Police Quest III: The Kindred
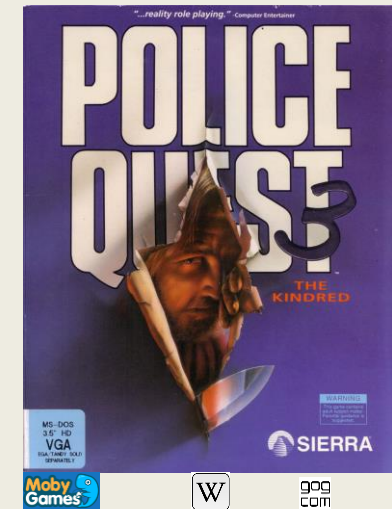
Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Jim Walls**

Part of series: **Police Quest**

Release: 1991

Main credits: Lead programmer: **Doug Oldfield**
Development System: **Jeff Stephenson, Robert E. Heitman et al.**
Graphics: **Mark Crowe et al.**
Music: **Jan Hammer**

Useful links: Playthrough: Complete Playlist Parts 1-6 (*321 mins.*)

Basic Overview

Much like the second **Police Quest** game, circumstances surrounding the creation of the third one are not exactly the stuff of legend — arguably the most notable bit of trivia here is the sudden departure of Jim Walls, the series' creator, from Sierra before the game was even completed, which is a bit ironic considering how much of Jim you are actually going to see this time around (he pops up every time you die, mentoring you on the exact details of your alleged stupidity). Allegedly, they had to bring in an extra writer to complete the game, and that writer happened to be none other than Jane Jensen, in her first serious stint for Sierra — I have no idea which parts of the game she is responsible for, but something tells me that maybe the entire «occult Satanic cult» bit might have come from her mischievous twisted mind, with the pentagrams and chicken blood and stuff presaging a similar motif in **Sins Of The Fathers**... then again, maybe not. All I know is, Jane Jensen would have looked pretty hot in a police uniform back in 1991, so it's kind of a bummer that you still always have Jim Walls guiding you into the next world whenever you die. Couldn't they at least have shared duties on that one?

On a more serious note, precise circumstances leading to Walls' departure from Sierra remain obscure. Ken Williams does not even mention Jim in his book; interviews with the retired police officer are scarce and largely avoid that topic; and second hand sources mostly just suggest that Walls was becoming dissatisfied with how things began to be run at Sierra, which in the early 1990s was beginning to behave like a serious business corporation instead of the friendly, scruffy get-together that it still was in the 1980s — a feeling I could certainly get behind if it were true.

Not that, of course, Jim Walls was some sort of easy-going, attention-shunning creative genius, extinguished by the rise of the corporate approach in the gaming industry. His only non-**Police Quest** game during the several years he spent with Sierra was **Codename: Iceman**, an absolute flaming disaster that illustrated how just about *everything* in an adventure game could go wrong; and the alleged «gritty realism» of the **Police Quest** games was not exactly supported by genius writing or innovative puzzle design, either. Yet there was certainly something wholesome and charismatic about the man's attitude and work spirit, and it is now clear that his loss of interest in his own creation and subsequent departure was one of the first, if not *the* very first warning bell for the future of Sierra On-Line and even «old school adventure gaming» in general. On the whole, Sierra's transition from its «Golden Age» of the late Eighties into the «Silver Age» of the early Nineties went fairly smooth — no doubt, due to Ken Williams' extraordinary managerial and scouting talent — but events such as Walls' departure illustrated fairly well that the atmosphere was already changing, even if no single individual could be blamed for that.

That said, if we decide to stay on the surface rather than scratch our way deep inside, everything seemed to be on the upturn. With technological advances leading to breakthroughs in digital video and audio, **Police Quest III** was the first game in the series to receive a brand new coating of hi-res VGA graphics, a full-on musical soundtrack commissioned from a professional composer, and even an entire set of rotoscoped real-life actors adding another realistic layer to the game (unfortunately, the budget was still too thin to allow for actual voice acting — it took Sierra at least another couple of years to begin including voice acting into all of its titles). This way, even if parts of the story seemed like they were simply remade from bits and pieces of earlier games (see on that below), the psychological effect was so different that fans and reviewers alike remained pleased — even if I do not think that the game could have earned Sierra a major *new* bunch of fans.

In retrospect, of course, as the many technical and designer innovations of **Police Quest III** grew dimmer and dimmer, nobody cares all that much about the last chapter in the exciting, but stereotypical life of Officer Sonny Bonds — at most, the game is briefly discussed in the overall context of the legacy of the **Police Quest** series, and as a stand-alone title, I think that it's even been overshadowed by the VGA remake of the first **Police Quest** game that came out in 1992. So it falls to us now to put the game under the proverbial microscope and see whether it could still be of any use to the modern retro-gamer.

