

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

PART 2

Although Al Lowe is now considered to be one of the all-time greats of computer game design, his arrival in this field didn't exactly happen as a result of single-minded determination. In fact, the whole thing was almost accidental.

Originally, Lowe's career had a more academic style, as he began his working life as a school music teacher and a musician (although this wasn't as glamorous a life as it sounds, as he was mostly involved with marching bands). As a sideline, Al was also actively involved in staging musical comedy and other theatre and also had a long history of involvement with electronic toys: PA systems, stereos and a lot of other things.

So how did all of this lead to games designing in general - and Leisure Suit Larry in particular? Well, it's obvious really, or so the man himself seems to think: "What else could a guy with all of those interests end up doing, other than designing 3 games?"

Actually, the decision wasn't as straightforward as all that. To feed his always healthy interest in electronic gadgetry, Lowe acquired an Apple computer in 1981 and, being a fairly lighthearted sort of character, one of his first software purchases was a game ("for my five year-old son, of course"). As fate would have it, that game was Mystery House, the first adventure from a small Californian company On-Line Systems, which was later to become Sierra On-Line.

Lowe enjoyed this first brush with computer gaming so much that it left him wanting more - but he found it difficult to come across any more games software that he actually liked. Lowe was particularly interested in getting his hands on some games with an educational twist, but he couldn't find anything that was both informative and fun. So, in the best of entrepreneurial traditions, he decided to see if he could come up with some him-

In the second part of our look behind the scenes at Sierra On-Line, Ciaran Brennan talks to the people behind three of the company's biggest game names - Police Quest, Space Quest and, of course, Leisure Suite Larry.

self.

Lowe takes up the story: "I bought a copy of the very first commercially available art package for the Apple and, with the help of a friend, got down to designing. We started in August and did two products in two months and sold them in the third."

The company which Lowe set up to manufacture and distribute these home-grown affairs, Sunny Side Soft, soon began to experience success, both critical and commercial. But Lowe soon discovered that there was a side to software publishing that wasn't much fun: taking and processing orders, duplicating disks, loading boxes and all of the other mundane tasks which are necessary in getting a product out of your head and into the customer's computer.

"I decided at that point that I would much rather create the stuff and let other people take care of the business side," Lowe continues, "so we looked around for publishers. We talked to a lot of people, but Sierra was just at the point where it wanted to get into educational software, so they bought our line of products."

And the rest is almost history. Lowe's involvement with Sierra On-Line has continued right up to the present day and has taken in a whole lot more than just the Larry series. However, that particular character is obviously not so easy to get away from, as Lowe has just finished Leisure Suit Larry 5 (whatever did happen to number 4?) and is currently in the process of reworking the original to bring it up to date.

The work that Lowe has been involved with when he wasn't engrossed with everyone's favourite computerised voyeur included an early icon-based word processor (once again designed with education in mind), and an involvement with a Disney line which Sierra published in the mid '80s.

However, the product which first caused that spark that resulted in the raging fire that is Leisure Suit Larry came from one of On-Line's earliest text adventures, which was about as far from Disney and

education as it's possible to get - that game was Soft Porn. Despite its rather sleazy title, this was no small-time affair: at the time of this game's release there were roughly 100,000 Apples in the world - Soft Porn sold 25,000 copies. As Lowe points out: "We figured that, with piracy, just about everybody had a copy someplace."

Having just completed Donald Duck's Adventure Playground, Lowe decided that it was time to update this 'classic' and bring it to life with the company's then-new 3D animated adventure interpreter. However, as far as Lowe was concerned, it was more than the graphics and sound which needed updating: "It was a serious product," he points out, "where you were a guy trying to score with three girls - I just couldn't believe that this would sell. So I suggested to Ken Williams [Sierra On-Line's boss] that we remake the game as a parody of itself and inject a little humour."

Williams agreed and Lowe immediately got to work, dropping all of the original game's text (except for one sentence, which has, unfortunately, disappeared into the darkest recesses of the memories of everyone who worked on the project) and adding a character for the player to manipulate - thus was born one of computer gaming's few true stars... Larry Laffer.

But although this was the game which really put Lowe, and to a certain extent Sierra On-Line itself, on the map, he still isn't exactly happy with the end result: "When we were through I was kind of sorry that we hadn't improved the puzzles too - some of them were pretty lame."

It may be difficult to believe now, but when Leisure Suit Larry originally shipped, the game didn't sell for a couple of months. However, word of mouth soon got things moving. Moving a bit too well actually, because along with commercial success, inevitably, came the backlash from that section of the American Moral Majority who weren't overjoyed with the game's overtly sexual content.

