

Q:

Before you got into video games, you've been a music teacher. Now that's quite an interesting step. How did it happen?

Lowe:

Well, I was a geek in nature. I had a real-to-real tape recorder when I was in the 6th grade; I built a speaker phone when nobody ever had a speaker phone. I did lots of geeky things. And I was in the band of course; I was the guy with the PA system who soldered the cables and put together the amplifiers and so forth. So I was always the nerd.

But I was also an extrovert, so I was always the guy who was talking on the PA system and who was fronting the band. I had a combination of interest in the humanities, I guess, that took me out of the realm of being a nerd and turned me into whatever combination I am of right and left brain. But it served me well when I got into game designing, because when I started programming, most programmers created their own games. But they were incredibly dull because the programmers were dull. I think one of the reasons that my games were more successful was because I had a background in showbusiness and was used being on stage and understood how to direct, how to block actors. So when I started setting on jokes on screen, it was pretty obvious. The American marching band phenomenon: they often perform at field shows and they use their people to create shapes and figures on the field. And by figuring out those maneuvers – that's the same as moving pixels around on a screen. So there is a very close correlation. When I started doing graphics, it was suddenly like "Oh yeah, I've done this before. This trumpet player over here and move this other thing over there." So there was actually a correlation, although it's not visible and obvious.

Q:

Was your teaching-background the reason that you first did educational software like Donald Duck's playground and others?

Lowe:

Yes, absolutely. Because I was the guy with the master's degree in education and music, it seemed obvious that I would be the one who did educational titles. And it was interesting for me because I had children at the time. When I first started, my son was about four or five years old, and we started playing Sierra games – and loved it. It was fun because even though there was a huge age difference between us he could think as quickly as I, so he often thought of the interest of puzzles before I did. I had to type in the responses, but he could certainly maneuver us around in the game. That became a fair father-son-thing we could do, and later when my daughter was older, she joined in and I also made games for her.

Q:

When did you buy your first videogame console and what was it?

Lowe:

The only video game console that was out then, or at least commonly available, was the Atari 2600. And yes, we did own one of those, but it was esoteric to know how to program for it. It was a sealed box and programming for that device was not common. I started programming in 1978, and I got my Apple around 1980.

Q:

Your games were mainly distributed for home computers rather than consoles – how did that come? Did you think that point & click adventure games wouldn't do well on consoles?

Lowe:

Well, partly it was because of what we knew, and we knew how to program for computers. Sierra started out as a computer game company, and because I started out programming the Apple II, it seemed a logical connection to do computer games instead of video games. The video game market back then was controlled by large companies, so there wasn't a place for a small business like ours, also, as the 80s went along, console games became more commonly programmed. But Sierra had a history of success in the computer game business and a failure in the video game consoles. In 1982 there was the "E.T. christmas", and it was a famous year, because Sierra took some venture capital and they said "You must do video console games". So they produced several games for the Atari, and that was the christmas that E.T. came out, and every kid I knew or had an association with *coughs* wanted E.T. for christmas. There was a huge interest in the game and when it finally came out they rushed it to market, but it wasn't done well. It wasn't much fun and everybody turned sour that they had spend their christmas money on E.T. and got a crappy game, and so they didn't like to buy other products. Almost everyone in the industry had literally tons of games returned to them. That, in fact, caused terrible problems at Sierra, because that winter they ramped up, I was employee no. 20, and in a year, they had ramped up to 120 employees. And then one day that spring, they cut it back to 40 employees and let go 2/3rd of their staff. They were broke. And that's why Sierra decided to stick with computer games, probably far too long. They probably should have issued many of those games for consoles, but because of that history they shied away from it.

Q:

How did that videogame crash affect your work at Sierra?

Lowe:

I was one of the guys fired. Ken Williams called me into his office and said: "We ran into some financial problems, so I need you to work on a contract basis as an outside contractor. I'll pay you advances against future royalties. That way, instead of being an extence on our books, you'll be a prepaid asset. That'll be better for tax purposes." And I said: "Oh, okay. So what kind of advances are we talking about?" He told me, I added it up and in the back of my mind I was thinking "I can get this done in that many months and that many months for that", so I've just gotten my pay doubled. And I asked: "So, have I just been fired?" and Ken said: "Yep!" And I said "Okay, great, thanks!" For the next fifteen years I worked for the company as an outside contractor. That was the best thing that could ever happen to me, because I'm sure had I continued on, I would have made a decent sallary, but nothing spectacular. But because I was taking a lot of risk, I got a lot of reward. When I had a hit game, suddenly it produced a lot of money.

Q:

You once wrote that you admire Shigeru Miyamoto, the only person you posses an autograph of. Would you say that he and his games had a big influence on your work?

