# AQUATRON
LATE TO A CRASHING PARTY
SIERRA ON-LINE, INC. 1983 **ATARI 400/800**

In 1973, pinball manufacturer **Williams Manufacturing Company**, branched out into the fledgling coin-operated video game market, when it subcontracted **Magnetic Corporation of America** to create its first arcade videogame **Paddle-Ball**, a clone of **Atari's** successful 1972 coin-op **Pong**. With whatever little market there was at the time Paddle-Ball never became a success, nonetheless, the endeavor resulted in the establishment of **Williams Electronics, Inc.,** in 1974. By 1979 the coin-op market had soared in popularity and Williams decided to put **Eugene Jarvis**, who had a successful record of pinball games behind him, to head the development of a new coin-op video arcade game. Management at Williams was unfamiliar with the technology used in electronic games and Jarvis and his team were afforded a large amount of creativity resulting in some excellent designed games. In late 1980 the team's first video arcade game **Defender** was demonstrated, the side-view, horizontally scrolling shooter, inspired by the likes of **Asteroids** and **Space Invaders**, entered production in 1981.
Defender went on to become the company's best-selling game and one of the highest-grossing arcade games ever with over 55.000 units sold. The success, like many of the early coin-op titles from the golden age of video arcade games, spawned numerous clones for personal computers over the next many years.
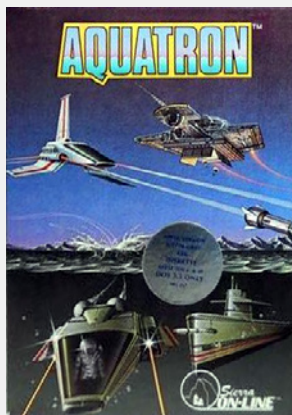
In 1981, early programming prodigy **Nasir Gebelli**, who had significant success with his fast-paced action games for the Apple II computer, created **Gorgon**. The defender-inspired game, published by **Sirius Software** ranked 3rd on Softalk's top 30 bestsellers list and became one of Gebelli's biggest hits. A year later, consumers' desire for coin-op arcade clones hadn't yet been depleted, and **Dan Thompson** wrote his Defender-inspired **Repton**, also published by Sirius Software. Both Gorgon and Repton became commercially successful and showed that there was indeed money to be made by copying other people's ideas.

In early 1983 **Justin Gray** began work on a Defender-inspired game. While knowing that the concept had been somewhat exhausted and was past its heyday, there was still a glimmer of hope of being able to make fortunes on the already proven and tested concept. Little did he or anyone know of the imminent disaster the market was heading towards.
To set the game apart Gray added a few additions to the gameplay with the ability to fly not only over the planet's ocean-covered surface battling flying interceptors but also beneath, destroying missile-firing submarines.
The game was picked up by **Sierra On-Line** but difficulties finding an appropriate and trademarkable name led to months of delay. Co-founder **Ken Williams** was keen on finding not only appealing but also unique titles for his company's products. For Williams, a name was an investment, the company's earlier adventure games had all benefitted from the Hi-Res naming. It would only require one successful product and the name would help market future products. After going through six different names, Aquatron was finally chosen, maybe inspired by **Robotron: 2084**, another successful Williams coin-op game.

Aquatron was released as a part of Sierra On-Line's short-lived **SierraVision** brand, the company's dedicated attempt to tap into the lucrative arcade market. The label was established following the reconstruction of the company after Ken and **Roberta Williams** had sold 20% of the company to venture capitalist **Jackie Morby** of **TA Associates**.

During 1983 the computer and video console game market was becoming saturated with an endless number of clones and subpar titles, the market was rapidly being buried in mass-produced games and cartridges, games nobody wanted. By Christmas, it became clear that a collapse was unavoidable. Companies like **Sierra On-Line** had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in the manufacturing of vast amounts of expensive cartridge-based games. What was supposed to be the best Christmas season ever ended in disaster when the market gave way and collapsed. Aquatron, no matter how much effort its name had required, arrived at the wrong time, consumers were seeking new and exciting pastures, and with the **North American video game crash**, ended Sierra's attempt to profit on dedicated arcade and cartridge-based games.
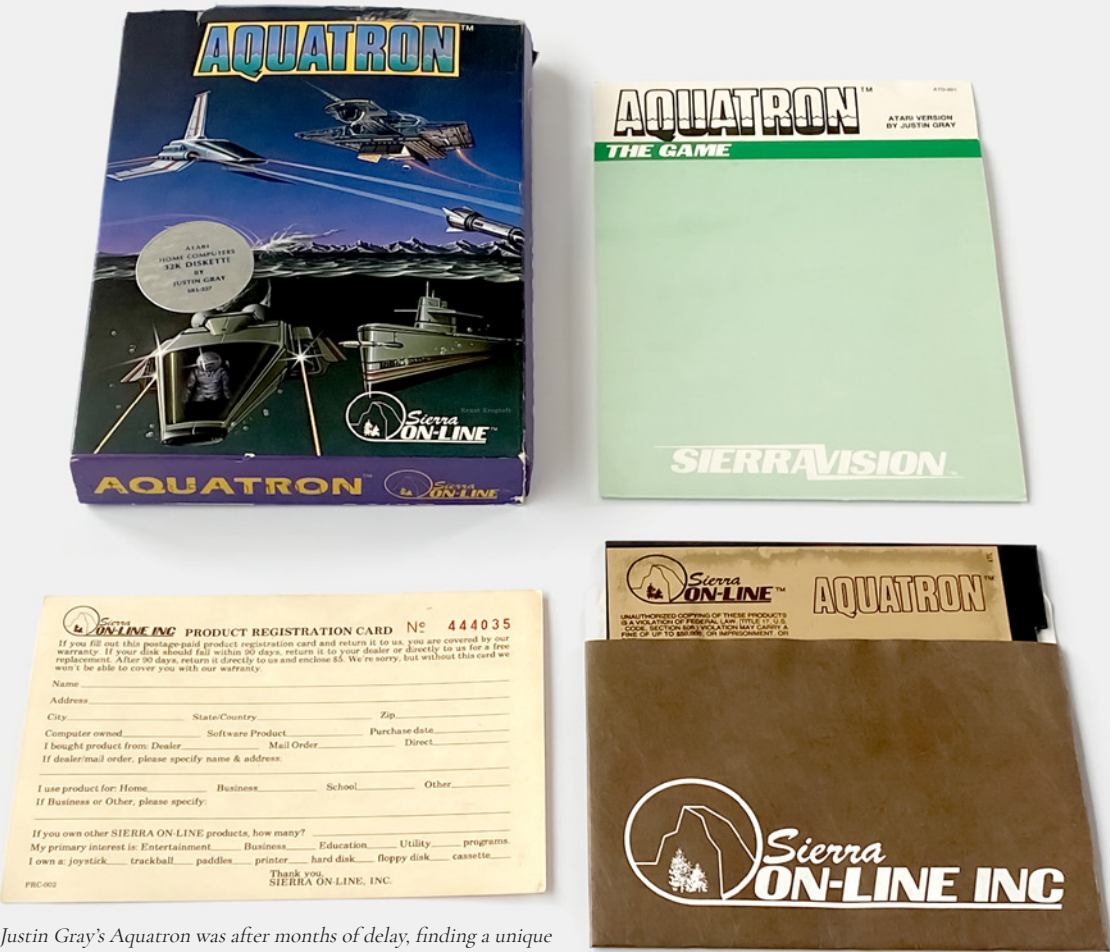
Justin Gray's Aquatron was after months of delay, finding a unique name, published by Sierra On-Line in 1983, for the Apple II and Atari 8-bit

While Aquatron didn't manage to make even a small dent in gaming history and only sold in poor numbers, it did manage to reach consumers before Atari managed to release the official home computer version of Defender, under its **Atarisoft label**.

LEISURE SUIT LARRY
AL LOWE'S GAMING LEGACY
SIERRA ON-LINE, INC. 1987-1996

In the autumn of 1982, **Sunnyside Soft** rented a small 10 by 10 feet booth at the San Francisco Civic Center. The second **Applefest** of the year was just about to open its doors to the public. The open-to-consumer show was a prime gathering for anything and everything Apple. Here software companies together with hardware suppliers would meet and show off their newest products and share their visions with the public. This was the perfect opportunity for the newly formed family and part-time operation conceived by **Al Lowe** and **Mike MacChesney** together with wifes Margareth and Ray Lynn, to showcase and market its two educational games, **Dragon's Keep** and **Bop-A-Bet**, created in the months prior.