Content evaluation

Plotline

Regardless of who precisely was responsible for the bulk of the game's plot — Jim Walls, Jane Jensen, or somebody else who went uncredited — **Police Quest III** suffers from a fairly strong case of sequelitis. The first two games played off each other nicely in that **Police Quest I** was all mostly about the routine struggles of a cop trying to keep up with complicated police procedure by walking around his vehicle and reciting Miranda rights, while **Police Quest II** was more of a straight-ahead thriller, focused on murder and detective work. They had plenty of things in common, but on the whole, the two games looked and felt as different as the color of Sonny Bonds' hair, changed from black to blonde for no reason at all other than to remind you how much the world at large has gone through in less than two years.

Not so with **Police Quest III**, whose first part essentially reads like a remake of **Police Quest I**, and whose second part has more parallels with **Police Quest II** than you could shake a nightstick at. At the beginning of the game, your main hero, Officer Sonny Bonds, despite having recently been promoted to Detective Sergeant in the Homicide division, has apparently been "*assigned to Traffic Division for a bit... overburdened as the department is*". The *real* reason for this re-assignment is, of course, that Jim and Co. want you to refresh your memory about what it means to be a routine patrol officer — writing out speeding tickets, arresting drunk drivers, sorting out highway trouble in more or less the same ways you already did that stuff back in 1987. This sort of «anti-plot» can theoretically work if it's done right — as it was in the first game — but, unfortunately, the way it's done in **Police Quest III** is far more draggy, which I shall try to explain more in the «Atmosphere» section.

Then, at the end of your first day at work, something terrible and totally life-changing happens right outside of your reach: a couple of bad-looking Thugs (with a capital T) daringly ambush and assault Sonny's totally innocent wife, Marie Wilkans Bonds, right inside the parking lot of Lytton's mall, stabbing her with what looks like a pen-knife for no apparent reason other than general misogyny (or a serious psychotic allergy to late-Eighties women's hairstyles). Fortunately, they somehow just end up putting her in a coma for several days — but now Sonny has larger fish to fry than speeding violators, as he is immediately

reassigned to Homicide and put on his wife's case. Here, the game turns into **Police Quest II**, with our hero having to do serious detective work once again, trudging along a suitcase of police tools and investigating a sinister occult organization that keeps murdering people to the left and right, while all poor Sonny is able to do is diligently scrape out clots of blood and skin from under their rigid fingernails.

It is almost certain that Jim and the boys were quite consciously aware that they were merely putting a slightly different twist on the events of the first two games this time — and that the underlying idea was to simply take everything that was (or at least seemed) good about those games and remake it on an entirely new level of technology, with better graphics, better sound, more realistic and detailed dialogue, and more, umm, psychological depth or whatever; in other words, more or less the same line of reasoning that would justify the existence of **Grand Theft Auto V** a quarter century later. One might have reasonably objected that, perhaps, it would have simply made sense instead to remake the first two games in better quality, while still striving to make the third title have a personality of its own — and, bizarrely, Sierra partially did that *just as well*, releasing a remade version of **Police Quest I** less than a year after **The Kindred**, which, hooray and hooray again, means that you now have not one, but a whoppin' *three* different ways to administer the Field Sobriety Test to a drunk driver.

Struggling to think what it might actually be, plot-wise, to at least somewhat individualize **The Kindred**, I can think of but two aspects, neither of them particularly beneficial. One is the decision, after five long years of deliberation, to introduce the idea of *police corruption* — in the first two games, just about everybody in Lytton's PD, from top-ranking officers to the lowly patrol officers, were as clean as a newborn baby's ass, and the worst thing one could find about any of the men in blue was an occasional fit of grumpiness or an atrocious sense of humor. Now, finally, Jim Walls has acknowledged that there *may* be one or two bad eggs in the Department from time to time — though, of course, hardly on any of the top levels. The scapegoat chosen for the task happens to be (spoiler alert!) Sonny's partner Pat Morales — a decision that, in today's world, should only result in heaping accusations of *both* racism and sexism on poor Jim Walls' head, though back at the time I don't think anybody really gave a damn.

