

## Leisure Suit Larry 5: Passionate Patti Does A Little Undercover Work

Studio: **Sierra On-Line**

Designer(s): **Al Lowe**

Part of series: **Leisure Suit Larry**

Release: September 7, 1991

Main credits: Lead programmer: **Brian K. Hughes**

Production designer: **Andy Hoyos**

Graphics: **Jane Cardinal**

Music: **Mark Seibert**

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### Basic Overview

So it is the fall of 1991, and when last we saw Larry Laffer, he seemed to be enjoying a well-earned retirement somewhere near Oakhurst, in a nice little programmer's shack in the mountains, making a series of adventure games based on his own life experience and enjoying the warm company of Passionate Patti, the best candidate as of yet for the true love of our hero's life. According to Al Lowe's own recollections, this was indeed supposed to be the end of the road for Larry — but alas, life sets its own rules every now and then, and even good people end up too weak to punch life in the face and shove its stupid rules down its throat.

The lengthy history of Sierra On-Line is populated with relative hits and relative misses, yet there is only a tiny handful of Sierra adventure games about which I can state with absolute certainty that these games should never have been produced in the first place — and the very first such game is most definitely *Leisure Suit Larry 5*. Well, I guess *Codename: Iceman*, which preceded it by a couple years, must come real close, but at least that game had a cool concept to it, ruined by extremely poorly



thought out execution. *Leisure Suit Larry 5*, in comparison, was a disaster on almost every possible account — indeed, if you simply erase it from your memory, the franchise will not suffer one bit, since there is no true continuity between it and the next two titles in the series, nor is it in any way necessary to play for those who wonder if there was ever anything important planned for the conjugal life of Larry and Patti (non-spoiler: nothing that could even remotely be called important). And while there may have been occasional positive reviews of it upon release, in retrospect it is pretty hard to come up with even one positive evaluation — so it's not just my own subjective take at work here.

Ironically, the one Larry game that has actually been «erased» is not *Larry 5*, but rather its prequel, *Larry 4*, a running gag in Sierra circles that eventually earned the sub-title of *The Missing Floppies*. Apparently, there had been some ideas to make a Larry-based multiplayer game (!) in the early era of network communication, but they were quickly scrapped and remained only as a vague memory, which then metamorphosed into a jokey mystification once Al started work on the true sequel to *Larry 3*. But the big unanswered question that remains is *why* he started that work in the first place. It is not as if he was totally out of creative ideas: he would go on to make at least two more classics for Sierra — the hilarious *Freddy Pharkas* (a loving tribute to *Blazing Saddles*) and the adorable *Torin's Passage* (now *there's* a game which was so unjustly deprived of a deserving sequel). Perhaps Ken ultimately just goaded him into it — after all, Sierra lived and breathed sequels, and *Larry* used to be one of their chief cash cows at that; not coincidentally, *Larry 5* went into production at about the same time as a VGA remake of the original *Land Of The Lounge Lizards*.

Much to Al's honor, the team behind *Larry 5* made everything possible to not make the game into a formulaic carbon copy of the preceding trilogy. It looks different, it sounds different, it goes out for different targets and off on different tangents. Yet almost — I do stress *almost*, once again — everything it does, from plot to humor to gameplay, it does wrong; and there is no better proof for this than the fact that *Larry 6* and *7* would distance themselves from their ill-fated elder as if it did not even exist (which is no small feat for a Sierra sequel considering how many plugins for their other titles these guys would typically throw in at every opportunity). Let us now take a more detailed look at each individual problem, and then try to speculate on why the formerly lucky stars aligned themselves like a bunch of incurable alcoholics for Larry Laffer in 1991.