Al Lowe, an accomplished jazz musician, had been teaching music in public schools for well over a decade and as part of his duties with the school district, he had become somewhat involved with computers. When he came down with chickenpox and was stuck at home, he experimented with a terminal hooked up remotely to the school district's PDP-11/70 minicomputer. In the time following, he borrowed various personal computers from the district before acquiring his first own computer, an Apple II Plus. Initially with the intent to write software that could help make his job easier but soon started experimenting with games he and his son could enjoy together.

With a background in education, Lowe decided to give the computer medium a try as an educational platform combining arcade and adventure with simple learning principles. The endeavor led to three developed titles, two of which were completed in time for the Applefest.

Lowe and his son had been playing several of **On-Line Systems'** early graphic adventure titles and loved not only the gameplay but the visual fidelity as well, the latter being influential for the visual style of Lowe's own games.

While the show experience was completely new and uncharted territory for Sunnyside Soft, On-Line systems one of the major players in the consumer software market had been at it for the better part of two years. Ken and Roberta Williams had initially built the company upon its early graphic adventure games but had quickly managed to get a footing in the lucrative action and arcade market.

The On-Line Systems booth was filled with its large portfolio of games, most playable on displays mounted so everybody passing by wouldn't miss it. The booth had a huge photo mural of a Yosemite National Park waterfall. Ken and a hesitant Roberta had earlier sold 20% of the company to venture capitalist **Jackie Morby** of **TA Associates**. Becoming a real corporation required a unique company name and On-Line Systems was becoming Sierra-On-Line, with the famous Yosemite landmark, the Half Dome, as its logo. Ken Williams was a big name in software, his skills and persona were liked and respected by many. When he went on the show floor he was met with smiles, conversations, and handshakes. One handshake that November in 1982 would eventually come to leave a significant mark on gaming history.

Sunnyside Soft's small but well-visited booth had a couple of Apple II computers installed for people coming by to try out its two titles. When Ken and Roberta toured the show floor they made their way by the booth and immediately became intrigued by how graphically similar the games looked to their own and very successful Hi-Res adventure games. They introduced themselves and ended up offering to buy the rights to the entire Sunnyside Soft product line, to market and publish through Sierra On-Line.

With the plans of entering the home educational software market, Ken predicted the three titles would be a perfect fit.

Both Dragon's Keep and Bop-A-Bet had been marketed in educational magazines and had sold for a few months, out of Al and Margaret's home, but the chance to have one of the biggest publishers behind their products with professional packaging, marketing, distribution, and sales, was an opportunity not to be missed. While other software publishers had shown interest in the games, they agreed to partner up with Ken and Roberta, not only had they come up with the best deal but they were local too, situated at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range only about 50 miles north of Fresno.

For Lowe, this would turn out to be an encounter changing the course of his life. In the summer of 1983 he left his secure professional career behind, became a fully-fledged game designer at Sierra, and on the side built a lifelong friendship with the Williamses.

Al Lowe's second game, Bop-A-Bet, an educational game to teach kids letter recognition and alphabetization.
This was one of two titles Sunnyside Soft brought to the Applefest in 1982. Bop-A-Bet was re-released by Sierra On-Line in 1983

Sierra's venture with The Walt Disney Company resulted in three educational titles published in 1984 (bottom row). The titles were later released in 1986 (top row). Al Lowe was involved in all three titles, designing Winnie the Pooh and Donald Duck's Playground and writing the music for Roberta William's Mickey's Space Adventure

While Sierra On-Line would struggle around the time of the North American Video Game Recession in 1983, a partnership with IBM would make the company reinvent the adventure game and herald it into the mainstream with Roberta's hugely successful King's Quest.

By 1984 Sierra still experienced financial issues and in the spring had to go through a massive firing round letting many of its programmers and designers, including Lowe, go.

The company still needed programmers and most went from being employees to being independently contracted. Williams and Lowe came to terms on a contract agreement based on royalties.

Lowe and a few other programmers worked perfectly into the contract model, working from home, delivering on time but several games got either delayed or not completed at all because programmers were lacking self-discipline.

Sierra On-Line would come to an agreement with The Walt Disney Company to develop educational games based on different Disney characters. Disney, at the time, didn't have its own developers and with Sierra On-Line's earlier and successful graphic adventures the company was a great fit to realize some of the many beloved Disney characters. Lowe's background in music and experience with educational games made him a perfect choice to work on the new endeavors.

Disney, impressed with Lowe's educational adventure Troll's Tale, the one game from the Sunnyside Soft days that didn't make it to the Applefest but was released by Sierra in 1983 and 1984, asked him to design an intuitive kids adventure game based on its 1985 movie The Black Cauldron.

Artist Mark Crowe, who later would come to work with Lowe on his first Leisure Suit Larry title, created the graphics. The Black Cauldron was released in 1986 and became the last title in the joint venture between Disney and Sierra. Following the departure, The Walt Disney Company, in 1988, incorporated Walt Disney Computer Software, Inc. as a subsidiary. Primarily to have third-party developers designing games based on the company's existing portfolio.

The Black Cauldron released the nearly every major platform in 1986 and 1987 was the last title in the joint venture between Sierra and Disney.

Friends who tried Benton's adult-oriented text adventure enjoyed it and encouraged him to try and publish it. Under the company name, Blue Sky Software, Benton sold around 100 copies.

Softporn was released by On-Line Systems for the Apple II (Left) and the Atari 8-bit (Right).
Chris Iden who did the Atari port, was, for a decade, one of the technological forces within Sierra and helped author its adventure game development systems. Iden left Sierra in 1991, like designer Jim Walls, for newly formed Tsunami Media

Back in 1981, Williams had at a trade show, met Chuck Benton who was promoting and selling his Softporn Adventure. A text-only adventure game with an adult-oriented theme, created initially as an exercise to learn Applesoft BASIC and to see if the computer could be a means to creating a database program. Benton's efforts resulted in a small database handler in the form of an adventure game.

While On-Line Systems was known for its graphic adventures, Williams was intrigued by the game and picked it up to publish it under the On-Line systems label. The move proved successful, not only would Softporn sell an estimated 25.000 copies, temporarily doubling the company's sales but also receive prominent coverage in Time Magazine's first column on computer entertainment, Software for the Masses. Despite the unusual and more adult-oriented content, the coverage spawned great market exposure. Time Magazine even published the famous cover photo, showing an Apple II computer and a waiter delivering Champagne to three naked women, one of which being Roberta Williams.

When Sierra On-Line was coming to a licensing agreement with Disney a few years later, Softporn Adventure was dropped from the company's portfolio. Now years later the Disney deal was history and with the majority of titles being all family-friendly fantasy, another themed game made sense. At the time Infocom's Leather Goddess of Phobos, a humorous and somewhat naughty text-only adventure game, was having great success, without too much commotion despite its more mature content. Williams and Lowe agreed that an updated version of Softporn Adventure, utilizing the company's now proven and successful Adventure Game Interpreter (AGI), was a possibility. Lowe, after completing King's Quest III went home and replayed Softporn. The game, even for its own time, was rudimentary and with very little depth. It had no protagonist, little or no plot, and of course no graphics. Lowe reported back to Williams that the game was so far past its due date, with the famous remark, it could as well have been wearing a '70s leisure suit, something that stuck and became an integral part of the game and later on in the franchise as a whole.

The basic structure of Softporn, its puzzles, characters, and locations were all solid but the text needed to go. The only way to update the game was essential to parodies on it. Lowe was known as the good humor guy at Sierra, always cracking jokes, and while he never had written a comedy before this proved a perfect chance to put some of his fun and prankster personality into a game.

With the notion that games not only should be fun but funny as well, Lowe went to work and stripped all text, rewrote the whole thing with wacky and (some explicit) humor, not only to make fun of the lifestyle portrayed but also of the player personified with the main character, who was put in as many embarrassing situations as possible.
Lowe crafted a middle-aged ill-polyester-dressed virgin nerd par excellence protagonist partially based on guys he had seen hustling women when he was a musician playing gigs at clubs in the '70s.

