST* at its best.

PICTURE MAKES PERFECT?

There is one dimension in which the designers have made an attempt to be less crude here than they have been in the past. Betting that gamers are no longer satisfied with the standard quality of graphics associated with Sierra adventure games, they have sprung for the sort of detailed cel animation used to spruce up the visuals of Sierra's very good and very successful *KING'S QUEST VII*. Combined with first-rate voice performances and an engaging storyline, such graphics can go a long way toward making a game feel more like a movie. But that only works if all the pieces come together just right, as they did in *KING'S QUEST VII*. Here, I'm afraid they don't.

The graphics are better than in any previous *SPACE QUEST*, but nowhere near the level of *KING'S QUEST*. (The various alien landscapes and creatures look less like something out of a Disney or Warner Brothers cartoon than like the flat, sketchwork drawings in *Broderbund's* *WHERE IN SPACE IS CARMEN SANDIEGO?*) The storyline is a grab-bag of hit-or-miss wisecracks and pratfalls—more "Spaceballs" than "Young Frankenstein," to be Mel Brooks about it. Most disappointing of all, though, is the voice acting. Gary Owens contributes his inimitable narration and a few of the other performers do good work in small roles, but William Hall hits all the wrong notes as Roger and too many of the character parts are voiced as though the actors reading the lines were trying out for a revival of "Hee Haw."

SPACE QUEST 6: THE SPINAL FRONTIER

Price: \$49.95

System

Requirements: IBM Compatible 486 25 MHz, 8 MB RAM, SVGA, 5 MB free hard drive space, mouse, DOS 5.0 or Windows 3.1; supports Sound Blaster compatible sound cards, General MIDI and Pro Audio Spectrum.

of Players: 1

Protection: None (CD-ROM)

Design: Scott Murphy and Josh Mandel

Publisher: Sierra On-Line

Bellvue, WA
(800) 757-7707



TIDY IS AS TIDY DOES Roger's housekeeping leaves something to be desired, but at least he's proud enough of his role as a "maintenance engineer" to hang a mop on the wall.

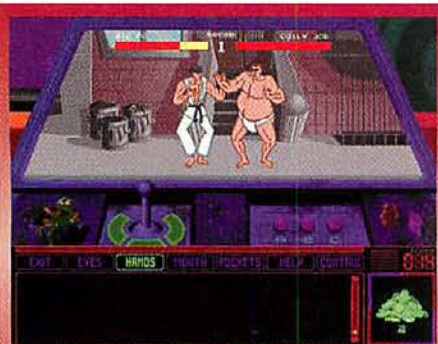
...AND STOP CALLING ME SHORE LEAVE

This is not to say there are no funny gags this time around. Running into E.T. sleeping it off in the corner of a liquor store is good for a laugh, and having the manual override button in your shuttlecraft call up an artificial co-pilot named "Manuel Auxveride" is a stroke of genius (though borrowed genius, since the gag is cribbed from the first "Airplane" movie).

There is also something resembling a decent story here, though as usual for a *SPACE QUEST*, the storytelling takes a back seat to the puzzles and the jokes. Our hero, Roger, having saved the known universe as captain of his own garbage scow the last time out, is stripped of his rank on a technicality and returned to the janitorial duds he wore back in *SPACE QUEST 1*.

After serving for some time under Commander Kielbasa on DeepShip 86 (a ship which looks surprisingly like Wilco's jock strap), he is awarded shore leave on the Times Square-like pleasure planet Polysorbate LX. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to him, sinister forces have begun to move against him. Even after he gets himself rescued from Polysorbate LX and uncovers their plot, he has to step lively to foil them first in outer space, then in cyberspace, and finally in innerspace.

It will surprise no one who has played one of these games before that somewhere in the mix there is a maze to navigate (though a simple one, thankfully), and somewhere else an old-fashioned logic puzzle to solve. There is also an action game, "Stooge Fighter 3," which puts the



BRING ON BIG MO Coily Joe and Big Mo go mano-a-mano in *Stooze Fighter 3*. Just watch out for that little cigarette-eating beastie living in the ashtray.