## Content evaluation

### *Plotline*

At the beginning of the game, Leisure Suit Larry finds himself working as a lowly assistant at one of America's top porn studios (!) — suffering from amnesia, the only explanation for how, when, and why he ever got there. Following an unlucky

accident with his boss, Larry is chosen as the test guy for probing the sexual prowess of three main finalists for "America's Sexiest Women", and has to travel all across the USA and secretly record three beautiful women going at him because... well, simply because no lady vying for the title of "America's Sexiest Woman" could resist getting it on with the dorkiest guy to come along. Meanwhile, Passionate Patti, back to her old ungrateful job of trying to introduce the average American barroom public to the wonders of classical piano, is recruited by a sleazy FBI (or was that CIA?) agent to investigate suspicious activity in the music business, such as the practice of leaving morally corrupt backward messages (JUST SAY YES!)



on popular recordings, or the rampant payola reigning in the freshly formed rap industry. Of course, just like Larry, Patti has to use her «personal charms» in certain situations to get what she, or, rather, Inspector Desmond, really want — but hey, when your country is in danger, marital fidelity is the *last* thing on anybody's mind.

One might reasonably object that such a plot is, in fact, hardly any more idiotic than a quest to keep a precious onklunk loaded with top secret microfilm out of the hands of KGB agents (just to lose it later in the jungle), or a quest to save your man from a tribe of evil cannibal Amazons by means of a magic marker (*Larry 3*). The real problem, however, is that while the previous games largely just gave Al Lowe an excuse to poke fun at various tropes and symbols of pop culture, *Larry 5* is the first (and, fortunately, the last) game in the series that seems to have tried to make some serious point. There are occasionally smart reference points — for instance, the entire angle of how the conservative-moralistic «war on porn» actually plays into the hands of the industry mafia — and occasionally vicious jabs of satire (lambasting of the entire «hidden backward messages» myth). But they are all so deeply enmeshed with the smutty-silly elements of the game that its adult and adolescent sides effectively cancel out each other.

It does not help matters that, as far as the smutty-silly stuff goes, *Larry 5* is almost totally unfunny. In place of the relatively tame (and even «tasteful») innuendos of the old trilogy, we are introduced to a much more direct brand of toilet humor, not to mention much more direct action — for instance, while Patti's amorous activities were mostly just hinted at in *Larry 3*, here she has the option to directly get it on with one of her targets, and is also subjected to a fairly creepy gynecological check-up at

the FBI Headquarters (God knows I hate to abuse the word *creepy* in old video game reviews, but that particular scene definitely merits the epithet). The three girls pursued by Larry aren't even successfully presented as stereotypical caricatures (the way his future interests would be in *Larry 6* and *7*) — they pop up for three brief scenes, get it on with Larry for peanuts and disappear forever. And then, of course, the game commits that one ultimate crime of having Patti wearing blackface (or, more accurately, *blacktype*) in order to fit in with the crowd at K-RAP Studios — offensive today, merely unfunny back in 1991, and fairly representative of the game's level of humor.

Somewhere in the background, for most of the game, hovers the «mystery» of Larry's amnesia and his separation from Patti — «explained» at the end of the game in such an ad hoc and utterly ridiculous fashion that, honestly, it would have been better to simply leave the player in total dark as to what might have happened in between the third and fifth hole, uh, game.

What *did* happen was that both Larry and Patti had a complete change of personality. Instead of a romantically minded, reasonably inventive, and strangely charismatic character from the original trilogy, what we have here is a passionless and passive character, almost completely deprived of agency and personality. And instead of a strange, sexy, slightly mystical *femme fatale* with a heart of gold, we essentially find a goofy tramp in a red dress who seems to enjoy when handsome-looking strangers insert unusual objects in her vagina («for the good of the country», of course). When the two of them finally have a romantic encounter at the end of the game, older fans of *Larry 3* might want to shed a tear or two, but nobody else will be able to take that reunion seriously.

There is only one explanation to this — namely, that the intention was to make an essentially *dirty* rather than essentially *funny* game (within Sierra's reasonable limits, of course), but then, when a dirty game also tries to give you tons of socially and politically relevant dialog instead of pixelated nudity, it is more likely that you will remain confounded and confused than truly entertained. Simply put, plot-wise *Larry 5* is a qualified mess: it seems to try to hit all the checkpoints at once, and, in the end, satisfies no one. Its humor is too salacious, its dirt too humor-oriented, its story too twisted and unbelievable, its characters too caricaturesque.

