

## Police Quest: In Pursuit Of The Death Angel

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Jim Walls**

Part of series: **Police Quest**

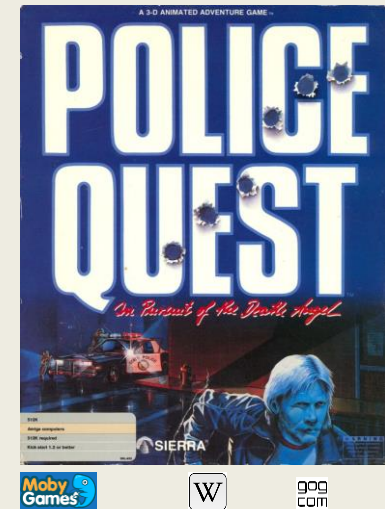
Release: December 1987

Main credits: Programming: **Greg Rowland, Al Lowe, Scott Murphy**  
Development System: **Jeff Stephenson, Chris Iden, Bob Heitman**

Graphics: **Mark Crowe, Jerry Moore**

Music: **Margaret Lowe**

Useful links: Playthrough: [Complete Playlist Parts 1-5 \(277 mins.\)](#)



### Basic Overview

Until 1987, all of Sierra's adventure games took place in fantasy or sci-fi worlds — **King's Quest**, **Space Quest**, even oddities like **The Black Cauldron** all competed to dazzle the player with the relative pixelated wonders of alternate universes, which seemed like the perfect designer answer to the rapidly progressing capacities of digital graphics and software processing. Even Al Lowe's **Larry** series, albeit *formally* placed on Planet Earth, was in reality confined to a bizarre Al-Lowian universe of hungry women and pervy men, within which no boring daily routine or career-related activities prevented people from spending 100% of their lives in pursuit of the prime evolutionary directive.



Real life in the real world was regarded as a subject that was way too dull to become the setting of an adventure game... then again, was it really «too dull», or was it just too *difficult* to properly convert into the new medium?

I mean, let's face it: even today, something like 90% of all video games (amounting to 100% if you confine yourself to action-based titles) take place in imaginary worlds, occasionally inspired by mythology or even real human history, but even then,

still striving to accentuate the fantastic, supernatural, otherworldly aspects of the environment. And while the main reason behind this is that video games continue to satisfy our craving for escapism, idealism, and self-aggrandizing (what *other* medium lets you step into the shoes of Superman with that much ease?), an important secondary reason is that «real life» is just so goddamn hard to program without it looking like a lame parody on real life. With all the huge technical and substantial progress made in video games over almost half a century now, we are still quite far from successfully modeling the actual environment in which we live; even simulations such as **Grand Theft Auto** still have to rely on satire, parody, and elements of absurdism to mask the fact that Los Santos is *not* Los Angeles, at least not when you're trying to do more than simply cruise around the town without a purpose.

Still, every once in a while some people made small, brave, risky steps to help bring about a solution to this problem — and it was quite an important step in this direction when Ken Williams, over a game of racquetball and an aftergame drink, offered Jim Walls, a retired Californian police officer, to design a video adventure game based on his own past experiences in the service of law and order. Even if, back in 1987, Jim's very profession was still a long ways away from becoming one of the most despised in progressive circles (though already getting there), we may still be underestimating the degree of risk Ken was taking with such a proposal — not only was he offering an important job at Sierra to somebody who had no prior experience whatsoever with video games or even computers as such, but he was actually offering him to make a *realistic* game, set in actual America and reflecting daily life events more or less as they would happen in daily life. This would certainly be a daring first in the history of Sierra, or, in fact, videogaming as such.

To make matters even more difficult, neither Ken nor Jim wanted to have a videogame equivalent of *Miami Vice* on their hands. Like any seasoned police officer, Walls knew perfectly well that 90% of a cop's life is spent in a state of dreary routine, and the challenge set before him was dire indeed — immerse the player into an environment that would reflect a real day in the life of a real police officer as close as possible, yet somehow manage to not entirely bore the player the same way an actual police officer would probably be bored on the job. The game had to combine crime-fighting adventure and thrill with the everyday craft of going through one's work duties; above all else, the game also had to have educational value, teaching players the importance and morality of following proper police procedure at all times. To make a game like this and get away with it, even in 1987, when critical opinion was generally more forgiving toward the fresh new medium, seemed like a near-impossible task — yet somehow, Jim and his team managed to *at least* not fall flat on their faces.

