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Roberta Lynn Williams was one of the most influential personal-computer-game designers of the 1980s and 1990s, becoming known as the "Mother" and "Queen" of video adventure games. Williams began her career in 1979 on a kitchen table in her Los Angeles home, playing a text-based adventure game titled Colossal Cave. She had no interest or experience in programming computers. Armed with her skills as a storyteller and reader of literature, and working with her husband, programmer Kenneth A. Williams (b. 1954), she made an art out of writing and designing graphic adventure games. Her first, *Mystery House* in 1980, was an unexpected success that launched the couple's business On-Line Systems. Soon renamed Sierra On-Line, Inc., the company grew to become one of the leaders in the computer-game industry, with growth increasing after the Williamses moved the company headquarters to Bellevue, Washington, in 1993. Roberta Williams worked on *Wizard and the Princess* (1980), *Mission: Asteroid* (1980), the *King's Quest* series (1984-1998), *Phantasmagoria* (1995), and many other computer games, redefining adventure games and introducing women heroes. Sierra On-Line was acquired by CUC International in 1996 and Williams retired in 1999.

Family, Marriage, Gamer

Roberta Lynn Heuer was born on February 16, 1953, in Los Angeles to John Heuer (1925-2013), a horticulturist and agriculture inspector, and Nova Clinton Heuer (b. 1929), a homemaker. She was raised in La Verne, east of Los Angeles, with her younger brother James Steven Heuer (b. 1954).

By all accounts, the family was close-knit. As a young child, Roberta had an active imagination that would often lead to storytelling. She called the stories she told her family movies. She was timid and had a soothing and serene manner. With brown eyes and long brown hair, she dressed in typical 1970s attire that showed off her California look. Being raised in a rural environment did not help with her shy, reserved demeanor. Roberta's brother suffered from epilepsy and her parents' attention was focused on him much of the time; she developed storytelling to charm and captivate her brother, family, friends, and others.

In 1970, when she was 17, Roberta Heuer met Kenneth Williams at John H. Francis Polytechnic High School in Sun Valley, a suburb of Los Angeles. Kenneth had been born in Evansville, Indiana. In high school, he played in a band, earned good grades, and learned creative ways to make money whenever possible. His father worked for Sears as a television repairman; he was from Cumberland County, Kentucky, and co-workers nicknamed him "Country" (Levy, 231). Kenneth grew up in a tough neighborhood in Pomona, near Los Angeles, periodically sharing a bedroom with his brothers Larry and John. Kenneth avoided fights, later saying he was "a coward ... I wouldn't hit back" (Levy, 231). After graduating from high school in 1970 at the age of 16, Kenneth immediately began attending California State Polytechnic College at the Pomona campus.

An online biography of Roberta Williams described the couple's meeting:

"She was dating a friend of his and two months after a double date where they ... met, Ken unexpectedly called her and asked her out. Roberta wasn't very impressed with him in the beginning. He was shy and insecure, like her, but also overly pushy at times. He asked her to go steady the first week. It took some time, but at one point Roberta suddenly realized that he was very intelligent and quite different from the other boys she had dated. Ken wanted them to have a permanent commitment and they got married when Roberta was only 19 years old" (Holmberg).

Their marriage was held November 4, 1972, five days after Kenneth's 18th birthday. Their first son, D. J., was born in 1973. Kenneth worked various jobs and moved the family frequently around the Los Angeles area during the early-to-mid-1970s. Their goal at some point was to move from Los Angeles to a log cabin in the woods and raise their growing family close to nature. After a time, Kenneth dropped out of college and enrolled in a nine-month program at the technical vocational school Control Data Institute (CDI) in Los Angeles. With a natural knack for programming he excelled, graduating at the top of his class.

