GAMEMAKERS

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Roberta Williams, time traveling adventuress

Sierra On-Line grew from a small ad for a game called Mystery House *placed in* Micro *magazine in 1980. The creators of this game were Ken and Roberta Williams. That was her first venture into the world of adventure games. Since then, she has written and published five other graphics adventures. And the oddest thing about this is: Roberta Williams is not even a computer programmer.*

Interview by Phil Wiswell

EF: Your love of literature is the reason you got into adventure games, but exactly how did it start?

RW: My husband was working as a computer programmer in Los Angeles, and he had a terminal that you could hook into a big IBM in downtown L.A. by using the telephone lines. He would bring it home to do his work, and on that IBM system there were some games. One of them was called *Colossal Caves*, by Crowther and Woods, and it's now known as *Adventure*. They designed the game at Stamford in 1976. Anyway, I played it and immediately got addicted to this type of activity because I'd always been a reader. But to me this was even better because you actually felt like you were part of the story, and that you had some control over what would happen to you. When you discovered a new area in a strange land, you would feel like you were there and were really discovering it on your own. You get all sorts of emotions going that you just don't feel when you read.

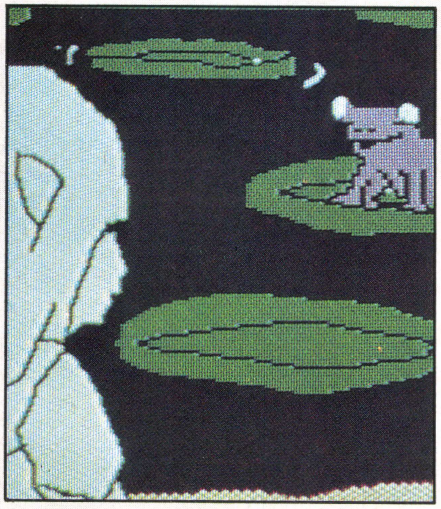
When I finally finished *Adventure* I wanted more, but nobody was writing adventures at the time except Scott Adams. So when we bought our Apple I got some Scott Adams games, and I liked them, too, but I didn't think they were as good as the original *Adventure*. I felt there weren't very many good adventures on the market, and that there wasn't much to choose from outside Scott Adams. And I believed that I couldn't be the only person who would like this kind of game, so I thought I would help out by starting work on my own game!

EF: That was MYSTERY HOUSE. Did you write it first as a text adventure and add graphics later?



RW: No, it was never done as a text adventure. *Mystery House* was done as a high-res game. In its infant form it was designed as "an adventure." There was really no thought about exactly what it was going to be. The scenario was designed. But then we decided to put in pictures and changed the design to a graphic adventure.

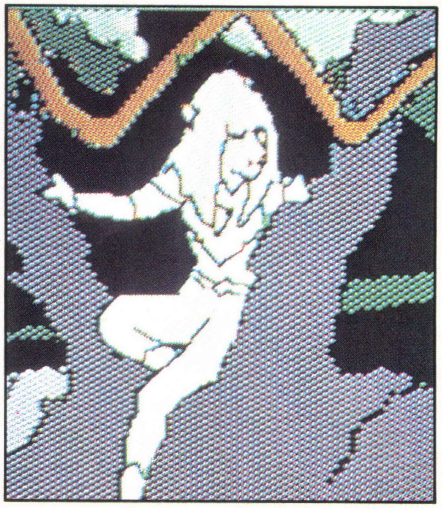
EF: Did you think it would capture a wider audience with pictures than without?





RW: We thought it would be new and exciting. When I was playing *Adventure* and the early Scott Adams games, I thought it would be nice to see a picture on the screen and not just the brief written description. I don't know why I thought that. I just did. But I didn't realize how limited computer graphics were. I found out when we actually started trying to put the pictures up on screen—that was even before a graphics tablet was available and we had to use this odd thing called a VersaWriter which was very hard to work with. When I look at the graphics on *Mystery House* now, I get embarrassed. But at that time it was quite an accomplishment because there was no way to draw those kinds of pictures on a home computer.

EF: Graphics took a big step forward in your next adventure, THE WIZARD AND THE PRINCESS. Why?





RW: Well, by that time we had gotten a graphics tablet which made things a lot easier. Then we discovered how to add color, and for a good year and a half or maybe two years we had a margin on graphic adventures because nobody else knew how to put that many color pictures, 100 or more, on a disk. At that time, the most anyone could fit was maybe eight or ten. But my husband figured out a way to do it.

EF: How did your adventures progress from THE WIZARD AND THE PRINCESS in terms of what changed?

RW: The next one, *Mission Asteroid*, wasn't part of the progression. Most people have never heard of it because it didn't get much press. It's a beginner's adventure game and I just whipped that one out in a couple of weeks because we wanted it on the market by Christmas. *Mission Asteroid* is pretty easy to play. The big progression came with *Time Zone* which utilizes 12 disk sides.

EF: What prompted that epic?

RW: I aimed it at an audience that I assumed was like me. When I play adventure games I don't want them to end. I was always disappointed to come the end if the game was good. I always wanted them to continue so I could discover even more new places. To me, that was the excitement—to find a whole new region of the game where I had never been, still waiting to be discovered and explored. And when I saw how small the games actually were, I was disappointed. So I thought, well, I'll make a really big one that will go on for a long, long time. And I did. I really set out purposely to make a very big adventure game. It's similar to the circumstances that prompted me to do *Mystery House*—my thought was that I couldn't possibly be the only player who felt that way about the types of games I liked.

