Space Quest III: The Pirates Of Pestulon

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s):   **Marc Crowe / Scott Murphy**

Part of series: **Space Quest**

Release: March 24, 1989

Main credits: Programming: **Ken Koch, Scott Murphy, Doug Oldfield, Christopher Smith**
Development System: **Pablo Ghenis, Stuart Goldstein, Robert E. Heitman, Jeff Stephenson**
Graphics: **Mark Crowe**
Music: **Bob Siebenberg**

Useful links: Playthrough: [Part 1](#) (64 *mins.*)   [Part 2](#) (65 *mins.*)

Basic Overview

This review should probably come with a disclaimer stating that **Space Quest III** was, in fact, the very first Sierra adventure game that I played and that this may have something to do with the fact that it has since become ensconced in my brain as one of the best adventure games of all time, period. Then again, happy coincidences *do* happen, and Sierra On-Line *was* on a major roll in the late Eighties, and each time I happen to replay this game I still find joy in so many of its aspects that this is no more pure nostalgia than, say, listening to an ABBA album from my deepest childhood. More like I was just incredibly lucky.

Anyway, in my previous review I did mention that the second game in the *Space Quest* series was not all that hot, looking and feeling rushed and not really matching the imaginative and comic standards set by the first entry; nevertheless, it still found critical and commercial acceptance, largely through lack of any serious competition — almost any Sierra adventure game in 1987 would have. Fortunately for the fortunes of the Space Quest saga, technical progress came along and saved the day: advances in processing power, graphic resolutions, and digital sound technology led to a new generation of adventure games,

kickstarted with **King's Quest IV**, and with the development of Sierra's Creative Interpreter everybody at the company had to step up their game or get off the ship. The Two Guys From Andromeda deemed themselves worthy of the challenge, and delivered a brand new chapter in the adventures of Roger Wilco, space janitor — and when I say «brand new», I actually mean what I say, rather than just stick with an obvious cliché.

That the game would be a major technical improvement over the first two was understood — better graphics, addition of a musical soundtrack, and a vastly improved parser system were all Sierra's trademarks of that era — but the important thing is that along with technical improvements came substantial ones. Not only did Roger Wilco finally gain some personality in the game, becoming an iconic protagonist, but so did his creators, the Two Guys From Andromeda, by daring to put themselves in the game as its chief McGuffin. For the very first time, the game got a truly original story, an actual solid plot that managed to combine intrigue and suspense with acid satire. And, finally, hard as it is to explain, the game — and the entire Space Quest universe with it — *came to life*. This was not just an adventure game in which you had to crack a few puzzles, get from Point A to Point B and then to Point C, save the world and go home: **Space Quest III** introduced a parallel reality in which you actually wanted to spend time, like in a good RPG (OK, I know for sure *I* actually did, whereas all I wanted on the planet Labion was to get the hell outta there as soon as possible). And although the game had not yet slipped into the comfortably winning formula of the later, talkie-era *Space Quest* games, I find this to be the same kind of refreshing blessing which also made **Leisure Suit Larry II** from the same era into arguably the best Larry game — with the creators not yet obsessed with their own mythology and not yet chained to their own inside jokes and running gags.

Content evaluation

Plotline

Here is the catch: **Space Quest III** tells the single best story in all of **Space Quest** history, and yet in so many reviews of the game you shall find that the main complaint is always the same — the game has almost no plot! Yes and no, no and yes. The thing is, the «plot» is actually not introduced until about the middle of the game. Before that, Roger Wilco largely wanders around seemingly without purpose — first, inside the bowels of a huge interstellar garbage freighter, where his little escape pod has been sucked in as a piece of space debris; later, once he escapes the freighter, amidst the endless purple dunes of the lonesome planet Phleebhut, where his ship has brought him for no particular reason. It is not until a brief pit stop at the Monolith Burger («Over 20 Gazillion Served Galaxy Wide!») that Roger, seemingly by sheer accident, is able to discover the reason fate has landed him in this precise quadrant, and proceeds to fulfill his mission — free his own creators, the Two Guys

of Andromeda, from the pesky hands of the (software) Pirates of Pestulon and their terrifying leader, the 14-year old Elmo Pug.