**Police Quest: In Pursuit Of The Death Angel** was no masterpiece; it was rarely, if ever, greeted as one upon release, and up to this day, the game itself and the overall series which it initiated remains a bit of a dark horse — or a bit of a black sheep,

if you will — in the Sierra catalog. With its near-total lack of plot, puzzles whose proper solution depended more on reading police manuals than creative thinking, and a completely blank-slate protagonist, it was closer in spirit to the early **King's Quest** games with their rather mechanical adaptation of clichéd fairy tale motives than to, say, **Space Quest** or **Leisure Suit Larry** — games that at least *tried* to be somewhat original and unpredictable. Today, even if you attempted to remake **Police Quest** in outstanding 4K graphics with ray tracing and sugar on top, rewriting all of its dialog and hiring top voice actors, you would not be able to come up with a market-ready product; and I am not even mentioning the «good cop» theme, which would never fly with today's gamers. (Interestingly, Jim Walls attempted to raise some money on Kickstarter back in 2013 for a new game series that would be a «spiritual successor» to **Police Quest** — and predictably failed).

Even so, back in 1987–88 the game managed to sell moderately well *and* even get some good reviews — not just because it presented a sort of un-lacquered portrayal of a cop's daily life, but, I think, precisely because it was one of the first adventure-style simulators of life in a realistic American city. You could (and sometimes were, in fact, forced to) simply cruise the streets of «Lytton», looking for action (and usually not getting any), years before **Grand Theft Auto** made such cruising a hundred times as efficient. The universe of **Police Quest** was, in many ways, more relatable than that of any other Sierra series. But that was in 1987; the question, of course, is whether there are any remaining reasons, other than purely historical, to get any actual enjoyment from the game *today*. Let us, then, spend a bit of time in pursuit of the Death Angel and try to find what can be enjoyable about it.

## Content evaluation

### Plotline

Believe it or not, there actually *is* a plot to **Police Quest: In Pursuit Of The Death Angel**. It begins when you actually begin to pursue «The Death Angel», a cunning and deadly big-time drug dealer who goes by the real name is Jessie Bains. Considering, however, that you do not get to actively begin pursuing him until, let's say, the final quarter or so of the game (and that a large part of that pursuit will be spent losing at poker with Jessie and his friends), it will not be much of an exaggeration to say that **Police Quest** was the first Sierra



game into which you were dropped without any clear objectives other than discover for yourself what it feels like to be a cop on active duty. «Fiction» has very little place in this game.

Given that art striving to imitate life, rather than the other way around, tends to provoke reactions of boredom from the consumer, it would be hard to expect the «storyline» of **Police Quest** to be anything other than terminally dull. But Jim, Ken, and the rest of the Sierra guys were very well aware of the problem at stake — the challenge was to walk the thin line between the dry educational values of the game and player entertainment. Whether they succeeded in rising up to it or not was, and still is, up to the player to decide, but it certainly cannot be said that they did not even try.

Most of the game is divided into tiny «vignettes», each covering a separate small incident in the routinely-busy life of a traffic (and later, a drug) cop. Although, formally, Lytton City is construed as an open sandbox — after the initial police briefing, you can just hop in your car and cruise around every location in town — in reality there's not much to do around these locations until the game decides to turn one or another of them into the background for another criminal development. As it is, like in real police life, you just wait and do nothing until things start to happen. Sonny investigates the consequences of a murder. Sonny writes a ticket for speeding. Sonny makes a DUI arrest. Sonny admonishes a group of rowdy bikers. Sonny relaxes with friends at a bar after work. Sonny apprehends a minor drug dealer. Sonny prepares evidence for a no bail warrant for the minor drug dealer — and so on. Each of the mini-stories is nothing special per se, but each is also relatively short (unless you get stuck on issues of police procedure, which we will discuss later), and the turnaround rate is calculated very precisely, so that the entertainment quotient do not drop below zero. Above all, **Police Quest** tries to lure in with unpredictability — what exactly is going to happen to Sonny Bonds in the *next* little chapter? Can't wait to find out.

