

Police Quest: Open Season

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Daryl F. Gates / Tammy Dargan**

Part of series: **Police Quest**

Release: November 1993

Main credits: Lead programmer: **Doug Oldfield**

Graphics: **Darrin Fuller et al.**

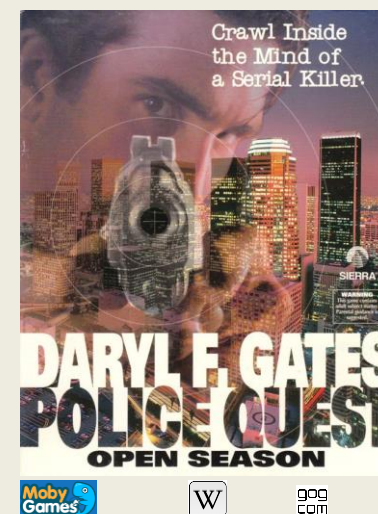
Cinematography: **Rod Fung**

Music: **Neal Grandstaff**

Useful links: Playthrough: [Complete Playlist Parts 1-9](#) (577 mins.)

Basic Overview

According to my observations (which are, of course, limited), no other title from the Golden (or, well, Silver, whatever) Age of Adventure Gaming — maybe no other title released by a major gaming studio in the 20th century, period — has earned itself more passionate hate and despidal in retrospect than *Police Quest: Open Season*. Not only does it always find itself at the absolute bottom of any tier lists for Sierra On-Line or old school adventure games, but 90% of professional or amateur reviews of it, written from a modern perspective, condemn it with a fervor rarely found in such texts — as an example, see the take on the poor thing by Jimmy Maher ([Digital Antiquarian](#)), who is often willing to look with forgiveness at design and ideological flaws in old-time games... but not *this* time, no. [PC Gamer](#) is a little less furious, but still quite harsh on the game, as is the assessment in [Adventure Gamers](#), although both at least tend to criticize the game more for the flaws in its design and execution than its political crimes. The ultimate consensus seems to be that if we had to single out *one* game that Sierra On-Line should never have made, it is this one. Even a complete turd such as *Codename: Iceman* would get an exemption.



My own memories of my initial acquaintance with the game are somewhat blurry; I must have played a pirated copy and I do not even remember if it was the CD version from 1996, with a full voice recording soundtrack, or the original floppy disk version from 1993. What I *do* remember is an initial feeling of disappointment. While *Police Quest* had never been my personal favorite of Sierra's franchises — has it ever been for anybody, except possibly a bunch of retired officers? — I did get heavily invested in the first three games, and, like everybody else, was expecting a return into the world of Sonny Bonds and his native City of Lytton, as designed by Jim Walls and his team.

Instead, the game told me it was designed by some guy named *Daryl F. Gates* — what could a young Russian student in pre-Internet days know about this name? — and went on right ahead to stun me with news that (a) all the action would take place in some grimy slums in downtown L.A.; (b) the protagonist would be a faceless detective in a brown suit called John Carey, rather than my good vanilla friend Sonny Bonds; (c) everything would be presented in a depressing palette of mostly brown and grey (with an occasional mix of police blue), because where a fictional city like Lytton might be comprised of blue skies, green parks, and brightly colored buildings, real-life L.A. consists of just three elements — ashes, shit, and police. Under different circumstances, I might have put the game down in about five minutes of playing time. However, most of my context came from the previous three *Police Quest* games rather than any real-life L.A. experience, so I just sighed and ploughed on. And, believe it or not, eventually I quite got into it — yes, I sincerely enjoyed the game (at least, parts of it) without even suspecting there might be certain «immoral» aspects to that enjoyment.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic Ken Williams, Sierra's president, was being grilled — as time went by and the game faded out of public memory, less frequently, but far more intensely with each passing year — for hiring Daryl Gates, former chief of L.A.P.D., the father of SWAT teams and the person chiefly held responsible for the Rodney King riots of 1992, to design and supervise the fourth installment in the *Police Quest* series. According to Ken himself, he merely "*wanted our police games to transition into tactical simulations more than just being interactive stories. Chief Gates had knowledge of police procedures and tactics that were well beyond what any one field officer could bring to the table.*" Can't really argue with that knowledge, can we?

Honestly, though, the one thing I am *not* here to do is to discuss the sensitive issue of whether it is fully or only partially justified that the name of Daryl F. Gates, in certain circles at least, has become synonymous with the concept of police brutality. Perhaps it is, and perhaps, as it often happens, the actual story is a little more complicated and nuanced. What I'm more interested in in *this* particular context is whether the brief sojourn of Daryl Gates at Sierra did actually result in the studio, formerly known for its fairly progressive and humanistic stance on social issues, producing a drastically imbalanced

«right-wing» game with a strong conservative and racist stance, fully deserving of the progressive hate in today's moral climate — or whether its chief goals were more aligned with Ken's memories, with anything particularly insensitive about it being more of an unfortunate side effect than anything else.