With the main storyline in place, Lowe created a list of animations, scenes, and characters needed for all the puzzles to work and for the unfolding of the story. Artist Mark Crowe, who was working full time on his and Scott Murphy's Space Quest, helped for four weeks, during evenings and weekends, to create all the detailed artwork. To this Lowe created various humorous interactions, alongside clue-giving messages. Crowe also tipped in and helped with puzzle design and humoristic features.
After about three months Lowe had rewritten and programmed his humoristic take on Softporn Adventure.
This was Lowe's first go at a text-parser-driven adventure game. All his earlier titles had been using a simplified interaction method and he was somewhat afraid that he might have missed things when players typed in words that didn't necessarily make sense. In the spring of 1987, the game was beta-tested for Lowe to track what players would type in and where in the game, for him to create responses, usually funny remarks that made sense in the context.
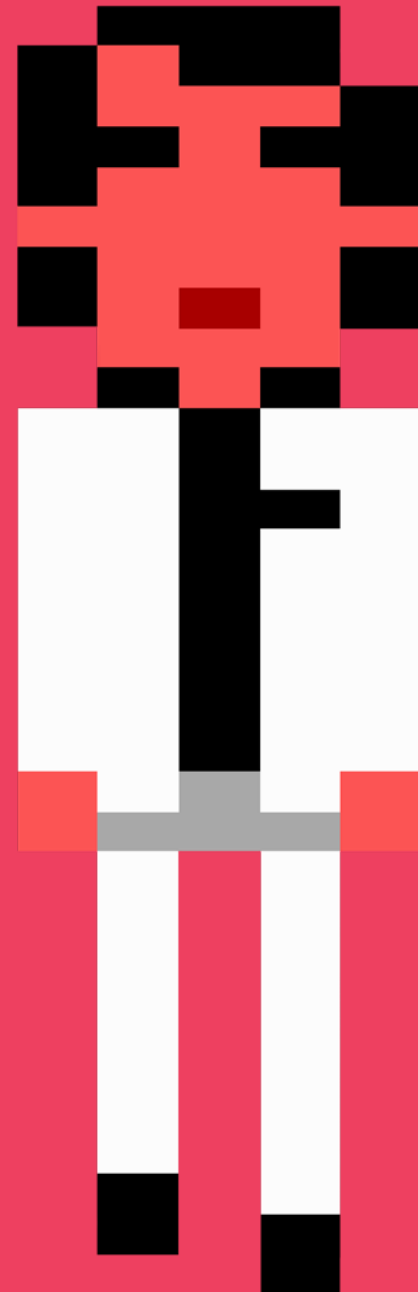
After two months of testing and refinement, development was reaching its final stages. It was clear that using the word porn in the title was probably a bad idea, while the controversy of using the word back in 1981 surely had been good for sales, it had also come with its own sets of complications.

John Williams, Ken's younger brother and marketing director at Sierra had come up with the name Leisure Suit Larry, which would become Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards.

The Lounge Lizards was the name of a '70s eclectic jazz group but also a term used of a well-dressed man who would frequent establishments in which the rich gather with the intention of seducing a wealthy woman with his flattery and deceptive charm, none of which Larry possessed.

Larry was in a dire need of a last name, up until now he had been using one of Lowe's friends' names but another name was needed. With nearly every word in the decided title starting with an L, Lowe pulled out the L volume of Encyclopedia Britannica, the first name that came to his attention was Arthur Laffer, a member of the Reagan administration Economic Policy Advisory Board.

With the beta testing out of the way and a name in place. Larry Laffer and his efforts conquering the hearts and pants of the opposite sex all while trying to reinvent himself as the cool guy, during one night in the city of Lost Wages was complete and released in June of 1987.

Lowe was talented, in multiple fields, and his role at Sierra had always been considerably diverse. Spending 16 years as an educator alongside being the high school band teacher, he had an exceptional ability to communicate, something that, alongside the beta-testing manifested in Leisure Suit Larry being one of the best games of the time employing a text-parser-driven interface.

Having played professional jazz since the age of 13 and earlier written the music for the company's Disney titles, alongside all of the music for Roberta's King's Quest II, it was only natural Lowe would write the game's main theme, a swinging jazzy arrangement. The main theme score would become one of adventure gaming's most recognizable.

Unsure of how Leisure Suit Larry would be received with its content deemed offensive by some, management chose to release it without any publicity or advertising budget. At the time of release the company was facing some minor financial issues and had cut back on advertising and instead relied more heavily on PR. While the content, with adult situations, somewhat vulgar language, and sexual insinuation, surely was daringly explicit for a game at the time, it wasn't much different from what was shown at the movies or on evening television, the only difference being that games were mainly perceived to be kids entertainment. Many of the bigger computer chain stores refused to sell the game, finding the adult content inappropriate resulting in first-month sales numbers lower than any new Sierra product launch in years with only 4.000 sold copies. Despite the controversy, Marketing managed to garner some major coverage in many of the popular gaming magazines at the time which helped spread the word.

With Lowe working as a contractor and agreeing to develop the game on spec, meaning without payment against a higher royalty, that year's Christmas initially looked a little bleak with him earning $2-3 for every sold copy. But word-of-mouth quickly spread and by year's end, the game had become not only a critical success but commercial as well. It would conquer the hearts of gamers everywhere and retailers learned that the game wasn't malicious or predatory but humoristic in a dirty yet innocent way and was indeed safe to sell.

Sales every month doubled and by the end of the year, the game had sold over 250,000 copies, becoming the company's second best selling title at the time only surpassed by King's Quest III. In total the title would go on to sell over 300.000 copies and spawn one of Sierra's longest-running series.

While Lowe's Leisure Suit Larry helped spawn and herald games with more adult-oriented content, the initial controversy also spawned the introduction of the Leisure Suit Larry bill, by the California State Legislature, to prohibit adult-oriented content in computer games. Fortunately, the legislation died in committee, thanks to the careful and persistent effort of the software industry.

Leisure Suit Larry became one of the most pirated software titles of the time, everyone with a computer had to have this title, for some reason. The piracy became so widespread that pirated copies of the game became a way to spread computer viruses. In late 1988, the New Accountant and the Financial Times reported that multiple banks and trading houses in Europe were hit with a virus that destroyed data after bored traders tried loading up pirated copies of the game. Sierra eventually had to respond to complaints that, No, official copies of the game were not going to destroy your computer and potentially bring down the global banking system.
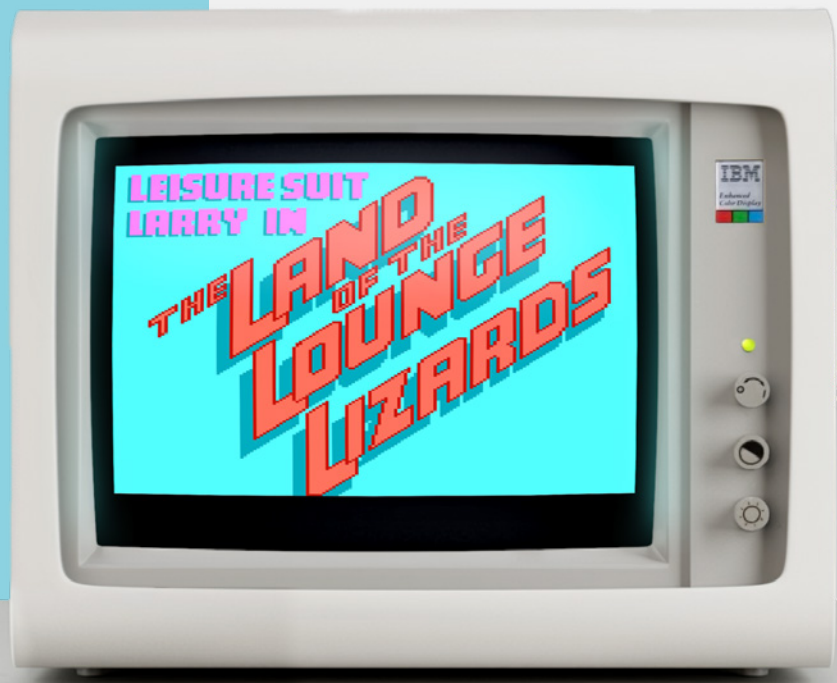
With Leisure Suit Larry's commercially slow start in the market and with Jim Walls' first Police Quest running behind, Lowe took over the programming and helped with the writing to complete it for the 1987 Christmas sales.