But even if the bad egg in question were to be a white guy instead of a Spanish-American girl, the portrayal would still remain grotesquely unbelievable, because Pat Morales is depicted as (a) rude, crude, and insubordinate, (b) psychotic and offensive in dealing with potential violators, *and* (c) downright criminal by the end of the game, capable of shooting you in the back if you don't get to her first. The idea of putting *all* those bad eggs in one single basket would probably not have occurred to even the creators of the cheapest and silliest police TV dramas. I mean, pure logic dictates that *either* you are rude and disobedient to your superiors *or* you secretly pilfer packets of cocaine from the evidence lockup, not *both* of these things at the same time,

right? And if Lytton PD can really afford to continue to keep Morales on the job with that kind of evaluation file, things must be really hard for the department — I mean, she is actually promoted to the status of Sonny's partner in the Homicide Department *after* he writes up a negative evaluation of her character. Perhaps somebody is pulling some strings for her at the top level somewhere? Shouldn't Sonny be looking into *that* level of corruption, then?..

(The irony of the situation is that even with all these features and circumstances, Pat Morales ends up coming across as a largely sympathetic character — her rudeness and insubordination just end up establishing her as an independent, confident lady, and most of the time she's just hanging around taking photos, delivering an occasional joke or two, and constantly stalling Sonny by taking extra trips to the mall in order to phone her bosses. It's almost as if they wanted to exonerate her by the end of the game, but then changed their mind at the last moment due to lack of funding for the additional purposes of the NPC Redemption Program).

The second and even bigger problem is that the game eventually introduces some sort of Satanic cult into Sonny's investigation without giving us the slightest info on what really is its motivation and the reasons underlying its creation and activities, other than the general *mwahaha I am the Anti-Christ* pattern. That the game's main antagonist and one of the cult's leaders just *happens* to be the brother of Sonny's primary nemesis of the first two games is, of course, just a fateful coincidence. «Hey! I can get my revenge on the asshole who killed my bro *and* bag myself another successful Satanic killing at the same time, ain't I just the luckiest bastard on earth?» This disastrous decision to tie together two disparate threads (revenge and Satanism) pretty much castrates the plot — and thus a game that was honestly supposed to push forward the darkness and grittiness elements of its predecessors ends up being far more ridiculously unbelievable than both of them.

It doesn't help, either, that the rushed nature of the game's ending fails to establish the main antagonist as a person of any significance. At least Jessie Bains was introduced to you at the end of **Police Quest I** and had a slight chance to intimidate you before the endgame; then, in **Police Quest II**, he kept menacingly cropping up at certain points in the game and had a tense stand-off with you at the end. His brother doesn't even get to bump you off himself if you fuck up — any of his minions has a higher chance of sending you off to the Jim Walls mentoring screen than he has. It would have been less insulting to the memory of poor Jessie if they'd just make Michael Bains into some anonymous cult leader, leaving out the «kindred» angle altogether. Then again, we're supposed to believe that in a nice, clean city like Lytton any ongoing crime has to be exclusively masterminded by members of the Bains conglomerate, sent to Earth in order to remind the God-fearing population of Lytton that life was never expected to be a rose garden. Fortunately, we still have people like Officer Sonny Bonds to prevent the evil dudes from completing their pentagram and turning Lytton into the headquarters for Satan's domination of this planet.

It is thus quite a good thing that you have to spend so much time in the game delving into the technicalities of police procedure and learning by heart Lytton's street geography — because it honestly takes your mind off the general idiocy of the plot, concentrating it on better (if occasionally more frustrating) aspects of the game. I don't know who is more guilty of the way things turned out — Jim, Jane, or anybody else working on the game — but I *do* know that in terms of the general story line, **Police Quest III** belongs right up there with **Codename: Iceman** as one of the stupidest things in Sierra history, and I *do* believe that it would have been a much better idea to just leave Jim Walls as a «technical consultant» on all aspects of the game rather than give him free rein to convert real-life action into detective fiction.

Puzzles

Arguably the only aspect in which **Police Quest III** managed to win the upper hand over its elder buddies are the game's puzzles — and this is largely because the game *has* a few of those, period. **Police Quest I** and **II**, essentially, were all about you studying the manual of proper police procedure and stoically applying it whenever you went. Never once did you really get into a situation that would require any out-of-the-box thinking, meaning that the most complicated the game ever got was when you had to do some pixel-hunting to identify a tiny object wedged in the corner of the screen.

