So what sort of things have been keeping you busy since we've heard from you last?

Well, I've been retired from Sierra for 10 years now. Although I fell out of retirement a few times along the way, I think now I'm permanently retired and just enjoying life., playing a lot of golf and doing volunteer work maintaining websites for non-profits. I also spend a lot of time reading and watching films.

I have several hobbies, golf and model railroading among them. Model railroading is a wonderful hobby; you get to do carpentry and electronics and artistic things...backgrounds, landscaping and all sorts of different things, besides modeling, painting, sculpting, molding...it's a very deep hobby and many guys go crazy with the depth. (laughs) I'm part of a local modular railroad club that builds layouts in 2-foot by 4-foot sections and we bring them all together at shows and hook them up and have a huge 40-foot by 30-foot layout, so we can run trains that are a hundred cars long like real trains. It's a great hobby and a good way to get out and meet a lot of people.

When you were with Sierra, what sort of approach did you take to game design? Where would you begin in your process?

It started with me doing research into ways to humiliate poor Larry. I made lots and lots of lists; lists of embarrassing situations that I could put him in, lists of jokes that I thought would be funny, and lists of things I could do that we hadn't done before. And as they occurred to me, I'd build lists of special animations, sound effects, dialogue and jokes. Often I would first come up with the setting and then funny things that could happen to him. Or at least things that I thought would be funny.

That was one of the worst parts of the job...the stuff that "I thought" was funny. Because you never know. It's not like going on stage at a comedy club where in seconds you have your answer. This was a process that took months and you wouldn't know for months whether it was really funny or not. The worst part was that when I started I would think, "Oh yeah, that would be funny, let's do that." But by the time we got through working out the details with the animators, working out the background scene so that it fit what was going to happen, working through the dialogue, recording all of it, getting the timing right, working with the programmers to make sure that the blocking was correct, and all the other things needed to make that one gag happen...well, hell. By then it wasn't funny at all! To *any* of us! By that point it was old and boring.

But about the time the game shipped, I would go to the media to show it to them and brag about it, all the while thinking, "None of this is going to work!" But the good news was when I'd get up enough nerve to show it to someone who had never seen it, they would laugh out loud and I'd think, "Maybe it's not as dumb as I think. Maybe it *is* funny." So I think that was the fun part of the job, but also the terror of it. (laughs) Because you just never knew after those months of preparation whether or not that thing you thought was funny six months ago actually *was* funny.

When it came to the humor in the Leisure Suit Larry games, specifically, was there ever a concern about becoming offensive, or sexist, or excessively crude? Was that ever a worry for you when you were writing the games?

It was and it wasn't. There were some things that Ken Williams would love to have had in the game. He'd tell me, "You've *got* to do this. It'd be hilarious." But then when he'd actually see it, he'd say, "Ooh, I don't know...that's...pretty raw!" So I learned quickly it was a waste of my time to go off of other people's suggestions. What I did was trust my wife. I would tell Margaret what I was doing and, if she scrunched up her nose and said, "Oh, God! You can't do that!" then I wouldn't do it. But the idea was, if I could run it by a woman who was not ultra-conservative or ultra-liberal, but a middle of the road person, and she thought it was a groaner, or maybe on the line...well, then, it'd be fine. (laughs) She was my benchmark for that stuff. And it seemed to work out.

She's one of the reason women play my games without being offended. I mean, frankly, the whole subject matter was much more pro female than pro male. Your hero's a guy who's such an easy target. All the women were superior to him. Maybe after the hooker in Larry 1, every other woman in the games was superior to Larry. So when women played the game they thought it was kind of neat; the women came out of top. Often literally! (laughs)

It's probably fair to say that most people discovering the Space Quest series would have had already some interest in science fiction. And those discovering King's Quest would have had an interest in medieval fantasy. For Leisure Suit Larry...well, we all have an interest in sex. Do you think that if the Larry games came out today, with the abundance of easily-accessible sexuality on the internet, those game would be overlooked in favor of something more graphic?

That's an interesting point. There's no way to tell. I think the games always had a schizophrenic aspect to them, because the box and the packaging were always racier than the contents. I started to say "the marketing" but Sierra didn't really do any marketing of Larry until Larry 5. Before that, they didn't run one advertisement in any magazine (other than their own house mag) or do anything to promote the games other than put them on the shelves and see if they fell off. So I guess I can't say the marketing. But the packaging at least always promised much more sex than was actually in the games. I would talk to Ken's brother John, who was in charge of marketing then, and say, "Johnny, are you serious about this? This game is not that sexy!" And he'd say, "Oh, yeah, yeah, but if they buy it and play it, they'll laugh and have a good time. But first we've got to get them to buy it!"

