

The Killing Game

Police Quest 4 Explores The Brutal Realities Of Police Work

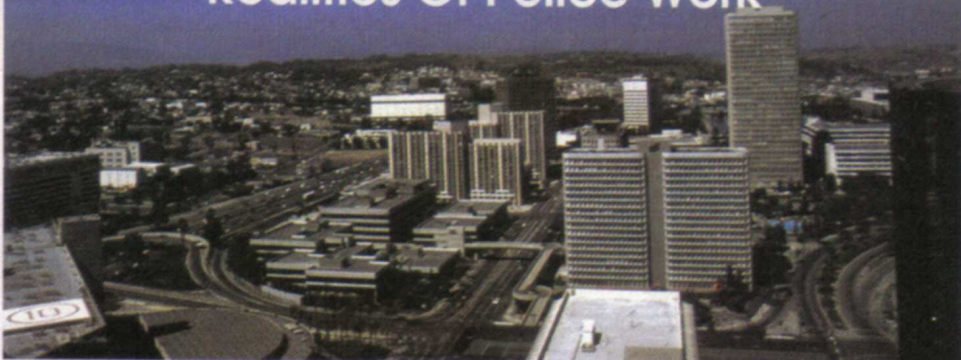


Photo by Susan Zurawik



by Dennis Owens

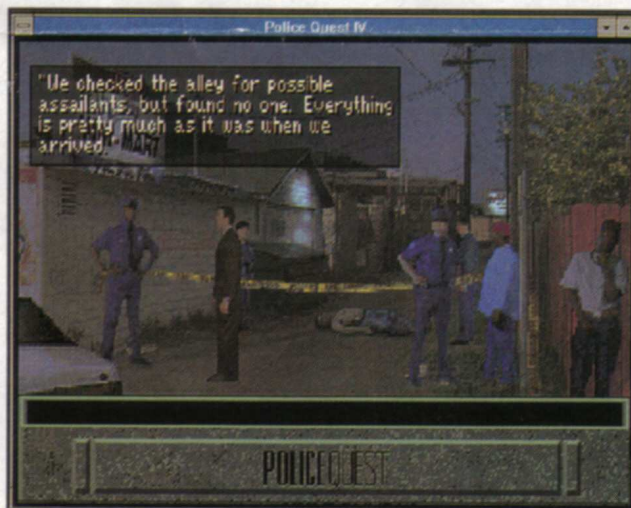


Police Quest 4: *Open Season* is not a pleasant game, but then, Sierra On-Line's series has always been ambitious. Its attempts to combine playability with the reality of detective work has always required the *PQ* series to balance carefully the drudgery, boredom, cynicism, and horror of real homicide investigation with the elements that go into a successful game. *Open Season* does succeed in that balance. However, it does so at so many levels, that to consider the game merely in terms of its entertainment value would be to miss its larger implications about our society and its struggle against the drug machine and violent crime in general.

First, though, the fact that the game requires us to face those implications is an indication of its strength as commentary. Surely, when Tammy Dargan, the former producer of "America's Most Wanted," the Powers That Be at Sierra On-Line, and Daryl F. Gates, the former Chief of Police in Los Angeles, decided to create *Open Season*, they were not unaware of the game's potential implications. Their decision to make the game as realistic as possible was, in effect, a decision to portray urban realities and all of their raw, tragic contradictions without comment—and nothing is more political than the truth. Indeed, when the player's partner, Hal Bottoms, complains bitterly that he's a diabetic, on his third wife, who has "seen things no man is supposed to," the ability of truth to destroy people's lives is vivid, almost disarming, and terrifying.

The fiction of the game is simple: the player

portrays Detective John Carney, lead investigator of the death of Detective Bob Hickman, whose body is found mutilated, tortured, and



semi-nude behind a convenience store in South Central Los Angeles. The player must follow a watered-down version of police procedure to solve the murder, which includes the collection of evidence, questioning of witnesses and collaterals, filling out seemingly endless amounts of paperwork, tracking down leads and contacts, schmoozing with fellow officers, dumping money into vending machines, and much pointing and clicking—most of

which is covered in the abridged Los Angeles Police Department manual included with the game.

It is in this pointing and clicking, however, that the game reveals its one weakness: the limits of its genre. That a player unsure of what to do next must move the mouse all over the screen and repeatedly, desperately, click and point is a noticeable flaw in a game designed to be so seamlessly authentic. Often, how much an astute detective/player notices may depend on the resolution of his monitor or the accuracy of his mouse. Especially in a game as linear as *Open Season*, the incredible power of the game is replaced by the frustrating reminder that graphic adventures, at times, are little more than glamorized text games. It wouldn't have been unreasonable, it would seem, in a game that comes on 12 high-density disks, to include a feature that would highlight the names of important items when the pointer passed over them.

Open Season repeatedly bludgeons us with reality in much the same metaphorical way as Detective Hickman must have been tortured before his murder. For instance, at one point Carney must discuss Hickman's death with Katherine Hickman, the slain detective's wife. Although he tries to console her, he cannot mask the real reason he has come: his job requires him to. When he questions her about Hickman's drug abuse and her husband's increasing inability to separate his work from his personal life, Carney is doing the same thing Hickman did; he's failing to step away from the job long enough simply to be, to feel, and to treat another human—in this case, the stunned, grieving widow of a longtime friend—with simple, unobtrusive compassion.

