Space Quest IV: Roger Wilco And The Time Rippers

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

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

Part of series: **Space Quest**

Release: March 4, 1991

Main credits: Creative Director: **Bill Davis**
Programming: **Scott Murphy, Doug Oldfield**
Graphics: **Mark Crowe**
Music: **Mark Seibert, Ken Allen**

Useful links: Playthrough: [Part 1](#) (65 *mins.*)   [Part 2](#) (65 *mins.*)   [Part 3](#) (*60 mins.*)

Basic Overview

By all accounts, *Space Quest IV* was the game that should have properly launched Roger Wilco into the future — the future, that is, of the gaming industry, rewarding our favorite janitorial anti-hero with all the benefits that had already been laid upon his more privileged royal colleague, King Graham: improved, hand-painted, 256-color graphics, brand new point-and-click interface, and, ultimately, a full speech pack, finally letting Roger complete his dorky image by talking to players in an appropriately dorky voice.

And the game did all that, for sure, but not without a certain layer of dark clouds on the horizon. First, despite nobody being able to tell at the time, it would turn out to be the very last game that could be strictly credited to the «Two Guys From Andromeda», whose partnership, allegedly for reasons more technical than personal, would soon be dissolved, as only Mark Crowe ended up working on *Space Quest V* and only Scott Murphy on *Space Quest VI* (which would actually be more of a Josh Mandel project anyway). This is not to imply that Mark and Scott were actually getting bored with their franchise and their parodic universe, but it might imply that life was taking its heavy toll on the creators, and that original excitement was slowly giving way to predictable and exhausting routine.

Second, *Space Quest IV* is precisely the place where you realize that Space Janitor Roger Wilco has finally begun to exist within the framework of his own personal mythology. The game was chockful not just with references to Roger's past — the plotline makes very little sense if you have not played the previous three entries — but even to his future, stretching the *Space Quest* universe to almost ridiculous dimensions without taking the time to properly populate these dimensions, like staking a multi-million acre land claim without even taking the time to investigate what lies within (gold mines or saline deserts). Although, from a technical perspective, the franchise had just as much to gain as any other at the time, in terms of actual substantial content the Two Guys had very little left to prove. All the basic ingredients of the *Space Quest* universe had been distilled and combined over the previous three games, and now all that was left to the authors was to go on playing by their own rules — something which is, of course, inevitable for any fictional universe if you let it run long enough, but which may or may not be felt *too* bluntly, depending on the artist's talent and professionalism.

In purely formal terms, though, *Space Quest IV* was an overwhelming success. The game sold well, as usual; was largely loved by critics; and even in today's retro-lists, is often listed as *the* single best game in the *Space Quest* series and one of the finest Sierra games ever. To me, this evaluation has always seemed inflated — I was definitely not a big fan of the game when I first played it — but there is no denying, either, that there is quite a bit to praise about the experience, and *not* just its technical aspects (at least one of which, the point-and-click interface, is always a minus rather than a plus in my book, but you know that already if you have read my thoughts on *King's Quest V*). So let us take a more detailed look at the game's various aspects, and see just how proverbially mixed that reaction can be.

Content evaluation

Plotline

I have to admit that I harbor a bit of a distaste for convoluted, anything-can-happen, time-travel-based plots in general, so if you want a detailed retelling of the sequence of events in *Space Quest IV*, go consult Wikipedia or something like that. In a nutshell, though, it goes like this: Roger Wilco's old arch-nemesis, Sludge Vohaul, mysteriously comes back to life and is about to tear Roger a new one, when a tall dark stranger appears out of nowhere and saves Roger's ass by opening a rift and sending him into another dimension... the dimension of *Space Quest XII*, to be exact.

