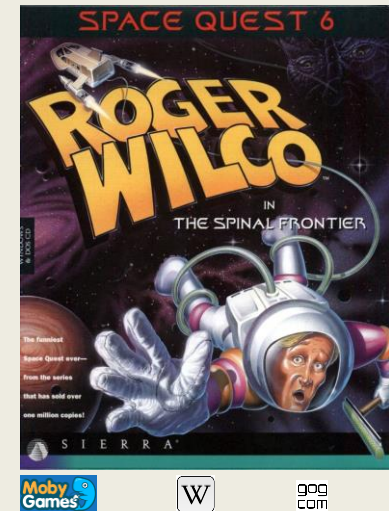


Space Quest 6: Roger Wilco In The Spinal Frontier

Studio: Sierra On-Line
Designer(s): Scott Murphy / Josh Mandel
Part of series: Space Quest
Release: July 11, 1995
Main credits: Producer: **Oliver Brelsford**
 Programming: **Steve Conrad**
 Graphics: **Michael Hutchison, John Shroades**
 Music: **Dan Kehler, Neal Grandstaff**
Useful links: [Complete playthrough](#) (7 parts, 494 mins.)



Basic Overview

Historical details on the creation of *Space Quest 6*, the last (or, at least, the last «canon») game in the *Space Quest* franchise, are rather blurry, and I am a bit lazy to dig up old interviews and memoirs to get a proper understanding of what happened in between 1993, when *Space Quest V* was released as a Dynamix product under the supervision of Mark Crowe, and 1995, when work on *Space Quest* migrated back to Sierra proper and the final product was credited to Scott Murphy. Apparently, most of the actual work was done by Josh Mandel, Sierra's multi-talented wonder kid who'd already supervised several other projects in the name of Roberta Williams (e.g. *The Dagger Of Amon Ra*) and Al Lowe (*Freddy Pharkas*) – but after Mandel had a falling out with Sierra officials some time in early 1995, he was promptly sacked, and finalization of the project was entrusted to Scott Murphy. This creates the illusion that differences between the fifth and sixth game in the series may reflect creative differences between the Two Guys From Andromeda (since Crowe is associated only with the fifth, and Murphy only with the sixth), but in reality, they rather reflect differences between a slightly older and a slightly younger generation of game designers.

It is impossible to say, of course, just how different *Space Quest 6* would have turned out if, through some magic twist, the Two Guys found themselves reunited at their home studio and asked to deliver a proper sequel in true, classic *Space Quest*



spirit. By all means, Mandel was a big fan of the series as well as a talented designer / writer with a sharp and complex sense of humor. But he was put in charge of the *Space Quest 6* project almost immediately upon completing work on *Freddy Pharkas*, the adventure game industry reply to *Blazing Saddles*, and I assume that his creative mindset still remained rooted in the *Freddy* way of thinking — namely, that *all* of this stuff is done primarily, if not exclusively, for the laughs. He clearly saw *Space Quest* as nothing other than a comic / parodic series, and his idea for progress in the franchise was clear and simple — to buff the game's comedy and parody elements to such heights and lengths that, once you'd reached the end of the game, you would be shitting jokes, gags, puns, and sarcasm non-stop for at least a week.

This was hardly the worst possible course of action — after all, *Space Quest* never did take itself all that seriously, and Josh Mandel *was* one of Sierra's best comedy writers of all time. But in my opinion, this meant somewhat underestimating and underselling the classic spirit of the franchise. The Two Guys were at their best whenever they were able to find that subtle balance between hilarious, exciting, and terrifying: *Space Quest* was out there not just to make us die of laughter, but also to open our minds to grotesquely vivid and vividly grotesque visions of the future, and sometimes it also added suspense and terror to the mix. The volcanic desolation and threatening lava pools of the planet Ortega had an aura of dangerous beauty, and the giant snake on Phleebhut, swallowing you in one bite if you were not careful, gave little me the willies. In those moments, you could almost forget that *Space Quest* was essentially supposed to be a «spoof» — above everything else, it was an *experience*, and you could very easily feel yourself in the shoes of the explorer of a pack of brand new worlds, even if they were all notoriously more post-modern in design than those of *Star Trek*.

