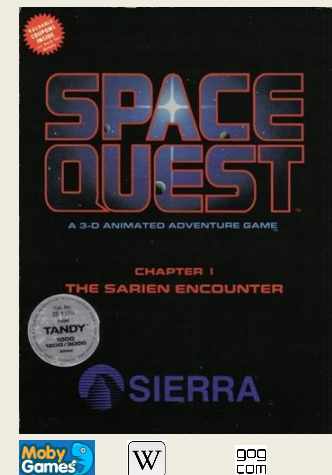


Space Quest: The Sarien Encounter

Studio: Sierra On-Line
Designer(s): Marc Crowe / Scott Murphy
Part of series: Space Quest
Release: October 1986
Main credits: Programming: Sol Ackerman, Scott Murphy, Ken Williams
 Development System: Jeff Stephenson, Chris Iden
 Graphics: Mark Crowe
Useful links: Playthrough: [Part 1](#) (60 mins.) [Part 2](#) (57 mins.)



Basic Overview

In 1986, with *King's Quest* firmly established as a permanently running series and already aiming for extra depth and scope with its third installment, *To Heir Is Human*, Sierra made its first, still quite tentative, move into the sci-fi market. The punch came from two of Sierra's residents, Mark Crowe and Scott Murphy, the former of which had already spent a lot of time working on previous games as graphics designer, while the latter was a relatively new acquired programming talent. Both had already worked together on Sierra's fun reimagining of Disney's *The Black Cauldron*, and, in the process, formed a partnership which is still fondly remembered today by fans around the world — the Two Guys From Andromeda, adopted fathers of Mr. Roger Wilco, the well-distinguished space janitor from outer space.

Although *Space Quest* was hardly the first sci-fi game on the market (naturally, the very status of the computer as a hi-tech gadget presupposes that, from the very beginning of the industry, sci-fi themes would be firmly integrated into computer lore), but it *was* the first text-and-graphic adventure game to share the honour. And, like almost any revolutionary breakthrough, in retrospect nothing is easier than picking on its numerous flaws. With drastically underwritten characters, laughably short running time, thoroughly imbalanced puzzles, it is quite a rough beginning. As with *King's Quest*, it ultimately took the authors at least a couple more efforts to get all of it right and smoothly running. However, back in 1986 everything was so



novel and exciting that the game quickly caught on in sales with the first installments of *King's Quest* (100,000 sales at the time was an extremely big achievement).

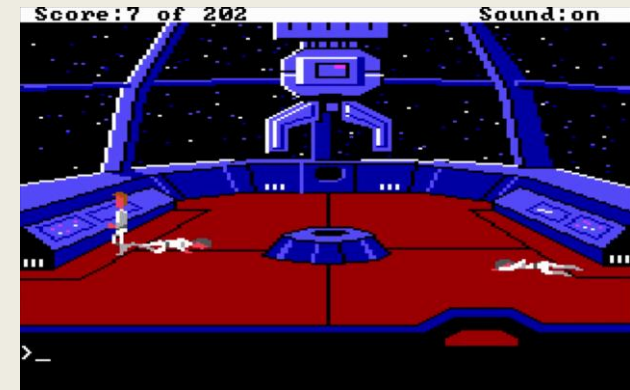
The idea itself was simple as pie. As Roger Wilco (more precisely, as a self-styled character: not until the third game does the name «Roger Wilco» become resident, independent of the player's choice), you are working as a janitor aboard some space craft which houses some fabulous gizmo called The Star Generator which is kidnapped by aliens called Sariens whose ship must be hunted down and destroyed in order to save the human race — not a particularly innovative concept in the annals of sci-fi history. But one thing was established here once and for all: the plotline would always be secondary to the atmosphere, the imagery, and, most important, the unique brand of sci-fi humor pioneered by the Two Guys.

Content evaluation

Plotline

The plot of *Space Quest* is so simple that I seriously suspect it was cobbled together in about five minutes already after most of the settings, images, and jokes had been introduced. Having never been much of a sci-fi buff, I cannot tell to what exact degree (100% or, say, more like 99.5?) all the main ingredients have been hobgoblinned from existing paperbacks, comic books, movies, and *Star Trek* re-runs, but arguably for each element in the game you can still find a couple dozen possible prototypes. For all their inventiveness, the Two Guys never tried to step into the shoes of Clarke or Kubrick; their object was the cheap, trashy version of sci-fi, and, come to think of it, they did not have much choice — ever tried making a best-selling computer game out of *A Space Odyssey*? Well, there you go.

In the end, the plot's saving grace is its humor aspects. Where Roberta Williams kind of walked the line between lightweight and serious (her Graham and Alexander might sometimes get into comic situations, but at the end of the day they were still your basic heroic types), Mark and Scott plunge head first into goofy, whacked-out parody. To begin the begin, your «(anti-)hero» is a janitor — and not a very good one at that. Thus it is already ironic that, for such a clutz in dayjob terms, he is saving the world on a more frequent basis than James Bond. Next, much of the time the game is advanced through decidedly non-standard solutions — including, for instance, one of the oddest ways ever invented to dispose of a huge carnivorous monster



and an even odder method of self-disguising in order to infiltrate the enemy's ranks. And... and...