What happens next — as in, the actual «plot» — is of very little importance, as Roger gets time-shifted from one *Space Quest* sub-universe to another, and eventually manages to outperform Mr. Vohaul, as well as earn himself a major surprise when the identity of the tall dark stranger is finally disclosed. Just as it was in *Space Quest III*, for quite a long time you simply wander around without a clear understanding of your purpose in life; the problem is, it does not feel particularly satisfactory even when you *do* grasp that purpose. In the place of a coherent and sarcastic story about rescuing a pair of hip programmers from a vile software company of space pirates, *Space Quest IV* offers you a series of fun, but disconnected vignettes: «Roger Wilco Is The Last Man On Earth Alive», «Roger Wilco Is Introduced To Third-Wave Feminism» (actually, looks more like second-wave, but what can you expect from a couple of old-school programmers?), «Roger Wilco Is Lost In The Supermarket», etc. Approximately 90% of the game is really spent on these vignettes; each time the game gets back to its main plot, it is mostly moanin' and groanin' time. To add insult to injury, the final «boss fight» with Vohaul is not even a proper parody of a proper fight, but rather an incomprehensible and illogical mess whose design was probably put off until the last day before shipping.

In the end, *Space Quest IV* is the only game in the series which, if you asked me what it was about, the most I could squeeze out of myself even after having just replayed it would be, «uhh... about time travel?» Because you, too, will probably be left behind with memories of having just visited *Space Quest XII: Vohaul's Revenge II* and *Space Quest X: Latex Babes Of Estros* rather than memories of what you actually *did* to get back to the regular timeline. Oh, right: apparently there is some planetary-level catastrophe that you somehow have to remedy by going back and forth through time, and that catastrophe was caused by... a virus-laden copy of a *Leisure Suit Larry* game (whether that had anything to do with Sludge Vohaul or not, I'm still not sure).

Anyway, stripping away the disappointing rubble of the game's main plot, its events are genuinely enjoyable only *outside* of the plot — such as Roger's meeting with the «Babes of Estros», a fairly hilarious (and nasty) jab at overconfident feminism on the part of the Two Guys; Roger's re-visiting the planet of Kerona from *Space Quest I*, just to contemplate the differences between two eras of computer graphics; and, most importantly, Roger's adventures at the shopping mall, where the Two Guys'

sarcastic attitudes towards all sides of modern pop culture — be it arcade gaming, clothing, fast food joints, or advertising — really break through and threaten to drown you in waves of non-stop laughter. These moments seriously raise the bar on the series' comedic potential, though at the expense of completely and thoroughly solidifying the principal character as a boorish nincompoop rather than a smartass Janitor Ivan that he was in the previous games.

This is, indeed, the breaking point where *Space Quest* became way too self-conscious about itself and began, much too often, falling back on the inside jokes and tropes of its own mythology rather than continuously breaking new grounds in storytelling. Sooner or later, even if Gary Owens does an overall great job as the ridiculously pompous narrator, you are going to get tired of having Roger's alleged incompetence and retardation shoved in your face all the time — even as he keeps quite cleverly solving one tricky puzzle after another. Where the first three games, especially the third one, were able to keep up a nice balance between «heroic action» and comedy, *Space Quest IV* plunges way too quickly and way too deeply into the territory of pure farce. A strong and complex plot could have helped — which is why *Space Quest V* would be somewhat of an improvement — but apparently, this time around the laughs were deemed more important, and the Two Guys simply did not have enough time for much else.

Puzzles

One thing you definitely will not remember *Space Quest IV* for is the strength of its puzzles. The game was made at the asscrack of dawn of Sierra's point-and-click era, when the interface had already been remade but its functionality and purposes still remained somewhat unclear — which means that most of the puzzles just involve grabbing object A and using it on object B, with your main challenges defined as pixel-hunting for both objects. The game is about as difficult to complete as digging the proper hint book out of a pile of *other* hint books, or having to backtrack all the way to a shopping mall to buy a necessary ingredient (a rather tedious segment by itself). You might be duped for a while by all the extra icons, such as «Smell» and «Lick», into thinking the game offers many more possibilities, but it soon turns out that all of these extra things are there just for laughs — we shall get to that later.