Of course, **Police Quest III** has that same thing in spades, too; but it also acknowledges — thank God — that even in the life of the most ordinary, routine-following cop there comes a time when a non-standard situation arises to which there is no ready answer in the manual, which is precisely the situation that segregates the «thinking cop» from the «dumb cop». Right at the beginning of the game, for instance, you are faced with the task of subduing and securing a deranged individual causing trouble at a public park — and in order to accomplish this task without either causing serious harm to the guy or getting clobbered yourself, you have to adopt a «tricky» strategy. A pretty simple strategy — even casual adventurers will probably figure it out in a jiffy — but one that you certainly won't find in your instructions, and which definitely had no analogy in either of the two previous games. (According to Jim Walls, the deranged guy episode was inspired by a real incident that happened to him during his own policing years — which only makes me wonder why he'd been saving it up so strictly until the third

game in the series). This is quite an auspicious start to the game's challenges — although immediately and seriously offset by the fact that your *next* series of challenges is going to be a rather boring rewrite of the traffic patrol sequences in **Police Quest I**, once again totally safe and predictable, unless you decide, for the fun of it, to shoot a secret agent point blank in the face or to take a pregnant lady to jail for speeding, and thus end the game prematurely because Officer Sonny Bonds refuses to be a mindless tool of the police establishment and would rather be its Angel of Death.

Once you finally get into Homicide and start up the investigation of the attempt on your wife's life, interesting challenges slowly begin coming back. You have to work out a way, for instance, to lure a homeless old lady into the PD so that she can help you identify one of the killers — problem is, she's afraid to leave her cart of the usual homeless stuff unattended, so you'll have to help her out with that. You have to get to the bottom of the odd conduct of your new partner, so you'll even be involved in a tiny bit of questionable activity, requiring you to do a little stealing, a little peeping, and even — oh my gosh! — finding a way to penetrate, unnoticed, inside the women's bathroom at the station. (No, there is *no* **Leisure Suit Larry** vibe in this game — even less of it, in fact, than in the first two games, which occasionally put Sonny «in the mood»). You even have to call upon the supernatural power of love and affection to help bring your wife back to life — fortunately, by using something that makes more sense than a rabbit's foot.

You *still* have to do everything you did before, though, such as diligently collecting evidence from the crime scenes, most of which will probably just rot away in the evidence locker rather than offer any meaningful assistance — but hey, anything to get a full score, right? (Unfortunately, the game ended up bugged so the maximum you could always get was 450 out of 460). The only serious downside to this is that, just as it was in **Police Quest II**, each time you visit a crime scene you shall have to open your trunk, open the suitcase inside the trunk, take out all the tools, use them to collect evidence, then open your trunk and suitcase again, put back all the tools one by one, close the suitcase, close the trunk, and drive away. Yes, apparently this is what real homicide detectives do in real life, but at least it would have been nice to have it all done in *one* click rather than in half a dozen. Once again, mock-realism strikes back at you with its dirty claws!

Another nice innovation — at least, in theory — is that for the first time ever you get to use your computer not just as a reference source, but as an actual working tool. There is a pretty cool (for 1991) piece of software («Composite Master») that allows you to put together a facial portrait based on the witness' description (probably influenced by all those character-building scripts in early RPG games); and a plotting device attached to the city map that allows to search for patterns, something that would be significantly perfected by Sierra almost a decade later with **Gabriel Knight 3** but already works here, though only once and in a very rudimentary form. Although the implementation of both these algorithms is somewhat crude

(particularly the city plotting tool, where it might take a while to figure out how to use it correctly), it sure feels like progress. At least the taxpayers' money isn't merely wasted on electronic devices that just sit around doing nothing, other than letting you enjoy inside jokes on the private lives of Sierra On-Line's employees.

Overall, however, the difficulty level of **Police Quest III** feels decreased in comparison — and this is, to a large degree, concomitant with the game's transition from a parser to a point-and-click interface. The latter *does* make repetitive actions a bit less frustrating (mouse-clicking, after all, takes significantly less time than having to type *open trunk*, *get suitcase, close trunk* all the time), but, as usual, it ends up severely limiting your choices *and* making the right ones usually way too obvious. That said, part of the easiness should also be attributed to the laziness of the team: the game's script is rather pathetically small, and there is nowhere near the amount of attention to surrounding detail as there was in **Police Quest II**. Even on screens where your *Look* button can net you different (usually quite laconic) descriptions of various objects, clicking the *Use* button on most of them will simply result in the brief appearance of a red cross — like, these suckers couldn't even be bothered to write a «*what on earth makes you think you can pick that up?*» generic type of message this time around.

As usual, dying is an easy option in a **Police Quest** game, and the various reasons for dying largely remain the same — the most common ones being insubordination (fail to treat Dispatch as your lord and master and you're dead meat), poor driving skills (I'll tackle the game's horrendous driving system below), highway nonchalance (every car in Lytton City makes it its goal to run over you whenever they get the chance), and, of course, lack of self-defense reflexes. Most of the deaths are reasonable, which kinda makes one sad about the loss of ability to die from embarrassment upon taking your clothes off at any random public place in Lytton City (see how cruelly 1991 restricts your freedom when compared to 1987!). Much worse are the several dead ends that you can run into — although, admittedly, there are very few *intentional* ones this time around; probably the only truly serious bummer occurs at the end if you have not been astute enough to predict your partner's backstabbing schtick just as you're busy bagging the last of your enemies.

