

Leisure Suit Larry

The last two decades have witnessed the growth of video and computer gaming from a small hobbyist pastime to a major form of entertainment. During its integration into modern culture, gaming has necessarily adopted certain traits that are inherent in human existence, namely violence and sex. Violence has actually been an integral part of games from the very beginning, whether it was the destruction of enemy tanks or missions against invading aliens. The integration of sex into gaming though, has taken a considerably different course. Although there were several small niches of games devoted to that topic in the early 1980s, it wasn't until the late 1980s and early 1990s that sex began to gain acceptance as a part of mainstream gaming. Perhaps the most significant catalyst to that process was the highly popular Leisure Suit Larry series produced by Sierra and developed in large by Al Lowe.

The history of Leisure Suit Larry begins with that of its publishing company, Sierra On-Line. It was incorporated in 1979 by Ken and Roberta Williams in a small town near Yosemite. They decided to direct their focus to a then unexplored genre, adventure games. Although their first big success was the *King's Quest* series, in the company's early days they received national attention due to a small game written by Chuck Benton. This game was certainly a unique element of Sierra's catalog at the time: it was the company's only non-graphic work and their sole adult-oriented game. Entitled *Softporn*, it was released in 1981 and had the distinction of being the subject of Time Magazine's first column on computer entertainment. The game was very successful for

its time period and attracted a large group of fans. However, when Williams was forced to choose between acquiring the software rights to Disney characters and keeping Softporn in production, he chose the former.

During the course of the next several years, Sierra went on to establish itself as the main producer of adventure games. The adult market continued on its own path. In 1982, *Interlude*, another text based game, gained some popularity. In 1983, Atari found itself in the headlines for halting the distribution of an independently produced title called *Custer's Revenge*. The considerably offensive goal of this game was to defile an Indian woman bound to a post (Compute Jan 92 p100). The genre was somewhat quiet for a while after that episode and didn't witness any noteworthy releases until 1987.

1987 was a very productive year for adult-themed computer games. One of the better known adult games of the decade, *MacPlaymate*, came out that year. Programmed by Mike Saenz and distributed by Pegasus Productions, *MacPlaymate* features an animated female character, Maxie, who depends upon the user for stimulation. It was a rather racy game. The game even included a Panic Button/Boss Switch that would launch a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet when clicked to avoid embarrassing situations. The game soon became very popular and sparked the interests of a wide variety of people. Request was made by female and gay gamers for a version with male characters. Two years later Saenz would develop *Virtual Valerie*, another classic of adult entertainment. These two titles were probably the most pirated games in the history of the Macintosh (Compute Jan 92 p104). Saenz offers an interesting perspective on his work: "*MacPlaymate* was a spoof of all the fetishistic trappings of the average male's preferred sexual imagery...I was hoping the absurdity of it would sink in, that by putting

it into such bold, simplified relief, men would realize how unreal it was to expect women to behave like that sexually.” (Compute Jan 92 p104)

The most significant release of 1987 though was *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards*. The idea for the series came about a year earlier during a brainstorming session between Ken Williams and one of Sierra’s head programmers. During their talk, the thought of doing a *Softporn* remake eventually came up and both were intrigued by the prospect. Al Lowe, the game’s programmer, was assigned to begin its development in collaboration with Mark Crowe, the game’s artist. After reviewing *Softporn* for ideas, Lowe came to the conclusion that the game was hopelessly out of date, saying, “it’s so behind the times it might as well be wearing a leisure suit!” (www.allowe.com) The phrase stuck, and it was decided that the remake would in a way be a spoof on the lifestyle presented in *Softporn*.

A few words on Al Lowe are in order. He arrived at Sierra in 1982 after being previously employed for 10 years as a high school band director. His first assignments within the company mostly involved Disney projects. Eventually, he worked his way up to the head programmer position for *King’s Quest III* and *Police Quest* in 1986 (www.sierrastudios.com/games/larry/). During his career at Sierra he has worked on approximately 25 projects (9 of which involve Leisure Suit Larry). His work has made him very well known within the industry, and has received media coverage from publications such as the *Rolling Stone*, *The New York Times*, and *Playboy*.