Three things are added to regular object-based puzzle-solving, and all three are questionable. One is, of course, the dreadful copy protection crap — each time you need to fly somewhere in your time pod, you have to enter some bizarre symbols that you can only look up in the game's manual: I can understand doing this once, but having to do it every time would be seriously annoying for all the honest players (and a good incentive to download a pirated cracked copy, as I confess to actually have done at the time). For some reason, this kind of bullshit was really hot with Sierra at the time — *Larry V* used precisely the same scheme, and gave a good incentive to software pirates all over the «uncivilized» world.

The second thing is that a lot, and I really mean it, *a lot* of your actions are heavily dependent on perfect timing. Everywhere you go, you have to avoid something, wait for something, or seize that one tiny window in time that gets you what you need to accomplish and/or saves you from certain death. This aspect became particularly frustrating with the appearance of ever more powerful CPUs, since timed events in Sierra games were often benchmarked against current CPUs rather than actual time — making the game virtually unplayable in spots — but even upon release, all these timed events must have seemed like a cheap copout from the actual challenge to design a good puzzle.

Finally, there are the actual arcade sequences — for those of us who already hated the timed events, these must have felt like an extra vicious slap in the face. Granted, they are all optional; one even actively *warns* you about itself and proposes to skip it ("not recommended for die-hard adventure players, the arcade-squeamish, or those with poor to non-existent motor skills" — yeah, thanks for rubbing this in my face, buddy!). But you cannot boast the highest score possible if you do not play these arcades, and you are still forced to go through those pangs of guilt and self-doubt if you choose to skip them, right? Granted, they are at least somewhat original, particularly the Monolith Burger mini-game where you have to flip as many burgers as possible before the conveyer begins insanely speeding up; the other game, «Ms. Astro Chicken», is a slightly more complicated variation on «Astro Chicken» from *Space Quest III* and is not really half-bad as an arcade diversion, but I'd still rather it were just a minor side quest with no effect on the score, and certainly not at the expense of *proper* adventure game puzzles.

In the end, if you strip away all the game-breaking timed crap and all the arcade sequences, you are left with virtually nothing to challenge your logical skills and adventurist intuition. In this, *Space Quest IV* is not alone among its Sierra contemporaries from the early point-and-click years — *King's Quest V* and *Larry V* both suffer from the exact same problem. Fortunately, at least *Space Quest IV* is saved from being a complete disaster by that single important factor which is intentionally missing in *King's Quest V* and accidentally missing in *Larry V* — the humor.

Atmosphere

At least in terms of spirit, *Space Quest IV* works more often than not. Despite spending the first big chunk of the game in a lonesome and somber environment (the future ruins of Xenon), the game ends up as the most populated *Space Quest* title up to date — from the proud Latex Babes of Estros and all the way to that planet's lively supermarket, Roger can finally find plenty of people to interact with, which, in turn, raises the game's comedic potential significantly. In addition, traveling by time pod gives you the ability to create your own Instant Contrasts wherever you feel like it — you can skedaddle back and forth between the lively shopping crowds on Estros and the desolate solitude of Xenon at the blink of an eye (just keep your damn copyright protection codes close at hand).

Through most of the game, you are actively hunted by the «Sequel Police», a mysterious special force which is seemingly on Vohaul's payroll — meaning a lot of tension and a general directive not to tarry too long in one place. Xenon is never a safe zone, and neither are the rocky crags of Estros; even the mall, at one point in the game, becomes one large chase scene, though at most other times you can stroll through it without too much fear (as long as you do not shoplift or anything). This is nicely carried over from previous games, where being stalked by various robotic enemies was also Roger's favorite pastime, though occasionally tension spills over into frustration, particularly if you run into various timing issues (very easy to do both in Vohaul's fortress on Xenon and on the rocks of Estros).