First and foremost, it is important to remember that the principal goal of the *Police Quest* series in its Jim Walls days had never been the art of «copaganda» — naturally, with the games written and designed by a former police officer, they would be on the whole sympathetic to the Department, but their main purpose was to try and de-romanticize the image of the dashing, excitement-seeking police officer from the average TV series: players would spend much more time observing the tedious minutiae of police procedure, filling out memos, checking car tires, stowing guns in lockers, and reading out rights than actually chasing dangerous criminals. (And who could forget that the biggest challenge of working undercover in the first *Police Quest* game was winning a few hands of poker?). If anything, *Police Quest: Open Season* put even more emphasis on that aspect; even if it were a game that was desperately trying to be as gung-ho and racist as possible, there was simply not enough time for the developers to indulge in their worst instincts, as most of it had to be spent on designing puzzles that could only be properly solved by strictly clinging to correct police procedure. (The game even came with a 50-page «Abridged (!) Manual of the Los Angeles Police Department» — which, fortunately, you did not have to study in detail to complete it, but which probably made for some inspired bathroom reading, e.g. "*the prescribed trousers belt shall be worn under the Police Equipment Belt. It shall be adjusted so that no part other than the top edge is visible*". God, I sure wish this game could take points away from you for flashing your "*prescribed trousers belt*" in public!).

Second, if you really need to alleviate your conscience, it helps to keep in mind that Chief Gates never really wrote the game. Proper credit here goes to Tammy Dargan, who had been working as a producer on various Sierra games since 1991 and, before that, had a bit of experience with *America's Most Wanted*, meaning that she was probably the only member of the staff «qualified» to write a police game under Gates' supervision. Honestly, the exact amount of Gates' contribution to *Open Season* remains a bit of a mystery (although he does appear in person as an Easter Egg cameo, provided you do a good job constantly returning to the useless extra floors of Parker Center). Dargan, on the other hand, was known for a pretty liberal pedigree, a rather telling indication on how the lines of demarcation and separation tended to be far more blurrier even back in the 1990s (let alone earlier times) than they are today. (I read a December 1993 interview with both herself and Gates at the same time and they kinda seemed having a pretty good time together).

Anyway, it's probably safe to say that the *principal* concern of *Police Quest: Open Season* was taking the well-established paradigm of *Police Quest* into the new technological realities of the mid-1990s — which, with all the advances in video and

sound capture, storage space, processing power, and accompanying increases in budget, now allowed for a far more realistic (and dramatic) approach to game-making. Any potential offensiveness of its script, dialog, or character depiction is to be taken as an unfortunate side effect of its day and age that, at least as far as I am concerned, can be overlooked *provided* the game itself is sufficiently fun and involving on other fronts — although this, too, is quite debatable.

Neither should *Police Quest: Open Season* be confused with the *Police Quest: SWAT* series that, under Sierra's name, would continue to be released until around the mid-2000s and the first batch of which continued to be designed by Dargan (but not Gates, even if the first game in the series still kissed some ass by bearing the full name of *Daryl F. Gates' Police Quest: SWAT*). All of those titles are really police action simulators, not adventure games, and although there is nothing particularly cop-a-gandish about them either, they represent the main idea of *Police Quest* taken out of its adventure game eggshell completely, working the same way as if you'd turn *Space Quest* into a rocket flight simulator or *Leisure Suit Larry* into pure strip poker. I never had any genuine interest in that stuff, and shall, of course, subject *Open Season* to the same general criteria I employ for any other adventure game, as should you.

But it *is* somewhat telling, perhaps, that Sierra preferred to turn their police-theme based adventure game series into a pure simulator even years before they went out of the adventure game business — above all, it means that Dargan herself probably did not care all that much about the story, and/or felt that the customers, too, would be more interested in learning to shoot their guns and properly cuff their suspects rather than solving inventory-based puzzles or listening to third-rate police drama dialog. Even with a new setting, a new character, and an overall positive (at the time) reception of the game, it was clear that *Police Quest* had run its course sooner than any other Sierra franchise, and it was *precisely* because *Police Quest* was not a series about doing interesting and extraordinary detective work — it was first and foremost a series about not forgetting to store your gun in a locker before stepping on the premises of the city jail, and just how many games do you need in order to impair the importance of those kinds of rules to the player? One is probably enough; *Police Quest* lasted through four, and even if the fourth one did attempt a drastic change of tone, we all know, deep down inside, that there is not that much difference between Officer Sonny Bonds and Detective John Carey.

One thing is for certain: the *Police Quest* series died a natural death, not because of its ill-fated final association with Chief Gates. In his memoirs, Ken Williams has almost turned his entire small chapter on the final days of *Police Quest* into a full-fledged apology for Gates, which does not at all come across as convincing — at the same time, he writes almost nothing about the game itself (not surprising, since Ken always comes across as businessman first, gamer last). We shall try to rectify this mistake here by concentrating exclusively on the game, rather than the unsavory aspects of its «godfather».

Content evaluation

Plotline

In the first three *Police Quests* designed by Jim Walls, the plot typically veered between the actual «storyline» (Officer Sonny Bonds hunts down «The Death Angel» or his accomplices) and the everyday minutiae of a police officer's busy schedule — giving out traffic tickets, arresting occasional miscreants for various misdemeanors, etc. Some of the games veered heavily toward the latter (the main plot of *Police Quest I* would not even begin until about halfway into the game), some toward the former (*Police Quest II* only had a few minor events to sidetrack you from the story), but generally, Jim made enough of an effort to quickly let the player know that it was all about putting yourself into the shoes of an average cop rather than about immersing yourself into some sort of unusual, exquisitely designed story with unexpected plot twists and whatnot.



