

As Welcome As An Insurance Salesman

"Space Quest II: Vohaul's Revenge"

Reviewed by Douglas Seacat

Sure, you're just a janitor. Sure, you've got your own problems. Sure, you're stuck on that same stupid base, but your home planet has serious problems. It seems that Vohaul, the supreme evil guy of the universe whose plans you ruined in *Space Quest: The Sarien Encounter*,

has been genetically engineering insurance salesmen as part of his plot to bring your planet to its knees. Somebody has to do something and there is no one lower in the cosmic pecking order to pass the buck to. Unfortunately, Vohaul even knows what to do with you. He will keep you working for him in a slave-labor camp on his planet. You find yourself shipped down to the planet in the shuttle and end up being sent by air-skimmer, to the labor camp.

Fortunately for you (and the story), Vohaul's thugs forget to fill up the tank on the air-skimmer, and you crash in the jungle, fortuitously landing upon your guards in the process. Up to this point,

everything has been almost entirely automatic, but from this point on, the real story starts.

The jungle is the heart of the game and it is, of course, where most of the playing time occurs. There is the jungle itself, a swamp, a forest, and several

other areas of interest. Most of all, there are many colorful and diverse ways to die. The save mechanism should be used extensively in this area, no matter how innocent the contemplated action. Some of these seemingly innocuous actions are: taking a pleasant swim in the swamp; navigating the tentacles of a man-eating plant; and escaping from the jail of the friendly local cannibal.

Once the various puzzles in the jungle are completed (no easy task), a shuttle must be stolen in order for your courageous hero to escape the dreadful planet and plunge headlong into . . . (What did you expect?) the arms of Sludge Vohaul.

Yes, Sludge quickly snaps up your ship and brings you aboard his massive battle-asteroid. Surprisingly, no guards are present at the docking bay when you leave the ship. What plans does Vohaul have for you? What demented tortuous scheme is being set up? For the most part, at least compared to the jungle, the asteroid is fairly tame. Completing the end game, however, is not an easy task. Who said saving the universe would be easy?

Graphic Descriptions

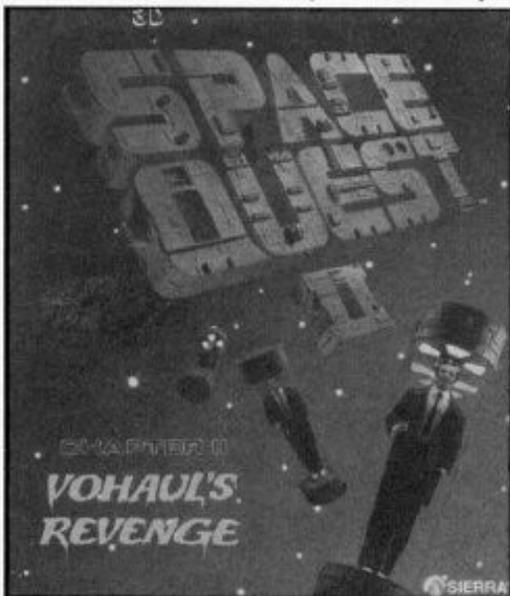
Though the game is similar to the original *Space Quest*, the addition of more detailed animation, more difficult puzzles, an improved parser (hurrah!), and greater scope makes a good game even better. While the game can be played independently of *Space Quest I*, many players will appreciate having experience with other **Sierra** text/graphics games before using this more difficult program. The first time one uses this system, it can be very disorienting, often making the puzzles seem much harder than they really are. The player should note that this is *not* a game where the graphics are merely additions which help enliven the text. In Sierra's *Quest* series, the graphics are the game.

To this end, the programmers have done a good job of providing simple but usable graphics. While the style and quality of the graphics themselves are not much different from the earlier *Quest* games, *Space Quest II* (SQII) has improved and broadened the animation to a great extent. Naturally, if you are buying the game for use on an IBM, an EGA board is highly recommended. The four colors offered on the CGA board just are not enough to get a feel for everything. It is easy to miss important objects and clues on a CGA system, simply because they cannot be discerned on the screen. Occasionally, the text descriptions will point out these difficult to discover objects, but the graphics are normally the only real tool for interpreting the game.