By 1988 technology had advanced to a place where higher-end machines could deliver higher resolution full-screen graphics, much more detailed animations, and movie-like music scores. The AGI framework, initially developed for the first King's Quest in 1983, was becoming more obsolete by the day. This resulted in Sierra developing and completing the first iteration of its object-oriented Sierra Creative Interpreter (SCI0) in the spring of 1988.

When Roberta Williams' King's Quest IV, the first game to be developed in SCI0, debuted as an invitation-only preview at the Consumer Electronics Show in June of 1988 the reaction from the audience was overwhelming. Using much more detailed graphics, animation, sound, and music, the experience was unlike anything earlier and touched the audience on a deeper emotional level. While afraid to leave potential customers with lower-end machines behind, Sierra simultaneously released an AGI version alongside the SCI. It turned out that a big part of the market was, like Sierra, very much at the forefront of technology and the SCI version of King's Quest IV became a massive success, leading to Sierra's other big adventure franchises, including the upcoming and second title in the Leisure Suit Larry series, switching to the new framework.

When Lowe had completed programming on Walls' Police Quest, along with some serious rewriting to make it playable by people without a police background, he yet again turned to Larry Laffer. Now, with the huge success of the first title and with Softporn Adventure's influence out of the way, Lowe could finally write his very own game without being influenced by outside parties, nonetheless, the adult-oriented content and Lowe's trademark raunchiness were all toned down due to the criticisms of the first title.

Leisure Suit Larry's age-specific quiz, to prove you were not a kid, led to many brute-force attempts to access the game. Ken Williams, vary of bad publicity, wanted to be sure that anyone playing Leisure Suit Larry was at least screened and insisted on the now-famous quiz. While Leisure Suit Larry was basically structured upon Softporn Adventure, Lowe filled the game with humorous content. A large part of the experience was exploring and interacting with every object, person, and location.
Artist Mark Crowe created the artwork for a stunning night out in the city, accompanied by Al Lowe's swinging main theme

The story continues the plot from the first but is much larger in scope. With Larry losing his virginity in the first he was now ready to go look for real love. A myriad of bizarre events takes Larry from winning the lottery to being featured on an '80s dating show, chased by KGB agents, to fighting a supervillain in a volcanic lair on an exotic island before finally finding true love. The story was more elaborate with an emphasis to provide a cinematographic experience with often long cut scenes. Overall the story had an extremely linear plot progression and without any real exploration made it a quite different experience than its predecessor.

The Linear story progression came not only from Lowe wanting more plot development but also from the game being structured in stages to fit on multiple floppies, without the need for constant disk swapping. This resulted in dead ends when you forgot important items in earlier stages as the only way to go back was to restore an earlier saved game but this was an issue with many of Sierra's adventure games and players knew to save early and to save often.

In late October of 1988, the game was released as Leisure Suit Larry Goes Looking for Love (In Several Wrong Places). While receiving mostly highly positive reviews, fans of the first game were disappointed with the dialed-down dirtiness.

Leisure Suit Larry 2 went on to sell over 250.000 copies and solidified the Leisure Suit Larry franchise as one of the most successful in the adventure game genre in the late '80s.

Leisure Suit Larry Goes Looking for Love (In Several Wrong Places) used the first iteration of the SCI framework allowing for full-screen 16 color EGA graphics, mouse for navigation, and support for sound card, for much sounds and music.

The switch to SCIo surely looked and sounded great but the realistic visual style didn't really fit the game and its personality.
The age-specific quiz was dropped for a Filth Meter that could be adjusted during gameplay.
A Boss key was implemented which instantly could replace the game screen with something more appropriate if your boss, parents, or wife were to come by

Lowe wasn't gonna rest on the laurels and went on, in January 1989, to create the third and what was supposed to be the final Leisure Suit Larry game. To complete his trilogy, Lowe wanted Larry to finally find real true love and settle down. Lowe listened to fans of the series and decided to return to the more adult-oriented content. The artistic style was redialled just a tad, from the more realistic and somewhat unfitting approach of the second title.

By the late '80s, the competition was getting stiffer. George Lucas' Games Division was on the march and its approach to adventure games was unique, intuitive, and player-friendly. Lucasfilm Games had in 1987 released Maniac Mansion, a graphic point-and-click adventure game with multiple playable characters. The title would come to play a huge influence on many graphic adventures to come, and its point-and-click interface become a standard feature in the genre.

To develop Leisure Suit Larry further, Lowe set himself up with a challenge, for the player to be able to switch roles midgame, a first at Sierra. In the first part, players would play as Larry and in the last part as Passionate Patty, the somewhat female counterpart to Larry Laffer.

The story continued on from the second title but with a few years passed. Larry, happily living with his exotic wife Kalalau, or so he thought. In the playable intro, we would soon learn that he not only was being dumped by an Amazonian Harley riding lesbian cannibal slo repair woman but also fired from his job. The gan behind the linear story progression from the seco to much fanfare, brings back many of the beloved from the first title.

While Lowe had primarily been developing the fi from his Fresno home, with higher ambitions and complex game now needed for a larger team and ' decided to open up a small office in Fresno. Here with fellow programmer Carlos Escobar, artist Bi who also had been working on graphics for the se and quality assurance lead Robin Bradley could d game without having to do the cumbersome comi from Oakhurst.

Lowe had composed the music for the two earlier now being fully occupied with the story, game de programming of a more complex game led to con Dana writing the enjoyable and fitting soundtrac previously composed jingles for national ad camp would after completing his work at Sierra becom tor of Jazz Studies at Fresno City College for the of the next three decades.

Leisure Suit Larry III: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of the Pulsating Pectorals was released for the IBM/PC, Atari ST, and Amiga in 1989

Leisure Suit Larry III would like its predecessors, become a commercial hit and received critical acclaim. when the '80s turned into the '90s Lowe's Larry trilogy had sold over three-quarters of a million copies, pretty good for a game, initially deemed too dirty for gaming. Following, Lowe and his family moved into a new house, in Fresno, deservedly called Casa de Larry, a tribute to his Leisure Suit Larry games which had helped pay for it.

With the '80s becoming the '90s, Al Lowe could finally, for the first time in three years, take a step back from Leisure Suit Larry. The trilogy had, commercially and critically, done extremely well with each installment selling around 250.000 copies, a remarkable feat measured in '80s metrics.

The completion of Leisure Suit Larry III had required significant efforts. Lowe and his team had been working around the clock, to make it in time for the 1989 holiday season, and with the story now nicely tied up, Lowe swore that he would never do a Leisure Suit Larry 4.

Lowe didn't completely abandon Larry and started working on a smaller project using Larry Laffer and the trademark humor from the games to create a spoof on popular desktop utility suites like the Norton Utilities. The Laffer Utilities provided you with wacky nonproductive pastimes that would make you look busy even when doing absolutely nothing worthwhile and came with the tagline, For everything you do at the office that has nothing to do with work.

The Laffer Utilities was released for MS-DOS in the fall of 1990. The first version of the software was, in typically Al Lowe fashion, labeled version 4.01.