Kenneth began working at various companies as a programmer, rising quickly through the ranks. He worked as an independent contractor for Warner Brothers, McDonnell Douglas, Bekins Moving and Storage, and Sterling Computers among others. In 1979, Roberta gave birth to their second son, Chris, while enjoying her life as a homemaker. While her husband expanded his computing skills through freelance projects as a programming consultant, Roberta had little interest or experience in the computer industry and was not a programmer. She did not feel comfortable with computers and didn't consider herself a gamer. Her interests revolved around fairy tales, magic, fantasy, telling and writing stories, reading books, and watching horror movies.

In 1979, Kenneth started working on an income tax program on an IBM mainframe as a consultant for a computer company. While working on the tax program on the IBM from home via a teletype machine, by accident he found another program labeled "Adventure." It turned out to be a game called Colossal Cave Adventure (also known ADVENT), a text-only game generally considered the first computer adventure game. Will Crowther (b. 1936) a programmer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), originally developed the Colossal Cave game in 1976 on the DEC PDP-10 mainframe. In 1977, Don Woods (b. 1954), a programmer at Stanford, enhanced the game.

Kenneth showed Colossal Cave to Roberta and she began playing it on the teletype in their home. She was hooked and could not stop playing the game. She later recalled:

"I just couldn't stop. It was compulsive. I started playing it and kept playing. I had a baby at the time, Chris was eight months old; I totally ignored him. I didn't want to be bothered. I didn't want to stop and make dinner" (Levy, 238).

After a month of playing, she wanted to find more games to indulge in. For Christmas in 1979, Roberta and Kenneth decided to get a \$2,000 Apple II computer as a gift for each other. With it they purchased 64 KB of memory, a floppy disk drive that held almost 85 KB of data, and a 12-inch monitor. In November 1979, Roberta bought Kenneth dinner at the Plank House, a local restaurant, and described an idea for a new computer game about a haunted house, with pictures

showing every room. As she described the game with increased excitement, her husband paid attention to how the characters were being depicted.

The Early Days -- On-Line Systems

In 1980, Roberta Williams wrote out a narrative, in longhand, of her design for an adventure game with both text and graphics. Kenneth supplied the technical programming work using their Apple II home computer. After three weeks and lots of anticipation, the first graphic adventure game ever created surfaced -- initially titled Hi-Res Adventure but soon to be known as Mystery House. Combining text and graphics together in a computer adventure game for the first time, Mystery House took the form of a detective story. It sets you in an old Victorian house in which your friends are killed off one-by-one -- you have to determine who the murderer is before becoming the next victim. According to video-game historian Laine Nooney, Williams was inspired by English mystery writer Agatha Christie's novel *And Then There Were None* and the murder-mystery board game Clue. Nooney also noted her unique approach to computer-game design:

"Many designers began with what they could code; Roberta Williams began by mapping out the space within which she would string up the components of a narrative" ("Let's Begin Again ...," 85).

Mystery House had no animation, no sound, and no color; the graphics consisted of black and white lines. Ziploc bags were used to hold copies of the game on 5.25-inch floppy disks. The Williamses distributed copies of the game to software companies in the Los Angeles area. They took the game to Programma International, the largest distributor of Apple software in the world at the time. Programma offered them 25 percent royalties. They sent a sample of the game to Apple Computers and waited for a month with no response. (Apple eventually responded a year later after Kenneth contacted them and he decided not to move forward with the company.) After a few more disappointments with other companies, the Williamses turned down the offer from Programma and decided to sell their product independently.

They paid \$200 to place an ad for Mystery House, priced at \$24.95, in the computer magazine *MICRO -- The 6502 Journal* and hoped for the best. Williams wrote the ad herself to save on costs. It directed customers to make checks out to "On-Line Systems," with orders by check or credit card to be sent to the couple's home address (772 No. Holbrook, Simi, CA, 93065). Their home phone number was provided for inquiries. Mystery House was released on May 5, 1980, and the ad appeared in the May issue of *MICRO*. Much to their surprise, the graphical adventure game was a colossal hit. People loved the game and wanted more. By the end of the month, they had taken in an unbelievable \$11,000. Mystery House jump-started Roberta Williams's career and marked the birth of the family business, initially called On-Line Systems. Steve Levy writes:

"Ken and Roberta made eleven thousand dollars that May. In June, they made twenty thousand dollars. July was thirty thousand. Their Simi Valley house was becoming a money machine" (Levy, 241).