At least *that* dead end comes across as somewhat deserved; unfortunately, the game's real problem is that it had always been and still remains one of the most bugged titles in Sierra history, so there are a few dead ends you can meet if you simply play the game not quite the same way as the designers would like you to. For instance, at one time I got hung up near the end when trying to obtain a search warrant from Judge Simpson, just because I did not give away Marie's locket to her at the hospital — which made the game believe that I needed to give it to the Judge instead, and then made the Judge get stuck in an endless conversation loop (!). At another moment, you can put away an important piece of evidence in the evidence room — and put yourself in an unwinnable situation because you need it later and there *is no way you can get it back* (like I said, whatever

gets locked up in the evidence room clearly stays there forever, to rot away until the end of time). The game does offer you quite a bit of choice — usually a «bad choice» over a «good choice» — and then it is liable to punish you for your «bad choices» not by reducing your score or making you die, but simply by going buggy on you. Looks like a rather clear case of cutting down the budget for beta-testing to me.

Atmosphere

With the transition to VGA graphics and all the technological advances allowing for increased realism in video games, the designer team of **Police Quest III** were clearly aiming for a much more cinematographic experience — if the previous titles were merely influenced by the likes of *Miami Vice*, here the goal was to truly allow the player to put oneself inside *Miami Vice*, for better or worse. Hence the use of real-life actors (or, at least, real-life *people*) for rotoscoping purposes; the presence of cut scenes temporarily taking the agency out of your hands; the hiring of none other than Jan Hammer himself, the mastermind behind the music of *Miami Vice*, to score the game; and a much heavier emphasis on Guts, Gore, and Grit than the last two times around. We have already established that the efficiency of all these efforts was seriously threatened by the weakness (to put it *very* mildly; some might want to use stronger words like «retardedness») of the overall plot of the game — but then again, many a time Sierra's inability to present a strong plot could be fully compensated for by the tenseness and emotional grip of the atmosphere (hello, **Phantasmagoria**!), so perhaps **Police Quest III** could also be salvaged in the same way?

It begins auspiciously enough, with already the opening credits providing a vast improvement on the perfunctory minimalism of the first two games — alternating flashing backgrounds of deep blue and dark red, against which Officer Sonny Bonds keeps pulling his gun on an unseen enemy; later on, cutting to a dashing image of Jim Walls in his dusted-off police uniform, striking a pose against a police vehicle and a pitch-dark background, as if reporting from a scene of the latest crime that happened in the dead of night... haunting, isn't it? setting you up for a level of gritty toughness you ain't never seen in a computer game before. Then there's the actual Police Department — renovated, multi-storied, with added space for a separate computer lab and a police psychologist office... we're *really* moving into the Nineties, aren't we?

Unfortunately, because of the game's stupid, stupid, *stupid* driving interface (see below on that), Lytton City this time around has even less of a feel of a real city than it had in **Police Quest II**. The absolute majority of the locations that you are able to visit consist of one or two screens of images, typically as devoid of people as possible, and there is even no possibility to return to most of them once you're done with a specific assignment. «Roaming» is essentially limited to the three stories of your Police Department, and even those get exhausted (and exhausting, given the need to wait for an elevator all the time) pretty quickly. With the first game in the series, you actually had a faint feeling of being placed in an open world-type environment; by the time of the third, it's all strictly about the story — and more about Sonny Bonds' personal vendetta than about going around normalizing the life of the City of Lytton.

The actual «atmosphere», promised by the game's opening, does not even begin to materialize properly until the first cut scene which happens late in the evening of the first day. By the standards of 1991, I'd say the presentation of the assault on poor Marie Wilkans in the mall's parking lot looked fairly gruesome indeed — suspenseful music, dimmed lights, threatening shadows, close-up of Marie's terrified face, screaming... yep, possibly the darkest and most disturbing element in a **Police Quest** game so far. But, of course, it quickly deteriorates into generic melodrama, and despite a few tense moments here and there, the game fails to deliver on the promise of that particular cut scene. We do not get any more cut scenes dealing with the members of Michael Bains' crazyass «cult»; we only get the most superficial look at the game's deuter-antagonist before he kicks the bucket, and we get *no* looks at all at the main villain (!). And as for the implicitly promised general «gritty» look at the City of Lytton and its problems, well...