Lowe's reaction to the criticisms which



Al Lowe

were hurled at his game is surprisingly low-key: "I think that they're missing the joke," he says of his critics, "because it's really meant as a comment on that lifestyle instead of a recommendation of it. When we did the game I felt that it had to reflect a sense of humour and I made it a very strong point that we did not have any off-colour language in the game at all. There's a lot of double entendres, but there's no use of hell or damn or any of those words. While the game understands just about every word that you can type in, it will never say anything really bad in reply. Also, any time that there's sexual activity happening, it always takes place behind a screen, it's hidden behind a shell - it's always by inference rather than being explicitly depicted."

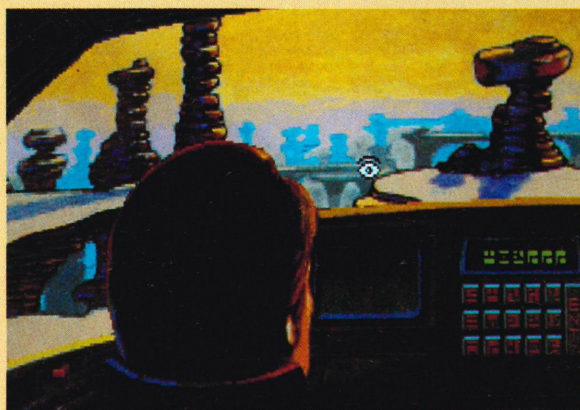
Even so, Leisure Suit Larry 2 was a reaction to that kind of negative feedback. In Larry 2, instead of Larry going out looking for sex, Lowe changed the theme slightly so that his character was looking for love - and the funny thing is that the game didn't sell very well - in fact, in commercial terms, it's the weakest of the whole series.

So, as the games-buying public had voted with their wallets, the third game in the series saw Larry return to his original ways, and brought the would-be Romeo a bigger audience than ever. However, at this time, Lowe was beginning to tire slightly of his diminutive creation. Apparently, upon finishing the third game, Lowe went on the record as saying that he would never do Leisure Suit Larry 4. And that, so the story goes, is why the series has jumped straight ahead to number 5!

However, Lowe himself disputes this version: "I did say that about not doing number 4 one night after about 30 hours straight programming, but I don't think that that's the reason why we've skipped a sequel. The truth is that I was in the middle of designing this current game when I met a friend in the local hardware store and she said to me 'what are you working on now, Larry 4?' and, as usual, I gave her a smartass answer and said 'no, Larry 5!' But then I stopped for a second and said wait a minute, who said that they had to be in order? So, from that quip came the idea that maybe we should skip one and see what happens."

From that germ of an idea came an area in the plot of Larry 5 which describes how the master disks for Larry 4 were stolen and erased by the game's villain - which also neatly explains why, in the current game, Larry has had amnesia for a year: the last thing he knew was that he was at the end of Larry 3 and now he's far away and doesn't know how he got there.

This whole 'missing game' story has now gotten slightly out of hand though, as whole groups of Larry fans - even those as far away as in Holland - are creating an entire cult around the game that never existed. Lowe chuckles as he recalls the



dialogue which was passed to him from a recent exchange on a Dutch bulletin board: "If you were to read the messages you would assume that they were actually playing the game, because they were passing hints back and forward and so on."

This cult can hardly be damaged by the fact that Lowe has a whole story worked out for what happened in Larry 4: apparently, Patty did a recording session for some villains who cheated her out of her royalties and... well, why spoil it? And anyhow, knowing the way Lowe works, it wouldn't be at all surprising if the game did eventually make an appearance.

So, having spent so many years involved with the hapless romancer, does Lowe actually like Larry? "Yeah!", he enthuses, "He's the wild side that I never had. I'm a married man - I've been married for 20 years - I don't run around or go to bars or anything like that, so this is the way that I can live that life vicariously."

Rumours have been flying around for some time now that Lowe's alter ego could soon have a chance to make his mark on a far larger audience, as a number of Hollywood studios are reputedly interested in bringing Larry to the silver screen. However, although Lowe would love to see his creation become a film star, he's quite sceptical about the possibilities of there ever being a Larry - The Movie: "What we need is Larry - The Money," he quips.

For the record, Lowe's own choice for the actor to play Larry on screen is Rick Moranis, Hollywood's most famous nerd, best-known for his parts in Ghostbusters and Honey I Shrunk The Kids.

But even amidst all of this talk of movies and so on, Larry fans can rest easy in the knowledge that their hero will probably be making at least one more appearance in his more usual computerised form. And they shouldn't have to wait too long either, for, as Lowe himself puts it: "It's part of my personality that I can't go very long without making a joke..."