That balance was almost shattered by the crude design of *Space Quest IV*, before being somewhat restored by Mark Crowe for the fifth game, which brought back the sense of excitement, exploration, and suspense. With Mandel taking over the game, however, the tables had turned once again. Even if the game still had a concise plot, it became much more of a *Joke Quest* than a *Space Quest* — with pretty much everything that you do serving one of three purposes: (a) be funny, (b) be funnier than funny, (c) don't stop being funny even when you're not funny. Worse, the *primary* target of Mandel's funniness, from the very first to the very last second, is none other than *you*, i.e. Roger Wilco. In case the previous five games were not clear enough to let you know how funny you are, *this* game reminds you of the fact approximately once per every 4–5 clicks of the mouse. You might feel uncomfortable about this, like I do, or you might totally love it; regardless, it would be hard to argue that *Space Quest 6* had swerved onto a seriously different road.

At least this time around, unlike in the situation with *Space Quest V*, the game had a sufficient budget to get the complete royal treatment. New and improved graphics, new stylish interface, full voice acting, and even, for the first time in Sierra

history, a separate demo version which came on its own CD, being distributed together with some issues of gaming magazines, and contained a completely different short story, only tangentially related to the main game. With decent sales and overall positive, though not particularly glowing, reviews, there were hardly any reasons for Ken Williams and his boys to shed any tears over the results — in fact, the sequel, *Space Quest VII*, went into production almost immediately, before being shelved and ultimately cancelled in the wake of Sierra's demise as an adventure game developer in early 1999. But time has not been too kind to the game: even if, from a technical point, it is still perfectly playable today (at least, it looks and sounds fairly decent on a modern PC screen), I rarely, if ever, see any serious nostalgia for it from veteran players or excitement displayed by occasional newcomers. Much like *King's Quest VII* and *VIII* ended up drowning the Kingdom of Daventry in frustratingly unresolved ignominy, *Space Quest VI* did the same to Roger Wilco, Janitor 2nd Class, leaving his fate forever undecided and his fans forever tantalized.

Content evaluation

Plotline

At least on a purely formal basis, *Space Quest 6* keeps up two of the series' most sacred traditions. First, it fully reboots Roger Wilco's life — at the beginning of the game, he is stripped of his rank, separated from the ship he commanded in *Space Quest V* and its merry crew (goodbye, Droole and Flo, you won't ever get the chance to receive voiceovers for your friendly personalities), and re-assigned as janitor to a completely new starcraft. Why exactly all of this is happening is never explained: at the start of the game, a lengthy list of crimes is listed which *supposedly* reflects a dreadful misinterpretation of Roger's heroism in *Space Quest V*, but since only a galactic court populated by total morons could generate such a misinterpretation, the real reason, of course, is that Roger Wilco simply needed a quick and easy reboot, and one was provided at minimal cost. Together with a bit of clumsy toilet humor (Roger's underwear symbolically metamorphosing into his next spaceship), this makes for the least auspicious start to a *Space Quest* game, ever.

Second, like in most *Space Quests*, the actual plot of the game takes its sweet time to materialize. Roger spends more than about a quarter of the game on shore leave on the planet of Polysorbate LX, basically just hanging around, carrying out mini-



assignments for random NPCs and ultimately getting himself into a weird drag as he gets abducted by two space ruffians for no apparent reason at all and has to find the oddest ways possible to escape from their clutches. Only much later on does it become clear that Roger has been selected as a target by a rich intergalactic widow, who apparently plans to use his body in order to transplant into it her brain and thus achieve immortality. Fortunately, her plan backfires and Roger manages to escape, with the aid of his good friend, Officer Stellar Santiago — unfortunately for *her*, as she gets trapped behind and now it is *her* body that the nasty old lady is trying to commandeer...

The fact that we are obviously heading in some *extremely* silly direction should not be bothersome all by itself, since *Space Quest* had always been king when it came to silly plots with more black holes in them than contained in the *Space Quest* universe. What *should* be bothersome is that the game mainly uses that silly plot as an excuse to introduce its silly characters and its overwhelming stream of never-ending gags and puns, which, apparently, is assumed to automatically justify all the holes and inconsistencies. (We never ever get to understand, for instance, why it was exactly Roger who was selected by Sharpei as her victim, or how did Sharpei get away from justice with releasing nerve gas in her bedroom, or... okay, I'm *not* going to fall into this trap, so you'll just have to take my word for the overall plot being extremely contrived and creaky).