...hmm, well, I kind of liked that bit with the homeless lady, whose general looks and dilapidated entourage does give the series a tiny bit of social realism that it completely lacked before — the «seedy» bits of Lytton City as portrayed in **Police Quest I** and **II** still looked pretty cute and sunny to me most of the time, while **Police Quest III** does introduce a few street corners that I *really* wouldn't want to find myself on even in broad daylight. But that's just about it, I'd say. On the whole, the team does an almost surprisingly lazy job at making Lytton City an *interesting* place to immerse yourself into and explore — compare, for instance, the admirable effort put into bringing to life the city of New Orleans in the first **Gabriel Knight** game, which also gives you an assortment of separate small locations, yet each of these is portrayed with love and care, rather than merely serves as an indifferent backdrop to the story.

Indeed, despite the general consensus of hatred toward the fourth installment in the **Police Quest** series, I would definitely argue that the atmosphere of seediness, danger, unrest, and overall tension would be pulled off far more efficiently in **Police Quest IV** than it is here. There is no doubt that all the superficial advances in technology that **The Kindred** puts in your face

could make a serious impression back in 1991, but this here is quite a proverbial case of how technological advances, no matter how sophisticated, inevitably become less impressive with time when not accompanied by genuine substance. Unlike the first two **Police Quest** games, I believe that this one simply does not have enough heart to keep on endearing itself to us.

Technical features

Graphics

The **Police Quest** series had never before been anything like the flagman of new developments at Sierra, so it must have actually been somewhat startling to see **Police Quest III**, rather than any other Sierra game, introduce the practice of using live actors — and not to just project their movements onto the character sprites, but to actually be filmed and rotoscoped into the game. Although the technology for full-motion video was not yet ready (Sierra would not go in that direction until four years later), **The Kindred** is as close as they got there by using then-currently available means — that said, the process must have been pretty expensive, since **Police Quest III** and **IV** were pretty much the only Sierra games for which it was reserved; no doubt, due to the strong desire to keep *this* particular series grounded in as much realism as it could handle.

The effort, I believe, was somewhat worth it. The game characters, when presented in relative close-up, looked stunning back in 1991 — realistic facial features, credible animations, and you even got to see some of the famous Sierra guys as role models (Josh Mandel, for instance, makes a pretty believable Leon the Sandwich-Munching Coroner; Corey Cole of **Quest For Glory** fame is the dashing police psychologist; and even Ken Williams himself puts in a brief appearance in the courtroom). Even today most of those close-ups continue to look pretty decent, though they could all use a bit of remastering. If there is one thing that gives the game a bit of visual atmosphere, it's these digital portraits — and it's *probably* a good thing that those are just portraits, with no actual acting in sight, or even any voiceovers.

Alas, the same good words cannot be put in for the actual graphic art: here, just as it was in the previous games in the series, the backgrounds are largely perfunctory and the basic character sprites have the same general VGA-level ugliness as most of

the sprites in this particular era of Sierra On-Line. In fact, the most striking thing about the backgrounds is that there simply almost *aren't* any — the few exterior shots that there are, such as Aspen Park, are remarkably free of interesting details (even less so than in **Police Quest II**!), and interiors-within-interiors, such as the individual offices within the Police Department, are given to you as small cubicles that occupy only the center of your screen, as if this game couldn't get any *more* claustrophobic. True, visual beauty and scenery porn had always been thought of as way below the dignity of the respectable **Police Quest** player — but *a little bit* would have been nice. As such, there is simply nothing to write about in this section, so let's just move on to the next one.

Sound

Apparently, most of the game's budget went to the art and animation department, so Sierra was unable to provide voice acting as well — as late as 1991, full voiceovers were still a bit of a luxury for the studio, with **Space Quest IV** drawing the lucky straw and everything else put on «mute». It does look a little weird having to look at Jim Walls all the time, moving his mouth like a fish, but budget is budget, and frankly, what would be the use anyway if you didn't have Gary Owens in your game? (And if you *did* get Gary Owens in a **Police Quest** game, it'd probably be more like *Police Academy* anyway — which might not have been a bad thing, but probably wouldn't agree with Jim properly).

What Ken and the managing guys *did* get was probably one of their proudest musical achievements — nothing less than a whole live Jan Hammer to write a full (well, a fairly short one) musical score for the game. They'd already worked with noted professionals, from William Goldstein to Bob Siebenberg, but having Hammer on board brought them (a) a guy seriously respected in elite musical circles and (b) the guy who wrote the score for *Miami Vice*, and who was, therefore, expected to give the game more «authenticity» than the rest of the team combined.