At the same time, the game is so much skewed in the direction of humor that «tension» rarely ever stands a chance of giving you the rightful jiffies, certainly not when you have Gary Owens triumphantly narrating the viscerous details of each one of your deaths — and most definitely not when you get around to the shopping mall, where getting chased by the Sequel Police and dying in the process is just a natural part of the life-as-a-joke cycle. The mall, with its endless lambasting of pop and consumer culture, is the high point of the game, be it the sickeningly friendly bot advertising «CDGIROMTV» or the «Cyber-Depunker» ("works while your child sleeps to replace black market implants") at the local Radio Shock, or Roger fiddling through a set of hilarious hintbooks for games like *SimSim* ("a simulated environment in which you can create any simulated environment!") or *King's Quest XXXVIII: Quest For Disk Space* (where the joke is now on the Two Guys — who is going to

laugh today at a game "over 12 gigabytes in length"?). And few things are more hilarious in video games than holding a conversation with a variety of burger ingredients ("I smell like any other set of 299 year old buns! While I have absolutely no taste, I do have a shelf life of three centuries").

For me, personally, the highest point of the game was Roger getting bullied by the alien bikers in the bar on Kerona — where everything could have gone smoothly were it not for the fact that the planet remained in the CGA graphic resolution of *Space Quest I*, while Roger landed on it in his full VGA 256-color glory, earning himself some serious burns from the «boomer generation» ("Whatsamatter, monochrome not good enough for you?"). The allegory of CGA vs. VGA symbolizing the nerd vs. jock conflict just works so alluringly well, and something tells me that it would no longer be possible to play on similar oppositions today (what are they going to do, mock the 2K standard from a 4K-viewpoint? hardly imaginable).

This rampant humor, which indeed surpasses *anything* the Two Guys tried out earlier — well, some of the jokes in *Space Quest III* are quite on the same level, but there simply aren't enough of them — is arguably the main reason why fans hold this game in such high esteem. The fact that they have little, if anything, to do with the storyline is irrelevant — as is the storyline itself, actually. What is relevant is that at this point, the *Space Quest* franchise has fully crystallized as a barrelhouse of laughs, making its elements of action, suspense, and visual fantasy at best secondary to its comedy. I can see where people might like that — why *does* one play *Space Quest* if not for the jokes? — but I would still like to have seen the franchise be able to retain the same balance as, say, *Quest For Glory* had managed to preserve until the very end, with its clever-as-heck mix of the serious and the comical.

Technical features

Graphics

It goes without saying that *Space Quest IV* benefited hugely from the transition to 256-color VGA and painted images instead of fully digital graphics. (There was also a downscaled EGA version for players with antiquated hardware, but, like all such affairs, it looks downright horrible). However, the fact that much of the game takes place in cramped locations, and that the emphasis is consistently on humor rather than on visuals, I doubt that it would ever end up on anyone's list of «Top 10 Visually Stunning Sierra-On Line games».

Of all the locations, probably the most visually expressive are the ruins of Xenon in «Space Quest XII». The lonesome desolation of the place, with huge abandoned drab concrete structures and rubble contrasting sharply with the red-tinted atmosphere provides feels that are not unlike the ones experienced in the previous games on planets such as Phleebhut and Ortega, only this time emphasizing the man-made nature of the desolation. The nature sights on Estros are also coolly designed — there is a little maze of natural rocky corridors and stairways that looks like something out of a whacky Sixties' fantasy movie — but, alas, they are there only for a few moments, and you do not really get to enjoy them much because of the Sequel Police running hot on your trail.

Close-up cutscenes are generally fine: the Latex Babes of Estros have been arduously shaped out with the diligence worthy of a *Leisure Suit Larry* artist, the pigboss manager of Monolith Burger is the evil grin of capitalism staring you right in the face, and although the ugly bikers of Kerona normally look like CGI sprites, their own personal close-up lets you experience all the horror of having to face such a gang of thugs in an intergalactic drinking environment. They are all, however, few and far between.