Space Quest 6 follows in the steps of *Space Quest V* by making the Space Quest universe much more lively and extraverted — in the first few games, it was usually Roger on his own, winding his way through all sorts of natural wonders, weird animals, and mute monsters; *Space Quest V* introduced dialog as an essential component of the story, and Mandel's sequel builds on that even further — most of the action takes place either on the extremely crowded planet of Polysorbate LX or on Roger's even more crowded ship, the SCS DeepShip 86. Unfortunately, the dialog is rarely as funny and entertaining as it is in the previous game; not a single character here has a personality that could even begin to compare to Flo and Droole, all of them being clichéd husks blasting off predictable puns or endless references to *Space Quest* history.

Speaking of *Space Quest* history, you know your sequel is in deep trouble if it focuses way too heavily on reintroducing historic characters just for the sake of making the player reconnect with the past for nostalgic purposes. Already on Polysorbate LX you meet two «old friends» from *Space Quest III* — the ScumSoft boss Elmo Pug, now bankrupt, living on the streets, and reduced to peddling cheat sheets for a quick fix of local alcohol (should the real Bill Gates take warning?), and the Phleebhut merchant Fester Blatz, now dealing in semi-legal implants in the relative security of an inconspicuous dirty basement. Always good to meet old friends, no? Except that their *only* purpose here is to throw a bone to the imaginary group of loyal old fans, who had been holding their breath since 1989, presumably flooding the offices of Sierra On-Line with letters screaming BRING BACK ELMO PUG!! in big bloody letters. Of course, this is not a *Space Quest*-specific offense, but it is still not cool

watching your favorite franchise succumb to the common curse of reviving old characters for no other reason than nostalgia.

Perhaps the least convincing angle of *Space Quest 6*'s plot is its clumsy quasi-romantic angle. For some odd reason, instead of going the logical way and trying to further develop the relationship between Roger Wilco and Beatrice from the previous game, the latter has been scrapped and replaced by Stellar Santiago, a well-meaning but fairly bland character with an absolutely inexplicable crush on Roger from the start (at least Beatrice is shown to be attracted to Roger only after getting to know his strong heroic sides — the reasons why Stellar should be drawn to the most inept janitor in the galaxy are left unclear, along with almost everything else). She comes out of the blue, saves Roger's life two times in a row, and draws him into a contrived love triangle which remains unresolved at the end of the game — and, consequently, forever. The «Dorky, Socially Awkward Guy vs. Strong, Empowered, But Lonely Girl» trope, already present in *Space Quest V*, is thrown into our faces like a massive custard pie here and quickly becomes unbearable — thank God at least that we only have to endure two «deep» conversations with Stellar throughout the game, one after the first rescue and one as our long-awaited reward for completing the game.

Several plot elements are introduced solely as spoofs, ranging from admittedly hilarious to fairly bizarre. In one episode, Roger is supposed to take out the security guard blocking his access to a shuttle by using the «Vulgar Nerve Pinch» — a "tactile/aural maneuver in which the applier pinches the bundle of nerve fibers at the base of the neck while whispering into the victim's ear dialogue from either *Tango & Cash* or *Hudson Hawk*". This is a beautiful way to combine homage for Star Trek (Spock's famous «Vulcan Nerve Pinch») with a mean jab at trashy pop culture, and it is funny even if you were fortunate enough to never see either of the aforementioned movies (I was!).

In another short sequence, Roger finds himself stuck in space after an accident with his shuttle, and gets jump-started by «Wriggley», a hot space babe with a penchant for chewing gum and being stalked by xenomorphs — a more-than-obvious nod to Ripley from *Alien*, probably indicating that the 21-year old Mandel must have developed a serious crush on Sigourney Weaver (and spent 16 years waiting for a chance to picture her as a somewhat more, um, *amenable* character). This one comes across as more of a fetish than an homage, and has nothing funny about it regardless of whether you're a fan of *Alien* or not.

Possibly the best of Mandel's inventions in the game is accessed closer to the finale, when Roger needs to enter «Cyberspace» — a grotesque, but somewhat visionary caricature of the Internet and Virtual Reality rolled in one. There, he is shoved inside the waiting room only to discover that it looks almost exactly like... the classic interface of Windows 3.1, with a character named «Sis Inny» (sys.ini, get it?) as the merciless receptionist. It is unfortunate that this awesome gag was already somewhat

obsolete upon the game's release, with Windows 95 forever eliminating the stunted look of preceding systems: to this day, it remains as one of the most elaborate and astute parodies on a computer interface ever created. And, for that matter, Sis Inny has more personality to her than most of the non-virtual characters in this game ("you bet your palette, little 32x32 pixel mama!").