This is not to say that all of its plot twists are equally inept — the story of Donald Tramp, the proud owner of the Tramp Casino in Atlantic City, and his poor estranged wife Iwana, reduced to renting out skates on the Boardwalk, has only managed to increase in value from 1991 to the present time, even if we never get to meet the Tycoon of Tastelessness in person. (Favorite bit of dialog in the game takes place during a Passionate Patti daydream: "Oh, my Donald!" — "THE Donald", he corrects). But at least everybody still remembers Donald Trump; who the hell remembers grotesque porn director Chi Chi LaRue,

transformed here into the beauty queen of illegal immigration, Chi Chi Lambada? That's another point that ultimately works against the game: it is *way* too much of a product of its time, much more strongly tied to the social, political, and cultural realities of the early Nineties than any other Larry game to any particular period. (Though it does add a very special time capsule effect to the experience of replaying it).

### Puzzles

The simplest and truest thing to be said about puzzles in *Larry 5* is that there are no puzzles in this game, period — certainly not in the traditional understanding of a «puzzle» as a problem in need of solution. Perhaps, in light of competition from LucasArts and other studios, Al took the players' complaints about puzzles in Sierra games being pretty tough and unfair too much to heart — enough to eliminate them entirely. Technically, there is a game to be played: you pick up objects, use them on one another, give them to other people, and occasionally go pixel-hunting, but I do not seem to remember even a single situation which would require an ingenious solution. A couple of times Larry or Patti do have to resort to non-trivial measures, but this usually requires going to the other corner of the room and using an object in an unconventional manner on another object, with the game giving you hints a-plenty. And, of course, there is the usual occasional needle-in-a-haystack chase (like finding Iwana's skate shop on the Boardwalk). That's IT.

Charmed or intimidated by the LucasArts style, Al pretty much swept the game clean of unwinnable situations (the plague of Sierra in general, and the *Larry* series in particular): this time, when you moved from one location to another, the only objects you needed were strategically placed in the same locations where you had to use them, nor could you stupidly give vital resources away to random characters with no hopes of ever getting them back. This may have been a welcome change (though it also contributed to simplifying the game, what with everything you might need always at your immediate disposal). The complete elimination of death situations, however, was not — all the gruesomely hilarious deaths Larry and Patti could experience back in *Larry 3* were gone, almost as if Al was taking the early Nineties' controversy around violence in video games way too seriously. In here, Larry doesn't even get properly electrocuted after putting his fingers in a socket, nor does he drown when jumping off the Boardwalk into the ocean. Where's the fun in that?



If there is one seriously — nay, *insanely* — difficult thing about the game, it is getting the complete number of possible points: *Larry 5* is a true completionist's nightmare. I am not even talking about the traditional Sierra trick of offering two alternate solutions to the same puzzle — an «easy» strategy that gives you less points and a «tricky» strategy that gives you more: this crops up all over the place here and at least makes some sense, given that winning the game through «easy» strategies can literally be done in your sleep, just by randomly clicking everywhere, and that only the «tricky» strategies require at least a small bit of thinking. But on top of that, you have to get extra points for trivial unnecessary actions — for instance, looking at some objects before taking or using them — and at least in one or two spots the game is plain bugged, so that you can get the maximum points only by performing certain actions in a particular strict order rather than the opposite (which also totally makes sense). But not to worry — whether you do or do not get the maximum points might not even begin to become a concern, because the number of points is never on the screen (you have to pull down a special menu to see how well you are doing), and Al did not even bother to remind you of your final score at the end of the game. So you will be working your ass off for no satisfaction whatsoever.

A very small positive payoff is that *Larry 5* is completely devoid of annoying, poorly designed arcade sequences — the closest you get to one is a mildly embarrassing situation during a mud wrestling match, which looks more like a corny parody on an arcade sequence than an actual test of your abilities. But that is merely because it is devoid of almost *any* challenges as such, so why make an exception for nimble fingers? Oh, sorry: you *do* have to be pretty nimble when punching in the bizarre copy-protection codes for buying airplane tickets (a pseudo-puzzle apparently inherited by Al from the similar copy-protection device in *Space Quest 4*, where it at least made visual sense for futuristic reasons; in the world of *Larry 5*, though, it seems as if the protagonist had brought all the goofiness and eccentricity of Nontoonyt Island with him back to America).