As for the animation, extra resolution and early motion capture techniques have certainly helped Roger Wilco (and his friends) become more human-like when you walk him across the screen, but I do not necessarily see this as an improvement in retrospect: most of those early 1990s Sierra sprites suffer from too many sharp angles and too much blockiness — in a way, I prefer the «matchstick legs» of earlier sprites just because they did not even begin to aspire to human likeliness. Still, you gotta appreciate the effort that the animators put into fleshing out Roger's moves during the short segment in which he has to cross-dress — those little bits when the guy has to keep his balance while moving around the mall in high heels are priceless.

Sound

With Bob Siebenberg no longer in the picture, the musical soundtrack by Mark Seibert and Ken Allen here is decidedly mediocre: not bad per se, but lacking the futuristic mystery of Siebenberg's ambient compositions and more clearly oriented at the decisive interpretation of *Space Quest* as «comedy». Only the basic theme of the post-apocalyptic Xenon is emotionally

intense and impressive on its own — cold, gruff ice plateaus of synth tones overlaid upon grim, martial-sounding synth bass and conveying an impression of death and devastation at your feet *and* danger around the corner at the same time. But the musical themes accompanying lighter and funnier places — the mall, most importantly — are not much to write home about, except those that are already recycled from the previous game, such as the Monolith Burger and the Astro Chicken themes.

Much more important, of course, is the fact that in December 1992, *Space Quest IV* became the first ever *Space Quest* to be fully voiced — mostly by Sierra's own employees or little-known names in the voice actor industry, but with one very important addition: radio host Gary Owens as Narrator. Gary might be *the* single most important reason behind the fans' adulation, since his usual deadpan-nonsense style serves him so well in a *Space Quest* setting. You most certainly have heard nothing until you have heard Gary declare "It's against the Third Law of Mall Security to be caught licking mall components!" or "Take it from someone who knows sick: licking corpses is going way beond simple dementia!" And the good news is that he has approximately 90% of the game's lines — Roger himself speaks only in the rarest of situations, and most of the other characters are restricted to, at best, one or two scenes. (Interestingly enough, Scott Murphy himself voices Sludge Vohaul, but since the vocals are electronically encoded for Terrifying Effect, you do not really get a whole lot of personality from the experience).

That said, as great as Gary's contribution to the game is, he is also one of the biggest reasons why the entire game feels like one big vaudeville show — when that ridiculously arch-pompous intonation crops up even in the most terrifying places (Xenon), nothing de-terrifies the experience better than yet another Gary Owens bomb. I am very happy to see the man's voice talent preserved in such a form in this game — but I am also very happy that *Space Quest III* came out before the digital speech era, *and* before the Two Guys felt like every single line in the game needed a comedic flair to it, rather than just a certain percentage of them.

Interface

As one of the first Sierra games with the brand new point-and-click interface, *Space Quest IV* shares all the benefits and

disadvantages of *King's Quest V*. The text parser is gone for good, but in your actions you are essentially limited to three operations — «look», «talk», «take / use» something, with fairly generic responses for the latter two when applied to the majority of objects. Perhaps somewhat dissatisfied with the crude limitations of such an interface, the Two Guys got a wee bit more creative than Roberta Williams and added two more icons — «Smell» (a nose) and «Taste» (a tongue). Unfortunately, they are there mostly for the laughs, never serving any important purpose — again, giving a boring generic response when applied to most objects, but occasionally quite amusing indeed (don't forget to smell and taste all the burger ingredients, for instance). Still, their addition feels more like an early parody of the point-and-click ideology than an attempt to intellectualize the interface, if you know what I mean.