COPS AND ROBBERS

If Al Lowe's path into the world of games design was somewhat unconventional, then Jim Walls' could only be described as bizarre. In fact, before this ex-highway patrolman sat down to create the original Police Quest he didn't even know how to

'Good Lord, Biggles...it's a Flying Wing!' 'Correction, Algy, that is a Gotha 229 - I've read the manual, you see...'

switch a computer on, let alone program a single line of code.

Unlikely as it may seem, Walls' entry into the Sierra On-Line 'family' came about through his wife's hairdressing business - but maybe that's a story best left to the man himself: "I had retired from the highway patrol for medical reasons, and had a year where I more or less sat around doing nothing. Ken Williams used to go to my wife to get his hair cut and they got talking about me one time and my wife said that I was sitting around doing nothing. So he invited me to play racquetball with him and that's how it all got started."

After racquetball, the pair sat down and, among other things, began to talk about Walls' career with what's arguably the world's most famous police force, the California Highway Patrol. During this conversation, Williams put forward the idea that Walls could write a police story based on his own experiences and, to introduce the ex-cop to On-Line's own particular style of computer game, loaned him a computer and a couple of games: Black Cauldron and King's Quest 2.

Walls' was immediately hooked and set about putting a plot together based on 'good police procedures'. This aspect of the program was deemed so important that the package even included a handbook, The Police Officer's Enforcement Guide, to aid the player in making decisions just like a real police officer would.

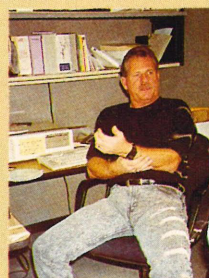
Police Quest was an immediate and lasting success, with the third game in the series now nearing completion. Fans of the original will be pleased to know that, after Police Quest 2's flirtation with more serious detective work, this third effort is going back to the basics of routine police work that the games' fans seem to enjoy. Walls explains: "The second game in the series didn't sell as well as the first one, and I think that the reason for that was that it was strictly detective work. In Police Quest 3 we're getting back to where we were in the original, because all of the feedback that we got from the fans was

that people enjoyed driving around in that marked car stopping people."

The way the story goes, Sonny Bonds [the hero of all three Police Quests] is promoted to sergeant and returns to the academy for his sergeant's training (this plot appears in the game as an opening cartoon, bringing the player up to date with what's happened so far in the series). Then, when his training's complete, he's temporarily put back into uniform again and

assigned to traffic duty.

The plot does thicken quite considerably from here on however, as Sonny soon drops handing out tickets to speeding juveniles to concentrate on hunting down a serial killer - a hunt which leads him into quite a few tricky situations, not least of which is the involvement of a Satanic cult.



Jim Walls

There's also a sub-plot involving a bad cop - but that, as they say, is another story...

Many of the characters from the first two games also make a reappearance - for a start, Sonny is now married to Sweet Cheeks Marie, who once again gets right into the thick of the action. But it's not just the good guys who've proved popular with the game's aficionados. Walls expands: "Remember at the end of Police Quest 2 where you killed the Death Angel? Well, we got so many letters from people who wanted him back in there, that I had no choice but to come up with some way that he could make his return." This dilemma was solved when Walls eventually came up with the idea of bringing the villain back in the shape of his vengeance-seeking brother.

Although the game itself is very much in the usual Police Quest style, one thing which has changed is the presentation. That's been completely overhauled using On-Line's new SCA development system, which allows the use of more sophisticated graphics and sound (the look of the game is in good hands, as its being looked after by a team of five artists headed up by Space Quest's Mark Crowe) than before as well as completely doing away with the player's need to type in commands form the keyboard.

Walls is a big fan of the new system, pointing out that removing the keyboard actually adds to the game's reality: "I've played with a couple of the games which are parserless," he explains, "and to me it just gives a greater feel for the game because you don't have to sit there and worry about 'what do I need to type in here?' You become part of the game at a deeper level."

But despite Walls' recommendation of the new system, its appearance did mean a whole lot more work, as the decision to use it wasn't made until after development of the game had already begun. In fact, Walls had already completely designed Police Quest 3 to support the keyboard and had to go back and rethink everything to support the mouse.

Walls' game designing career hasn't been exclusively devoted to Police Quest - he took some time out after completing the second game to create Sierra On-Line's move into the world of espionage, Code-name: Iceman - however it's a fair bet that the story of the Bonds dynasty will continue. And why is Walls so sure of this? "Well there's a good reason," he explains, "at the end of this one, Marie's pregnant, so..."