John Williams was to get people to try the game by packaging it with babes on the front, because if you said, "Oh, no, it's just a big funny game and people are going to laugh a lot and you never really get laid..." (laughs) that's bad marketing. Whether it would sell today is difficult to discuss because how can you compare the way things were then and now? Because, man, in 20 years, the world has changed in many ways, particularly software and computers.

Another big difference is that back then people were used to solving puzzles. You had to be a puzzle solver just in order to get that damn DOS to work! Today people turn their computer on and if it doesn't work, they dial an 800 number and somebody

takes control of their computer and fixes it for them. It's a different time and games reflect that.

I read in an interview that Scott Murphy of the Space Quest series resisted the development of icon based navigation for Space Quest IV; he wanted to keep the text parser. Did you have any similar apprehensions about the icon bar?

I thought it was a good idea. I actually came up with it first, back in 1984 with The Black Cauldron. I don't know if you've ever seen that game but, rather than icons we used the keyboard's function keys, arranged in a logical pattern. F3, F4, F5 and F6 were Look, Take, Put and Do. With those four actions, performed with those four keys, anticipated the icon-based system which Roberta brought out later. It also had four basic actions, plus control panels, inventory, and so on.

To me, it was always about appealing to a broader audience. I even made my games simpler. Of all the Sierra games, and of most adventure games, my games were always the easiest. Frankly, I wasn't a very good adventure game player, so I always had trouble playing other's games. I'd think, "Well how the hell would anybody ever think of *that?"* So I tried hard to eliminate the "guess what I should do now" approach by actually giving people clues, and maintain have some sort of logic. Like, if you get sunburned, you need to find sunscreen. Where would you find that? I'd hide it in a drug store, not in the top of a tree.

But when the icon-based system came in, I thought it was an interesting challenge and looked forward to using it because I thought it would make the games simpler. What I didn't realize was how simple it would make them. All of our first round of games under that system revealed that we needed a much longer game story, more puzzles, and a lot more clues, because, evidently under the old games, the real challenge was typing in the right words. And when you removed that "what word should I use / what word are they looking for" problem and replaced it with pointing and clicking, suddenly the games got really short. Larry 5, gosh, you can play through that in a couple of hours if you really push. And that's true also of Space Quest IV and King's Quest IV because the icons took away so much of the difficulty created by typing.

That actually leads me into a question about Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist, which—and I'm not saying this to butter you up or anything—is probably still my favorite game of all time.

Wow! Well, thanks! And you should tell Josh Mandel, too, because he had a lot to do with that game. He is still a really funny guy.

My question is that a few of your games, starting with Freddy Pharkas and then following again in Larry 6 and Larry 7, take place in the same contained area, which itself is just a small collection of screens that the player visits over and over. It's interesting to me that you would address the concern of the games going by too quickly by actually compacting the scope of the game!

We did that because the art got suddenly much more expensive than the programming. In the old days, programming was expensive and somebody could whip up the simple graphics very quickly with only 320 by 200 pixels. But when we went to higher resolutions, it took more artwork and a lot more artists' time. Plus, our standards of animation grew, so it took more animators on a project, which costs a lot

more money. So, rather than making a game like little beads on a string where you see a certain scene once and then see it again, I reused scenes.

I frankly did it to save money. My whole goal was to write a game that sold well enough that Sierra would allow me to write another one. (laughs) It was such fun creating those games, and while it was a lot of work, it was so much fun that I just wanted to do something that won't cost a lot of money but will sell enough that Sierra will make some money on it and I'll make a little money on it, and then we can all do it all over again. But at the end of the adventure game business, that was lost, that philosophy went away. Had I been allowed to do Larry 8, I still think I could have made it profitable. And that might have changed the decline of adventure games.

I don't mean to get too heavy here, but Grim Fandango came out about the time the adventure game publishing world was crashing. It was an expensive game to make and it was a rather esoteric topic without broad appeal which didn't sell well. And when Gabriel Knight came out a year behind schedule and at double its original budget, it had a tough time making a profit. And so the suits looked at this situation and said, "Adventure games must be dead. We'd better not do another Larry game because it won't make money either." But that had never been my history. All of my games had been profitable because I was careful with the money given me. I never went over budget and never shipped late. I always made Christmas.

The one mistake I did make was they asked me to speed up Larry 5 to get it out earlier, so that they could have the Christmas season for King's Quest, and whatever Space Quest that was. And we actually did that. We actually shipped it two months early. We busted our asses, got the thing done, and got it shipped in early September, at least six weeks before we usually shipped games (around Halloween). The sad part was that when I went into the stores at Thanksgiving and asked, "What new games do you have?" they answered, "Space Quest, and King's Quest." I asked, "What's the new Larry game for Christmas?" And they answered, "Well, there's this old game, Larry 5, but it's been out for a while." And I thought, "Shit! I just shot off my own foot!" (laughs) So I never did that again! I shipped on Halloween every time!