After four weeks of starting the project, Crowe had completed all of the artwork that was used in the game. During this time, Lowe worked on the language parser and game code. The game was completed within three months. One of the most important

aspects of the development process, beta testing, began at this time. A dozen beta-testers were recruited from CompuServe's Gamers Forum, and their feedback allowed Lowe to make the game exceedingly smart for its time period. The game shipped in June and although its sales started out very poorly it eventually made its way onto Softsell's Top 10 list. *Leisure Suit Larry* would go on to receive the Software Publishers Award for Best Adventure Game of 1987.

Two years later, Sierra would come out with its first *Larry* sequel, *Leisure Suit Larry II: Looking for Love(In Several Wrong Places)*. The game was received quite warmly by critics and *Larry* fans alike. *Compute* magazine had two pages devoted to its review and offered such commentary as: "Sierra's latest installment not only lives up to the original, but surpasses it: The graphics and animation are better and the storyline is more intricate and sophisticated" (June 89 p66). *PC Magazine* lauded its "awesome musical score" (*PC Magazine* Jun 89 p448). Some criticism was made that the adult humor had been toned down a bit, but all in all the reviews were very positive.

In 1990 *Leisure Suit Larry III: Passionate Patti in the Pursuit of the Pulsating Pectorals* was released. Once again, critics found the game to be exceedingly entertaining. Reviews cited it as "one of the best sounding games ever" and even praised character development (*PC Magazine* March 90 p411). *PC Magazine* also commented that "though the sex is far more graphic than the earlier installments, it's inoffensive and used to good effect" (*PC Magazine* March 90 p412). There was a bit of wariness in the review's conclusion though, as seen by its writer saying, "Although some gamers are crying out for a *Larry IV*, this hopeless romantic thinks its time to pick on someone else and let poor *Larry* live happily ever after." (*PC Magazine* March 90 p412) This was in

fact exactly what Al Lowe had intended. He had planned it to be the last of a trilogy and consequently tied up the plot sufficiently to accomplish that. He had no expectations of continuing the series (www.allowe.com).

In three short years then, one can begin to see a shift in the general opinion of adult games. 1987 started with MacPlaymate gathering a great deal of negative attention to the genre, but ended with an adult game winning a very competitive computer game award. The following years saw the *Larry* games being heavily praised in industry magazines and creating substantial earnings for Sierra. In 1991, it was expected that the *Leisure Suit Larry* series would bring in between \$20 to \$25 million in revenue (Time Sept 91). There were some groups though, that were not at all enthusiastic about the adult genre's increasing popularity. A great deal of controversy surrounded the series. One of the best examples of this was a bill proposed by the State of California, dubbed the "Leisure Suit Larry" bill, which would have prohibited adult themes in any computer game (www.sierrastudios.com/games/larry/). A similar attempt to legislate adult oriented games was brought to the California assembly by Sally Tanner. She introduced a bill to prohibit the depiction of alcohol or cigarettes in computer games sold within the state. (Compute Jan 92 p104). This bill was also defeated in committee. In general though, the public seemed to have become much more accepting of the adult genre. *Leisure Suit Larry III* was even recommended as a good Christmas gift by Time Magazine in December of 1990. (p82)

What reasons can be seen for this significant shift in opinion? It seems like some of the initial hostility the adult genre received stemmed from the public's conception of video and computer games at that time. In an article by *Compute* in 1992, several

designers voiced the belief that one of the prominent reasons computer games received so much scrutiny was that they were primarily associated with children and perceived as children's entertainment. Ken Williams himself, comments on the issue in an article for Time Magazine in 1991, "The problem is that virtually everyone thinks of computer games as part of the toy industry, and the idea of a toy with a sexual theme is inherently objectionable" (p 72). Perhaps the production of the *Leisure Suit Larry* series can be seen as a catalyst in expanding the public conception on this issue. By creating a game that was both challenging, adult-oriented, and highly successful, people may have begun to realize that the market for games extended well beyond children.