This is certainly quite different from the first two games, where your purpose in life was clearly established just a few minutes into the game — and, of course, in both cases it had to do with saving the world from evil guys. If you ask me, though, saving your own authors from evil guys is a far more cool and creative purpose, not to mention one free of megalomaniacal clichés. Furthermore, if the previous plots were in themselves just comically enhanced facsimiles of every single cheap sci-fi thriller ever written, **The Pirates Of Pestulon** is the first (and only) game in the series whose chief satirical target is not so much the actual field of science of fiction as it is the growing software industry — the «Pirates» in question are, in fact, *software* pirates, running a huge underground organization which kidnaps talented programmers around the world and exploits their talents for the benefit of their young and insolent boss, Elmo. (There is a scene in the game where Roger witnesses ScumSoft executives in action, as they walk around tiny cubicles stuffed with programmers, cracking whips over their heads — no better metaphor could be imagined for the state of the software industry, and I suppose that to a large extent it is just as relevant today as it was back in 1989).
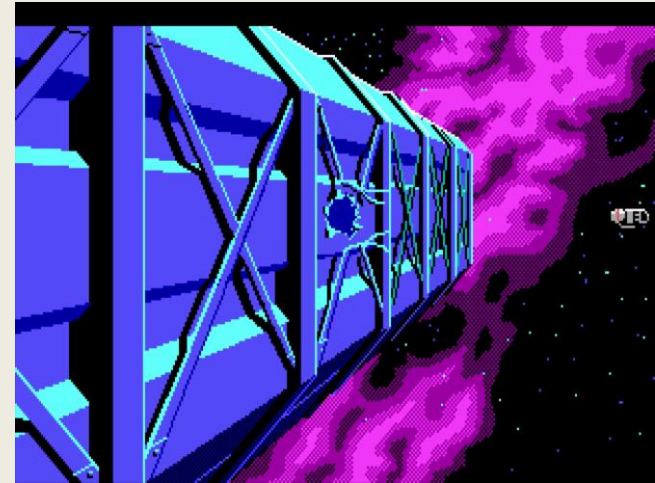
But while there most definitely *is* a plot, it is indeed also true that you have to spend a large part of the game (which is in itself relatively short) wondering when that plot is going to manifest itself — and it is perfectly all right. Because in addition to having one of the most original and biting plots in early adventure games, **Space Quest III** is also one of adventure gaming's earliest experiments in «open world-building». As soon as you get your ship and escape from the freighter, you are free to go anywhere you like — and even if «anywhere» only means three or four different locations, it still makes a huge difference from the strictly linear progression of the first two **Space Quests**, or even from the open-world ideology of the **King's Quest** series, where you were also free in your movements but the entire world was just one huge territory. **Space Quest III** actually gives you free rein to travel through space, landing on different planets, exploring them one after another, returning to old ones once you got bored with new ones — it creates a truly *immersive* experience which was sorely lacking in the previous games, and that is well worth a temporary lack of a storyline, I think.

Finally, **Space Quest III** has probably the most inventive and satisfying conclusion to a **Space Quest** game ever — tying up

loose ends by providing a concise and clear answer to the question of how the heck were the Two Guys From Andromeda able to end up as programmed characters in their own game, and leaving things wrapped up well enough to not require a sequel, but open enough to produce one if necessary. (Unfortunately, the next three games in the series left way too many questions open for fans to be satisfied). Everything here is on a small scale — no giant end-of-game explosions, no saving the world, no huge award ceremony — but that small scale is precisely what makes the refreshing difference.

Puzzles

Like everything else, puzzle design has been vastly improved in **Space Quest III**. First, because of the quasi-open-world setting, there are very few opportunities to get hopelessly stuck — if you forgot to obtain a vital object on one of the planets before moving on, you can always go back and retrieve it at any time. Second, the «moon logic» situations of **Space Quest II** have pretty much been wiped out: each single action that you have to perform is fully rational and may be deduced with relative confidence. Some progression is achieved through accidents, but even these accidents are the results of perfectly reasonable actions, such as ordering and consuming a meal at the Monolith Burger or shopping at the souvenir shop on Phleebhut. There is exactly *one*

moment in the entire game when I remember getting frustrated — after getting mugged by a huge rat in the bowels of the garbage freighter —what happens after that makes very little sense and is never properly explained... but *one* illogical situation in a Sierra adventure game is still a record of sorts.

As was already typical of Sierra games, some of the challenges have multiple solutions — well, actually, in this case only *one* challenge (overwhelming Terminator Arnoid) has properly multiple solutions, but both are equally complex and require a bit of creative thinking (as opposed to the «trick the rat and win some points» vs. «give it some of your treasure and lose points» dilemma of the previous generation). A few are based on timing (i.e. standing around and waiting for something to happen), which is never a good thing, but at least nothing ever depends on random encounters (the bane of early **King's Quest** games).