On the other hand, the final part of the game, in which you have to explore the interior of Stellar's body to locate and annihilate the robotized shape of Sharpei's conscience, feels rather out of place. The creative idea itself — a journey through the various regions of the human body, getting a good lesson in anatomy along the way — is not all that new in fiction, but was certainly novel for adventure games, and it is implemented with sufficient detail and graphic precision. But what exactly does it have to do in a *Space Quest* game, with an emphasis on the *Space* part? Wouldn't we rather prefer Roger making his way through pools of lava, bizarre alien-infested landscapes, and asteroid fields, than through somebody's intestines and esophagus? Wouldn't this particular sequence have made a better candidate for one of Sierra's «edutainment» titles for kids, like *Surgeon Quest* or something? I am not sure. It's not that it ain't at all fun solving tricky puzzles while lodged inside somebody else's innards — it just feels like a part of a different game.

In the end, what remains is a very mixed and confused reaction. *Space Quest 6* is a pretty big game for its time; there's lots to do here, and it is always possible to get a satisfactory payoff if you are looking exclusively for hilarity and nothing else. But if you are invested deep enough in the title character to hope for a sensible, reasonable story arc, then, I'm sorry to say, *Space Quest 6* is the second time that the franchise clearly loses the way (the first time was with *Space Quest IV*); and it almost makes me *not* sorry that the seventh game never happened, because I am not sure how exactly Scott Murphy was supposed to pull Roger out of the mess in which he was left by Josh Mandel.

Puzzles

Much like its predecessor, *Space Quest 6* is not going to make the list of either the most or the least difficult Sierra games to play; nor, to the best of my recollection, does it feature any particularly outstanding or particularly dumb challenges for the player. If anything, some of the puzzles are just irritating because of the nature of the quest — for instance, the major challenge of the first section of the game is to scoop together several hundred buckazoids in order to pay for a hotel room on Polysorbate LX for which you have absolutely no purpose whatsoever (in fact, you don't even get to set foot in it once



you put up the cash). Maybe the original intention of the designers was to have Roger set up a meeting place with one of those creepy ladies of the night on the streets of Polysorbate LX — but then they chickened out at the last moment.

Most of the puzzles are multi-part, making you really work for your own money: for instance, capturing a dangerous Endodroid requires (a) freezing him in nitrogen, (b) shattering him in a million pieces, (c) keeping the pieces separate from each other so they do not reassemble back in one unit. Fail to perform each of these tasks within a small time window and you die (and die you *will*). Likewise, the two guards standing watch over the shuttle bay area will have to be taken out separately by *very* different means, and it will take you quite some time to figure out the process. Mandel takes his job seriously — none of that weak «pick up a hammer, smash the window, get the gold» bullshit from the days of yore. But if you do your job diligently, look around, talk to everybody, and remember to backtrack every once in a while, you won't have any serious problems.

Occasionally, there are settings that lead you into frustrating traps: for instance, the hilariously designed arcade game of *Stooge Fighter* (in which you do get the chance to set Larry, Moe, and Curly against each other) is essentially unwinnable without a cheat sheet, but you do not know that from the beginning, and may spend far more time than necessary trying to figure out the right combo to beat up your opponent without realising that a proper spoof of *Street Fighter* simply *cannot* have you win the game honestly (as it happens in real life with about 90% of the normal people, I'd say). Fortunately, once you do get the cheat sheet, the game pretty much begins to play itself, freeing you from the pesky danger of arcade sequences.

In another situation, when Roger comes across a DataCorder whose internal construction can be modified for various reasons, you can fool around with chips and transistors for hours, but what you really need to do is look up the manual included with the original CD. According to Mandel, this was not at all supposed to be a form of copyright protection, but rather another lengthy puzzle requiring Roger to read a lengthy comic book; however, after he was sacked, the renewed team just did not have enough time to complete his design and simply relegated the assembly instructions to paper. At least this explains the rather puzzling presence of copy protection on a CD-ROM game — prior to this, Sierra only included copy protection for floppy disk versions, since CDs were considered too difficult to copy (and if I remember right, CD burners were still a rarity in 1995). Explains, that is, but hardly justifies.