Police Quest: Open Season largely dispenses with that formula. Each of its three predecessors started out in the same way: on a bright, sunny morning Officer Sonny Bonds parks his vehicle in the cozy parking lot of Lytton City Department and goes to work, mingling with his cop buddies, sharing the local news and gossip, adjusting his uniform, and wasting as much time as possible on the little pleasures of cop life before actually going out to hunt serious crime. Yes, there are quite a few bad eggs spoiling the quiet and happy world of Lytton City, but overall it's a colorful paradise where your main concern is not to forget to walk around your police vehicle every time you take it out for a ride, or you'll end up with a flat tire and then you'll just *have* to miss that nice coffee break with your friend Steve over at Carol's Cafe — game over, man!

In stark contrast, *Police Quest: Open Season* opens its season in the middle of the night, with your character parking his car in some dirty, dangerous suburb of downtown L.A. to investigate a murder scene — a *double* murder scene, as you quickly discover, with one of the victims being no less than another police officer and the other a young boy from the local (all-black) neighborhood. No previous game in the series threw you right inside the action from the very start, so, clearly, plot matters *much* more here than it used to. If only it were a *good* plot... unfortunately, Tammy Dargan is no Jane Jensen (or even Lorelei Shannon, to think of all those Sierra gal writers with their dark and disturbed fantasies) when it comes to placing your

imagination at the service of the gaming community — and besides, there's that little matter of having to conform to the demands of «police realism» when designing a *Police Quest* game, so no werewolves, lost Wagner operas, or strange aliens from Dimension X to help out the unfortunate script writer.

Pretty soon it becomes evident that the plot is bifurcating into two separate detective stories: one that is more grounded in social issues, being directly related to the problem of gang warfare in suburban L.A., and one with a thriller / horror twist, dealing with a serial killer on the loose. The first subplot, centered around the killing of the little boy Bobby Washington, is taken care of rather quickly and without a whole lot of direct (more like collateral) involvement on the part of your character; arguably, though, it is important in setting up the «general context» of the second subplot, indirectly hinting, perhaps, that the overall atmosphere of violence and fear, so predominant in those suburbs, is the perfect breeding ground for psychopathic monsters in human form.

This may, in fact, be the chief ideological contribution of Daryl F. Gates to the game: in the eyes of its new protagonist, Detective John Carey, the «City of Angels» is nowhere near a happy paradise with a few bad eggs scattered around, as the fictional Lytton City was for his predecessor on the job, but is instead a place "*full of dirtbags, creeps, and losers*", as he bitterly announces a bare two minutes into the game upon learning that his cop friend has just been brutally murdered. One might ascribe this remark to a situation of stress, of course, but the plot of the game does little to dissipate that impression: indeed, *most* of the people you're going to meet are either dirtbags, creeps, or losers, sometimes all of those at the same time. Apart from a couple work colleagues, like the cute SID officer Julie Chester, and the grieving family members of the victims, there aren't a whole lot of people you meet in this game that are going to stir your sympathies.

The main plot of the game hardly rises above third-rate TV police drama, though in its final twists and turns it does try to borrow a page or two from both *Psycho* and *Silence Of The Lambs* (again, in progressive circles this has earned the game a reputation of being «transphobic», but it is hardly any more transphobic than either of the two aforementioned movies). Along the way, we get more or less stereotypical images of the various L.A. subcultures — from the hip-hop scene to the red lights district to the neo-Nazi community — none of which ultimately turn out to be in any way related to the major crimes of the game, but together constitute a somewhat coherent, if caricaturesque, depiction of the «seedy side» of the big city. (Given that we see almost nothing *but* the seedy side, I'd be more OK calling the game «L.A.-phobic» than «transphobic» — definitely not sure that its release earned «The Big Orange» a lot of reputation points). It feels as if either Dargan was much more interested in having you run through this gallery of stereotypes than in writing a proper police investigation story. At first, you do get around, gathering clues on and from various suspects, occasionally running into a red herring or two (like the neo-Nazi

guy); eventually, though, you end up looking more like an impartial observer of the ongoing horrors, until, at the end of the game, a lucky turn of events (in the guise of an involuntary canine assistant) suddenly leads you right to your destination. The ending is openly bad: ridiculously illogical and blatantly rushed, it pretty much negates all the effort Detective Carey puts into his investigation — you might as well simply have done nothing at all and just patiently waited until your last victim came along — and makes me suspect that the game was running over budget (the most standard explanation for all the rushed endings in video games, of which there are plenty).

That said, putting aside the corny ending and the stereotypical characters (on this issue I'll add some more thoughts below, in the *Atmosphere* section), the overall storyline of *Police Quest: Open Season* is hardly among the worst I've seen in the world of video gaming. You may very well be disappointed in the ending, but you will *probably* be intrigued enough, once you've started, to see the whole thing to its end. Along the way, there'll be at least one shootout, at least a couple of tense moments where you have to act quickly and decisively under pressure, and, of course, lots of talking with a variety of characters — don't expect any unusually sharp dialog or cleverness, because most of them generally say what they're expected to say in ways in which they're expected to say it, but then the game is all about ordinary police procedure applied to ordinary people, and ordinary people don't really talk the way they do in Coen brothers' movies. The main problem with the story is that some people have the talent to put genius inside the ordinary, and some don't; Tammy Dargan, not even with Chief Gates looking over her shoulder, certainly belonged to the latter category. The actions of her characters do not bear much individuality, and their dialog typically walks the line between triteness and corniness, with an occasional quasi-philosophical joke now and then ("*Dude, nothing sticks in my mind... I'm a product of the Seventies*", a corner store owner confesses to our detective when asked one of the possible questions). It's not too bad, and it's not too good, just okay, really.