A Windows 3.X version was released in 1992 to take advantage of Microsoft's enhanced graphical user interface introduced with Windows 3.0, the first Windows to gain significant development and commercial traction
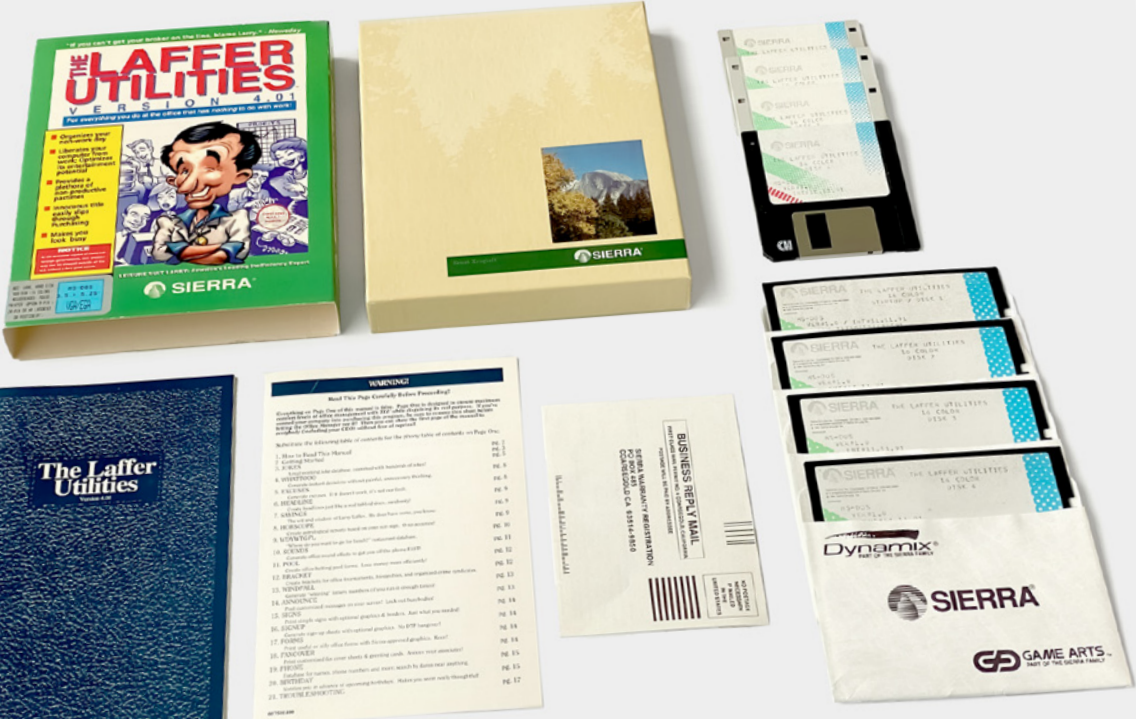
Following the release of The Laffer Utilities, Lowe and Ken Williams brainstormed on an online multiplayer Leisure Suit Larry title. Williams had, inspired by the Prodigy online service launched in 1988, invested two years developing the first game-only online environment, The Sierra Network. When the service was launched in May of 1991 the company was eager to add already known and successful games to the service to attract monthly paying customers.

While an office, for an online adaption of Leisure Suit Larry, was established and a team assembled in early 1991, the project was abandoned within a few months, when it became apparent that the project and the technical requirements had their own sets of challenges.

The previous year, the latest installment in the company's flagship series, King's Quest, had been released to numerous awards and massive success. Selling more than 500,000 copies it became Sierra On-Line's best-selling game for the next five years.

Development had switched from the aging AGI to the new and up-to-date SCI1 framework allowing for beautiful and detailed 256 color VGA graphics and a point-and-click interface. With the internal

development tools at Sierra being in a constant state of flux, there was a saying, only switch to the latest tools when Roberta Williams' King's Quest had been released using the same tools. Now, with the success of King's Quest V: Absence Makes the Heart Go Yonder!, the other major franchises would all adopt the new framework.

Lowe was commissioned to continue his Leisure Suit Larry saga and began working on ideas for a 4th game. The two earlier titles had been story-driven and by tying everything up nicely in the 3rd, with Larry and Passionate Patti living happily ever after, continuing the story proved a challenge.

While struggling with how to start and continue the story, Lowe went down to the Sierra office in Oakhurst, in the hallway he was asked if he was working on a Leisure Suit Larry 4. With a cocky remark, he replied, No, Larry 5! Of course, I'm working on Larry 4! With the remark, he realized that by completely skipping the story of a 4th title he could write and design a new story unconstrained of what had happened in the previous game.

Passionate Patti Does A Little Undercover Work

In 1991, when Lowe wrote the design document for his fourth Larry title he incorporated some hints to what had happened in the time following the third title, allowing players to envision some of the missing story themselves. In true Lowe fashion, the new title was labeled Leisure Suit Larry 5 to much confusion to everybody else but himself and his team.

Furthermore, the design document shows some of the challenges of doing a Leisure Suit Larry game in the new era, where point-and-click interaction now was the expected standard. While the consumer market indeed praised the intuitive player-friendly interaction method, heralded primarily by main-competitor, Lucasfilm Games, the Leisure Suit Larry titles were very much built on the basis that players, using the text-parser could type in whatever they wanted (usually all kinds of profanities and absurd actions) and the game would respond with humorous messages. For this, a zipper action icon was added to the interface allowing players to perform these more raunchy actions.

The text parser had also allowed for the conception of nearly every thinkable (and unthinkable) puzzle resulting in time-consuming solutions when words or phrases had to be guessed, ultimately delivering lengthier and more difficult to complete games.

At the time, Williams and marketing had done a survey, using the warranty cards, people would send in and realized that a majority of players didn't manage to complete the company's adventure titles before moving on to other games. With this in mind Lowe's Leisure Suit Larry 5 became the company's guinea pig, for trying to create a more player-friendly and easier to complete adventure game while employing all the modern bells and whistles.

Leisure Suit Larry 5 Passionate Patti Does a Little Undercover Work was released for the IBM/PC, Atari ST, and Amiga on the 7th of September 1991

Lowe expanded on the multi-character approach used in the third title, with control periodically switching between Larry and Passionate Patti. Who together but apart would take on organized crime.
Larry finds himself in the adult film industry, working a low-level job for PornProdCorp, a mob-affiliated company. His boss, with an ulterior motive, sends him across the country to scout for models to appear in America's Sexiest Home Videos. All while Patti gets hired by the FBI to dig up incriminating evidence on two record companies both suspected of hiding subliminal messages in their songs. Along with the story and plot, clues were given that Julius Biggs, the owner of America's Sexiest Home Videos, had stolen the floppies of the fourth game causing Larry to become amnesiac.

Williams' vision for Sierra On-Line had always been, given the continuous advancement in technology, to move its interactive products ever closer to what Hollywood was able to deliver. In 1989 Sierra opened up a new Creative Director position, hoping to bring in someone from the industry to aid in the work towards minimizing the gap between games and movies while still upkeeping a certain quality level across the company's now many projects. Sierra reached out to Bill Davis and offered him the new position. Davis accepted and joined the company in July of 1989, bringing with him an impressive resume, having designed, directed, and co-directed more than 150 animated television commercials for some of the leading companies in the US, work that had earned him numerous awards, including an Emmy. Becoming head of the art and music department at Sierra not only fulfilled Davis' many-year dream of putting the big city life in the rearview mirror but also as an opportunity for him to take art and animation into new and interesting directions.

With the move to 256 colors, graphics now could be rendered much more realistic, something Williams was very keen on, nonetheless Davis, rightfully so, opted for a more abstract art style, arguing that a realistic style would turn the game into something completely different. The exaggerated and artsy style came from Davis' affection for Cubism and suited the character of the game very well. Backgrounds were hand-painted, scanned in, and overlayed with computer-drawn animation elements.
The depiction of Larry was very much based upon earlier design work done for the packaging and fitted very well with the overall art style portrayed.

The overall difficulty was greatly reduced, in comparison to earlier titles. Cutscenes could be skipped and being able to complete the game even by neglecting many items and puzzles, and without dying rendered the experience really out of character for a Sierra adventure game. While Sierra and the Leisure Suit Larry 5 team tried to hatch on to what made titles from companies like Lucasfilm Games both enjoyable and challenging at the same time, they in the process forgot themselves.

To loyal fans, the lack of death scenes was disappointing. While being a frustrating element it typically was done in humorous and spectacular fashion and played a big part in any Sierra adventure game experience.

Lowe's choice of completely skipping the 4th title, jumping straight to Leisure suit Larry 5, was not only needed for him to continue the saga but ultimately proved a great marketing stunt, creating a lot of publicity... and confusion with consumers. Even to this day, the missing Leisure Suit Larry 4 is an ongoing subject for discussion and conspiracies.