I really do enjoy the puzzle design in the last section of the game — where, trapped inside Stellar's body, Roger has to learn how to combine his quasi-girlfriend's secretions and bile components with various little inorganic objects accidentally ingested by her over time (paper clips!) in order to overcome various obstacles on his way to Sharpei's nano-robot. Even if, as

I already said, this section does feel like it belongs somewhere else, it is still a neat little combination of *Incredible Machine*-inspired constructionism, detailed anatomy lesson, and sickly humor, with most of the mini-challenges being both logical and hilarious (and Roger even gets to Ride The Worm!). Compared to that part with its clearly defined purpose and mechanics, everything else feels a bit disconcerted — you really spend a large chunk of the game having vague fun, but not understanding full well what it is that you are supposed to do and, most importantly, *why* you are supposed to do it. But then again, that's pretty much the way most of us get through life anyway, so why complain?

Atmosphere

No other thing distinguishes the last *Space Quest* game from the first five as strongly as general atmosphere, and this — no question about it — is all because of Josh Mandel. From the very first to the very last screen and dialog replica, *Space Quest 6* is flat-out lightweight comedy and nothing else. The sense of mystery and dangerous excitement, the feeling of uncovering strange new worlds, the good old whiff of boldly going where no janitor has gone before — all these things are no more. When Roger is dropped onto the streets of Polysorbate LX at the beginning of the game, this happens in much the same way your character would be dropped into the seedy back streets of Chicago or Los Angeles in a detective game: grimly, casually, and with stone cold irony. You have come here on shore leave — to drink, gamble, and carry out suspicious errands for suspicious-looking characters. Even if this is your first time on this planet, it still feels like an erratic version of home, not an amazing new landscape with incredible new vistas to admire and new organic species to meet and interact with.



Actually, speaking of landscapes and vistas, I do believe that the only «landscapes» you will face in the game are virtual ones — like the green pastures used as a cemetery for Stellar, or the imposing, but abandoned cyberterrain construction site through which Roger has to waddle in order to acquire precious information on Sharpei's project. Other than that, Polysorbate LX is just a claustrophobic mess of dark alleys, bars, and casinos; Sharpei's quarters are located inside a small space station; and most of the other action is spent aboard Roger's ship, which is no more «atmospheric» than the Enterprise. This is where you realize that, to a certain small extent at least, Mark Crowe and Scott Murphy were visionaries — two guys who really loved their sci-fi stuff and wanted to see their videogame adaptation of the genre relatively true to its imaginative roots. Mandel, on the other hand, is first and foremost a *comedian*, perhaps even a comic genius if you want to go that far, who may or may not

love his sci-fi, but is mostly interested in spoofing it. His *Space Quest* universe, consequently, has no need of gorgeous views or thrilling roller coaster rides; all it needs is lots and lots of sarcasm, much like his vision of the Wild West in *Freddy Pharkas*.

Taken in relatively small doses, this sarcasm nearly always works. The arcade of Polysorbate LX alone is the place that launched a thousand laughs — with titles such as *Virtual Amtrak*, *More Dull Kommat 2*, *Beat The Crap Out Of Urkel*, *MBA Toejam* (where "you have to play in a three-piece suit, barefoot, while avoiding deadly athlete's foot fungus growing on the court"), *Secret Recipes Of The Luftwaffe* (where "you have to duplicate famous gourmet dishes while piloting vintage combat aircraft against the Nazi Menace"), and, of course, the already mentioned *Stooge Fighter*, you shall wish the team had a sufficient budget to at least animate them all, let alone allow you to participate. The lionine character of Commander Kielbasa pokes almost offensive, but irresistible fun at the unimaginative zoomorphic depictions of aliens in sci-fi ("is that his command center, or his scratching post?... wait, kids, don't fight, it's BOTH!"). The sight of "Major Tom was here" scribbled on the dirty wall of Roger's prison cell in the bowels of the spaceship will be a blessing for all the David Bowie fans in the audience. Ah, screw it, there's just too many of these moments to mention, and not enough thoughts and words to come up with any systematic conclusions anyway.