Another important factor in the growing acceptance of the adult genre, specifically the *Leisure Suit Larry* series, was the manner in which Sierra published its material. Williams had always been an advocate of strictly categorizing the company's work: games either fell into the adult genre, the family genre, or the children genre. He was strongly opposed to minors gaining access to adult material. There were even some security measures in the game to prevent kids from playing. At the beginning of the first three Larry games, the user needed to answer a series of questions correctly in order to advance to the first screen. These questions involved issues that only an older audience would be able to answer easily. Granted the system wasn't foolproof, but it was a step in the right direction. Williams actually wanted to extend the protection of minors even further. He chaired a committee of the Software Publishers Association that attempted to bring about a rating system for computer games that would be similar to movies. (Time Sept 91) However, the movement was a little ahead of its time, because a widespread rating system wasn't adopted until 1994 (US News & World Report 94)

One additional motivation for this swing of public opinion may have to do with the cultural climate of the eighties and nineties. The sexual environment of that time period was an exceedingly wary one due to the emergence of a new sexually transmitted disease, AIDS. The media spread reservations about casual sex through countless reports and warnings passed on by the medical community. Since real sex was no longer safe, there is evidence that the adult genre of gaming began to be looked at as a possible substitution. Mike Saenz, the creator of MacPlaymate and Virtual Valerie, observed this in the following comment to a Personal Computing reporter in 1987, “This program is software for the 80s, thrills without the risk of disease” (Personal Computing July 1987) A similar statement can be seen in a Newsweek article seven years later which reported on the relationship between technology and sex. “It’s the allure of new technology to fulfill old needs. And in these AIDS-obsessed times, it’s the ultimate in safe sex” (Newsweek March 94)

The history of Leisure Suit Larry does not end here though. Even though Al Lowe had never intended to create any more Larry games, the previous ones had been so successful that Lowe and Sierra couldn’t resist the opportunity. Lowe had difficulty thinking of a way to begin the next sequel though because the plot of the previous Larry seemed conclusive. Eventually he arrived at a novel idea, instead of making a Larry 4, why not make a Larry 5? (www.allowe.com) This is exactly what happened, *Leisure Suit Larry 5: Passionate Patti Does a Little Undercover Work* was released in 1992. It was followed by *Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out*(1994), which in turn was succeeded by *Leisure Suit Larry 7: Love for Sail*(1997). There was also a *Leisure Suit*

Larry's Casino and the *Leisure Suit Larry Pleasure Pack*, a compilation of all the Larry games.

For every additional Larry that was released, the criticisms of the series increased. Larry 5 received reviews from PC Magazine stating that “the puzzles were exceptionally easy”, “there seemed to be less sex, eroticism, and innuendo than in previous Larrys”, and that “Larry has just run one episode too long”. (PC Magazine Feb 92) The reviews for Larry 6 were similar. With *Leisure Suit Larry 7* it seemed that just about all of the reviewers had had enough. Even though the graphics were largely improved and the game contained many interesting gimmicks, *Computer Life* stated that “the juvenile humour wears as thin as Larry’s hair” and that “the whole affair is getting routine and more than a little limp” Even harsher reviews were made by the gaming site www.gamesdomain.com. Their coverage of the game included such lines as “it’s time to put Larry to sleep” and “Sierra is really scraping the bottom of the barrel with this one.”

Sierra’s corporate path followed the same downward trend as the Larry series. In 1993 it was featured in a Fortune magazine article as one of the 25 coolest companies (Fortune Aut 93 p56). In the mid-nineties they produced a string of highly successful football games in the FRONT PAGE SPORTS series. These games represented Sierra’s peak. It was all downhill after that. In 1999 they released FOOTBALL PRO 99, which was a long awaited successor to that series, and the title was plagued with bugs that made the game basically unplayable. A recall was issued that cost the company over one million dollars and their reputation was severely shaken (Computer Gaming World Apr 99 p51) Later that year, they were forced to essentially shut down their Eugene, Oregon office which had been the heart of the company for over a decade. (Computer Gaming

World Feb 00 p34.) More recently, there have been several changes in management with most of the key positions being occupied by Frenchmen.

The *Leisure Suit Larry* series is one of the most important constituents of the adult gaming genre. Through innovative design, unique humor, and responsible publishing, it provided the public with an excellent example of a computer game for more mature audiences. In doing so, *Leisure Suit Larry* was able to remove some of the stigma surrounding the adult genre and provide Sierra with an incredibly successful group of games. Although neither the *Larry* series nor Sierra On-Line finished out as strongly as they began, both represent a significant part of gaming history.