Something that I've always wondered, which I think fits into your answer to an earlier question about wanting to humiliate the character as much as possible, is that the death sequences in Sierra games always seemed to have quite a lot invested in them. Unique animations, obviously, and sometimes some of the funniest moments in the game. Were the creative and varied methods of killing your characters a sort of cathartic response to the game design process?

It was actually an expedient way out of logic problems that we had, but it was also a chance for us to put in another laugh. In every case where you die, we could have put in something that would have taken a long time to program, a lot of effort and expense to create, so it would be logical for you to do, but what would have been the payoff? You screwed up and you're no closer to your goal. Sure, we could let you recover, but to me it was better to slip in a joke and make fun of you for messing up.

I think we pulled that off best in Freddy Pharkas. Every one of those deaths was great. It may have been Josh's idea—I don't want to take credit where it's not due—or mine, but once we came up with the idea that Whittlin' Willie, the storyteller, would tell you the story of Freddy Pharkas, then when you died, he could just describe some

"damn fool thing Freddy did" that killed him. (laughs) Once we started, it was easy to run with it!

All Sierra's games took a lot of heat from reviewers for the many deaths. So in Larry 5 I decided that you were not going to die again. No more deaths. But when the game came out, not one reviewer even noticed! No one said, "It's nice not to die in this game." And I went to a lot of trouble to make sure that it didn't happen, so it was disappointing, but by then dying had become old-hat. I felt that we had milked it to death, so it was fun to try something different.

And that's brings up one of my pet peeves with games today. Today's publishers don't try to "hit the ball where they ain't." Their attitude is much more to try to "hit a home run" than "let's do something that's never been done before and see if it works" which was the attitude at Sierra then. Ken thought "we've got King's Quest, and we know that's going to sell, so let's do something else, like Jones in the Fast Lane" which is still my favorite loser of all time. "Loser" in the sense of sales. It was an interesting game with a unique design that was a lot of fun but it was a weird, out-there kind of project that didn't sell well at all. But they could do those kinds of projects things because there were a lot of other games making money.

But when a game costs twenty, thirty or forty million dollars, as some of these today's games do, you don't dare do anything strange. You have to do what's already out there and successful. And that's disappointing.

So are you keeping up on the current state of gaming, or was that just kind of a general observation?

Well, four years ago I started a game development company with some private financial backing and a producer who had been around the business for a while. We created a game called Sam Suede: Undercover Exposure. It wasn't an adventure game but it had elements of humor in it and had conversation trees. I guess the closest comparison would be Beyond Good and Evil crossed with Psychonauts, but even that's not a fair description. It was an action/adventure game, with stealth and strategy, with a plot I was very proud of.

We kept the parts of adventure games that made them funny: the conversation trees, the interaction with interesting characters, the plot development. There were funny ways of taking out guards...a lot of humor. But in between there was a lot of sneaking around, a lot of fighting, and action. We took it to every major publisher and the guys in charge would say, "Oh, Al, I love your humor." and "I grew up playing your games!" and "You're the reason I'm in the business!" and "I can't wait to see what you've done!"

Then I'd show them the game and our ideas and do our pitch. Their responses would be, "That's the first game I've seen in months that I would actually play myself." and "It's amazing. You've done things I've never seen before." and other wonderful compliments.

But a week later we'd call and they'd say, "We're not interested." When I asked, "Why?" they'd say, "Because we can't find any comparables. There's no game like it on the market and therefore we don't know if it's going to sell or not. We can't give

you any money because the way we fund projects is by guessing that a game's going to be a little bit better than some other game so it might sell a little bit more than that other one, but not as much as this one. Since there are no other games like yours, we can't tell if it's going to sell or not."

It was really frustrating. We shut the company down, sent everybody home, and I retired again. It was a sad. And you wonder why the game business today is so non-creative? When people base decisions only on previous products, all you'll ever get is products that are like previous products.

That's a sad story.

It is! I really poured my heart and soul into this thing, worked on it for two years and did the best we could. And we came up with something that really interesting and fun. But then to have people say, "There's nothing else like it so we can't fund it," was the height of insult! (laughs)

In the old days, Ken Williams was a committee of one. He'd strive to find a niche that wasn't filled. He'd look for holes in the marketplace. One time he told me to "Go into Barnes and Noble and Blockbuster look at all the categories on their shelves and figure out which ones are *not* games."

Once he played racquetball with a cop who regaled him with great police stories. Ken said, "Why don't you join us? We'll write those stories down and make a game out of it?" And that became Police Quest. He didn't say "There are no police procedural games out there so I don't know how it'll sell, therefore we'd better not fund it."