...well, the real problem here is that it is hard to think of much else since the game is so gruesomely short. All of it, except for the outro, takes place in but three different locations — two spaceships and a large planet mostly filled with yellow sand, brown rocks and purple skies. You escape from one ship, find a second one, then infiltrate a third one, and that's about it. When the game is so short, it cannot help but convey the feeling of merely a preparation stage for something bigger and better, and this serves as an excuse for all kinds of plotheoles and goofs. Why the heck was the Sarien Spider Droid dropped on Kerona? How did Roger's ship manage to approach the Deltaur without being spotted? What about the strange lack of language barrier between Roger and the Sariens? But ultimately none of this really matters, because if the entire game is just like a test stage, well then, test stage it is.

Puzzles

The *Space Quest* series take a specially twisted sort of pride in the illogical nature of most of their puzzles — this is, after all, a spoof, and spoof games are supposed to have spoof puzzles. Consequently, I have no problem with the idea of dispatching a monster in a way you are *least* likely to think of when faced with the necessity of dispatching a monster. But regardless of these general considerations, the fact remains that *The Sarien Encounter* does not have a fairly good balance of complex vs. simple puzzles. Thus, the entire first section (on board the Arcana) is fairly trivial, provided you know the basic rules of Sierra game playing (leave no stone unturned, etc.). Then you are on Kerona, and whoosh, the difficulty level soars so high you can get stuck for days. Then you are on your way to Ulence Flats, and back to mostly trivial again — with one exception (concerning learning your next destination).

In brief, *most* of the puzzles are obvious, but a few are unjustifiedly complex. Of course, that is the usual bane of early Sierra games, when the art of puzzle-making was still in its initial phase, but in any case, the first *Space Quest* is probably not a game you shall fondly remember in terms of brainstorming. In one case, finding the right solution depends on whether you are able to discover a vital object that is, quite literally, not seen *at all* on the screen — you all but have to *guess* it is lying there. In another case, it depends on whether you are able to repeat a certain action multiple times when you really have very little incentive to do it. To top it all, it is impossible to get 202 out of 202 possible points without indulging in a couple Easter Egg-



like activities of a hilarious, but completely random nature. [On the positive side, this certainly does add to the game's replayability, but in a rather cruel way at that.]

Sierra's regular bane, arcade sequences, is also a serious pain in the ass. At one point, you are required to navigate your vehicle ("sand skimmer") through a set of rocks — a sequence that is as poorly animated as it is poorly controlled. (A very similar arcade exists in *Leisure Suit Larry III*, but at least it is better programmed in that game). The player's interaction with the Sariens is mostly limited to a series of «quickdraw» battles where the main point seems to be that you have to press the fire key *before* you can even make sure that an enemy is present, otherwise you're toast. And then there is the slot machines sequence — aaarrgh! Sometimes it seems to me that the main point of having slot machines in so many Sierra games is to teach the player how to operate in Quick Save / Quick Restore mode. At least in *Leisure Suit Larry* you have the «thinking man's alternative» to play some blackjack, but apparently in Ulence Flats, cards are strictly off the table.

Atmosphere

One thing to be said in defense of the Two Guys is that they certainly did their homework on outer space mythology. For a game with such rudimentary graphics and such a limited plotline, a lot of effort went into making the whole thing believable. When you're in space, you're in space, and when you are suffocating from thirst amidst sandy dunes, well, that is exactly what you're doing. Graphics, text information, and characters' activities are all relatively detailed and well-thought out.

The major part of the atmosphere, though, is striking a careful balance between the horrid and the hilarious. On one hand, life in space ain't for the faint-hearted. Danger lurks on every corner and sometimes between corners. You absolutely never know when and how you might walk into a deathtrap. Much to the Two Guys' honor, being careful in this game actually pays off: most of the times, if you take the effort to look around and weigh your options, you can prevent yourself from being mashed, smashed, and pumped. Still, unless your sixth sense is truly overdeveloped, it is hardly possible to know everything beforehand, and you will definitely get a couple heart-jumps as the game goes on (heck, you might even get them in this modern age — a shock is still a shock even when it's in 16 colors).

On the other hand, all of the «horrid» elements are always compensated for with fun ones. The number of different ways to die is already large enough to warrant intentional attempts at suicide — although the deaths are only occasionally



accompanied with funny messages, and never with funny pictures («Space Quest Deaths» wouldn't really become a classic trademark until the third game in the series). Monsters, rather than truly scary, are either weird (like the spider droid) or hilarious (like the Orat). And even the superficially impenetrable Sariens turn out to have a goofy side about them if you stay on board their ship long enough to find that out. In somebody else's hands, this mix of humor and horror would be frustrating, but the Two Guys craft it in such a way that you never really find yourself torn between the two sides.