In a way, it actually helps that the game was made in 1987, when digital technologies still forced creators to think in terms of projections of «pseudo-realism», rather than trying to immerse the player into a completely realistic situation. By today's standards, the dialogs between characters would have probably been interminable — and terminally boring — and the mini-storylines would have been dragged out to horrendous lengths. In real life, it probably takes a police officer at least 5-10 minutes to write a ticket; in **Police Quest**, you can do it within 30 seconds (provided you quickly understand the commands you need to punch in). Simple, unsophisticated events deserve simple, unsophisticated treatments, and this is precisely what you get; the overall approach is very adequate to the purposes of the game.

At the same time, Walls and his team do find ways of livening up situations so that stuff does not get *too* dry and procedural. Some of Sonny's encounters have humorous or even titillating notes — for instance, stopping a gaudy sports car for running a

red light leads the poor officer into a downright **Leisure Suit Larry** situation, where you can make a free choice between following your duty or getting seduced by the gorgeous violator (yes, there *is* a way here to fail in your duties without having a premature... *game over*. You just won't get the full points). Interacting with drunk driver «Art Serabian» and some of the other criminals can lead to some funny dialog. The little inside jokes and sarcastic exchanges between Sonny and his cop buddies, either down at the station or when they're gathered together at some drinking joint in town, are not exactly *Wire*-level witticisms, but they do a good job of bringing the environment to life — in the small way that the small environment genuinely deserves. In short, there *is* a bit of meat on these bones, even if most of it really has more to do with atmosphere than actual plot.

The other good side is the progression: although you do begin life as a fairly lowly traffic cop, already reading the local newspaper at the very beginning of the game gives you a subtle premonition of things to come — a major anti-drug battle in your hometown — and even when your primary occupation still consists of hunting down traffic violators, you occasionally get glimpses into the activities of your chief future enemies, either through your own activities (like investigating a crime scene where a minor drug dealer was shot by a bigger fish) or through hearsay (like hearing the escort lady, Sweet Cheeks Marie, first mention the «Death Angel» at the bar). Eventually, Sonny moves into the big game, where the plot finally kicks off — ironically, though, the game is probably at its weakest in its final stretch, with the entire undercover operation at the Hotel Delphoria, where you expect everything to get *hot* but in reality spend most of the time playing poker.

In any case, a lot of thought clearly went into that sequencing, and that at least deserves respect. As to the total linearity of the plot, for a game like **Police Quest** it is, at the very least, logically justified — the very idea of the game is that survival, efficacy, and success in the cop business is only possible if everything is done strictly by the book. Deviate from proper police procedure, or from a thorough and meticulous attitude towards your work, and you are either dead (worst scenario) or get the «wrong» results that will still carry you through the rest of the game, but with diminished returns (points) — like, for instance, failing to obtain a no-bail warrant for your pet prisoner will have him walking free through your own fault, whereas if you *do* obtain the warrant, the prisoner will simply escape jail on his own: same result under both scenarios, but more points and personal satisfaction for you in the first case, naturally.

It should be noted, of course, that the «bad cop» element is completely absent from the game — all of your cop buddies and your immediate superiors are presented as loyal and honest workers, all of whom have their human sides (some are grumbly, some play pranks on each other, some take a bit too much time showering in the locker room) but none show anything even close to «inhuman». But let's get serious: nobody could ever expect a simple veteran ex-cop design a game along the lines of

frickin' *Serpico* — certainly not if *his* own experience in the force was generally more positive than negative. At least the designers are absolutely relentless on the player if you ever try to engage in an act of «police brutality» — you don't even get to fire your gun until the very last scene in the game (when it actually does it for you)! I'm pretty sure that nobody back in 1987 even tried to analyze the game from a «police-whitewashing» angle, and there is no use applying revisionist practices to it now, either. Unless you think drunk drivers do not deserve jail time, or drug pushers do not need to be prosecuted, there is really not a single moment in **Police Quest** that could be morally questionable from any other angle. (Well, there may be a couple gay jokes here and there that wouldn't sit too well with modern sensitive audiences).