That the game includes the player in this intrusion, is, of course, an astounding, overwhelming accomplishment. The player cares nothing about

Police Quest 4: Open Season



TITLE:
PRICE:
SYSTEM:
REQUIREMENTS:

Police Quest 4: Open Season
\$69.95
IBM
386-25MHz or better, 4MB RAM,
VGA graphics, 22MB hard drive
space, mouse; supports
Windows 3.1; supports all major
sound cards

DESIGNERS:
PUBLISHER:

Tammy Dargan, Daryl F. Gates
Sierra On-Line
Coarsegold, CA
(209) 683-4468

this woman; she is simply a part of a puzzle to be solved in the ferreting out of the killer. After forcing Katherine Hickman in tears from the room, Carney thinks nothing of casually grilling Valerie, their young daughter, or of searching a part of the house which she mentions; the player probably won't, either. It's not until the second visit to the house that the player realizes there might have been a more humane and ethical way to proceed.

Many games over the years have encouraged that lack of consideration for NPCs. The tendency to slaughter all and take all in role-playing games has been so pervasive that the few games which punish such behavior could be counted on one hand. But to run across such selfishness in a game like this seems incredibly damning—and heartrending—because it's true to life. We treat each other, the game implies, in our attempts merely to cope with the problems with which we are faced, like NPCs.

In that irony lies but one of the many strengths of *Open Season*. Its accuracy forces the player to consider issues that lie far beyond the typical scope of most computer games. The distinction between behavior in game-play and behavior in real life, for instance, calls to mind the ongoing debate over the effect of televised violence on its viewers, or of pornography on the attitudes of its purchasers toward women—and may indicate why so many more fantasy role-playing games exist than do those reflecting real life situations. The reality in the game's presentation of a confrontation between Carney and a television journalist, each of whom would argue that he was merely trying to do his best to fulfill his duty to society, is complex and fairly drips with the frustration inherent in the relationship between the police—dedicated to preserving justice through action and investigation, and the journalists—dedicated

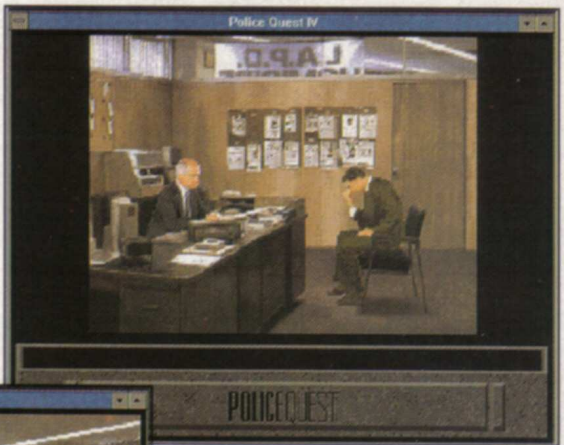
to the same end through disclosure and debate. Carney's later inability to explain to a storekeeper why the televised scene appeared as it did involves many of the conflicting values of contemporary society. Few realistic depictions of societal misperception could present that conflict as accurately as, say, the NPC in *Ultima V* does when he asks, "Do you know Lord Blackthorne? No? Then how do you judge him?"



Indeed, the *Ultima* series depicts many of the struggles implicit in *Open Season* more effectively than does this one game. *The Black Gate*, for instance, freed of the necessity to be true to life, easily and directly examines the implications of class warfare on society. *Open*



Season can only do so indirectly—by forcing the curious player to wonder why gang warfare occurs as it does, why the police are perceived as they are, and what would cause the mother of a horribly murdered child to refuse to cooperate fully with those dedicated to bringing his murderer to justice. However, *Ultima* has addressed those societal questions over many years; *Open Season* attempts to do so in one game.



That it accomplishes its task is noteworthy. The game draws us in; it surrounds us with a reality that is horrifying because it is our own. From the opening scene, when we realize that our character icon is faceless, it attracts us. Scott McCloud, in his book *Understanding Comics*, muses that the compelling power of the cartoon face is in its ambiguity. "The cartoon is a vacuum," he says, "into which our identity and awareness are pulled, an empty shell that we inhabit

which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it." In much the same way, the good detective attempts to enter the mind of the criminal. There are reasons for everything, he understands, and in realizing that, he deciphers clues, pieces together motives, and visualizes sequences in which criminal events occurred. In effect, he becomes the criminal. Chief Gates knows that. Tammy Dargan knows that.

The VGA graphics are photo-realistic. If anything, that realism adds to the grimness and sense of pressure which an actual homicide investigation entails. The score, by Neal Grandstaff, is moody and evocative. The overall sense of *Police Quest 4* is of a tight package designed for those willing not to step into the shoes of a flatfoot trying to track down a gangster, but, instead, of a real-life investigator trying to untangle the knots of circumstance which lead to violence and horror.

The contemporary detective story is not about rain-soaked streets or dames so hardened that their beauty is less mutable only when compared to their cold, cynical hearts, but about class warfare and poverty so extreme and relative that hope can only exist through the desperation of violence and crime. *Open Season* tells that story magnificently. Not for the immature. **CGW**