Leisure Suit Larry 5 sold around 250,000 copies, keeping in line with the sales figures of the earlier titles. But with the ever-growing consumer market, new titles should surpass earlier in sales giving the larger potential customer pool. Indications of a shifting and more competitive market were brewing on the horizon.

During 1990 and 1991, Sierra began working on SCI1 VGA remakes of all its original major adventure titles. The company had always offered a great variety of titles from its back catalog and now with a handful of years of technological advancement, modern remakes not only would cater to fans of the originals but with the much larger consumer market, also reach completely new customers.

While an original title could require $500.000 or more to develop, converting older successful titles, bringing them up to modern standards, was only a tenth of that. The opening title in the King's Quest, Space Quest, Police Quest, Quest for Glory, and Leisure Suit Larry series all received a makeover.

Leisure Suit Larry was ready for the new decade with 256 colors and a point-and-click interface. The new more abstract art style fitted the game and its character extremely well. Creative Director Bill Davis really understood how art and style emphasized and conveyed a product.

While the game on the outside looked amazing, struggles adapting to the new era and customers' expectations show throughout the game. The multi-player approach while interesting adds no real interaction or intertwining between the two stories.

A talkie version, that also would incorporate a studio audience that would randomly laugh at various lines, was discussed but never put into production
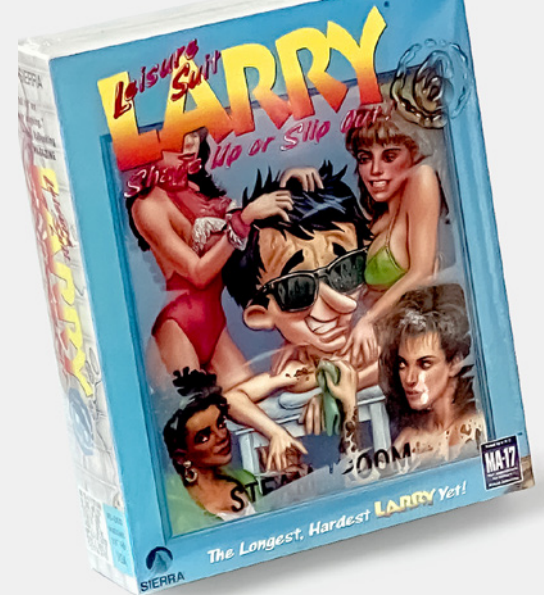

Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizard was updated to 256 color graphics, a stereo music soundtrack, and a point-and-click interface using the same art style as Leisure Suit Larry 5. The remake played nearly identical to the original though some text was changed to mirror current 1991 events.

Despite being cheaper to produce the remakes still required skilled labor and resources, and with consumers primarily looking forward and not backward, the titles never gained enough traction to become a viable venture. In 1992 it was decided that no further updates from the company's back catalog of adventure games were to be produced.

The remake of the original Leisure Suit Larry was released in the summer of 1991, only a few months prior to the release of Leisure Suit Larry 5, creating excitement for the upcoming release.

For a brief period of time the remake was sold in the original pink slipcase (left) before it was released in a newly designed box (right)

In 1992, before continuing the tale of Larry Laffer, Lowe and Josh Mandel got together to write and design a new humoristic title that would tap into the ever-popular western theme. Mandel, who had joined Sierra in 1990, was appointed as a junior designer and project manager and assembled a team while Lowe, from his home, developed the story and overall design. The two ended up mix-matching their ideas into a finished story and game, loaded with humor and charm.

Freddy Pharkas was released in 1993 on floppies (left). In 1994 a CD-ROM version with voice-over and CD-quality music was released (right)

Following the completion of Freddy Pharkas, Lowe finished the design document for the next installment in the Leisure Suit Larry series. With games, expectations, and ambitions getting bigger by the day and requiring significantly more resources, the size of development teams had to follow suit. To streamline production, Williams agreed for Lowe to set up a small office in Fresno, where the team could work efficiently throughout the entire process.

While development typically would start in December or early January, to ensure games got out in time for the all-important Christmas season, with the new office being renovated and a team of local residents needed to be assembled, development lost valuable time and didn't get going until February of 1993.

Lowe had over the last three titles tried building upon the original concept with more intricate stories and plot designs all while trying to adapt to the advancement in technology, all of which had somewhat sidetracked the series from what initially had made the first game unique and enjoyable. The fourth title had proved a valuable learning lesson and now with a much better understanding of how to design a game around the point-and-click interface, Lowe went back to the roots, to try and capture the spirit of the original 1987 title and portray it gameplay in an up-to-date manner.

Having the team assembled in one place and with Lowe yet again overseeing the production resulted in a much better product than the previous title. Passionate Patti, the playable character introduced in the third title and who never really contributed much to the concept, was dropped. Larry could yet again roam freely, now at the fabulous La Costa Lotta health resort. Seducing, or at least try seducing beautiful women over the course of 4 days, without committing to a higher level plot or story.
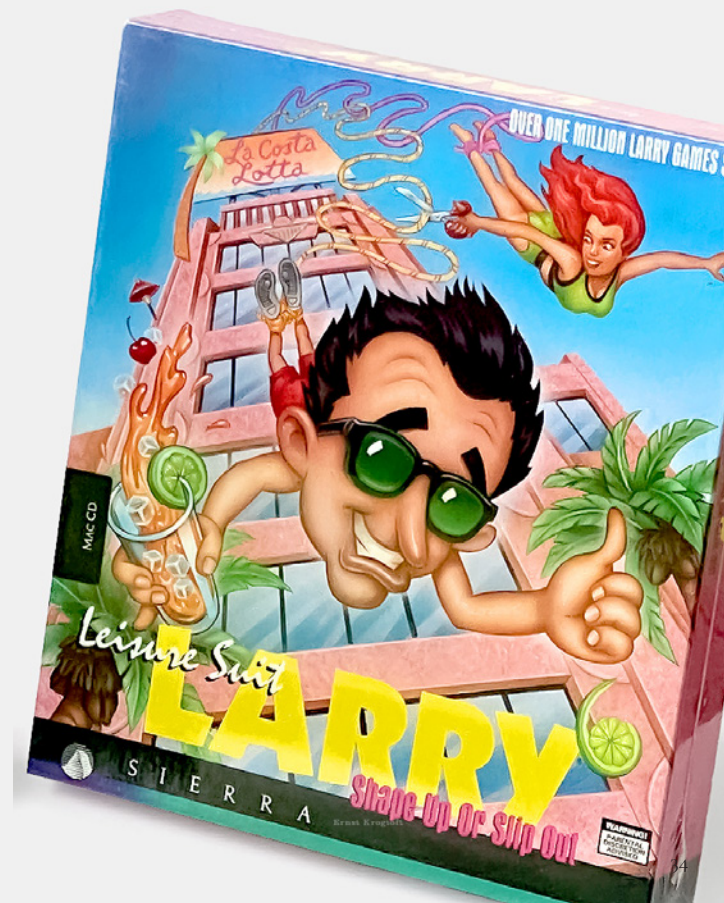
During development, Sierra's internal development team was scrambling to complete a new 32-bit version of the SCI framework, allowing for high-resolution Super VGA graphics. While the internal team had promised the new framework (SCI2) would be ready in time for Christmas. With a delayed start and a certain risk the new interpreter wouldn't be completed in time, Lowe opted to maintain development in SCI1. The team proceeded to create the artwork in SVGA resolution and applied downscaled versions for SCI1. This resulted in an SVGA version fairly quickly could be assembled, when the SCI2 framework was ready.

Leisure Suit Larry 6 Shape up or Slip Out was released in late Autumn of 1993 and succeeded on everything the previous title had failed on. The puzzles were better, the writing was better and the premise, to seduce as many women as possible, was back to much acclaim from fans of the series.

Following the floppy release, which reached retailers before Christmas in 1993, Lowe and his team adopted the new SCI2 framework. Within a few months, they managed to not only convert Leisure Suit Larry 6 to SVGA but also add a quite excellent full voiceover along with some changes

By 1993, Sierra On-Line had reached a size that made it difficult to attract senior personnel to rural small town Oakhurst and relocated its headquarter and most of the key administrative staff, to the Seattle area. After the completion of Leisure Suit Larry 6, Lowe left Oakhurst for Seattle where he together with professional musician and producer, Mark Seibert, assembled a team for a new non-mature adventure game, designed to be enjoyed by parents and kids as a shared experience. Torin's Passage was completed and released on Halloween in 1995, for the IBM/PC and the Macintosh.