Mind you, however, that there is *NOTHING* whatsoever in this game to deserve the death warrant on the part of The Digital Antiquarian: "*this game takes its demonization of all that isn't white, straight, and suburban to what would be a comical extreme if it wasn't so hateful*". This super-strong statement is then backed by exactly *two* examples: (a) the serial killer is a transvestite (oh gee, let's toss *Silence Of The Lambs* into the trash bin as well while we're at it); (b) one of the in-game police files describes a street gang that consists of "*unwed mothers on public assistance*" — something that could certainly be construed as offensive if it was not totally taken out of its general humorous context; the tradition of thinking up hilariously exaggerated descriptions for criminals and gangs goes all the way back to the first *Police Quest*. Anyway, if one needs to dig *that* deep inside the bowels of the game to find something «hateful» about it — reading those files is completely optional, for the most part — then it is clear enough that some people just need to read so much more into this thing than it actually

contains. For sure, if you happen to share some extreme «defund-the-police-to-solve-all-our-problems» mentality, you'll find every bit of the game offensive — but you'll probably do the same with each of the previous games in the series as well, and even more probably, you won't even be interested in trying any one of them out *or* reading this review in the first place.

Puzzles

In each of Jim Walls' *Police Quest* games the most difficult thing had always been not to solve any particular case per se, but to solve it in exactly the right way — which meant faithfully sticking to all the minutiae of police procedure in order to get the maximum score. This principle was carried over to the new design team as well. The actual «puzzles» in *Open Season*, as a rule, are quite straightforward. You have to collect evidence, exhaust dialog trees with witnesses and experts, and, occasionally, turn up in the right places at the right times — that's more or less all you have to do until the game enters its final (and most bizarre) stage. But there are lots of things you could *forget* to do along the way and get penalized. Forgot to take notes after questioning an important witness — points docked. Forgot to submit your next report — points docked. Forgot to take a photo at the next crime scene — points docked. Forgot to present evidence to SID *before* turning it in to storage — points docked, and so on and on.



The main problem with this (generally logical and meaningful) design is that, ultimately, it does not matter. Forget to do all these things, be a sloppy and irresponsible cop all the way through, and all you end up with at the end of the game is a low overall score that you aren't even properly reminded of unless you bother to check the separate and unintrusive stats screen every once in a while. True, missing a couple of *really* important things — like having to go through the same annoying shooting exercises each day of the game — will eventually result in a permanent game over, but for the most part, you have nothing but your conscience to worry about. It would have at least been nice to have some sort of «Sleuth-o-Meter» displayed at the end of the game, or have some official judgement passed on you by your commanding officer, but ultimately the game leads either straight to your death if you do something really stupid or careless, or to your commendation for solving the case (which, honestly, should have instead gone to the dog, who does most of your work for you).

It certainly does not help that, with all the myriad of micro-managing mini-tasks set out before Detective Carey, some of the challenges are hopelessly bugged; for instance, some actions performed at the «wrong» time (that is, before or after some other actions) can leave you without the coveted points, even though there is absolutely no logical explanation for why that is other than an elementary programmer's mistake, not corrected in any of the game's ensuing patches. This is also a part of *Police Quest's* legacy — for a game that prides itself on teaching the player the meaning of discipline, it sure is ridiculously buggy — and it's a psychologically nasty blow for completionists, who can waste hours trying to do everything right only to discover, at the end of the game, that life is out there to punish you for your effort, not for your laziness.

This is particularly surprising when you realize how much work went into, for instance, the writing of the game's dialog when it comes to interaction with the game's NPCs. Typically, Sierra games have a very limited number of reactions when you try to use various random objects from your inventory on people or things around you; in *Open Season*, however, you can expect *something* to happen when flashing your badge — or, for that matter, even an empty glass jar from your toolkit — not only at your colleagues, superiors, or witnesses, but even at random patrons in the local bar. The writers really saw to it that the city came alive, or that you would not get *too* bored in the typical adventure game situation of being stuck on a puzzle and resorting to the «try everything on everyone» technique to break through. I honestly wouldn't mind if a bit of that verve were spent on filtering out bugs instead, but I do admire the effort.

Outside of the usual inventory-based puzzles and dialog trees, the game does not offer a lot of extra challenges. The driving system, earlier removed in *Police Quest II* and reinstated in *Police Quest III*, is once again removed, perhaps because of negative feedback for the third game. The shooting range, which you have to beat in order to stay alive, is a trivial task for anybody with relatively decent eyesight, which makes it particularly annoying when you have to complete it at least three times (they could have at least varied the challenge, but it's always the same). There is one shootout sequence where you have to be just a little bit nimble, and a few cases where you have to make split-second decisions to avoid near-instant death, but that's about it, I think. In this way, *Open Season* does not break with tradition — *Police Quest* had always taken pride in being strictly in the adventure game camp and nowhere else, which makes it all the more surprising how quick Tammy Dargan would be to break with that tradition when she would turn the franchise into the *S.W.A.T.* simulator the very next year.