But here also lies the problem, because soon enough — *very* soon, in fact — *Space Quest 6* begins to deal with hilariousness overload. With almost every single interaction yielding something genuinely or potentially funny, the game becomes a candy store without any overriding purpose to it. It sort of worked for Mandel in *Freddy Pharkas*, where most of the jokes served a unified goal — to lambast stereotypical clichés of the Wild West mythology; here, it is more of a randomized, chaotic smorgasboard where you can make fun of just about anything from *Star Wars* to Sierra's own 'Girl In The Tower' (as briefly performed by a very Elton John-looking alien during a bout of druggy hallucination), as long as every second joke is about Roger Wilco and how much of a dork that guy is. And since Roger Wilco is essentially *you*, the player, it will hardly be a surprise if, by the end of the game, you will feel just a tad humiliated.

I suspect that it was something like this which was the major turn-off for players. Sure, they'd come here to have a good laugh, as usual, but that was not the *only* thing they expected. For a game that places so much emphasis on meta-referencing the history of *Space Quest* (Roger's entire cabin is like a huge, sprawling tribute to the series), it has the least *Space Quest*-ish feel of them all — which would probably not be such a bad thing had it not been the sixth game's destiny to become the conclusion of the entire saga. When you look at it from that angle, it almost makes me wish it never existed: *Space Quest V* would have made a far more satisfying, if still inconclusive, wrap-up to the life story of Roger Wilco.

Technical features

Graphics

Of all the games released by Sierra in 1994–96 (its last properly productive years, a.k.a. the «Seattle period»), *Space Quest 6* does somewhat stand out in terms of graphics. Pretty much every Sierra adventure title from that period followed one of two models – cartoon-style animation (e.g. *King's Quest VII* or *Larry VII*), or full-motion video (the two *Phantasmagorias*, *Gabriel Knight 2*) with live actors. *Space Quest 6* is certainly closer to the first model, yet it does not fully abandon a realistic approach to digital imagery in favor of all-out Disney. Fortunately, graphic resolution had improved to the point that the game does not look horrendously pixelated on a modern display, which makes it a fairly unique representative of the company's legacy – a pleasant result of the natural evolution of Sierra's digital artistry from way back when up until the mid-1990s without any revolutionary modifications. Michael Hutchison, a Sierra veteran whose previous project was *Gabriel Knight*, must have been really proud of this one (at least, he would not get the chance to become even prouder of another one).

Considering, however, that approximately 95% of the game takes place strictly indoors or in highly confined environments (such as the mini-maze of Polysorbate LX's narrow alleys, tightly boxed in by huddling, drab buildings), these advances in graphic technology do not get to be enjoyed in all their potential glory. When you do wander out in space, it is but for a bunch of fleeting, teensy-weensy moments; most of the time is spent cowering and pixel-hunting inside all sorts of tiny cubicles, which are indeed packed with all sorts of stuff but still have a highly pragmatic look to them. In other words, there are hardly any chances to look at a particular backdrop and go all *wowzers!* on it. The only exception is Stellar's anatomy section – where the artists clearly had fun with their colorful representations of bile ponds, islands of Langerhans, and various areas of the duodenum. Like I already said, I am not sure what all that stuff does in a *Space Quest* game, but it's still perfectly lovely and artistically disgusting to travel through.

Where the improved capacities of the graphics engine *do* make a serious difference is in the quality of character sprites and their animations. Even relatively small-sized characters now get a chance at actual facial expressions, while walking and interacting with objects feels smooth and natural. During the holographic burial ceremony for Stellar, after the gravedigger (who, by the way, bears an uncanny resemblance to the New Orleanian cemetery watcher Toussaint Gervais in *Gabriel Knight*) turns on his vacuum shovel (or whatever it is supposed to be called), you see all the onlookers desperately clinging on



to surrounding trees or to each other in order to avoid being sucked into the grave — just for a couple of seconds, but each has an individual pose and even facial expression while hanging on for dear life. Then, once the digging stops, they come down smoothly and realistically, through a small set of different character poses. This is something that not only would have been technically impossible even two years before, but looks funny and realistic even today, and the game is full of these mini-animations which make it lively and relatable.