Perhaps *one* somewhat cringy bit of writing for the game involves «Sweet Cheeks Marie», introduced midway through the story as Sonny's old classmate turned hooker, who quickly gets infatuated with her high school crush upon re-encountering him and eventually achieves her own Mary Magdalenesque «redemption» after agreeing to assist Lytton Police with the operation against the Death Angel. She is never really given any specific motivation other than being taken in with Sonny's good looks, and the way things happen, you don't even get to understand if this unexpected love interest, being forced on the title character, is genuinely affected by his warmth and kindness, or is simply using him for her own safety. *This* is precisely the moment where I'd like to have some choices — e.g. different reactions and outcomes depending on Sonny's treatment of the lady — and the way Bonds is railroaded into romance feels poorly written and orchestrated. I certainly hope this piece of the story isn't autobiographical or anything, because if this is how Jim Walls met *his* wife, I wouldn't envy the guy...

### Puzzles

In pre-Internet days, the easiness of beating *Police Quest* depended exclusively on one factor: whether your copy of the game was officially licensed, i.e. came in its own box with the player's manual, or whether you pirated it off a friend and did not have a xeroxed copy of said manual. Well, either that or you would have to be a police officer on active duty yourself. I still have vivid memories from the late Eighties of how approximately half of the (still relatively small) computer-endowed crowds in the city of Moscow — where, at the time, pretty much *all* software was pirated — ran around town,



desperately trying to find out what it was exactly that you were supposed to do with the drunk guy upon apprehending him. "Cuff drunk"? "Arrest drunk"? "Beat shit out of drunk?" "Insert nightstick in..." ...sorry, people would try *anything* out of sheer desperation, until some wise man (or, more likely, some guy with overseas connections) finally dropped the bomb on the herd — "GIVE TEST", people! (yep, in Soviet Russia, Field Sobriety Test administers *you!*).

For those happy, civilized, progressive souls who *did* buy an officially licensed copy of the game, becoming the proud owners of the Lytton Police Department Policeman's Indoctrination Guide (*indoctrination!!*), beating the game would be a total cakewalk — provided they took the time to study the manual, of course. *Police Quest* is not a game about some particularly inventive, out-of-the-box thinking cop, finding himself in unpredictable, unprecedented situations and having to devise truly creative ways to get out of his predicaments. No, *Police Quest* was intentionally designed as a game about an absolutely regular, ordinary cop — albeit well-trained, professional, and courageous when necessary — who survives in this world precisely because he does everything by the book, never even thinking of resorting to extra-procedural means. Your name may be Sonny, but you don't even get to be Sonny Crockett, let alone Dirty Harry.

As it is, the most difficult thing about pretty much every *Police Quest* game is not getting stuff done, but getting stuff done *just right* — for the maximum amount of points, that is. The actions you can take in any of the situations that arise fall into three types: (a) *lethal* actions — decisions that either get you killed or, more frequently, suspended from the force, which is pretty much the same thing for the game's purposes; (b) *incorrect* actions — decisions or, more frequently, failures to make any decisions that constitute forgivable violations of procedure and simply cost you game points; (c) *commendable* actions — like not forgetting to read your Miranda rights to every criminal you bag on the streets. That's about it. No "cornered in a dark basement and out of ammo, you have to break off a piece of lead pipe and quickly fashion your own bullets" type of actions for Sonny Bonds in the City of Lytton, where nothing out of the ordinary ever happens.

Subsequently, the game is all about *disciplining* your mind — it is more difficult, for instance, to remember to *always* give a safety check to your vehicle in the police yard than it is to figure out how to intercept a drug deal in the park. Skip walking around your car even once and, no matter how often you have done it in the past, you obligatorily end up with a flat tire upon exiting the yard. This irritating circumstance is always brought up by irritated reviewers of the game: just what exactly is the bloody probability, they whine, of getting a flat tire in real life upon forgetting to safety-check your car? couldn't they at least have made it a *random* event? Such whining, however, completely misses the point: one of **Police Quest's** actual goals was teach the player a bit of discipline — according to Jim Walls, questions like "hey, who'll ever know if I decide to *not* put my gun in the locker before entering jail? just for once?" should never even begin to form in the head of a correctly trained and

responsible police officer, and even if in real life you shall not *always* be punished for such negligence, well, this is exactly what the game is here for; in the virtual world, punishment for negligence is impossible to avoid.