Lowe:

Absolutely. Not a direct influence, but by his creativity. He really helped me see new ways of doing things. I'll never forget the first time we played Mario. We've got a Famicom from Japan – somehow, I don't remember how. And one of the guys that worked at Sierra had been an electronics technician in the US Airforce, fixing radar systems. And he figured out how to rewire it to work at a different TV refreshrate, because it was PAL. As we started playing those games, we saw that they were wonderful. I'll never forget the first time when I accidently broke through the top of the game and ran around on the scoreboard, and realised

that it was not a bug. You could literally get outside the box. It was just really great game design, so much fun, and yet very simple and easily accessible.

Q:

Have you yourself been a fan of adventure games like some titles from Infocom or thelike?

Lowe:

When I started, I played a lot of Infocom games. Everyone did. But when I first gotta hooked on graphic adventures, I rarely played the text adventures after that. I think that happened with a lot of people, and that was one of the reasons for Sierra's success in the 80s. Especially the graphics that we did, where you could maneuver the character wherever you wanted to and you didn't have to follow a particular path onscreen. It just made you feel like you were in charge. And you were much more involved mentally, because you were also controlling the character physically.

Q:

Talking of adventures: Let's do the inevitable and talk a bit about Larry Laffer. When people hear your name, the first thing that comes to their mind is Leisure Suit Larry. Does it disappoint you in a way that people always ask you things about Larry and tend to neglect your other games?

Lowe:

No, not at all. I think it's understandable. It was my big success and to a certain extent it was a game that was most like me and most of my personality. And that's what I think is one of the reasons the game was successful, because it had a strong point of view from one personality; something which is lacking in games today. Sid Meyer still does it, and of course Nintendo follows that philosophy of "one designer – one vision". But in many other companies games are designed by a committee and I think that they show it. That is one of the problems.

Q:

Wasn't it a juggling act to have saucy jokes and some nice curved ladies in a game without the danger of going one step too far?

Lowe:

Well, I think my wife provided me with the stability that I needed, because whenever I would come up with something that was questionable, I would go to her and say: "What do you think?" And if she went "Eww", I would probably take it out. If she would grin or chuckle, it stayed. So there was a lot of self-editing going on. And frankly, I didn't want to do pornography, something that would be so edgy that it would turn people off. I wanted people to play the game and I wanted to reach a broad a audience as possible, and so I really tried to keep the humor and the sex much more mainstream.

Q: Out of your 16 years with Sierra, you spent perhaps half the time on Larry titles ...

Lowe:

Probably that's about right, yes. Maybe almost half.

Q:

So he is perhaps one of the most long-lived adventure characters ever. Even when you left Sierra, Larry lived – and lives – on, in a way ...

Lowe:

Yes, in a way. You know, it was actually complimentary and flattering to me, that they did a game without me and it wasn't very successful. It fell flat particularly with people who had played my games. It made me feel good to read the bad reviews, because it was a painful experience: I created those characters and popularized them, and then to have them go with someone else just because they were cheaper ... I guess it was good to see that they got what they paid for. But ... what was the question again?

Q:

So many years of Larry – what's the secret of his success?

Lowe:

It's something I thought about over the years and I believe that the thing that made Larry popular with guys was, that – no matter how bad you were with women – Larry was worse. And so it was a chance for man to feel superior. And the reason that he was so popular with women is because all women have dated some jerk like this. So they could relate. Something that people don't realise is that my games are extremely popular with women. They were never sold as women's games – when you looked at the box you knew exactly where the target audience was – but yet invariably, women would tell me how much they enjoyed the game. And it makes sense, because the games are designed in such a way that the female characters were always superior.

Q:

But you wouldn't go as far as calling it a feministic game, would you?

Lowe:

Well, in some ways it is ... but in a lot of ways, it's not. The women in the game are all more intelligent than the men. They are quicker, snappier and funnier. Many of them are bimbo's, but they're bimbo's who end up getting the upper hand. It was an interesting line to balance upon. I didn't want to go so far one way that people would say "Yes, this is a feminist-game", but on the other hand I wanted to make the games appealing to women as well.

Q:

Has there been a point when you thought: "Okay, that's enough from Larry, he won't return"?