Kenneth continued working full-time at his programming job and Roberta cared for the house and their children while packaging and sending game orders by UPS. But it did not take long to figure out the business needed full-time attention. Calls were coming in day and night to their home from all over the country.

Mystery House was the first game in what would become a series of six adventures called Hi-Res Adventures published between 1980 and 1983. Four months after Mystery House was released, Williams finished her second Hi-Res Adventure game, Wizard and the Princess, inspired by the novels of J. R. R. Tolkien. The game allowed you to battle against a wizard to save the life of a princess and included color graphics. It was released in September 1980, selling more than 60,000 copies at a cost of \$32.95 and becoming a bigger hit than Mystery House.

The success of the games enabled Roberta and Kenneth to move near Roberta's parents, who had an apple orchard not far from Yosemite National Park, above Oakhurst, California, a quiet rural place near the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The couple decided it would be a nice place to live and, in October 1980, moved their family to the first house they looked at. It was a 2,000-square-foot, two-story, three-bedroom rustic cabin on 5.5 acres, located at 36575 Mudge Ranch Road in the town of Coarsegold.

The Williamses began hiring staff to assist with their company's massive load of calls and sales. Roberta's father John Heuer became the company's California distributor and Kenneth's younger brother John Williams joined as advertising manager. *Softalk*, a magazine focused exclusively on Apple II computers, published its first issue in September 1980. In the October 1980 issue, Mystery House was listed in the magazine's "Softalk Presents the Bestsellers -- The Top Thirty" section.

With the unexpected success continuing to move at a very fast pace, the Williamses needed to hire still more staff and find office space outside their home. On December 1, 1980, they opened their first official headquarters in Oakhurst, seven miles up Route 41 from Coarsegold. The office was on the second floor of a dark-brown wood-frame structure whose ground floor housed a stationery store and a print shop.

As if she was not already busy, in two weeks Williams wrote and designed a Hi-Res Adventure titled Mission: Asteroid. A shorter science-fiction game for beginners and young players, it was based on *Lucifer's Hammer*, a post-apocalypse science fiction novel by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle. On-Line Systems released Mission: Asteroid at a cost of \$19.95. In the February 1981 issue of *Softalk*, the Williamses, their adventure games, and their new company were featured in an article, while both Mystery House and Wizard and the Princess were again listed in magazine's Top Thirty section. In 10 short months, On-Line Systems had become a powerful fast-moving establishment.

The next Hi-Res Adventure game, Time Zone, was one of the most ambitious of all the computer games written and designed by Roberta Williams. She spent more than six months cultivating her ideas and almost an entire year to complete the design. The game was one of the biggest projects On-Line Systems and Williams had undertaken. It required restructuring of their

adventure programming procedures. The game became the largest and most complex written to that point. Released in 1982, it sold for \$99.95 and came on 12 disks.

The year 1982 was a bittersweet. The developer who owned the office building where the On-Line Systems was headquartered offered to build a new facility in Oakhurst as the company's headquarters. The new headquarters, located at 48677 Victoria Lane, would open in 1983. At this time the company name was changed from On-Line Systems to Sierra On-Line to reflect its location near the Sierra foothills.

In mid-1982, the world-famous James Maury Henson (1936-1990), creator of the Muppets, reached out to Roberta Williams. Jim Henson was a huge fan of On-Line System's games. Petter Holmberg's biography of Williams says:

"One day Roberta Williams was contacted by Jim Henson ... He had played Sierra's games and wanted to know if Roberta was interested in writing an adventure game version of his upcoming movie *The Dark Crystal*. Roberta naturally accepted and started working on the game. Since the movie had still not been released, Roberta was sent a script of it to work on" (Holmberg).