In terms of «player comfort», *Open Season* shares Sierra's general ideology of the mid-1990s, copied over from LucasArts: relatively few death opportunities (cropping up in about 4-5 situations which are clearly rife with danger, so you'll probably be prepared) and no chances of softlocking yourself out of the game by doing something you're not supposed to do, like dropping a key item — well, except when you fall victim to one of the game's many bugs, some of which still remain unpatched. (Like I

already said, it's pretty easy to softlock yourself out of the highest score, though). You *do* have a small chance to get stuck near the end of the game, because both Jim Walls' *and* Tammy Dargan's *Police Quest* are typically at their weakest the moment it comes down to the protagonist having to think a little outside the box and improvise, instead of rigidly clinging to prescribed police procedure. As long as 99% of your time is occupied by investigating crime scenes, talking to witnesses / suspects / work colleagues etc., filing reports, and practicing your shooting, it's OK. But the final set of puzzles, in stark contrast to the general spirit of the game, is purely nonsensical. The most glaring example (*spoiler alert!*) is when, for some unexplainable reason, you have to lasso a suspicious dog in the random hope that it might lead you to the killer — is that a standard prescribed tactic for an LAPD officer? — and in order to lasso the dog, you have to procure yourself a barely visible piece of rope from an inconspicuous paper bag in a garbage dump that you most likely have already inspected several times in the first part of the game. Because, you know, it's a normal thing — in L.A., if you need a piece of rope for some reason, your obvious destination is the nearest garbage dump. Because, you know, who'd want to spend a chunk of one's meager police officer salary on a piece of rope from a local hardware store?

Still, I do not want to create the impression that the *entire* game rides that kind of ridiculousness; clearly, the final stretch was done in a hurry when the team discovered it was running over budget or something. For the most part, puzzle-wise, it's okay: not great, not terrible, like most Sierra games from that period. And given how many different types of reactions you can get by trying out «wrong» solutions to your issues, it seems rather clear that the main emphasis was on the ambience, rather than on all the brainstorming — so let's get to the ambience already.

Atmosphere

According to the general critical perspective on *Open Season*, nowhere does that game suffer as much and show the cringey deficiencies of its time as in the overall presentation of its scene. Los Angeles, the city "*of dirtbags, creeps, and losers*", lives up to its sweeping characterization by Detective Carey in the opening, with its only positive characters to be found way up there in Parker Center — white, smiling, and 100% loyal to their duty — while everybody and everything else is a grotesquely twisted caricature of reality, ranging from psychopathic



monsters on the prowl to uncultured black hoodlums, whores, gay queens, and other riff-raff. If you want a single clean spot in the entire city, get busy procuring yourself a Parker Center ID.

While there certainly is a modicum of truth in such an impression, let us also not forget that this is a (slightly soapy) police drama, meaning that it *has* to concentrate on "dirtbags, creeps, and losers" by its very definition; condemning *Open Season* for sticking to the «police good, scumbags bad» principle would be like complaining that *The Wire* never once gave us a guided tour of The Baltimore Museum of Art. The game does try quite hard to depict those areas of L.A. that you pass through as a life-during-wartime zone: the overriding colors are gray and brown, garbage and gang-related graffiti are everywhere, and absolutely nobody is happy in any way, other than an occasional crazy or two — attitudes generally range from openly hostile and aggressive to wary and vigilant. But there are quite a few characters written and acted out in order to evoke sympathy from the player: the widow of the downed police officer, the desperate mother of the black boy who became a collateral victim, even the working ladies in the red district are all presented as... well, as people worthy to be protected by Detective Carey, let's put it that way. Stereotypical, sure, but worthy.

Unfortunately, because you do not get to drive around the city, you only get to experience isolated «pockets» of it; still, I would say that it manages to paint a more expressive portrait of an urban environment than the previous two *Police Quests*, with much more attention dedicated to specific details. NPCs that are not directly related to your quest are relatively scarce, but they do exist and can be interacted with in different ways. The locations themselves are fairly varied — you get to see suburban residences in both white and black areas of the city, a posh rapper mansion, a creepy neo-Nazi den, a «working girl» establishment, an indie movie theater, a barroom where cops like to hang out after work... well, nothing that rises above the usual tropes, but certainly more diverse and representative than it used to be in *Police Quest III*.

One specific criticism of the game was in its representation of African-American characters and especially their speech patois ("yo, I be fly today" is the most often quoted example). According to Dargan, her primary inspiration for writing characters such as «Raymond Jones The Third» and «Yo Money» was Fab Five Freddy's [Fresh Fly Favor: Words And Phrases Of The Hip Hop Generation](#), one of those humorous «first-source» slang dictionaries whose typical problems are that (a) it only represents one particular slice of dialect from one particular location, (b) inevitably gets embellished by its own creator in the most subjective ways possible, and (c) gets terribly dated a year or two after publication. On the other hand, I believe that this problem, too, is much exaggerated — the actual African-American actors who voiced those roles seem to have had little problem with the jargon, and for about 90% of the time, it does not deviate too terribly from speech patterns that persist up to this day (and, in fact, are steadily adopted more and more by progressively-oriented white folks). If, every once in a while, a

"*this be my hood*" or two creeps in, well, hell, I've seen Instagram photos subtitled "*this be my hood*" without any tongue-in-cheek attitude, so let's not get too riled up about things that just aren't worth it. (I have only recently read an interminable discussion on Reddit about the allegedly embarrassing use of the word *hella* by a teenage character in *Life Is Strange*, and couldn't stop wondering about how much more productive the discussion would have been if it tried to keep strictly focused on the sociolinguistic aspects, instead of constantly derailing into silly emotional outbursts of «*who the hell talks like that?*» and «*what business do those French game designers have trying to mimic American teen lingo?*», even though the actual dialog was written by an American writer).