Yet while I am absolutely not against the disciplinary angle — never personally found it too difficult to waste five extra seconds for the prescribed walkaround, or to type in "open locker", "put gun", "close locker"... .."open locker", "take gun", "close locker" when it's a matter of life and death — I do think that the game could do with at least a pinch more creativity when it comes to battling criminals. Going over all of those mini-vignettes once again, I found that pretty much the *only* case when Sonny Bonds is required to use his head in addition to his manual is when he has to collect enough evidence to convince the judge to issue a no bail warrant for one of his drug clients. It's not a particularly difficult puzzle — all you really have to do is meticulously explore your own office — but it is something you actually do on your own, and even responsible police officers are sometimes left on their own, you know?

Where this strategy *really* crashes and burns, though, is in the game's final segment, when Sonny, poorly disguised as a pimp on holiday, has to infiltrate an illegal gambling scene at the Hotel Delphoria, using his unrefusable girlfriend Sweet Cheeks Marie as bait. At least here, it might seem, the designers could be allowed to forego standard procedure and invent something creative to help our guy fool the bad dudes and deal with the «Death Angel» in some extraordinary fashion. Instead, your freedom of action is all but restricted to not one, but *two* rounds of deadly... POKER. Few things are more irritable about early video games than that awful fixation on poker — a card game that is exceptionally easy to program and absolutely *not* fun to play when it is completely stripped of its psychological factor. It's all reduced to random luck, which is, of course, not in your favor something like 70% of the time, making it impossible to beat the sequence without «scum-saving» after each win. But what makes it even worse is the painful realization that you are *finally* out of your police uniform, ready to unleash a bit of creative trickstery on your enemies... and you're stuck here playing friggin' *poker*? I'm pretty sure that quite a few players must have said "fuck that, I'm outta here" at that point, never getting to reap the sweet satisfaction of finally taking out Jessie Bains and watching that embarrassing kiss from Sweet Cheeks Marie on the steps of the Lytton Courthouse.

At least the game is reasonably well-programmed; the parser, well evolved beyond the rough early days of **King's Quest**, is able to recognize plenty of synonyms (occasionally even short sentences when you find yourself in dialog situations, such as "it's an emergency" or "can I see your license", etc.), and I do not remember ever getting stuck simply because I had no idea *how* to issue a command despite knowing perfectly well *what* to issue. Disciplining myself with all the repetitiveness was a special kind of fun, too (though I can understand how *not* fun it can be for those who hate discipline or who think they already have too much discipline in real life to go through with all that shit again in the virtual one). But it also goes without saying



that **Police Quest** is certainly not a game that will go down in history because of the genius of its puzzles — and any game that forces poker down your throat has quite a bit to answer for, just as well.

### Atmosphere

The way it was planned — an «open» environment which the player was able to cruise around at will, looking for all sorts of opportunities to enforce law and order — **Police Quest** certainly offered its creators a chance to build up a living, breathing city where you could feel right at home, sort of a proto-*Grand Theft Auto* in reverse, where you play the cop rather than the criminal. However, such a chance could probably not be taken as early as 1987, and hardly in the context of an adventure game: to have a «street life simulator» *and* a plot running at the same time would require far more resources and expertise than Sierra had at the time. The most they could give you was the ability to stop at certain random locations and get a random stock image from a set of three or four location pictures (some of these shamelessly appropriated from *Leisure Suit Larry!*), just to implant the impression that the city of Lytton was a bit more than a 4x4 grid of screens with large static rectangulars for houses and small moving rectangulars for vehicles.



But at least Jim Walls and his boys tried *somehow* to make Lytton into a place not entirely devoid of life. Its coffeehouses and bars are full of people, with some of whom you can even try to strike up a conversation (usually futile, but every once in a while some funny dialog might pop up). Its jail yard is occupied by a nonchalant black dude playing basketball all day long, while the cell next to the one in which you bag your own prisoners is occupied by a mean-looking, bulky-hulky software pirate (just as a friendly warning to all of us unscrupulous Muscovites). And then, of course, there are all your buddies down at the police station, who always have a snide or humorous remark to make or an anecdote to tell whenever you brush past them (only once per each appearance, though). The writing isn't exactly comedy gold or anything (I'm pretty sure they had Al Lowe come by and donate a couple of dirty jokes), but it does enliven things a bit, providing pretty much the same kind of loose distraction from writing tickets or administering FSTs all day long as it prob'ly does in real life for real cops.