Other than «Smell» and «Taste», however, there is nothing out of ordinary about the interface (no boss key, no special options other than the usual save / restore / quit, etc.). The gameplay is almost fully predictable, too, with the exception of the already mentioned arcade sequences — of which Ms. Astro Chicken is the actually smoothly functioning one, well programmed for anybody with a soft spot for archaic arcade games. (The Monolith Burger sequence, though, is only good for all the laughs from talking with Ketchup and Mustard). Do watch out, however, for timing-related bugs — the escape from the Sequel Police in the mall can, in particular, be a really tough challenge even for those who have properly configured their DOSBox for playing in the modern age. Shame on you, Two Guys, for spending so much time thinking on the future of *Space Quest* and not so much on the future of computer processing power!

Verdict: *Worth It For All The Laughs, Not Worth It For Much Of Anything Else*

A brief survey shows that people usually have fond memories of *Space Quest IV* and tepid memories of *Space Quest VI*, despite the two games having much in common (the presence of Gary Owens, for one thing): the defended point of view here is that *IV* was funny and fresh, while *VI* truly passed the point of self-parody. Personally, though, I think that *VI* simply took all the flaws that were already present in *IV* and amplified them — but then at least *VI* had something resembling a coherent plot, whereas *IV* was there largely for the laughs. (Not to mention I'd much rather play *Stooge Fighter*

Space Quest IV - Roger Wilco and The Time Rippers
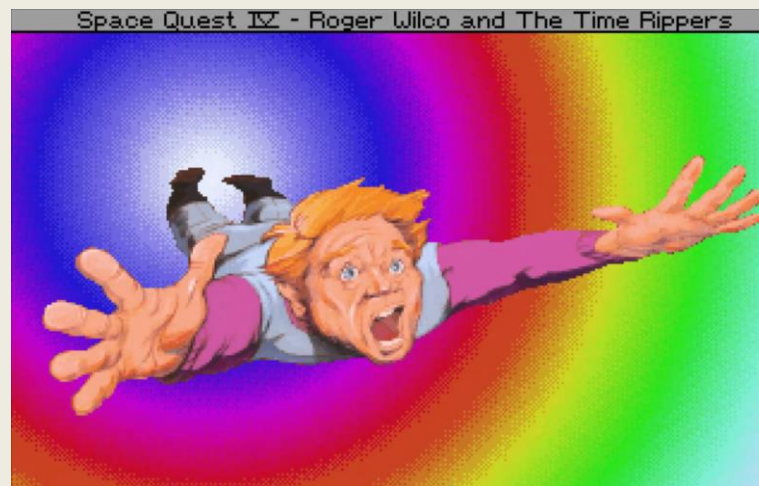
any time of day than *Ms. Astro Chicken*!)

Anyway, in the end I still *like* the game — enough to heartily recommend it to anybody, young or old, who hasn't played it yet. Its good points — the humor, the sarcasm, the occasional wittiness, the pervasive Gary Owens — outweigh the bad points or, at least, render them forgivable. However, along with *Leisure Suit Larry*, *Space Quest IV* is one of the two strongest arguments that the Founding Fathers of Sierra On-Line had really lived through their Golden Age in the second half of the Eighties. While there would still be fresh blood, most notably Lori Cole and Jane Jensen, who understood how to bring adventure games properly up to the standards of a new decade, the old blood, like the Two Guys and Al Lowe (and Roberta Williams, for that matter), found itself too heavily weighted down by its glorious legacy and coasting on its achievements.

Curiously (running a bit ahead), while *Space Quest IV* and *VI* would indeed be quite similar in tone and atmosphere, the fifth game in the series would be significantly different — and unquestionably superior to both of these even while completely lacking voice acting. The reason? The fifth game was far more focused on the *plot* (a genuine StarTrek-ish adventure) than on the humorous mini-vignettes that constitute the majority of both of those other games. With that much invested in the story, there was less time to be spent on silly inside jokes and the ever-annoying deprecation of Roger Wilco's character (though there would still be plenty of humor). In a way, *Space Quest V* would feel more like the proper sequel to *Space Quest III* to me than its predecessor — proving that the cruel course of history is not really irreversible as long as there is the proper will to reverse it.