Lowe:

Yes, at the end of the third game. I was very proud of the ending that I came up with, because it pretty much tied up a big bow on top of the series. I ended it and assumed that that would be the end of the games. Back then, there was no game that went over 3. Even movies were that way. I don't think there was a fourth sequel until Rambo. It was just common to think that you would get three games out of a character and that would be the end of it. I did a third game and at the end of it I had Larry encounter Ken Williams and Sierra; Ken offered him a job and he ended up sitting on this beautiful setting with the girl of his dreams and he said "I think I'll write a computer game and I'll start it outside a bar named Lefty's." So it all kind of tied up and made a nice circle and I thought "That's the end of that" and went on to other things. But it turned out that the sales department disagreed with that philosophy and said: "You've got to do another title." That really created a problem, because I had Larry in this happy situation and I had no good way to get out of it. I couldn't figure out how to begin Larry 4. So I happened to run into a woman in the hallway at Sierra one day I hadn't seen for a while and she said "Hey, what are you working on now? Larry 4?" And I jokingly said "No,

Larry 5”, just to get a laugh. And it suddenly kind of hit me: “Who says you have to do them in order? Why can’t I do No. 5 after No. 3?” And so that’s what I did. In Larry 5 I referred back to “Leisure Suit Larry and the Missing Floppies” as if it was a real game, and he remembered things that happened in that game, which I of course never wrote. It was just an easy way for me to get out.

It turned out to be a brilliant marketing strategy as well – which I never thought of, I have to admit. The salesman said: “We have Larry 5 coming out”, and everyone would say: “Wait, I don’t think I’ve seen Larry 4?” It turned out to be a good way to sell the next game.

Q:

Wasn’t Larry 4 planned as a multiplayer online adventure?

Lowe:

It was never intended to be Larry 4. That came after 3 and before 5, but we didn’t see the online adventure game as a sequel, but as a chance to do a multiplayer product. And we had a hell of a time coming up with an adventure format that worked for multiple players. I think it has been solved in a way with World Of Warcraft and those sorts of games. But, obviously, we didn’t have the horsepower to pull off that kind of game, nor the time nor resources to create it. There have been three of us working on this project; one of the guys ended up working at such a low level that he was actually trying to create a multi-tasking program, that would be able to read from dozens of modems at one time. It was a hell of a task for him to do, especially when modems had commonly 1200 Baud. We ended up reinventing a lot of what the internet had accomplished; we had no knowledge and so he ended up coding a lot of stuff that many people had coded. But, god bless him, he did accomplish it and made it work and we had the ability to play multiplayer games in a very efficient manner.

Q:

And you never thought of that concept again, later on?

Lowe:

We never found a good answer for it, because adventure games are basically puzzle based and storyline based. We couldn’t figure out how to have multiple persons solve the same puzzles. We were stuck in that idea of puzzles and inventory and object manipulation. Other people solved it, but in different ways. They turned it into action games where the puzzles weren’t that critical. And then there were also whole series of games where the players created the puzzles in the environment. The sandbox games are very successful, too. So we went back to what we knew and what we knew how to do and ended up that the online environment that we created, called the Sierra Network, turned out to be quite successful. It was one of the early online gaming companies that made a profit. And they made that profit by selling the company to AT&T and then later to America Online where it went into some dark basement and was never seen of or heard from again.

Q:

Has there been any kind of “real-life” Larry that inspired your “virtual” Larry?

Lowe:

No, not particularly. I was going for exaggeration and parody, so I made him quite a bit worse than anybody I knew. So the answer is no. But I think that the narrator of the game does have a real life inspiration – and that’s me. After I wrote the games for a while, it took me some time to realize, but I’m the narrator in the game. I liked to create the feeling that the narrator

has this all-knowing, god-like presence in the game and also a personality. I think that was unusual for adventure games.

Q:

Today, adventure games seem to be out of fashion. What do you think is the reason for this and can they have a comeback?

Lowe:

The main reason that they're out of fashion is that they were the perfect games for the 80s. Computers of the 80s required you to be able to solve puzzles. You had to get the thing running, configuring your autoexec.bat file ... all that required puzzle solving skills. Adventure games went perfectly with that type of machine. People began liking games which didn't strain their brains, but were easy to master and that would allow them to be more action oriented.

Q:

Are you just retired from, or even tired of videogames today?

Lowe:

I have retired from, and I find that I play very few games today. Very few games are really interesting at this point. It's kind of ironic: You get into games because you love video games. But then once you're in the business, it becomes market research instead of joy. It turns into work. I found that the more I was in the industry, the less games I actually played. And since I've gotten out of the industry, few games came out that really interested me. Sam and Max is a good example and exception, and Psychonaut. But for the most part, I was never very good at shooters and I don't enjoy the long strategy games. And I never had enough time to play online games.

Well, of all the games I played ... gosh, for years I played Backgammon, and I think I play Freecell more than anything today. I play a few casual games, Bejeweled for example.

Q:

So you don't own any of the decent consoles, do you?

Lowe:

I bought a whole of consoles for years: The 3DO, Genesis, Gamecube. But I don't have any of the current ones. I played some Playstation 3 and Xbox 360 at a game company a few years ago.