Stereotypical or not, I might add that the writers did a pretty good job supplying most of the characters in the game with *some* sort of personality. For Jim Walls, making his city of Lytton come alive always seemed like an afterthought — even when the game featured bystanding NPCs, they were, at most, procured with a generic replica or two ("*Good day, Officer! Nice weather, isn't it?*"); only in *Police Quest III* some of the characters began developing a little character, by which time it was already too late (and, by the way, I think it was probably Jane Jensen, rather than Walls, who was responsible for advancing those NPCs from pure mannequin stage to something slightly advanced). In *Police Quest: Open Season*, on the other hand, the morgue assistant will be cracking jokes non-stop, the morgue receptionist will be an empty-headed girl with nothing but nail polish on her mind ("*you have an appointment to shoot your gun? I have an appointment to get my nails done!*"), the tow yard guard will be a personage out of an imaginary Coen Brothers movie, the neo-Nazi thug will use the F-word more frequently than any hero in any Tarantino flick, and the psychotherapist at the health care center will say stuff like "*please don't touch my plant, she doesn't like to be handled, she had a bad experience once, she still hasn't gotten over it*". Much, if not most, of this will be predictable, some of it will be cringeworthy, a bit of it will be smart, but on the whole, meeting new people in the game is always accompanied with a touch of intrigue.

And a touch of tension, too. In an odd way, I cannot help thinking about the overall atmosphere of *Police Quest: Open Season* without placing it in the context of the other Sierra game that was being polished at the same time and with which it shares quite a few features in terms of graphic and gameplay design — Jane Jensen's *Gabriel Knight: Sins Of The Fathers*. Although the latter is, without any questions, FAR superior to the Gates-Dargan project, both games focus on adding a permanent sinister layer on things you'd normally think of as relatively familiar, cuddly, and safe (New Orleans is no longer the «Big Easy» capital of jazz and Mardi Gras, but the central residence of the spirit of Black Voodoo; Los Angeles is no longer an embodiment of the spirit of Hollywood, but a constant reminder of the aftermath of the Rodney King riots). This was, on the whole, a period when Sierra On-Line was «going dark», subtly shifting its focus from light comedy to more mature themes,

and Daryl Gates' vision of contemporary L.A. as a war zone, regardless of its degree of realism or bigotry, strangely enough, fits pretty well into this evolving paradigm. I cannot for a moment admit to really digging this atmosphere, but I get it, and I certainly recognize its right to existence. Let us now take a brief look at the technical means used to create it.

Technical features

Graphics

Unquestionably the most innovative and — for its time — technically impressive aspect of *Open Season* was its visual artistry. This was Sierra's first (and, ironically, last) adventure game that almost completely forsook both hand-painted and pure digital art in favor of actual photoshots of real exteriors and interiors of L.A. that would consequently be scanned and edited into digital backdrops; likewise, all the static and dynamic action for playable and non-playable characters was produced through motion capture technology used on real actors. Essentially, this was just one step shy of full-motion video, which Sierra would



endorse two years later, but not quite there yet; however, compared to the studio's other games from the same year — such as *Gabriel Knight* or *Leisure Suit Larry 6* — this was a huge step up, not very revolutionary, perhaps, in terms of the overall video game perspectives (the animated sprites in something like the original *Mortal Kombat* put their equivalents in *Police Quest* to shame), but very much so in terms of a realistic, immersive approach to adventure games.

Alas, like so many other things, these particular technologies have not aged particularly well; not quite as awfully, that is, as most instances of early 3D modeling, but still, the hand-painted and animated art from the above-mentioned games looks *much* better on modern day monitors than all the «photo-realistic» stuff in *Open Season*. For one thing, «realism» means perfunctory pragmatism — in 1993, the only reason to admire most of those shots was how unusually realistic they looked on your screen, but now that standards for «realism» have jumped sky high compared to those days, we can only enjoy the vistas of *Open Season* if they convey a certain aesthetics, and conveying aesthetics was probably the last thing on the minds of the game's developers. What you get is simply a generic, uninteresting, and poorly pixelated approximation of various places in Los Angeles. Like [Parker Center](#) — you could argue that the game at least preserves a snapshot of the exterior of this historical

landmark before it was demolished in 2019, but the problem is that the building always looked terrible (not that you'd expect police stations to look aesthetically pleasing anywhere other than the *Resident Evil* universe), and gazing at a 640x480 representation of a corner of it on a big screen is hardly going to do much for its looks.

Another thing is the color palette: while the overriding brown and ash-grey colors of the game clearly have a symbolic importance, it's ultimately more than a little depressing to spend the entire game in this setting, as opposed to the generally bright and uplifting colors of Lytton. The only times this impression changes are the predictable environments of the morgue (mostly white, of course) and the Itty-Bitty Club (where everything is drenched in more red than David Lynch's Black Lodge). Taken together with the low resolution, this combination makes certain environments look like a chaotic mess of drab, vomit-colored pixels (like the interior of Kim's five-and-dime store, for instance). In the end, the pictures of the game fail to make it look memorable, pretty, or sinister; anything it brings to the table in terms of atmosphere is rather conveyed by means of sound than visuals.

The animated sprites, brought to life with motion capture technology used on real actors, are also fairly average, even for the standards of 1993. It's not nearly as embarrassing as those moments in Sierra's early FMV games, like *Phantasmagoria*, where everybody was so proud of the new technology that you had to waste away lots of precious seconds watching actors slowly fling back their hair, leisurely stretching in the middle of the room, or closing an average door with as much cautious diligence as they could muster, just because, you know, they *could*. Here, too, you sometimes have to endure an NPC take a moment or two of vanity before engaging in dialog with your character, but it is never quite *that* obvious; even so, it is hard to imagine somebody in this modern day and age being impressed by those bits of gratuitous gesticulation.