Three Stooges in karate outfits and has them beating each other up in the style of *STREET FIGHTER*. (The concept is funnier than the execution. As far as arcade game parodies go, "Stooze Fighter" can't hold a candle to "Astro Chicken" in *SPACE QUEST 4*.) These are the usual sorts of filler you find in a *SPACE QUEST*, and complaining about them is like complaining about Andy Rooney filling up the tail end of "60 Minutes": you know what you're going to get going in; if you don't want it, you don't have to turn on the set.

Where I feel on more solid ground complaining is in regard to the game's other puzzles. For one thing, too many of them depend on the player's spotting a tiny or obscure object against a dark and cluttered background. In the first scene, a demolished bicycle leans against a garbage heap, with a crucial ID card dangling from its carcass; if it weren't for the fact that a "Getting Started" tipsheet that comes with the game tells you it's there, I would never have noticed it. A few scenes later, your success depends on your realizing that you can click on two wall panels and three pipes that, for the longest time, just looked like so much background art to me.

There is also the matter of randomly timed events, which the designers have used liberally in the game's first chapter. In the opening scene, you can't even move until you grab hold of a passing robot, and in order to do that, you have to wait for the right robot to pass and then time your grab just right. The wait isn't long—but in another sense any wait is too long once you've figured out what to do and just want to get on with doing it.

In a later scene, progress depends on your talking to a roaming blade runner named Blaine Rohmer. I had to wander among three screens for something like ten minutes before he finally showed up.

Things come off somewhat better in the middle third of the game, after Roger makes it back to his ship from a trap on Delta Burksilon V; there's a good brig escape sequence and a twisted re-imagining of what happens when you take morphine. (You start to morph, naturally.) The endgame, which has Roger inserted microscopically into a cohort's stomach, pancreas, gall bladder, intestines, and so on, includes a couple of



WAIT, THIS ISN'T 10 FORWARD! No, it's 8 Rear, *DeepShip 86*'s quaint little club, which is hurting for business at the moment.

decent puzzles—I especially like the idea of hitching a ride on an intestinal tape-worm. But I have to admit that a couple of hours of crawling around inside someone's guts left me slightly queasy.

HARD TO SWALLOW

Even if you have a stronger stomach than I for subjects gastroenterological, the game may still manage to give you an ulcer, for reasons that have nothing to do with its storyline. For one thing, it runs slowly. Obviously, the faster your machine, the less of a problem this is; but even on a fast 486 with scrolling turned off and graphic detail tuned to a minimum, waiting for Roger to amble snail-like across the screen can be a trial.

Compounding the problem is the fact that Roger has the bad habit of going to places on the screen other than the ones where you clicked (he kept walking behind the bar at "Orion's Belt," for instance, even though I was clicking in front of it)

and taking long, circuitous routes to get from any given Point A to Point B.

Then there are matters of poor design, the most annoying example of which is that you have to position your cursor much too carefully (and have it set to "Walk") in order to make the "Exit" points at the edges of a screen appear. It is possible to walk to the edge of a screen and still not be allowed to exit, just because Roger is a few pixels to the left or the right of the "correct" location.

Add to this the poor line readings by William Hall (who robs jokes of their humor by emphasizing the wrong words in a sentence) and the graphics that too often look like they were drawn by B-team illustrators rather than Sierra's top artists, and you get a game that only occasionally lives up to its pedigree.

In some ways, the best thing about *SPACE QUEST 6* is its title: both the subtitle, which offers the best pun in the game, and the mere fact that the game is a new *SPACE QUEST* at all, regardless of how good it is. There were something like five "Police Academy" movies and eight or nine "Friday the Thirteenth" installments, and it wasn't because they kept getting better every time. People like what they are familiar with, and those sorts of people will like *SPACE QUEST 6* just fine.

As for me, though, I'd rather see something brand new, different, and more inspired than yet another go 'round in a well-worn groove. Inspired silliness and crudeness can be great fun—look at *FREDDY PHARKAS OF LEISURE SUIT LARRY*. But take away the inspiration and what's left, the merely silly and the merely crude, gives you sadly little to get excited about. ☹

THE EDITORS SPEAK

SPACE QUEST 6

RATING ★★★★★

PROS You can count on a fairly funny gag every few scenes. The look of the game is the best of any in the *SPACE QUEST* series.

CONS KING'S QUEST VII has spoiled us for any game with only adequate visuals, sound, and scripting; plus, the game's technical performance is surprisingly weak.