Finally, one thing worth mentioning, though not strictly related to puzzles as such, is the rather weird decision to drastically expand the field of «player choice» by introducing an option where you can try to combine any object in your inventory with any other one in order to produce a specific response. In older, parser-based Sierra games such an option would be very tedious to test out, because you would have to type «use monocle with golden bridle» or «use hair rejuvenator with wad o' dough» every single time; with the transition to a point-and-click interface where you could open an inventory screen and just drag any object around, this became technically easy — but *only* in *Larry 5* do you actually have a system where the developers bothered to come up with unique descriptions for each and every pointless operation mathematically imaginable (e.g.: *combine bra with DataPak* → "Ordinarily, you'd have no problem tucking the DataPak inside your bra (in fact, you'd probably enjoy it). But hiding items in this bra presents an insurmountable logistical problem.") They even have asymmetric

responses — using your DataPak with your bra is not the same as using your bra with the DataPak, if you can believe it. Eventually, you will find yourself clinging to each and every one of your objects instead of discarding or using them up just to test out whether they *really* thought of every single combination... and believe me, they did.

Some of the nonsensical comments to the player's nonsensical actions are actually quite hilarious, and it can definitely be fun to just kill a bit of time by clicking one object over all the others (and there are quite a few). Problem is, it would have made so much more sense if it were all part of a better game, but in *Larry 5* this unexpected bit of creative ultra-freedom rather sharply contrasts with the fact of how little of anything else you are allowed to do outside the inventory screen. Obviously, the writers' resources should rather have been poured into other areas of the game; in fact, who even needs an adventure game in which the most exciting action consists of blindly poking a bunch of inventory items into one another?

### Atmosphere

*Cramped.* This seems to be the first word in my head when thinking of the overall «feel» of the game. Simply put, there is no breathing space in *Larry 5*. You begin your game in a tiny three-room segment of the (allegedly) giant building of Larry's porn corporation. From there, passing through a large but empty courtyard, you hop in your limo and are immediately transported into the airport building — stretched over a whoppin' three screens, with far less breathing space than even the airport in *Larry 2*. From there, just about everywhere you go seems cut down to bare basics. A few rooms to be explored, then abandoned forever once you jump into the next segment of the game. Never before have Larry or Patti felt so stifled in their actions, certainly not in *Larry 3* where you were able to roam freely over all of Nontoonyt Island, and not even in *Larry 2*, which was also divided into chronological and spatial segments — but each of those gave you more individual freedom of action than *Larry 5* in its entirety.

The cartoonish and thoroughly satirical nature of the game also means that the delicate balance of nasty humor, romantic-heroic action, and lite-smut of the original trilogy has been dismantled: romantic-heroic action is a big no-no (well, you *do* get to be a Big Hero near the end of the game, but it is done in such a primitively parodic fashion that you won't even be able to experience a true sense of pride), and humor and smut have pretty much been merged into one. I know that people often



apply the word «juvenile» to all of the *Larry* games without exception, and I can live with that, but in this case *Larry 5* is juvenile squared. For all the dirty silliness of the original game, by the very fact of its existence in 1987 it already displayed a bit of a rebellious spirit; *Larry 5*, on the contrary, even despite its seemingly progressive politics, is completely mainstream and predictable — and «juvenile rebellious» is significantly different from «juvenile mainstream». Alas, this is pretty much all I can say about the atmospheric qualities of this digital disaster. It is pretty much the Sierra On-Line adventure game equivalent of being stuck in a stinking toilet whose only saving grace is a bunch of wisecracking graffiti on the walls.

## Technical features

### Graphics

The art style used for *Larry 5* was fairly unique for Sierra at the time, but this does not necessarily make it good. Two dominant ideas seem to rule over the visuals: (a) make everyone and everything cartoonishly caricaturesque and grotesque and (b) shift the overall viewing emphasis from long shots, typical of most Sierra games until then, to a closer, full shot-style perspective, making the human sprites bigger than they used to be and objects such as buildings and furniture loom large over everything else; backgrounds and panoramas are pretty much non-existent in the game.