There are also several arcade sequences, but — surprise surprise! — they totally make sense and are even reasonably enjoyable. At the end of the game there is a monumental robot battle (the «Nuk'em Duk'em Robots», hilariously preceding

Duke Nukem by a good two years), followed by a frenzied shootout with some of ScumSoft's fighter ships sent in pursuit of Roger: both require very modest technical skill from the player and are won more through intelligence than finger nimbness (such as not forgetting to set the ship's speed to Attack before the battle!). The single most questionable and often criticized challenge is the «Astro Chicken» arcade that you absolutely have to play in order to set the plot in motion — but (a) you do not even need to win it in order to advance (though you do deprive yourself of a nifty amount of points if you keep losing); (b) most of the time, you can win by holding your finger on one single key (UP); (c) the Two Guys eventually apologize for the idea by lambasting themselves at the end of the game when offering their programming services to Ken Williams («What are your credits?» – «Ever heard of Astro Chicken?» – «No» – «Good!»). Anyway, this is one of the very, very few Sierra games in which the incorporated arcade sequences will probably not piss off adventure gamers too much.

Atmosphere

Space: the final frontier. This is the first game in the series which totally and utterly feels like a *Space* Quest: even when you are not spending time sitting in the cockpit of your ship or zipping between planets at light speed, the game almost never lets you forget about the vastness of the universe. There's the huge garbage freighter, full to the brim of various space garbage and rusty remains of all types of spacecraft. There's the lonely planet Phleebhut, consisting of endlessly stretching pink dunes and dark horizons with thunder and lightning as the only thing to break up the monotony. There's Monolith Burger, a tiny fast-food dot in between the endless stars. There's the volcanic planet Ortega, consisting of a bunch of rocks in pools of lava, above which

there is still nothing but the starry sky — and the moon of Pestulon, which you can watch through a telescope. It is not until you descend into the cramped underground bunkers of ScumSoft that you, very temporarily, lose touch with the starry skies — but not for long.

Just like in **Space Quest II**, this vast space is often way too lonesome — nary a living soul in most of the locations you visit — but in this case, the loneliness comes across naturally, since the planets in question have harsh conditions (Phleebhut is a near-constant death trap, with lightning bolts, giant snakes, and venomous scorpazoids haunting your every step; Ortega generates way too much heat to be survivable without special equipment). On the other hand, you *do* encounter colorful aliens

from time to time, such as the unforgettable junk dealer Fester Blatz and a whole crowd of predictably ridiculous aliens in the Monolith Burger (though, admittedly, most of those guys do not have much to say other than «Quit crowding JERK!»), and these places provide a nice and relieving contrast with the dangerous empty spaces all around.

As expected, death follows you everywhere, but almost never in a ridiculous manner — if something looks like a potential threat, then it most likely *is* a threat and you should stay away from it, but Fester Blatz is not going to gun you down for shoplifting, and even the angry guy in the adjacent airlock in Monolith Burger dispatches you for good only if you attempt to hijack his ship *twice* in a row. Most of the time you will probably not so much be running away from death as *craving* for it, just to watch all the gory splatterfests and read all the hilarious messages that the Two Guys have in store for you — but sometimes the situation does get tense, most obviously when you are on the run from the invisible Terminator Arnoid or only have a limited time to get inside ScumSoft before the guards take you down with their terrifying Jello guns.

However, humor is just as all-pervasive as terror, be it on the menu of the Monolith Burger («Would you like some Space Spuds with that?»), on the back of the postcards in Fester's shop («Arrakis holds many delights for the adventurous vacationer... nothing can compare with being crushed by a sandworm»), or in the obscure graffiti in the depths of the garbage freighter («For a good time, don't call HAL!»). The jokes are funnier than they have ever been, and with the deaths gorier than they have ever been, **Space Quest III** delivers a juicier experience on all counts. At the same time, most of the jokes still target pop culture, sci-fi clichés, and crass commercialism rather than the protagonist — by the time of **Space Quest IV**, too many of them would be insultingly self-referential, but in this game, Roger Wilco is actually treated with a modicum of respect: he is a simple, silent, relatively witty and agile protagonist, almost a space cowboy rather than a space janitor, and this creates a subtle special bond between the player and the controlled sprite on screen, a bond that would be hard to replicate in subsequent games just because Roger would be much more of a «dork» with whom the player would probably not want to identify. Here, it is all done just about right.