The text interaction with the game has also improved in SQII. One of the things which makes the *Quest* series of games unique is the fact that they are constantly trying to unify both text and graphic forms of computer entertainment. While they are still far from their ideal, SQII has come closer to this. The vocabulary has been expanded, including many verbs which were sorely lacking in the first game. Now, one can actually describe most actions completely, rather than merely using the ubiquitous verb, "use." The game has a long way to go before their parser will compare with the better ones in the industry, but SQII shows some steps in the right direction.

Another mark of improvement lies in the structure of the puzzles and plot, the heart of any adventure game. The original *Space Quest*, while enjoyable, was not particularly difficult. Problems arose only with unfamiliarity with the graphic environment. SQII offers the same graphic challenges, while also providing some clever puzzles. While the "grab-it-all" strategy still applies, the uses for most

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TITLE:	Space Quest II
SYSTEMS:	IBM
# PLAYERS:	Solitaire
PRICE:	\$49.95
DESIGNERS:	Mark Crowe and Scott Murphy
PUBLISHER:	Sierra Coarsegold, CA

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objects in the game are not obvious. Deductive reasoning and creativity are necessary in most situations, along with a little luck.

Finally, while the game is still linear, more flexibility does exist in SQll. The scope of the game is greater, so different avenues of pursuit can be explored within the same general location.

"Disk Cussin'" of Negatives

All said, SQll is well presented. Nevertheless, there are some negative factors. First, disk access while restoring games or changing screens takes a while, so use of a hard drive is recommended. Second, the tradition of utilizing arcade sequences which are often non-essential to the plot (and dull, as well) continues to annoy those who prefer thought over reflex in their entertainment.

Third, and more important, is the inadequacy of the text descriptions. Even with an EGA card, there are several areas in the IBM version where an

object's graphics are unclear. In such situations, having a complete text description as a back up would save a lot of trouble. In CGA mode, such descriptions are more a necessity than a luxury. Any object which appears on the screen in clear view to the player should be described in the description accessed by the "Look" command. The mailbox located in the jungle is a good example of where this is lacking. Most players will eventually figure out what the item is, but it is not immediately obvious from the graphic depiction.

Fourth, some of the puzzles are actually hidden within the game. In one instance, a light source is needed in order to continue. Even though a fire existed, it was impossible to get anything that would burn from it. The answer was a glowing gem that was hidden in an underground tunnel in the swamp. There was no indication of this in the room description and the only way this reviewer found it was by accidentally swimming over a section of the swamp that was deeper than the rest. Such a solution to this puzzle seems ridiculously illogical. With a large map to explore, it is doubtful that most players will have the patience to search every inch of every screen for hidden clues.

Objects of Perception

Despite these quirks, SQll is still a fine game. Most of the difficulties can be overcome by a simple strategy. When playing the game, keep in mind that this is a text/graphics game with the emphasis on graphics. People who are accustomed only to text descriptions will have a hard time with this game and should concentrate on examining the pictures carefully. Objects in the game are rarely there simply for decoration. Try to pick up anything, and this means *anything* you come across. Also, if a player attempts an action that should work, but finds that it does not, trying it from a different section of the screen. It is not enough in these games to simply be in a room in order to accomplish something. Players must be near to the object of the action. Sometimes, the player must be on a specific side of the object in order to accomplish the action.

At the same time, the text descriptions should not be ignored. The "Look" command should be used in every room, as well as examining items which are picked up. This may sound obvious, but after getting used to the graphics, it is easy to forget that the text descriptions even exist. Further, with the improved parser, experimentation should be encouraged. Even if an action sounds ridiculous, players should not give up. This is a humor-oriented game and an appreciation of this is the key to success.

Regenerated Genre

All in all, SQll is an enjoyable and satisfying game. The improvements evident in this game give proof to Sierra's willingness to make the genre more effective. While the puzzles are still not incredibly difficult, they do give the game a depth which was lacking in the original. If further improvements are adopted, I'm sure Space Quest III will be even more successful.

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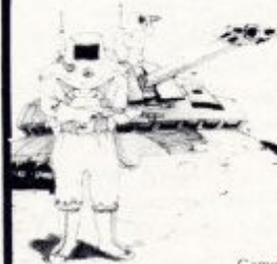
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