The parser's ability to understand input and the variety of responses to that input are, as usual, pretty limited, but a step above most of Sierra's previous games, I would say. As a rule, each individual object depicted in the game has its own verbal description, although lovers of the stereotypical «take-everything-that's-not-nailed-down-and-shove-it-in-your-pocket» way of adventuring will be sorely disappointed: most of your inventory can only be gotten in the police station (as tools of the trade) or at crime scenes (as evidence) — as a responsible police officer, you can't even allow yourself a glass of scotch at the bar, let alone pilfering Judge Palmer's gavel or Jessie Bains' poker deck. But you *can*, for instance, «take off your clothes» just about anywhere you go! Even if it results in an immediate death from embarrassment (as does walking out of the shower room dressed only in your towel, for that matter — apparently, a cop's moral integrity is every bit as important as a cop's dedication to proper police procedure).

The one area in which the game *totally* fails, though, is in conveying any sense of danger or tension. Whether intentionally or not, the city of Lytton ends up being a permanently sunny, cozy, happy place, only occasionally disturbed by some petty misdemeanor; even when there appears to be evidence of serious criminal activity, usually drug-related, it seems to be coming out of nowhere — like, why the hell would the perfectly adequate and satisfied schoolkids of Lytton even turn to drugs in the first place? Your biggest dangers are related not to dying in a firefight (there are only two occasions in the entire game when you can do that, and only through the most shameful negligence on your part), but to crashing your car through reckless driving in the streets, or failing to understand the proper bureaucratic procedures and getting fired. Even in that final stretch when you're supposed to investigate the «seedy underbelly» of the city, your gangster antagonists are a couple of clean, polite guys who only want to play some poker, not stick needles under your thumbs or anything.

In short, all of us here who are weary of the world's troubles, instability, inflation, and environmental problems, would hardly mind moving into the city of Lytton circa 1987, where the average storeowner's most common problem is having a bunch of bikers clog the parking lot with their Harleys, and the few known criminals are not so much a threat to society as an amusing diversion, adding a bit of spice to an otherwise paradisiacal existence (e.g. "Short Fat Fanny", wanted for petty theft; "*unusual traits: halitosis to the magnitude equal to the breath of eight mules!*", etc.). This is why, upon finally beating the game, you don't really feel a lot of moral satisfaction — you *do* catch the arch-criminal, but you don't exactly get to see how, in the process, you have managed to make the life of your fellow citizens any happier than it already is.

Subsequent *Police Quest* games, I believe, would take note of this issue — although the extra elements of darkness in *II* and *III* would rather have to do with the personal vendetta ongoing between Sonny Bonds and his enemies rather than general justice and such (and *Police Quest IV*, the darkest and grimmest game in the series, would be its own beast altogether). Yet, in addition

to reflecting the general infancy of hardware and software technology, as well as the adventure game genre itself, it is also possible that *Police Quest* had no choice but to align, intentionally or not, with the still relatively light tone of police action dramas and soaps of the late Eighties, being essentially a product of its time. It might, in fact, have been a good thing that Sierra went out of business by the time *The Wire* hit the screens, or else poor Jim Walls could get stuck with the impossible task of throwing a big dose of existentialist *Weltschmerz* into the script. At least nothing about the original **Police Quest** gives you the idea that no sooner than you have bagged the «Death Angel», there are three more around the corner just waiting to take his place...

## Technical features

### Graphics

If there was one sphere in which **Police Quest** completely lacked any originality or imagination, it was the visuals — in fact, thinking of the series as a whole, I cannot help but come to the conclusion that the **Police Quest** team usually got leftovers from other projects for their graphic art. Here, the graphics were handled by Mark Crowe, who'd worked as primary graphic artist on the majority of Sierra's early AGI-era games, and it's clear as day that he was far more excited working on his *own* project (**Space Quest**), or even on Al Lowe's **Leisure Suit Larry**, than on a boring police simulator where you had to rein in your imagination in favor of the drab reality of an ordinary American city.