Technical features

Graphics

Being the first (and only) **Space Quest** from Sierra's second generation (1988–1990) of adventure games, the third entry in the series makes a predictably huge leap forward in terms of graphics, with increased resolutions and larger color palettes; at the same time, Marc Crowe, like William Skirvin in contemporary **King's Quest** and **Larry** series, goes for a relatively

austere look when it comes to pixel-populating the screen — meaning that the game still looks extremely well today even when stretched across a big chunk of a 1080p display, unlike those titles which tried to make excessive use of every pixel and now look extremely blurry and painful.

This is the first time when **Space Quest** achieved a certain degree of graphic monumentality — the desolate vistas of Phleebhut, the purple-dune planet, and Ortega, the richly-red-lava planet, are particularly impressive and vital in creating a general feel of awe; while I may certainly be mistaken by not taking into consideration the many arcade games of the era, I think this might have been the very first time in the history of plot-based video games that computer graphics really showed their potential to compete with sci-fi movies in a vivid portrayal of the vastness, beauty and (sometimes) terror of the outer space — the first yellow brick in the road that leads straight to **Mass Effect**.

The game introduced proper cut scenes, occasionally providing skilfully done close-ups of characters (this is the first time we get to really ogle our precious Roger) and nice animations — that change of look on Fester Blatz's face when you show him the glowing gem is beyond priceless. Even the arrogant grin on Elmo Pug's mug when he is taunting you before the robot battle is generated with enough skill to make you really hate the sucker's guts back in the day. And although they would obviously improve on this particular art in later games, each and every one of the bizarre life forms queuing up for their Happy Meal within the confined space of Monolith Burger is well worth examining, particularly the «Employee Of The Week» whose face looks like it has been seriously infested by the Bagpipe Virus.

As a final bonus, **Space Quest III** features the first (and only?) appearance of Sierra On-Line's Oakhurst headquarters in a Sierra game — pictured quite a bit more beautifully, I might add, than it looks on photos of the real thing... see for yourself:

Sound

Deciding that their renovation of **Space Quest** for the new age of computing should show no inferiority whatsoever to **King's Quest**, the Two Guys also got hold of a professional composer — who somehow turned out to be no less than Bob Siebenberg, the drummer for Supertramp. Actually, the main reason was that Siebenberg happened to live in Oakhurst and was looking for some extra musical jobs in between touring; he had never had any prior experience working with computers, but the fresh excitement of the enterprise helped generate some magic, and come up with a full soundtrack which is, indeed, probably the second best soundtrack from Sierra's second generation — after **King's Quest IV**, of course.

But where the **King's Quest IV** soundtrack was understandably folk-and-Renaissance-based, with MIDI flutes, lutes, and harps creating a suitable fairy-tale atmosphere, the music of **Space Quest III**, which also accompanies you for most of the game, is suitably electronic, cold, and sonically distant. Thus, the "Garbage Freighter" theme sounds like a beginner robot composer's take on a slow funky dance, with a subtle hint of constant unseen menace running through its bass pulses; the Ortega theme is a grumbling, creaky, sluggish industrial-ambient composition, with its mix of moody electronic hum and booming metal gear sounding not unlike something off David Bowie's Berlin Trilogy; and the corridors of ScumSoft are «enlivened» with spooky bass taps, scattered percussion bursts, and occasional nonchalant whistlings of a couple bars from Roger's theme to get a combination of suspense and relief at the same time.

The lighter moments in the game get plenty of musical support, too — for instance, pushing forward through the deadly pink dunes of Phleebhut is accompanied only by the sounds of gushing winds, but as soon as you get to the safe haven of Fester's World O' Wonders, a hilarious carnival theme begins playing, urging you to finally drop your guard and relax. The easy-listening muzak of Monolith Burger quickly turns out to be an elevator version of Roger's own theme — and, of course, who could ever forget the theme of Astro Chicken, which is essentially just one bar of an old country theme looped for eternity... or at least until you finally land all the bloody chickens?

As a minor added bonus, **Space Quest III** features the first ever *spoken* line in a Sierra game — in the introduction scene, when Roger awakens in his pod and utters a single "Where am I?" (Something I never got to experience until having replayed

the entire game thirty years later — because I, of course, played the PC DOS version, and the digitized vocal audio was only working on Tandys, Amigas, and Macs). This is, of course, little more than just a slight bit of trivia — regular voiceover work would not start until more than a year later, with Sierra's third generation of games — but somehow in retrospect it still adds a bit of gravity to the proceedings. And while I might be just imagining things, it seems as if there is definitely something special to these early full soundtracks — after they had become the normal state of affairs for video games, they usually ceased to draw that much attention to themselves, but back in 1988-89, it was very much about the *challenge*, with people really going all the way to prove that digital music in video games can make all the difference there is, with **King's Quest IV** and **Space Quest III** as the strongest evidence for that.