Leisure Suit Larry 6 Shape Up or Slip Out, the fifth installment in the series, was released on floppies in late autumn of 1993 (left). Over the following months, the team completed an upgraded version with SVGA graphics and voiceover, released on CD-ROM in the Spring of 1994 (right)

Leisure Suit Larry 6 was a major upgrade, in every aspect, from the previous title. The writing was better, the humor was better, and the women even more beautiful. The game returned to the structure of the original 1987 title, allowing for a confined but sandbox-like game. It used the same art style as earlier but with a bit of added funkyiness. With the 1994 CD-ROM release, Larry spoke for the first time and it felt and sounded just right

Torin's Passage, released in 1995, was a break from the adult-themed Leisure Suit Larry games. The game was intended to be the first in a series of five games but due to relatively small sales figures, combined with both Sierra and the consumer market heading in new directions, the plan was abandoned

The majority of the team from Torin's Passage would remain together and move on to the development of Lowe's 6th Leisure Suit Larry game. Now, with a decade of Larry and adventure game experience, Lowe finally felt he knew what he was doing. The road had been an experiment in not only writing, storytelling, and design but in production and technology as well. Initially, the team discussed the possibility of taking advantage of the newest technology by employing full-motion video with live-action actors shot on bluescreen but quickly realized the whole universe only had worked because it was presented using technology not able to

deliver photorealistic graphics, Larry and his universe was a cartoon a needed to be treated like it. Turning to video could rather easily turn a mature but innocent concept into a completely different beast and the team decided to use the same cartoon style used in Torin's Passage. Throughout development everybody on the team could chip in with ideas and weekly meetings were held to make sure everybody was on the same page, resulting in better writing and more spicy dialogues and humor.
Combining Lowe's accumulated experience and having a well-assembled team led to what most would consider the best title in the series.

Leisure Suit Larry Love for Sail was released in 1996 and became Al Lowe's last original Leisure Suit Larry title. By many regarded as the best in the series.
The franchise would eventually continue but without Lowe's involvement, needless to say, what followed years later was disastrous.
It would take another 20 years before Larry Laffer yet again had his own game

Leisure Suit Larry Love for Sail when released in 1996 was the first title in the series to receive a Mature ESRB rating, not only was the writing and dialogues riskier but it also showed more adult imagery than earlier titles. It was received with mixed reviews, the time had clearly moved on from '70s leisure suits and sexual innuendo content and humor. Not only were new genres capturing the desire of gamers everywhere, but adventure games, in the classical sense, were being overtaken by new concepts. In September of 1993, the Miller brother's Myst had been released to massive commercial success. Over the next five years, the game continued to set new metrics for AAA titles in the '90s. By 1998 the title had sold almost 4 million copies, becoming the best-selling computer game in the US. Prior to the release of Leisure Suit Larry Love for Sail, Lowe's saga, combined, had surpassed 2 million sold copies, Love for Sail would go on to sell around 280.000 copies, very much in line with earlier titles but too small a number for a flagship title in the mid-'90s and far from enough to cover the millions of dollars spent on development and manufac-

Sources: Allow.com, Wikipedia, The Sierra Adventure by Shawn Mills, MEL Magazine, Retrogamer, IGN, Ralph Robert, Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution by Steven Levy

SAM & MAX HIT THE ROAD
A WHACKY FREEZE-FRAME OF AMERICANA POP CULTURE
LUCASARTS 1993

If you're keen on getting a slice of parodied Americana pop culture, mixed with wacky and humorous characters, LucasArts' 1993 adventure game Sam & Max Hit the Road is a sure winner. While Steve Purcell's vigilante private detective universe, starring Sam and Max, an Irish Wolfhound in a suit and a restless naked rabbit, earned its first widespread recognition (especially outside the US) with the release of the game, the characters had existed for well over a decade.

In the late '70s, Purcell's younger brother, Dave, was creating various simple comics featuring a dog and rabbit team of detectives. With often unfinished comics laying around the house, Steve, as the older brother he was, started finishing them as cruel parodies on Dave's stories and its two characters. While young Dave, over time, lost interest in Sam and Max, Purcell continued to work on them, creating his own set of stories using the wacky characters. In 1980, while being an undergraduate at the California College of the Arts, Purcell took the anthropomorphic dog and rabbit and produced a number of Sam & Max comic strips for the university's weekly newsletter.
Following his graduation in 1982, Purcell became involved in freelance illustration, working briefly for Marvel Comics and later on with cartoonist Steven Moncuse on his Fish Police series.
The detective duo debuted in 1987, in the first feature-length comic series, Sam & Max: Freelance Police when Moncuse offered Purcell the opportunity to get his stories published through his Fishwrap Productions. The comic con-

tained two stories that along with a third became the basis for Purcell's future work on the universe.

Many aspects of the comics were influenced by Purcell's own experiences, creating stories with personal and unique elements.

Sam & Max: Freelance Police, soon gained a devoted following and eventually got the attention of artists at the Lucasfilm Games Division. Purcell was recommended to art director Gary Winnick and was hired as an artist and animator.

In 1988 Purcell's first published work became the beautiful cover art for Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders, the second title utilizing Ron Gilbert's SCUMM scripting language and game engine. To present the SCUMM programmers with something to practice and do internal

testing on, Purcell created a few animations for his Sam and Max character alongside their New York office as a backdrop. The characters soon earned their recognition throughout the office.

Purcell went on to do animation for the 1989 adventure title Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade before diving into the fabulous Monkey Island series of games.

In 1990 Lucasfilm started publishing The Adventurer, a quarterly magazine designed as a consumer newsletter, including staff interviews, promotion of upcoming releases, merchandise, and company news and headlines.

To add a leisure element, Purcell created a series of comic strips which would include his Sam & Max characters and parodies on the company's released games.

One of Steve Purcell's twelve Sam & Max comics featured in The Adventurer newsletter, a physical magazine published from 1990 to 1996 by LucasArts

A reorganization of George Lucas' companies in 1990 led to the Lucasfilm Games division moving out of the iconic Skywalker Ranch in Marin County and into offices in nearby San Rafael, now with a new name, LucasArts.