True enough, if you're a classic Eighties aficionado and the harsh industrial synths and processed guitars of the 'Miami Vice Theme' still rock your boat, you might easily love the main musical themes of **Police Quest III** as well, even with their glossy MIDI interface (or maybe *especially* because of the glossy MIDI interface). With the first game in the series having nothing but rudimentary beeps and the second one rather lazily scored by Mark Seibert (also in *Miami Vice* style, but with very short and tentative compositions), Hammer's soundtrack feels like a real «police symphony» in comparison. The main theme is multi-layered and catchy, with MIDI keyboards, brass, and guitars giving the brief two-minute overture plenty of dynamic development; the energetic Patrolling and Chase themes give you some great Eighties rhythmics to bounce along to; and the quiet, spooky, ambient themes accompanying Sonny Bonds at murder scenes, morgues, and criminal dens are... well, as good

as this kind of «incidental music» ever gets. The «happier» themes, accompanying Marie's convalescence and the happy ending (*'we're going to have a baby!'*), are full of corny chord sequences, of course, but I guess we all saw it coming anyway. (Did you expect the game to end on a *Rosemary's Baby* note or something?).

In short, if only the music were an adequate fit for the game's storyline and visuals, it could have been quite a solid cherry on top; as it is, there is a notable discrepancy between the quality of the music and everything else. I'm not saying, of course, that *Miami Vice*-style music was Jan Hammer's greatest achievement in the world of music — that'd be like saying that Alec Guinness' greatest role in cinema was that of Obi-Wan Kenobi — and I'm *definitely* not saying that the scripts of *Miami Vice* were always superior to the third-rate writing of **Police Quest III**, but there's still a big distinction between pulp that makes sense and pulp that does not, and when your composer works his ass off to provide impressive atmosphere for your game while your writers do their worst to reduce that atmosphere to nonsense... well, something is not quite right with this particular alignment of the stars.

Interface

The gameplay of **Police Quest III** generally follows the pattern of most of Sierra's «first generation point-and-click» games: a rather minimalistic set of options, essentially reduced to a four-element set of «Walk», «Talk», «Look», and «Operate» (= 'take' or 'use') buttons, out of which only «Look» is universal — as I already stated, the game's set of responses to your actions is fairly laconic, and approximately 90% of the actions you try out will net you a red «you-can't-do-that» cross. Even worse, the coders did not do a very good job with the hotspots — the desk space in the offices, for instance, is so cluttered that even if you can *visually* sort out the

difference between your input basket, your phone, and your computer, getting to properly «Operate» each one of them is a challenge for the likes of Wilhelm Tell. Or, for instance, try and open the trunk of your car in one go if the game positions it at the edge of the screen, so that a millimeter-wide error will have you opening the door of the car and getting inside rather than accessing your goddamn tool kit in the back.

Still, these are minor quibbles; overall, the worst thing that can be said about the general interface and gameplay system is

that it is nothing more and nothing less than «adequate» and «perfunctory». Where it *really* makes sense to rant, rave, and throw in the towel is the driving system. You might remember that in **Police Quest II**, player-controlled driving around Lytton City was completely eliminated — the game would just automatically take you where you wanted to go upon being given a destination, which took good care of all the annoying driving problems in the first game but also deprived you of the general «feel» of the City of Lytton around you, reducing it to a number of small, disconnected locations.

Well, now the driving is back with a vengeance — and somehow, it manages to bring back *both* the annoying driving problems of **Police Quest I** *and* the lack of the «city feel» of **Police Quest II**! This time, the Jim Walls team came up with a sort of lite-version driving simulator, where you are given an over-the-shoulder 3rd person view of your car's interior, a little window with a top-to-bottom perspective, and a challenge to drive your car from Point A to Point B through Lytton City's old mesh of streets and alleys without crashing or running stop signs. The single worst thing about this «challenge» is that it either requires you to memorize the entire (admittedly, not too complicated) geography of Lytton in advance, or to always have the Lytton map from your game manual lying open before you, almost as a sort of additional copy protection. If you are ready for either of these options, the challenge becomes not so much of a challenge but rather a tedious bore, concentrating all of your attention on a tiny road map square in the top right corner of your screen as you count out the street numbers so as not to miss your turn — do it and you'll have to make a full circle around the nearest block, of course.