I am not so sure, however, that I would call myself a fan of the close-ups in this game. While our good old friend Fester Blatz has been portrayed quite faithfully to his looks in *Space Quest III* (with the added caveat that "he has aged somewhat, looks like he's grown a few more neck rings"), our good friend Roger Wilco, too, has not been immune to ravages of time — with added wrinkles, weird-looking bushy blond eyebrows, and a permanently depressed look as opposed to the far cockier and livelier appearance in *Space Quest V*. That, of course, can be attributed to life (or, more accurately, lazy game designers) treating our hero in an unfriendly manner — but then it would seem that life is cruel to the *Space Quest* universe in general, since his new passion, Stellar Santiago, is also depicted as somebody on whom life has taken a heavy toll (with graying hair, deep wrinkles, and a tired look in her yellow eyes). Perhaps it is a good thing that the game refuses to sexualize its characters, and there's nothing wrong with aging, but we still can't help it if we prefer our James Bond of *Dr. No* and *Goldfinger* to the James Bond of *Diamonds Are Forever*, can we? This particular Roger Wilco just... doesn't inspire me all that much. Though, admittedly, this is all a question of style and taste rather than lack of quality or imagination on the part of the artists.

Sound

I honestly do not remember much about the soundtrack of *Space Quest 6* other than it being sufficiently spacy. Most of the themes are just diligently crafted chunks of MIDI sci-fi elevator muzak. The only theme, other than the classic main *Space Quest* theme, which is marginally distinctive and memorable, is the lively jazz music playing in Polysorbate LX's barroom — like a piece of 1920s swing futuristically arranged for the Space Age, heavily contributing to the merry-and-seedy atmosphere of the place. (It is particularly fun to have yourself turned inside out by the Endodroid in the bar's basement to those happy sounds). Other than that, the individual themes are mostly appropriate for their locations, and that's that.

Voice acting in the game is generally okay — not great, not awful. The key component, of course, is the return of Gary Owens as Narrator, bringing back all of his deadpan cool from *Space Quest IV*. Provided you do not get tired of his mock-meta-pomp by the end of the game (which is a possibility, given the enormous number of dialog lines he has to provide for all the options), he remains the main star of the show throughout and the #1 reason why you should click on everything in sight with as many

options as possible (if you miss out on Gary Owens pronouncing "oops, wrong endearing little furry purring creatures!...", you have pretty much wasted your money on this game). On the other hand, Roger Wilco, voiced here by William Hall (a voice actor just as unknown as Jeff Bender who voiced Roger for *Space Quest IV*), is somewhat disappointing — pictured as a permanently clueless wimp with few, if any, additional personality aspects.

Pretty much *all* female roles in the game are voiced by Carol Bach y Rita, who had previously voiced Valanice in *King's Quest VII*, and while she shows herself to be impressively versatile (voicing the straightforward military lady Stellar Santiago, the deviously evil Sharpei, *and* the bimbo-fashion oversexed «Wriggley»), none of these performances truly transgress «perfunctory». The talented Denny Delk (*Day Of The Tentacle's* one and only Hoagie!) is wasted on the episodic role of «Jebba the Hop» in the medbay, and the other bit players are even less memorable.

Overall, as you can see, sound is definitely not a major forte of this game. It kind of looks as if most of Sierra's audio-related resources in those years were allocated to composition and voice acting (or, rather, just general acting) for the FMV games, while the cartoon-style ones mostly got leftovers — which is, of course, ironic, considering the quick and utter demise of FMV in just a few years, but who really knows where the future goes when trying out a fresh, allegedly revolutionary approach? Not Sierra On-Line, that's for sure.

Interface

One thing that Sierra really liked experimenting on in those years was the overall look of the game interface — in sharp contrast with the AGI / SCI years of 1984–1990, when most of the titles were getting the exact same standardized interface, visually differing only through the actual art. *Space Quest 6* is no exception: it gets its own unique makeover, although the screen layout follows the pattern previously tested on *King's Quest VII* — with a large chunk of the screen permanently given away to accommodate the menu and the dialog window. The chunk itself, however, gets a minimalistic design, with oh-so-sci-fi green lettering on a black screen and, in a novel move, actual words replacing menu icons («FEET», «EYES», «HANDS», «MOUTH», etc.). Maybe they thought such a shift would make your screen look more like an actual command center (than a scratching post). I can't really say if this is good design or bad design, but it *is* different.