Interface

Like all Sierra games of its generation, **Space Quest III** runs in Sierra's Creative Interpreter, which means a cooler font than before and the ability to pause the game while typing commands into the parser. The parser itself is relatively well designed (no silly bugs such as were present in **Larry II**, for instance), and allows for a limited amount of experimentation, usually on the humorous side (e.g. if you type in "*look at girl*" while staring at the Monolith Burger employee, you get this response: "*The clerk is offended that you would think he's a female. Any idiot should be able to tell the difference*").

Action sequences are pretty minimalistic — control your Astro Chicken with arrow keys, punch and block punches with your robot during the Nuk'em Duk'em sequence with Elmo, track and shoot down fighter ships on your control hud, nothing special or particularly difficult / frustrating about any of that. Some agility is required while navigating the tricky paths of Ortega, and there is a somewhat boring, if altogether funny, sequence in the ScumSoft offices where, so as not to attract attention to yourself, you have to empty («vaporize») the garbage basket of every employee on your way to Elmo's office — this one can get a bit tricky if you miss a few pixels when correctly positioning Roger, but nothing to lose sleep about.

The overhead menu is typical SCI, minimalistic and pragmatic; extra features include «VaporCalc», a non-functioning abacus intended to make fun of the calculator function included in just about every piece of software at the time, and, of course, the «Boss Key» which, this time around, really puts you sulking in the corner. In other words, just don't bother snooping around

the menu and get on with playing the game — a principle that would be somewhat violated in subsequent installments, with their extra icons and stuff, but here it works just fine.

Verdict: *Space Quest's Finest Couple Of Hours*

Although in many retrospective ratings it is **Space Quest IV**, not **III**, which is typically extolled as the pinnacle of the series, I think it mainly has to do with the technical excellence of that game — better graphics and addition voice acting, including Gary Owens' fabulous narration, would be objective improvements that cannot be neglected. However, the disadvantage of all later **Space Quest** games would be that they were comfortably set in an already well established formula, with running gags and self-referential jokes that could get stale and annoying. In *this* game, on the other hand, nothing as of yet is set in stone, and, in particular, Roger Wilco is still more of an ingenious space traveler than the parodic space loser he would become in the next three games (in a very similar manner to Larry Laffer, whose portrayal in 1988-89 was also distinctly different from later games along the very same lines). This implies a delicate and efficient balance between humor, action, and suspense which would be seriously skewed towards humor (and not always genuinely funny humor) in later games.

Other than technical antiquity (which, come to think of it, is not a problem now that *all* Sierra games look like museum pieces), the only common criticisms of **Space Quest III** which I am aware of is the late-plot-arrival (not so much of a problem, in my opinion, as an interesting and rare artistic feature) and the fact that the game is short — indeed, a complete playthrough exploring every nook and cranny barely covers two hours of gameplay, but the curious thing is that, due to the many different locations covered in the game, it does not *feel* particularly short: in fact, upon completion there is a distinct feeling that you have just emerged from a fairly lengthy Odyssey. You found your way out of a giant garbage freighter, you defeated a terrifying killer machine on a desert planet, you accepted a rescue mission at a fast food joint, you caused a volcanic eruption on the hottest planet in the universe, you infiltrated the underground lair of the galaxy's vilest software pirate company, you survived a robotic battle in the arena, you emerged victorious from a major battle in the skies, and you even helped your own creators get employment at Sierra On-Line — just how long *does* a game like this need to be?

In all seriousness, I could never find any major flaws with this game; to me, it is as close to utmost perfection as an adventure game can get. The length, the diversity of settings, the action, the humor, the satire, the suspense, the beauty of the graphics and the music, all in just the right proportions — a textbook example of how to make an adventure game into a piece of art, even at a stage when you do not yet have the blessing of properly advanced technology to go along with your imagination and creativity. Incidentally, **Space Quest III** is the only game in the series which, up to this day, has not received a complete remake, either from Sierra itself or the independent fan community: there have been occasional attempts and partial results (including a fairly awful-looking 3D reimagination), but nothing that has ever been brought to completion — and the reason, I think, is that the original game is just so well-rounded in all of its aspects (and still looks and sounds so good today!), that people instinctively cower before the challenge. If you ever want to try one of those rusty old classics, yet remain unsure if you will be able to handle EGA-era graphics instead of modern 3D, text boxes instead of voice acting, and command parsers instead of controllers, **Space Quest III** is probably the very first title that would end up on my recommendation list.