To add a little «excitement» to the situation and give you the illusion of training your driving reflexes, the team gives you the option of speeding up and slowing down — the former is advisable for long stretches of open road, the latter is absolutely necessary before taking turns, to avoid crashing. Gee, this is so much fun! At least, for some innovative reason, the City of Lytton has apparently decreed to remove all street lights (might just as well, since the city is oddly devoid of pedestrians anyway), so your only other problem are the stop signs installed all around the city's perimeter (but not between any of the interior blocks). I cannot even begin to describe how much I hate this stupid system — beating it never really gives me any of that classic «gamer pride», just relief that one more tedious ride is finally over. And since I do not see any of Lytton City anyway, just a monotonous stretch of road, the system adds absolutely nothing in terms of atmosphere. How did they even manage to make a driving system in 1991 that makes the driving system of 1987 feel so marvelous in comparison?

Occasionally, the game takes pity on you and decides to drive you to your next destination automatically (e.g. the hospital where you have to visit Marie every day, or the mall where Morales regularly takes you for her phone calls). But you can never really predict when that agency shall be taken out of your hands; and at the very end of the game, just when you're finally ready to kick the bad guys' asses once and for all, you are forced to take not one, but *three* trips to the bad guys' hideout and

back, in order to first get a search warrant from the judge and then a special judicial order for a battering ram unit. All of this really brings back to mind the worst simulator excesses of **Codename: Iceman**, and makes me suspect that perhaps Jim Walls just hated his former job *so* much that he wanted the players to take pity on him for having had to go through so much bureaucratic and procedural tedium over the years — except that the reaction I most commonly experience while replaying through these sequences is anything *but* pity.

Some strange programming decisions, too, were made for the action sequences in the game, which are actually very few — most notably the shootout and chase at the old saloon and the final showdown with Michael Bains — and require little other than drawing your gun and correctly aiming it at your target. Actually, the saloon shootout originally got me bogged down for a bit because there is no special option for drawing your gun, as there used to be in the parser-endowed first two games; apparently, all you have to do is simply select it from the inventory, which somehow makes you immune to Steve Rocklin's bullet — yes, another rather unfortunate consequence of eliminating the text parser and not quite understanding how to compensate with the point-and-click interface in special circumstances.

On the whole, the game feels «okay» when it is simply making you do the run-of-the-mill adventure game stuff — and it feels either terrible or, at least, clumsy and awkward when it tries to make you do something out of the ordinary. Arguably the lone exception is the «Composite Master» software, where you can actually have fun putting together your own preferred portrait of the villain (and hear the homeless witness' occasional ironic quips on your progress). That little bit is quite well designed; but you only go through it *once*, and you have to drive that damn car all day long, day in and out!

Verdict: *An expendable chapter in the life of Officer Sonny Bonds, though not without a bit of historical importance.*

I suppose the best thing that can be said about **Police Quest III** is... well, this is not a game that would give the impression its creators were running on autopilot while designing and programming it. Clearly, there *was* a burning desire — either on the part of Jim Walls personally or Sierra in general — to push forward those ever-pushable boundaries, to make a generally more cinematic and involving experience, maybe even to

convince the world that there is something better than watching *Miami Vice* and that something is being a character *inside* the likes of *Miami Vice*. And some of those efforts paid off — in the form of Jan Hammer's music, or the niftily handled roto-scoped animations, or the appearance of tension-building cutscenes, or the decision to at least occasionally put the title character in situations that require using one's head in addition to one's manual of police procedure.

Unfortunately, it just looks as if the enthusiasm for the game ran out midway through the production, while the intelligence required to make it seem respectable was hardly ever there in the first place. The first two games could somehow get away with their clichéd (or, in the case of the first game, almost non-existent) plots because they were both very much fixed on the player's crime-solving skills rather than the social implications of the crimes; **Police Quest III**, however, made the mistake of trying to seriously play with your emotions, and in this enterprise it failed worse than the average cheap soap opera. Throw in the relative lack of fresh ideas, where some chunks of the game played out like re-writes of sequences from older ones; the sparseness and boredom of the dialog; the clunkiness of the abysmal driving system; the bugs and dead ends; the obviously rushed and unconvincing finale — and you can easily understand why, even within a series that usually gets fairly little respect as such, **Police Quest III** is so frequently regarded as a relative clunker.

I am definitely ready to appreciate it for some of its innovative technical decisions, and I had a bit of fun replaying it recently (other than the driving sequences, which always irritate the heck out of me); but I do have to admit that Officer Sonny Bonds works much better as an «anti-interesting» character in Sierra's CGA and EGA ages, and that he simply could not survive the transition to the VGA age — so maybe it's a good thing that, unlike King Graham of Daventry, Roger Wilco, or Leisure Suit Larry, we never got to hear him talk the talk. Instead, that dubious honor went to his successor, John Carey of **Police Quest IV**, a game that usually garners much more hate than **Police Quest III** and usually for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with video games — but that's already a whole different story which we shall tackle another time.