Surprisingly, there are next to no cutscenes and almost no close-ups of characters throughout the game — and in those few instances when you *do* get a relatively large realistic face up on screen, there is nothing particularly attractive or impressive about it, unlike the highly evocative visual art of the close-ups in, say, *Gabriel Knight*; again, it's all simply about «hey, that's a real person's face articulating in the middle of your monitor, how cool is *that?*» — well, it wasn't even such big news back in 1993, let alone a quarter century later. In short, this is just another story of how visual realism never really works if it is turned into a stand-alone value for its own sake. Moving on.

Sound

The original game, released in November 1993, only came out on floppy disks, with no space for a full audio soundtrack; all the text had to be read, and the sound was limited to various audio effects and a basic musical soundtrack thrown together by

Neal Grandstaff, one of Sierra's composers in residence and a major presence on most of the company's games from 1993 to 1995 (you can easily tell when, for instance, the elevator muzak theme from *Leisure Suit Larry 6* unexpectedly crops up inside the elevator in Parker Center, most likely producing a leery chuckle from any regular Sierra customer at the time). The score was no better and no worse than it had always been in the *Police Quest* series: actually, Neal had a seemingly tough job to follow Jan Hammer's professional work in *Police Quest 3*, but I think he did alright, focusing a little less on making the whole thing sound like a stereotypically police soap opera and a little more on supporting the atmosphere of darkness, tragedy, and suspense. The corniest moments are the ones that take place in public or «culturally marked» locations — such as the funky theme played in the mansion of «Yo Money», or the strip club muzak, or the goofy variation on the Horst Wessel Lied playing on the stereo in the apartment of the neo-Nazi guy — but even those are good enough for a laugh.

As for the voice acting, the whole wide world had to wait for two more years, baited breath and all, for the CD-ROM edition of the game with full voice coverage. In the end, all of the voice actors were different from the original actors used for motion capture, and none of the names were recognizable — apparently, the budget was so small that the studio could only allow itself a bunch of relative unknowns (at least they managed to avoid filling in the gaps with Sierra's own employees, as they had to do in the earliest days of voice-powered games). The result is a game full of rather predictable, but not awful performances — I struggle to remember even a single job that made an actual impression on me, but the only moments of genuine cringe are associated with the actors working too hard to exaggerate their accents or speech deficiencies. Bob Liberman's panicky stuttering for Russel Marks, the nervous owner of the movie theater, is probably the worst, and Denise Tapscott also tries way too hard to portray Sherry Moore, the morgue receptionist, as the quintessential nothing-but-nail-polish-on-her-mind girl, though the blame should probably lie on the voice director rather than the recording artist.

Unfortunately, Doug Boyd, voicing the main character of the game, remains throughout the very epitome of mediocrity. One could argue that completely stripping his hero from any sort of genuine emotionality works reasonably well in work-related situations (that's what «professional conduct» is all about, after all), but this eventually spills even onto situations where the hero is *supposed* to show some rage, and he still comes through like a wet blanket. Almost every other character in the game has at least one or two emotional states — for instance, the coroner in the morgue can relatively easily switch between the «cynically humorous tongue-in-cheek» approach and the «deadly-serious-and-preoccupied» manner — but Detective Carey is clearly a rock, an island, and a virtual intelligence interface rolled into one, which makes playing for him not particularly rewarding. Then again, maybe that's exactly the kind of character Chief Gates needed to reflect his vision.

Returning to the issue of accents and vernaculars that was briefly touched upon in the *Atmosphere* section, if you're real

sensitive about it you might probably want to restrict yourself to the non-talkie version of the game, so as to avoid too much pain from the hyperbolized deliveries of African-American and Asian characters — I don't find them as caricaturesque as some of the game's reviewers, though; stereotypical, yes, but hardly out there to make the average white gamer snicker at the goofiness of all them «colored» people. Bottomline is, everybody is trying quite hard to impersonate precisely the stereotype they are being thrown — the bratty / arrogant lady of the famous rapper, the chatty Southern old guy guarding the tow station, the pretentious and snobby psychotherapist lady at the health center, the sleazy-but-caring Madame of the house at the club, the list goes on and on and it gets a little tiresome, but never truly out of hand because, fortunately, all the actors only have a very limited amount of lines to go on.

Interface

The game uses Sierra's standard point-and-click interface with but a few stylistic modifications; for instance, the toolbar normally remains concealed from view behind a simple *PoliceQuest* logo which transforms into a toolbar only upon being swiped with the mouse (although you can toggle the alternative mode) — a nice design solution for the widescreen format of the game's visuals (as opposed to, e.g., pure black bars in *Gabriel Knight*). In general, though, the gameplay mechanics is absolutely typical for a mouse-driven Sierra game at the time, with no options whatsoever except for the regular «walk», «look», «operate», and «talk» icons. The only compliment I can dish out here is that, typically, each single game screen contains quite a wealth of clickable hotspots, and it *does* make sense to try all the available options on them — this is not quite on the level of *Larry 6*, where you could get a humorous response from completely random actions such as «talking» to «flowers» or «banisters», but compared to, for instance, the relative sparseness of *Police Quest 3, Open Season* does ask the player to experiment with its limited system of choices, which shows that the designers did care about the game, after all.