This style contributes heavily to the «cramped» atmosphere I mentioned earlier, and somehow makes you forget that Leisure Suit Larry is, after all, just a tiny human being caught in the gears of a strangely beautiful and deadly cruel world — the feeling that permeated *Larry 2* and *Larry 3*. Instead, everything feels very... utilitarian, I'd say. A few of the images, like the exterior of Donald Tramp's casino, all neon lights and golden baubles and sassy dames in a row, have clearly been produced with love and affection (somebody on the team must have really had it for the Donald!). But mostly you won't be able to remember anything other than the grotesquely distorted angles and comic-book style shapes of things, rather forcefully reminding you that you are not supposed to take anything here seriously.

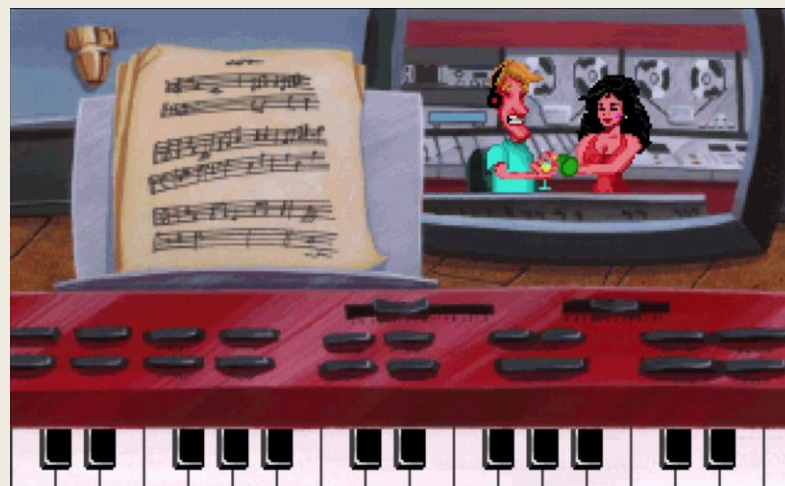
Strange enough, actual close-ups and cut scenes are kept to a minimum, and even the lovely ladies — *the* number one reason



most people play a Larry game, after all — have very little screen presence (plus, there are only three of them, as opposed to at least five in *Larry 3*). But worst of all is the picturing of our beloved protagonist himself. From a half-funny, half-respectable figure which, somehow, you could identify with in the previous game, Larry has been transformed into a grotesque middle-aged midget with a disproportionately huge head and a permanently stuck idiotic expression on his face — alas, he would find himself stuck with this image for the rest of his life at Sierra. With this transformation perished the last shreds of Mr. Laffer's dignity, as nobody would ever be capable of taking his image seriously, let alone identifying with the character. Perhaps the intention here was to wipe out any perception of «virility» or «masculinity»: the grotesque Quasimodo-style reimagining of Larry's personality was supposed to make all of his advances on the opposite sex, no matter how crude or sexist, seem more laughable than anything else. But then, who exactly would have been mistaking Larry Laffer for Sean Connery or Brad Pitt in those first few games? Dorkiness and a bit of oafishness had always been Leisure Suit Larry's defining features, yet *Larry 5* has elevated these qualities over everything else — in fact, it has pretty much erased everything else. Of all the things that distinguish the late Larry games from the early ones, none has beaten the visual transformation of Larry for barbed wire barrier effect, and I only hope it was not Al Lowe himself who came up with the idea, because whoever did must surely burn in hell until the recovery of *Larry 4: The Missing Floppies*.

## Sound

*Larry 5* arrived at a time when full voiceovers were not yet a sure-fire guarantee from Sierra, which means that you will not experience the (somewhat questionable) delight of Jan Rabson impersonating the title character. The only vocal presence in the game is a small bunch of sound effects — the boss yelling COFFEE! through the closed doors, Larry going EEYYOOW! when you decide to get his fingers caught in an electric socket, and — true to the toilet spirit of the game — vomiting, farting, and toilet-flushing sounds which you can activate randomly by pressing one of the functional buttons. (If your reaction to the game is anything like mine, you will find yourself abusing that vomiting button more often than you'd think). Given the general lameness of so much dialog, though, I'm not sure the lack of voice actors is necessarily a bad thing in this particular case.



The musical soundtrack, composed by Mark Seibert, is OK. The Larry theme has once again been fully reinvented, embellished with extra rococo flourishes to the point of becoming barely recognizable in places. The other themes are typically inobtrusive, elevator-ish MIDI compositions without any particular hooks: like almost everything else in the game, they are all lightweight and juvenile, often exploiting generic Latin dance patterns to enhance an atmosphere of total giddy nonchalance.