To get back to what you asked before... the evolution from *The Wizard and the Princess* to *Time Zone* was obviously the increase in size and the intricacies of the puzzles: *Time Zone* is a very hard game. From that to *The Dark Crystal* I would say the graphics got a little better and my vocabulary style changed—my description of what was going on around the player was more detailed. I was able

From Roberta's first game, MYSTERY HOUSE, to DARK CRYSTAL, (above left) the graphics and vocabulary both improved.

to use more adjectives.

EF: Where will the progression go from here?

RW: My new game is a *big* change! It's going to be on the PCjr.

EF: Why the PCjr?

RW: 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 replayable. And *my* type of game, usually, when you solve it once, that's it. There's no reason to play it again.

EF: That's true of most adventure games, isn't it?

RW: Yes, except the fantasy/role playing games. *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. I'd always wanted to have an animated adventure game, but the game I foresaw really couldn't be done on a computer that existed up to that point in time. Then I found out what the PCjr was capable of. I was really happy when I found out that this comptuer could do things other computers could not do. I could finally have my animated adventure game.

EF: What's so special about the PCjr?

RW: It has 16 solid colors. It's hard to do animation with artifacted colors, but with solid colors things are much easier. Also, it has more memory—128K—and it takes a lot of memory to do animation. My game will be available on the PCjr only until other computers come up to the game's requirements.

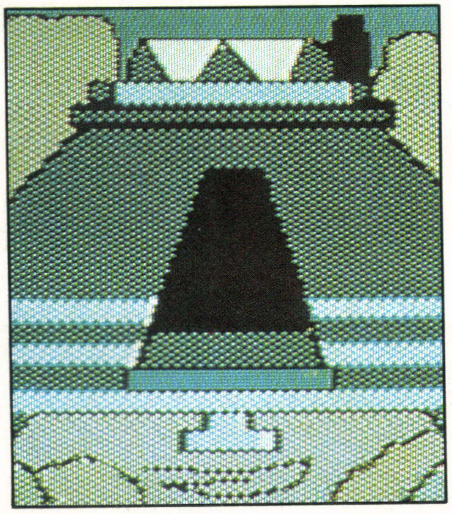
To get back to my original thought, I had to make it replayable. The only way I could think of to do this without using a character generator was to make it so the problems could be solved in more than one way with different outcomes. In point of fact, it's not *totally* replayable but you can play it several times before you see everything, and then you've got to throw it away!

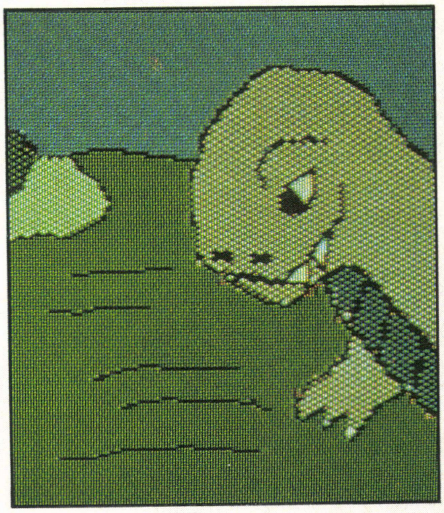
EF: How does the game work?

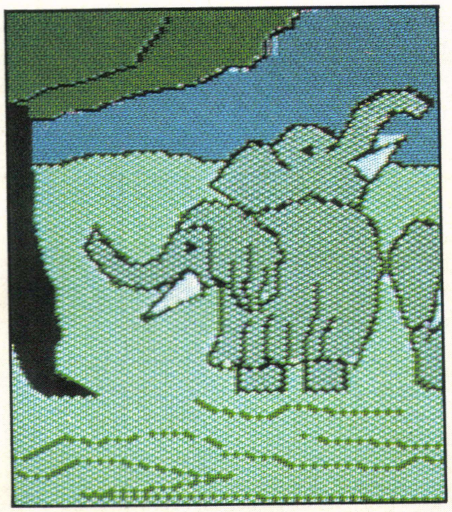
RW: Like the original *Adventure*, you get a score. Certain objects are worth a certain number of points and if you do certain things you can increase your score. If you don't do certain things your score might decrease. If you solve puzzles the more obvious way, you get fewer points than if you solve them the more difficult way. Different things can happen; you can see different things depending on what you do. And this game is in real time. In fact, there are characters roaming around in this game that can appear and get you at any time. Essentially it still has my style; you are still you—you don't generate a character—and you still have to use your wits and logic to solve the puzzles. Plus the story lines still look like my kind of story lines. Yet, the new game has a lot of new qualities. It has animation. Your character walks around and you control him with a joystick, not the keyboard. He can run and walk and swim and jump and stoop...

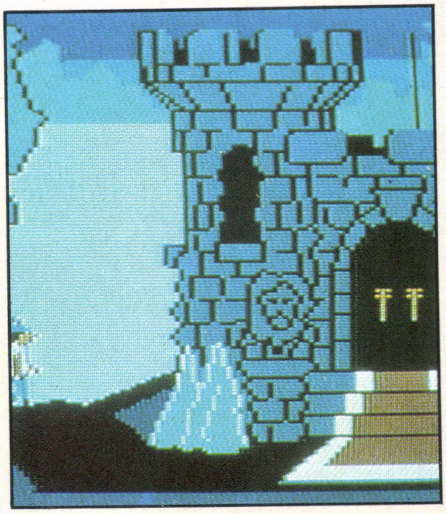
EF: And is all this done with graphics as beautiful as those from THE DARK CRYSTAL?

RW: Better. The graphics are great. Your character is full color and the game has sound going most of the time. You hear little birds singing and doors creaking open and other things like that. And it has three dimensions. You can walk behind objects, in front of them, or bump into them. □









Bottom right, a sneak look at Roberta's newest adventure game for the PCjr. The other three shots are from TIME ZONE.