But amid all this excitement, on September 3, 1982, Roberta and Kenneth's house on Mudge Ranch Road burned down while they were at a music festival hosted by Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak. No one was hurt and their sons were safe with the babysitter, but Roberta had to resume designing adventure games from the office headquarters. Henson invited Roberta Williams to attend the movie premiere on December 14, 1982, in Los Angeles and meet the director in person. Roberta finished her Hi-Res Adventure text-based game *The Dark Crystal* (also known as *Gelfling Adventure*) and released it in 1983.

The Birth of King's Quest -- IBM's Top-Secret Game

In late 1982, International Business Machines (IBM) had begun working on a new computer designed for the home that would have graphic and sound capabilities then unheard-of in the industry. Its code name was Peanut but it would later be known as Personal Computer Junior (PCjr).

In 1983, IBM reached out to On-Line Systems in search of a game for its new computer. The computer company was looking for a game that would demonstrate how great the computer was and show off its new features. Williams recalled in a 1984 interview:

"IBM came to me a long time ago and asked me to write an adventure-type game for the forthcoming PCjr. They said it couldn't be like any other adventure game that had been done and it had to be re-playable. And my type of game, usually, when you solve it once, that's it. There's no reason to play it again ... *Ultima* or *Wizardry* you can replay because you have a character generator and you can make different things happen. But that's not my style. In effect, IBM was asking me to go against my style. And I couldn't think of any way to make my kind of game replayable without having a character generator. I thought a long time about this" (*Roberta Williams Anthology*, 36-37).

IBM was willing to fund the project, market the game, and pay royalties, but the top-secret project had to break new ground, identify new technologies, and be revolutionary. The Williamses accepted IBM's offer and knew they could perform a miracle with IBM's new machine, which had a powerful 16-bit processor and an unheard of 256 KB of memory. The company also provided prototype computers for Sierra On-Line to use. Roberta Williams worked with a team of top designers and developers to create a fairy-tale element with no less than 16 solid-color graphics. To do animation, it took 128 KB of memory. The game played music in the background, and the player controlled the main character on the screen.

The Adventure Game Interpreter (AGI) was completed as a game engine encompassing all the new requirements for the PCjr platform. In July 1983, the fantasy fairy-tale adventure game called King's Quest I was released using the AGI. The animation, filled with knights, treasures, and puzzles, allowed gamers to play from a 3rd-person perspective controlling and moving a character inside a physical world. The success of the game brought notoriety to Williams, making her one of the best-known game designers in the industry.

Between 1984 and 1998, the game grew into a series with the addition of King's Quest II to VIII, redefining the concept of adventure gaming. In King's Quest IV, Williams introduced the first major game with a recognizable female heroine, a significant step forward.

Growing Rapidly

By 1983, Sierra On-Line had sales of \$10 million, making it one of the largest independent publishers of home-computer software. The following June, Sierra On-Line joined forces with Disney to develop a series of educational games for ages seven and up. By December 1984, three educational games were completed. Williams wrote and designed two of the games. The first, titled Mickey's Space Adventure, released in 1984. Designed to teach children about the solar system, Mickey's Space Adventure was the first computer game to feature the Disney characters Mickey Mouse and Pluto.

This was also the first time that Roberta found herself working on the design of a game without collaborating with her husband. Sierra needed Kenneth's full attention to manage day-to-day operations of the company. Sierra On-Line employee Al Lowe (b. 1946), a programmer and video-game designer, partnered with Roberta Williams on the design for Mickey's Space Adventure. On July 26, 1985, Disney released the movie *Black Cauldron*. Lowe would team up with her again to design a game based on the movie, which came out in 1986.