Are you aware of the amateur adventure game communities that have built up since the end of Sierra and LucasArts? There's a whole group of gamers who create engines, like Adventure Game Studio, and they use that to create their own adventure games.

Oh sure! I've peeked in on it. I hear from people every once in a while and, if they want to do that, God bless them. More power to them. Let them have a great time. My problem is that, for 15 years, I was at the top of the mountain. I had the best tools in the business, the best engine, the best animators, and the best programmers. Any wacky thing I thought up, they could implement. But for me to go into a hobbyist situation now and start doing a game has no appeal whatsoever. I'd rather do something new with my life and learn something else than go backward and try to recreate the past.

As far as I'm concerned—and this is heresy to whomever happens to own my intellectual property at this moment—I don't really care if people copy my games or download them off of a warez site because I would rather that people played them and enjoyed them than not. What good is it to keep them locked up in some vault someplace and inaccessible?

If VU puts out another Larry Collection, then fine, sure, buy that collection. You'll be legal and I'll get my 25 cents or whatever out of the deal. I actually asked VU to let me post them on my site so people could download them but they wouldn't let me do that.

Which of your games would you say you are most proud of? The one you can say turned out closest to what you'd hoped to achieve?

Well, Freddy came awfully close! I started working on it shortly after I took a four-day course in screenwriting at UCLA. We studied plot and character development and all of the things that make a movie in the traditional Hollywood mold...a happy ending, conflict and resolution, and so forth. I wanted to do a game with a strong plot and that's how Freddy came about.

You see, Freddy has a strictly linear plot. We kept one variable that was incremented every time that you succeeded at a goal. There are about 38 along this path to finish the game. I was most proud that by hiding that in a round environment, few people ever said Freddy was a linear game. But it was, strictly linear, because plot point number four wouldn't happen until number three was completed. That's why the plot was so strong and why you saw such development in the characters and the story. Plus, it was funny. I remain proud of Freddy.

But more than that, I'm proud of Larry 7. Honestly, it was the first game I did where I truly thought, "I know how to do this." In all my earlier games, I always felt like I was guessing, thinking, "Man, I hope no one finds I don't have a clue how to do this!" But by the time I got to Larry 7, I actually did know "how to do this!" But, damn the luck, that was the last one! And I was like, oh man, I just figured this out! Now I can actually do some good games! (laughs)

The reasons I like Larry 7 best is that we finally got real music as opposed to MIDI music or that horrible little tweaker we had in the very beginning. We had digitized audio, we had real voiceovers. And felt qualified to direct those voiceover recordings. I had gotten better at that, too. The first game I did voiceovers on was Larry 6 and it was okay, primarily because I had enough sense to hire great voiceover actors who brought it to life much more than my direction did. By the time I got to Larry 7, I felt comfortable in the studio and I felt like I could keep it loose. We improvised a lot of that dialog in the studio, then changed the game when we got home. We also had great tools by then. I was pleased with its plot; it was wacky but plausible.

I like some of the subtleties, too, like the PA announcer who constantly interrupts *a la* M.A.S.H. so you grow used to him but later he becomes an integral part of the game's puzzles. And he's also there to give you help. If you're a good game player, you probably didn't notice that, but if you're a bad game player, the PA announcer would tell you what to do next. I thought that was a fun way to get people to move on when they got hung up. A timer counted how long it had been since you earned any points. As time passed, you got more and more specific clues of what to do, until finally an announcement said, "God damn it, go there and do that!" (laughs)

All those reasons make me think it's my best.

Al, thanks for your time! Is there anything you'd like to leave our readers with?

If people stayed with this interview this far, they would enjoy my website. There's a ton of material at www.allowe.com, material like insider stories from the old Sierra days, what happened, why, when and how. There's a lot of freebies, too: all the sound effects and music from my games, all posted and ready for free download. Plus a lot

of graphics and other things that are nowhere else on the Web...just a flock of free stuff, including some of the original games that I created early l in the 80s.

I also have a daily joke email, with two jokes, one a little risqué and the other one not. Office-suitable jokes, no pornography, racism, or any of that. I've done this every day for nine years now, over 4,500 jokes and I still have hundreds more to go. All of it's free.

The most important question, obviously, I had to save for the end. You only get one of the Leisure Suit Larry girls; who is it?

That's a great question. I've never been asked that in all these years! (thinks) Oh, gosh! It'd have to be Patti. Oh, yeah. She's the worldly-wise one! The hip jazzster, a musician.

So it probably feels good to get that out.

Well, yeah! I've never thought about it before! Now finally, I'll sleep easy tonight. Thanks!