With LucasArts having considerable success with its adventure games and especially the in-game characters alongside the positive reaction to the Sam & Max comic strips in The Adventurer, the company, in 1992, offered Purcell the opportunity to produce an adventure game based on his Sam and Max franchise. The same year development on Sam & Max Hit the Road began, partially based on Purcell's 1989 comic On the
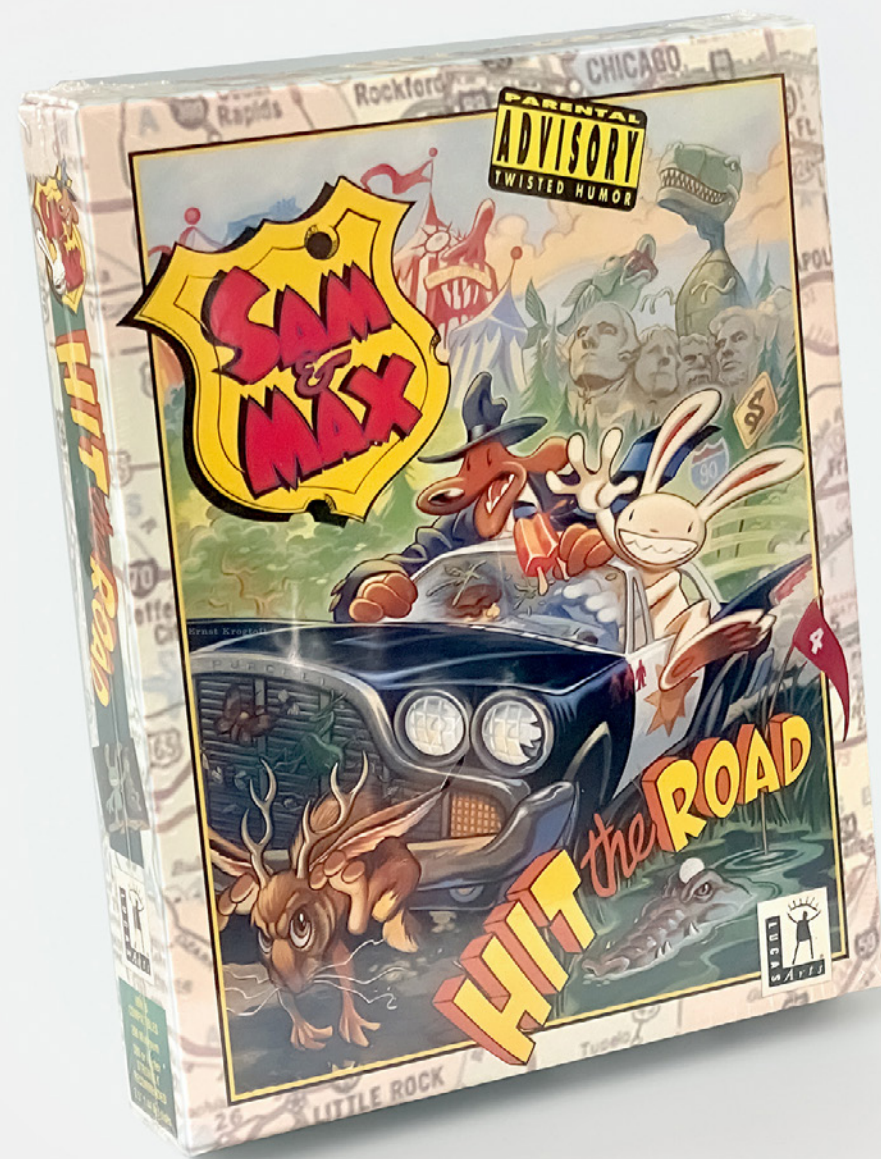
Road and events from his own life, like his childhood road trips across the US with his family.

A small but experienced and ambitious team of designers, consisting of Sean Clark, Michael Stemmle, and Purcell's soon-to-be wife Collette Michaud, who was head of the LucasArts art department, was brought together. LucasArts planned a relatively short production schedule of only eight months, as management wanted a second adventure title to accompany Day of the Tentacle on its planned release in 1993. The tight timeline required the team to employ storyboarding, a first at LucasArts, to keep everything as streamlined and efficient as possible.

A story was quickly developed with the vigilante detective team traveling across the United States in search of Bruno, a frozen bigfoot, and Trixie, a Giraffe-Necked Girl, both having escaped from a carnival. The journey takes the player through a parody of America's bizarre and wonderful tourist sights, most of which now represent a forgotten time when road trips and weird small town attractions were a united family event.

Alongside the main story, Purcell added several minigames leaving players with things to do if they got stuck or needed a break from the story and its puzzle-solving.

The original US 3.5" floppy release of Sam & Max Hit the Road, published in 1993

Sam & Max Hit the Road, when released, became a commercial success and exceeded every figure projected by marketing, which should be mentioned was set low considering the game being one of a kind and unproven territory in both style and expression.
It was praised for its humor, dialogue, amusing and wacky characters, and bizarre locations, and stood out from the otherwise fierce competition in the genre at the time.

In November of 1993, a CD-ROM version with full voice acting was released, the game was otherwise identical to the floppy counterpart.
The sheer quality of the voice-acting, using professional actors, something LucasArts mastered in the first try with Day of the Tentacle, smoked the competition.
With favorable reviews in most gaming magazines and being one of four nominees for the 1994 Annie Award in the Best Animated CD-ROM category, it grew to an instant classic and one of the greatest from the golden era of adventure games.

With the short timeframe, it was obvious that Gilbert's ingenious and proven SCUMM engine, which had been used in every single Lucas adventure title reaching back to Maniac Mansion in 1987, was the go-to tool. The framework had seen numerous iterations as technology had advanced throughout the '80s and early '90s, and the team decided it yet again needed an overhaul. The classic verb selection, taking up most of the bottom part of the screen was replaced by a multi-function mouse cursor, in which actions could be cycled through by clicking the right mouse button. Removing the verb jitter and cleaning up the UI, the designers could focus on immersion and pinpoint accessibility.

In December of 2008 Symbiote Studios released a rather large and high-quality limited edition (1.000 pieces) statue based on Steve Purcell's Sam and Max characters

Sam & Max Hit the Road was released on CD-ROM in late 1993, as one of the first adventure titles to feature full voice acting.
The CD also came with four bonus CD Audio tracks.
The game was released for the Macintosh in 1995 and also localized for a number of countries.
A 2002 re-release included compatibility with Windows
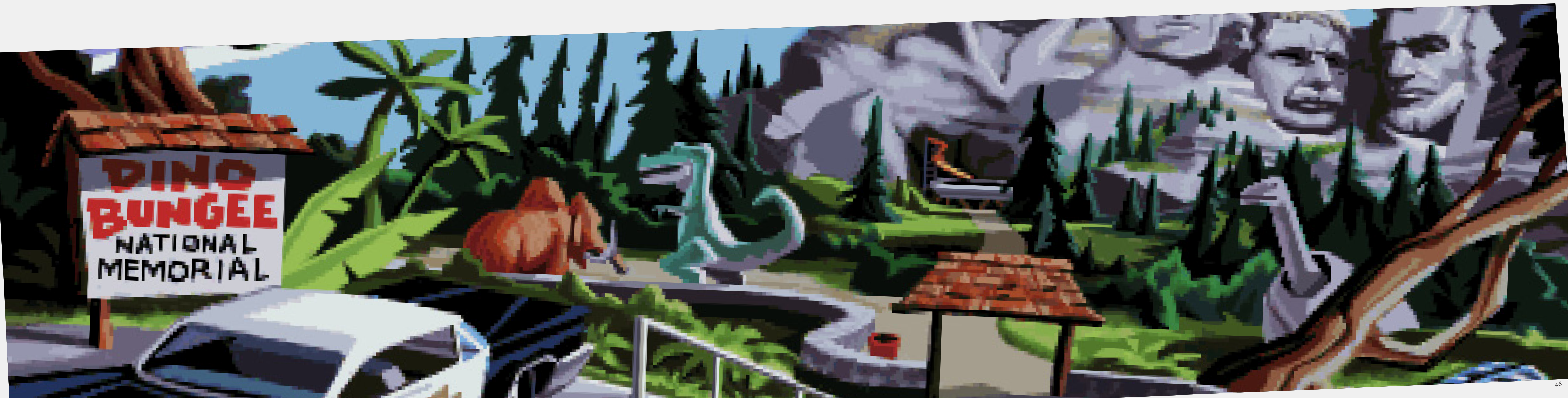
Purcell's Sam and Max universe gained widespread fame and traction following the release of the game. FOX produced a television series together with Canadian animation studio Nelvana where Purcell joined story editor Dan Smith in 1996. The series first aired on FOX Kids in the Autumn of 1997. The following year the series won the Gemini Award for Best Animated Series before being canceled in April of 1998.

It would take another decade before the detective duo yet again appeared in a commercially released game. In 2005, LucasArt's license with Purcell's Sam & Max franchise expired which allowed him to bring it to Telltale Games, a new company formed by members of Stemmle's old development team. The episodic adventure game series was published in 2006 and 2007 and is now considered the first successful application of the episodic distribution model.

After the brief stint at Lucas' Industrial Might and Magic, Purcell went on to Pixar Animation Studios, where he on the side acted as an advisor in the development of LucasArts' Sam & Max: Freelance Police, a 3D sequel to the original Sam & Max game. Development began in 2002 and Purcell assisted Stemmle's development team with concept art and the game's plot. Unfortunately, the project was abruptly canceled in the spring of 2004.

While LucasArts had been advertising a commitment to invest more in its original properties it was clear that both economic and market conditions, at the time, worked against the development of classic adventure games, leaving the 2000 title Escape From Monkey Island the last original adventure game from LucasArts.

Symbiote Studios went back to Sam & Max in 2012, creating two smaller figurines. By using magnets, limb could be manipulated while still being attached.
(the figurines came with hand guns but my kids have made them dissappear, just like with everything else they touches)