In fact, **Police Quest** is pretty much the *only* Sierra game I can remember at the moment that blatantly reuses part of its assets from other games — the most obvious example being one of the random backdrops of Lytton which «steals» the disco backdrop from **Leisure Suit Larry**, although I'm pretty sure some other elements and sprites were pilfered as well. This is not really a big deal per se, but it just goes to show how much they cared about this particular game.

Like any random AGI-era Sierra game, it still looks reasonably nice even today if you lower your expectations, but there's simply not a lot to go around. The general map of Lytton is a well-organized 2D projection brimming with straight angles and

rectangular shapes, while the actual locations are usually restricted to one or two screens' worth of interiors; the most detailed depiction is, naturally, that of your own native police station, but even that one is ergonomically and pragmatically designed. For all of Lytton's much-lauded «prosperity and growth» (talked about in the newspaper that you are supposed to read at the beginning of the game), business there kind of seems to still remain on late 19th century level...

Also, despite there having been some progress in making those games more vividly come to life with the use of close-up images — most notably in **Leisure Suit Larry**, where Al Lowe managed to realize that seducing the player with tiny sprites of pixelated ladies just wasn't going to cut it — **Police Quest** makes almost no use of that advanced approach, leaving you in the dark as to what Sonny Bonds or «The Death Angel» actually look like. The only exception to the rule is Sonny's incident with the Lady in the Red Sports Car, most of which is essentially a **Larry**-themed Easter egg, and I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the image of the lady happens to be an outtake from Al Lowe's game which Mark thought was too good to throw away (even the eye-and-lip animations are done **Larry**-style, with «happy» and «angry» variations). Some players and reviewers complained that **Larry**-style images or plot sequences cannot belong in a **Police Quest**, but I dunno, *anything* to make the game feel less monotonous... anyway, that's pretty much it about the graphics.

### Sound

There is not much to say about the role of sound in **Police Quest** because there is so little of it, and what little there is typically ranges from annoyingly bizarre to bizarrely annoying. All «music» is credited to Margaret Lowe, Al's wife, who seemingly had a penchant for a little bit of macabre composing — her only other credit for a classic-era Sierra game is **King's Quest III**, where she came up with some creepy and/or mournful themes to depict the evil wizard Manannan and the wretched waif Gwydion, and it seems like an outtake from those «sessions» was actually used as the main opening theme in **Police Quest** as well — making this one of the weirdest openings, in terms of atmosphere, for any Sierra game. Seeing as how you don't actually get to bury any of your co-workers six feet underground in this game, starting it off to the sounds of a lo-fi PC speaker funeral march sure provides one with an inadequate impression, to say the least.

Pretty much every single other musical theme is borrowed from elsewhere as well — I think that the final «triumphant» music is simply a sped-up version of the closing fanfares in **King's Quest III**, for instance. At least the «Chicken Theme», played when you find a bound chicken on your sergeant's desk, planted there by the mysterious «Gremlin» prankster, is sensibly borrowed from the old classic 'Chicken Reel'; later, they would reuse the same melody in **Space Quest III** for the «Astro Chicken Theme», forever associating it with Roger Wilco instead of Sonny Bonds. (If you don't care much for traditional Irish

fiddle music, you might want to gorge yourself on [this hilarious Les Paul interpretation](#) of the theme from the Fifties). There's also a «Happy Birthday» theme on occasion, a catchy chase sequence which I do not recognize from anywhere, and... that's pretty much it, I believe, other than occasional pips and squeaks when you open and close your car door and suchlike. Not that it makes **Police Quest** a particularly bad game, sound-wise — serious discriminatory judgements on Sierra's music can only be made beginning with the arrival of proper sound cards in 1988 — but given how even the early **Space Quest** and (especially) **Leisure Suit Larry** games at least had catchy main themes written for them, it's clear that in this particular case, nobody really gave the slightest damn. And honestly, I don't blame them. (In a way, it's better to have it this way than have to sit through all the corny «police soap»-style muzak of the later games in the series!).