Technical features

Graphics

Since this is the earliest game in the series, graphics are obviously poor even for AGI standards. The sprite of Roger Wilco can hardly be looked upon without shudders, and many of the locations are illustrated in a very sketchy way. The contrast between the overwhelming yellow of the sands of Kerona, the overwhelming brown of the rocks of Kerona, and the overwhelming purple (sic!) of the skies of Kerona makes for a nice first impression — one of isolation and emptiness — but soon enough you begin to wonder if the real reason behind all the simplicity wasn't an overwhelmingly tight budget. Ship interiors mostly consist of look-alike corridors and identical doors, and the only place, in fact, that looks lively at all is the bar at Ulence Flats.

On the other side, the few screens that Marc Crowe took the time to develop do show dedication to the craft. Technical areas, computer panels, general spaceship design — all is done with attention to detail that was unprecedented for 1986. The best views are close-ups, of course, such as when Roger is sitting in the shuttle cockpit, but there are also some nifty space panoramas as well. Interestingly, some pictures are there just for the fun of it: for instance, there is a section where, in true *Star Wars* mode, you are going into an asteroid field, and you might probably think that it's another one of those damn arcades where you will have to evade nasty gray rocks, but it isn't — it's just a few seconds of «AGI cinema» that's done nicely enough for you to drop your controls and just enjoy the sequence for a few relaxed seconds.

Special kudos goes to funny cameo appearances by both the Blues Brothers and ZZ Top in the Ulence Flats bar; although sprite animation is easily the weakest thing about those early AGI games when it comes to graphics, these particular ones, with their thoroughly pixelated sunglasses and beards, are easily recognizable to anyone who has ever seen the real thing.



Apparently, though, the ZZ Top appearance was not taken lightly by the band itself, or their management, leading to a bit of trouble with Sierra — as if, for some reason, this appearance could have any negative impact on their career! (To be more precise, the actual trouble may have concerned the remade VGA version of the game rather than the original).

Sound

Well... the game does mark the first appearance of the famous *Space Quest Theme*, arguably Sierra's most recognizable tune after Al Lowe's Leisure Suit Larry theme. Other than that, it doesn't mark much of anything. Again, the Ulence Flats bar is the best place to appreciate the unlimited possibilities of the PC speaker, as it tries to emulate some sort of sci-fi age synth-pop theme for the alien band, something good-timey and crazy (namely, 'I Can't Turn You Loose') for the Blues Brothers, and something with a supposed rock beat (namely, 'Sharp Dressed Man' — specially dedicated to Mr. Roger Wilco!) for ZZ Top. The effort is commendable, but you *really* have to go out on a limb these days to fall for its charms.

Sometimes the sounds are an awful distraction — for instance, during the atrocious rock-avoiding arcade sequence, which is made even more unbearable as the speaker drives you crazy while you are trying to figure out just how often it is necessary to push the arrow keys in order to restore the game twenty times instead of fifty. Droid and emergency beeps and bleeps on board the Sarien ship are equally ugly. In the Kerona caves you are told about how the sound of dripping water soothes your nerves, but if it is my nerves we are talking about, it merely *gets* on them. In short, you're not missing much — in fact, you're only gaining — if you just play through the game with the sound turned off, turning it back on briefly for a laugh during the bar scene.

Interface

Space Quest's status as the first tentative step into something new and unknown is perhaps most evident in its parser system. Compared to *King's Quest III*, marketed at around the same time, it definitely takes a step back in terms of possibilities. For instance, once again you can't just type 'look' in order to get a general overview of your surroundings (although 'look around' does work, for some reason). The number of possible options to be performed with various objects is drastically limited, in fact, the number of objects themselves is so small that most of your time will be spent receiving messages like 'I don't understand' blah blah (and not even funny messages at that — the received answers, as compared to even already the second game in the series, are usually quite straightforward and boring). If you type 'look at the table', you are most likely to get a response like "You see a table".

Arcade sequences, as has already been mentioned, are also a pain in the neck. The only point of the slot machine experience is to make you suffer (as in, 'I am supposed to be an intelligent being of the planet Earth... so why the hell am I spending hours of my precious time spinning a stupid set of cherries and diamonds when it isn't even for *real* money?'), and don't get me started *again* on the sand skimmer sequence. In its place, they might have added a little extra spaceship-controlling sequences, which are, however, reduced here to rudimentary commands like 'pull throttle' and, oh yes — drumroll! — 'push button'.

Verdict: *Historically important*

The first *Space Quest* is not as perfect an introduction into the world of Roger Wilco as it could have been — it is, quite honestly, a rushed and semi-finished project, which might have something to do with (probably) lacking the same reverential technical support as was characteristic of Sierra's main golden-egg hen at the time, *King's Quest*. (In this respect, it is arguably one of the very few games in the Sierra canon where the later remade version seriously improves on the original). It is still worth playing through, though, at least once, if only to see where it all begins and experience firsthand just how much it has all changed since then. And it is also impressive that, despite all of its numerous limitations, the game still captured a solid part of its potential audience in its time, and, more importantly, that Ken Williams gave the Two Guys the green light on further proceedings — ones that helped eventually make *Space Quest* into a national phenomenon.