On the other hand, the available options beyond the usual inventory-operating and dialog mechanisms are almost non-existent in the game. Several times Detective Carey has to go to the shooting range, with a very trivial and unrewarding shooting mini-game involved (remaining exactly the same all three times you have to complete it to maximize your score), and



one time there is a shootout where (provided you do pick up the shotgun) it's also a rather trivial matter of timely reaction and absolutely nothing else. Speaking of shootouts, death situations are rare in the game, but they do exist and sometimes crop up in the least expected situations (such as repeatedly «harrassing» the photographer at the station — see, the game actually gives a shit about woman rights!), although the accompanying animations are surprisingly timid (usually the screen just dissolves to red-and-gray around you — lazy as heck).

The challenge of driving around, as I have already mentioned, has disappeared; moving from one location to another is accomplished by means of an in-game map where points of interest are gradually unlocked through the game — again, quite similar to moving around in *Gabriel Knight*, though nowhere near as stylish (for instance, different locations on the *GK* map were all marked with symbolic icons, helping you to quickly and efficiently identify them, whereas the ones in *Police Quest* are all presented as boring red dots, and you have to hop from one to another to check their pop-up tags — annoying!). Most of the locations, once you have indicated the desire to check them out, are introduced with a static animation, which is cute the first time around and then, of course, becomes time-consuming — you'll have to take in the sights of the butt-ugly exterior of Parker Center so many times while playing, you might start considering a career in the demolition business.

On the whole, everything about the game's interface serves the same «pragmatic» goals as the game's script and mechanics: even the font of the subtitles is arguably the least aesthetic font ever to be found in a Sierra game — a small, ugly, typewriter-style monstrosity to emphasize the procedural routine-ness of Detective Carey's work. Since this was an intentional part of the design, it's hard to blame the game for that, and it *does* do a pretty good job at making you feel bored, drab, and miserable with all these visual and stylistic settings — the only question is, *do* you want to feel this kind of miserable?

Verdict: *One of those... umm... «culturologically stimulating» experiences that are more fun to mentally process post-factum than to, well, «experience» firsthand.*

«Good» or «bad», *Police Quest: Open Season* is, at the least, a very revealing product of its time — and, in being that, is a curious document of the American state of mind in the early 1990s. While it is nowhere near a true classic of the adventure game genre — next to titles like *Gabriel Knight* or *Day Of The Tentacle* from the same year,



it can at best limp along like an inconspicuous lapdog — it has one serious advantage over everything else in sticking to realism and true relevance rather than escapist artistic fantasy; and, with the advent of new technical possibilities as well as the «maturation» of the adventure game genre as a whole, it has the chance of enhancing that realism in more detailed and psychologically subtle fashion than any of the Jim Walls-led games in the franchise.

The only problem is, transitioning from fantasy to realism in a video game rather dramatically raises the stakes, because this is where the video game market enters into straightforward competition with «serious» art, a competition in which it is almost inevitably bound to lose. The plot, the dialog, the atmosphere of *Open Season* could hardly be on par with even a mid-level police-themed soap, and the advantageous factor of personal immersion is hardly enough to compensate for that. Ultimately, the game fails because it is too boring, clichéd, and predictable, not because it tries to enforce Daryl F. Gates' vision of the black-and-white contrast between the Corrupted Criminal and the Courageous Cop. In trying to show us the ordinary routine of the law enforcement universe, Gates and Dargan set the same serious challenge for themselves as Jim Walls did earlier — try to make us find excitement and fun in the ordinary — but lack the talent to even begin overcoming that challenge.

It does not help matters, either, that the game ultimately violates its own consistency and, when it comes to the denouement, chucks all that police realism outside the window, going for an absurd, cheap horror movie vibe at the end that suddenly brings it onto the turf of contemporary ridiculously titillating experiences like *Night Trap*. It is not even the corny vibe of the ending that feels wrong, but rather its blatant incongruity with the rest of the game — whose main message during its first 80% seems to have been along the lines of "*Look at me! I'm tedious and generic, but at least I'm not cheesy!*", but then the final 20% are like "*Okay, now I'm cheesy and there's nothing wrong with it!*". It's downright the equivalent of trying to quench a raging fire with a can of gasoline.

And yet, despite all that, I still found myself entertained while replaying the game for this review. Perhaps it is just the usual predictable bias of an adventure game fan, but somehow I find some odd value in disasters such as these from the early days of videogaming. I can see that, while it is difficult to throw the tag of «*labor of love*», the *Police Quest* team really made a serious effort to push forward some boundaries, and I appreciate the fact that they were not simply imitating the legacy of Jim Walls, but deliberately tried to combine its fundamental principles with a more realistic and gritty take on the darker side of life in the big American city. There is no doubt that, if given a chance to be handled properly, the franchise could transform into something genuinely great — transitioning from the video game market answer to *Miami Vice* into an equivalent of *The Wire*. Instead, Sierra preferred to go the technical-tactical route and turn the whole thing into a series of straightforward simulators, squashing any further aspirations at intelligent story-telling long before becoming squashed itself.

Ultimately, this has resulted in a situation where the adventure game genre, having begotten so many first-rate *detective* games (e.g. the *Tex Murphy* or *Nancy Drew* series), has remained deprived of an equally first-rate *police* game — and with both the police theme and the point-and-click genre not going through the best of times at the moment, there's little chance of remedying that situation in the foreseeable future. Which, in turn, is a bit of a saving grace for *Police Quest: Open Season*, a game that I do not really like a lot but still open-heartedly recommend to those seeking to expand their gaming horizons. You probably won't fall in love, either, but you *will* be in for something... «different». I think even the self-professed haters would confess to getting an unforgettable impression, or else how could they generate so much bile?