### Interface

Although the general interface of **Police Quest** was no different from Sierra's standard AGI interface at the time, here at least the structure of the game allowed for a couple of interesting twists. Chief among those, of course, was the addition of a little «driving simulator»; in order to move from one location to another, you actually had to guide your car from point A to point B, cruising past Lytton's perfectly organized blocks (or, if you so wanted, taking the crosstown highway — however, entering and exiting it without crashing was nearly impossible, so I don't remember actually using it even once). Care had to be taken not to crash your vehicle into the sidewalk or into another car, and not to run any red lights (*Grand Theft Auto* says ironic hello!) — although, if you were in a hurry, you could hit fastest speed, put up a siren, and not bother with red lights at all. It was mildly realistic, like everything about the game, but must have felt either very frustrating or very boring for the average player, so they would get rid of it completely in **Police Quest II**. (Then they would think it made the game too forgiving for the player, so they brought it back, in a completely revamped state, for **Police Quest III**).

Another cool detail was the ability to use a computer in the PC Room of your police department — one of the first, if not *the* first, apparition of a «computer-within-a-computer» in the history of adventure games? Naturally, the possibilities were



limited — only one search prompt where you could type in names, phone numbers, license plates etc. — but every once in a while you could come up with an unpredictable search term and get an unpredictable result. (Hint: do not forget to input 'shit', 'fuck', and 'piss' the next time you're revisiting the game — I'm pretty sure Al Lowe must have been creeping in at night and leaving his juvenile pranks all over the place!).

There were also some useful shortcuts added to the parser, like the ability to use function keys to quickly get in and out of your car instead of having to type «get in» and «get out» all the time, or to draw your gun and shoot (not nearly as useful since, as I already wrote, you only *have* to draw your weapon once or twice in the entire game, and you don't have to shoot even once!), or to call Dispatch (*quite* useful, since every now and then you can lose a bunch of points if you do not report to your superiors on a regular basis). This did not cover all the bases — for instance, you *still* have to type in 'open door' and 'close door' every single time you deal with your vehicle, and God forbid you from ever leaving the screen *forgetting* to close that door! — but at least it did show the players that the team somehow cared about user-friendliness, in what limited ways the circumstances allowed them to care.

Overall, compared to the frustrating difficulty of mastering the game controls in some of the other Jim Walls-engineered titles (**Codename Iceman** — UGH!), **Police Quest** was pretty decent from a contemporary point of view. Vehicle navigation was relatively easy, shooting was a cinch, and the only non-pure-puzzle-based activity that *really* sucked was, as you have already guessed, poker. (*Never*, and I mean *never* ever, kids, put a game of poker in an adventure game, unless there's a scripted way to cheat or at least unless it doesn't really matter if you win or lose.) But neither was it particularly innovative; and as for the parser, this is one of those rare cases where even I, the world's biggest fan of parser-based video games, occasionally get tired of its repetitiveness. Police bureaucracy definitely agrees better with the point-and-click approach.

**Verdict:** *Good for those who need more self-discipline in their lives...*

Out of all the classic Sierra franchises, **Police Quest** is probably the least often remembered, and you can see why — not only is this a series whose «moral values» have been shaken to the core in the progressive era, but it also happens to be the series that, in full agreement with said values, imposes the most relentless discipline and punishment on the player... and since girls, uh, *gamers* just want to have fun, this idea of



replacing cute little puzzles with strict adherence to typing in procedural phrases quickly died a miserable death. No wonder Jim Walls had so much trouble with his Kickstarter ideas.

That said, I still insist that **Police Quest** is not a bad game — in fact, it's well worth a spin or two even in its original state (there would later be a point-and-click remake from Sierra itself, which I hope to cover separately some day). If you want a *really* bad Jim Walls game, play **Codename Iceman**; this one, with its cutesy Lytton town and occasional nods to **Leisure Suit Larry**, still understands the difference between «disciplining» and «torturing» the player. Additionally, sometimes it is fun to play a crime-themed game with such a light tone — no friggin' «shades of gray», each and every character a totally one-dimensional stereotype (bring these back! not *all* people are really complex and multi-layered!), and all shall be well if you only just diligently remember to walk around your car before taking it out of the garage.