At least, unlike *King's Quest VII*, the game did not retain the abominable one-for-everything cursor. There is not all that much



Roger can do, but he can at least LOOK, TALK to, and OPERATE on everything, and there are enough dialog options included to make you want to do all that to everything on the screen. Okay, so TALK will most often give you a generic result ("Your words are so unspectacular, nature doesn't even see fit to grant it an echo"), but every once in a while, Gary Owens will still contribute a minor gem (e.g. TALK to PLANT yielding "Mother Teresa, the Pope, and Jimmy Carter could all talk to this plant until they were blue in the face and beating on each other, and it would still do no good"), so I typically end up TALKing to everything until I am blue in the face. It is still a nice improvement over the nonsense icons of *Space Quest IV* (SMELL and LICK, which yielded generic results in about 90% of all cases).

Space Quest 6 also does a good job in stomping out pixel hunting. For one thing, higher graphic resolution helps all separate objects be very clearly defined on screen (this is particularly helpful in Roger's quarters, littered with tiny souvenirs from his previous journeys). For another, all cursor icons are shaped as triangles, with the sharp upper angle ideally clickable over even the tiniest object (something that was more of a problem, e.g., in *Gabriel Knight*, with its bubble-shaped icons that could easily miss the hotspot). This still does not help much in a few odd situations when the object is completely hidden away (e.g. the «Churlish Moddie» you need to find in order to neutralize your kidnapper), but on the whole, technical problems while interacting with stuff in *Space Quest 6* are few and far between.

The game is also notably free from any type of arcade sequences, other than the *Stooge Fighter* sequence which is unwinnable anyway (and practically unlosable once you get the cheat sheet). The only tedious moment occurs during Roger's adventure in Cyberspace, when you are supposed to look for clues while navigating a giant alphabetic file system — not so much because you have to think of all the proper topics to look them up under their respective letters, but because you have to climb your way to the top shelves by opening the lower drawers and forming makeshift stairways, which is a drag (it is very easy to miss here and start opening or closing drawers instead of picking up files, or vice versa), and kind of an anti-climactic development right after the magnificently designed parody on the Windows 3.1 interface.

Overall, the gameplay is quite smooth, though, as usual, running the game on more modern PCs may lead to speed-related issues (one notable bug occurs during Roger's first encounter with the tapeworm in Stellar's intestines, where you have to use special timer fixes to reach the bugger).

Verdict: *This is how a beloved franchise dies a horrible death — in pangs of non-stop laughter.*

When all is said and done, *Space Quest 6* is a pretty good game. The graphics are good, the voice acting is decent, the jokes are funny, the plot is engaging, the puzzles are nicely designed. Wherever you look, you won't find serious reason to complain, and most of your complaints will be easily beaten in court anyway. I even had fun replaying the game for this review, and I even think that *Stooge Fighter* might be the single best idea for an arcade game to ever appear in the twisted minds of Sierra On-Line employees.

Yet when placed in the overall context of Sierra's history, *Space Quest 6* still ultimately leaves me cold. It feels artificial and contrived, a diligent, but forced attempt to prolong the life of a franchise which finally ran out of ideas on how to evolve and expand, and now had to resort to endless self-references in order to survive. Perhaps it would have been better to present it as a completely different game — leave in all the jokes if you will, but take away the monikers of *Space Quest* and Roger Wilco, and let Josh Mandel exercise his sense of humor on his own franchise, rather than one taken away from its original creators. (Note that a very similar fortune was destined, around the same time, for Guybrush Threepwood, whose deprivation from his father Ron Gilbert also resulted in a personality change). Then again, such a separation would still have hardly succeeded in making this proverbially *good* game into a *great* one.

It might not have been inevitable. The Golden Age of Comedy Adventure Games was largely over by the mid-Nineties: games could not possibly get any funnier than *Day Of The Tentacle*, and not even Al Lowe could continue to mine the well of jokes at the same rate he did during the formative period of Sierra. Steering *Space Quest* into the nearly drained pool of pure comedy was not a wise decision. Had the game retained its earlier balance between impressionist sci-fi and quirky satire, it might have significantly benefited from evolving technology — improved graphics, interface, voice acting — and taken Roger Wilco to new evolutionary heights, if only for a brief while at least. Instead, it reduced a multi-dimensional (okay, at least *two*-dimensional) character to laughing stock, and condensed a formerly multi-layered portrayal of the sci-fi universe to the level of National Lampoon. This is regrettable — though it goes without saying that there have frequently been *much* less dignified fates suffered by beloved franchises and characters in the history of videogames.