REACH FOR THE STARS

Next to Roberta Williams and Al Lowe, Sierra On-Line's biggest name developers have got to be the 'Boys From Andromeda', the wacky duo behind that classic of goofball science fiction adventuring, the Space Quest series (check out page 60 for a review of the latest in the series, Space Quest IV, Roger Wilco And



Space Quest IV

The Time Rippers).

Behind the off the wall 'nose and glasses' disguise are two of Sierra On-Line's longest serving employees, programmer Scott Murphy and artist Mark Crowe. And although neither of this duo have a rags to riches story to rival that of Al Lowe or Jim Walls, their respective roads to computer gaming heaven were far from straight either.

Murphy in particular had an unconventional route to his current position. Having moved to the Sierra mountains in the early '80s to indulge in a little backpacking in the Yosemite valley (a beautiful national park close to On-Line's headquarters), Murphy took part-time work to support himself. However, this hippy lifestyle was all to change when a friend of his wife's got a job as a disk duplicator with the newly founded On-Line

Entertainment. Through this connection, Murphy saw his first adventure game (either Soft Porn, The Wizard and The Princess or Mystery House, it's been such a long time that even Murphy can't remember) and in his own words became: "Quite fascinated with the whole thing."

Murphy began to hang around the games developer's plant "bugging them until they gave me a job." His wish was finally

granted when a vacancy opened up in the dealer returns support department...

Crowe also joined Sierra about eight years ago, once again by a circuitous route. Having worked as a graphic designer for the company which manufactured, among other things, Sierra On-Line's disk labels, Crowe eventually joined the games company's art department. His first involvement with games came when he joined the first Disney software project, Winnie The Pooh, which was headed up by a certain Al Lowe.

Crowe and Murphy teamed up for the first time on the Black Cauldron game (Murphy had by

now left the customer support department behind and was making his first inroads into design and programming) and soon discovered mutual interests in science fiction and comedy.

When the Disney game was eventually complete, the duo decided to work on a game of their own, and combining their interests, came up with Roger Wilco, the

interests, came up with Roger Wilco, the bumbling but loveable futuristic anti-hero. Ken Williams immediately saw the potential and the development team that would become famous behind piggy glasses and shades hasn't looked back since.

"We wanted to do something that parodied the movies - in fact we wanted to parody everything!" Explains Crowe, continuing: "Most of all though, we wanted to take a normal person to an extraordinary place and see what he could do - but Roger was sub-normal I guess"

The latest in the series uses a few new ideas that haven't been incorporated into Sierra games in the past, including multiple sounds, stereo panning and colour cycling. The story too takes a few unexpected twists, with Roger jumping forward to Space Quest 12 and back to Space Quest 10 and so on...

Crowe explains where this element of time travelling came from: "Well the company was taking hits from the public for this whole sequel thing. Just like in the movie industry, people were calling for us to be original and come up with something different, so we tried to have fun with that and parody the whole sequel aspect of these products."

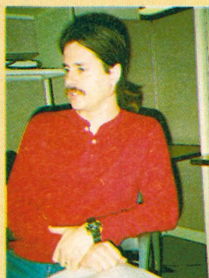
"It's not just a matter of taking advantage of a successful title though," Murphy continues, "a week after the release of Space Quest 3 we had people on the phone asking when Space Quest 4 was coming out - they want them!"

To give the people what they want, the pair collaborate on the concept and storyline before splitting up to continue work in their own specialist departments: Crowe comes up with the game's 'look and the feel', while Murphy takes over the programming and writing.

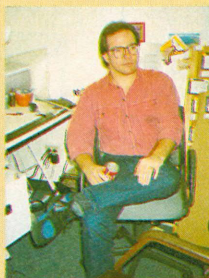
This system has proved remarkably effective so far, with the Space Quest series being the most consistent of all Sierra On-Line's many genres. However, Murphy and Crowe now feel that they'd like to try their hands at something a little different. Murphy takes up the story: "We won't be doing another Space Quest - that's not to say that there won't be another game in the series, it's just that we won't be doing it. Although we've no solid ideas of what type of game we'd like to do next, we've lived with Roger Wilco a long time now, and though we like him a lot, we're ready for a break now."

The pair aren't even sure what type of game they'd like to produce next. "Maybe something serious," says Crowe, "or even something humorous again - but this time in a completely different vein." "But we're more thinking about taking a vacation," Murphy pipes up. But if they do get their wish, let's hope that it's not too long before the Boys From Andromeda get their feet back on the ground and continue to produce games as strong as they've done for Roger Wilco. Over and out.

Ciaran Brennan



Scott Murphy



Mark Crowe