Williams realized there should be a fantasy adventure game containing popular classic nursery rhymes. She designed Mixed-Up Mother Goose, an educational game for very young children. The picture of Mother Goose on the original game box is Williams herself with two children (not her own), reading a book of nursery rhymes. The game was released in 1987.

Sierra continued to grow at rapid speed and success throughout the second half of the 1980s. With each game Roberta designed her vision expanded, increasing in complexity, which meant Kenneth had to think quickly, diversify and broaden the scope of the products beyond Apple, and increase staffing. In 1989, Sierra On-Line went public and traded on NASDAQ.

Move to Bellevue

Sierra had grown enormously since its first years. The time had come to make a decision to move to a major city in order to recruit highly skilled workers and lead the company into the future. In 1993 the Williamses decided to move Sierra On-Line's corporate headquarters from rural Oakhurst to the Seattle area, which had become known as a center of the fast-growing high-technology field, with a "network of financial and legal companies" serving the industry ("Software Company to Move Here"). They chose a location at 3380 146th Pl SE in **Bellevue**, on King County's Eastside across Lake Washington from Seattle, close to such tech giants as **Microsoft** and Nintendo of America, both headquartered in nearby Redmond. The move began in August 1993 and was completed in 1994. Roberta and Kenneth found a home on Mercer Island, not far from the new headquarters, and Roberta worked there on the next game in the King's Quest series.

The move to King County's tech hub proved highly successful. By the fall of 1994, Sierra had 540 employees and \$50 million in sales and was well on its way to tremendous growth. As Kenneth Williams said years later, "After the company moved in 1993, our revenue exploded ... [it] tripled or more between 1993 and 1996" ("Ken Williams").

Soon after the move, inspired by the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King, Roberta Williams designed the adult horror game Phantasmagoria by writing a 550-page script. More than 200 people were involved in the making of the game, which took more than two years to develop. As the time and effort involved grew, so did the budget, increasing from an original \$800,000 to \$4.5 million. Game features included violence and graphic gore. On August 24, 1995, the live-action adult horror video game was released on 7 CDs, at a cost of \$69.95 that raised some eyebrows. Never before in Sierra's history had a game jumped to No. 1 on the charts so quickly or been so controversial. An instant hit, the game brought in more than \$12 million in sales, but controversy surrounded it because of the violent and sexual content. Despite the outcry, the game won numerous awards, honors, and recognitions.

On February 20, 1996, Sierra On-Line announced the company was going to be acquired by CUC International of Stamford, Connecticut, with the sales price initially given as more than \$700 million. The amount had increased to a reported \$1.5 billion by the time the acquisition was completed on July 26, 1996. Kenneth Williams later said, "As CEO, I had a 'fiscal duty' to shareholders to take the deal" ("Ken Williams"). Kenneth and Roberta stepped down as officers of Sierra, staying away from the public eye and rarely giving interviews. Roberta Williams continued to develop some games with Sierra, including King's Quest VIII, which was released in 1998 with 3-D animation. Williams retired from Sierra in 1999.

Legacy

Roberta Williams designed more than 20 memorable games, winning numerous awards and receiving several honors as one of the few female game developers in an industry dominated by men. By simply sitting at the rickety table in her kitchen creating her first game, Mystery House, in 1980, she went on to become co-owner of a company worth more than \$700 million in 16 short years. In an interview, Williams gave her view of the field in which she made her mark:

"My definition of an adventure game is really an interactive story set with puzzles and obstacles to solve and worlds to explore. I believe that the 'true' adventure game genre will never die any more than any type of storytelling would ever die" (Jong).

Fondly known as the Mother and Queen of Graphic Adventure, Williams took her love of storytelling and created with her husband outstanding, complicated portfolios of games that pushed programming capabilities to a level of success that had not been achieved before. She was not a programmer but impacted adventure games by introducing graphics, color, and 3-D animation, breaking new ground during the 1980s and 1990s.