There is one sound-based «challenge» in the game that could have potentially been fun if it were only implemented in the right way — at a certain point, Patti has to improvise a lead melody over a synth pattern, which you can actually try to play yourself twice before the controls are wrestled away from you so that it can be played the right way. Unfortunately, the mouse controls in that «challenge» are barely responsive, and even if you *are* a keyboard player, you will hardly be able to wrench anything cohesive out of your instrument — just another way for the game to prove how it can suck in so many different ones.

### Interface

The standard point-and-click interface for early 1990s' Sierra games allowed for four different commands: Look, Take / Interact, Talk, and, in true Al Lowe fashion, Unzip (parallel to similarly-conceived Smell and Lick in *Space Quest 4*). Unfortunately, introducing the icons was one thing, but letting the player make the best of them was quite another — in most cases other than Look, all the other three icons return fairly generic responses, including Unzip: in 99% of the situations, clicking your zipper over object X simply gives you a standard "Don't do that to the X!" answer. By the time of *Larry 6*, Al and his team would finally learn how to make you have more fun with these options, but *Larry 5* is extremely bare-bones when it comes to any sort of interactions. Hint (too corny to be dubbed a spoiler anyway): do *not* bother using your zipper on anything except for members of the opposite sex — and even then, usually just to get a rebuke rather than any action. This is, after all, a family-oriented game.

As to any other aspects of gameplay... well, considering how little gameplay there is in the first place, describing its aspects is a futile enterprise. Oh, almost forgot: there is an additional » button here which lets you skip ahead, missing lengthy cutscenes if you have already seen them previously — a feature which was already introduced, but more crudely, in *King's Quest 5* and of which Al seems to have been so proud that he decided to introduce and demonstrate it each time you start the game (thank you, Al). Additionally, I think that *Larry 5* is the only Sierra adventure game which lets you — nay, *implores* you — to protect your saved games with an actual *password*. Why? Who the hell would want to steal a *Leisure Suit Larry 5* saved game? Your 10-year old kid? The milkman? The FBI? Just another stupid embarrassment which, fortunately, was never repeated (but boy does it get annoying every time you launch the game).

**Verdict:** *A historical treasure pool of poor design decisions and cringy narrative twists.*

If you were patient enough to read through all of the sections, you must by now be amazed at the sheer number of odd / crazy / ridiculous things about this game — sometimes quite objectively so, given that they were never tried after *Larry 5*. Considering that the *Larry* series in general was one of Sierra's highest achievements, and that subsequent games were able to at least partially revert the disaster, even after all these years I still remain befuddled at how exactly a mastermind like Al Lowe could have produced such a stinker. Nothing but a general, and rather shaky, explanation comes to mind — the overall odd lack of focus and sanity experienced by the Sierra staff as a whole during the big transition into the era of point-and-click interface, VGA graphics, talkies, and «adventure game maturity», however we might want to define that. In about a year's time, that focus would fortunately return and bring Sierra into its Silver Age; but *Larry 5*, along with *King's Quest 5* and a couple other games, remains an unhappy monument to that period of turmoil.

Perhaps the game's only redeeming quality is closely tied to one of its biggest curses: by making *Larry 5* into the most «socio-politically relevant» game in the entire series — a fairly stupid move for a *Larry* game — Al had accidentally transformed it into a nice little piece of history. It is a good reflection of the fashions, trends, slang, and everyday concerns (porn, drugs, rap music, censorship, President Bush, you name it) of the early Nineties, a decent dietary supplement for any of us reading back on the social and cultural life of that weird, but exciting time. In fact, giving Sierra's general penchant for the escapism of fantasy, sci-fi, and mystery in their titles, *Larry 5* just might have been the most «realistic» of their games next to the *Police Quest* series (which focused on a pedantic rather than satirical attitude anyway). This does not make even a single small step towards turning it into a good game, though; so if you are not looking to get your fix of that funny-smelling American atmosphere of 1991, you might altogether ignore it and make a straight jump from *Larry 3* to *Larry 6* — particularly since we've already got that number 4 missing anyway.

