Don Kennedy

PCjr PROFILE:



The Treasures of Sierra On-Line

It sounds just like another farfetched video game. The adventure has reached a critical point. You have already amassed some treasures, but in your search for the great fortune, you are suddenly confronted with a big blue giant and his new baby. What do you do if you're to survive? Do you fight? Do you run away? Come on, you're an adventurer! Be creative and daring! "Play ball with the giant and its baby," is your response, and you are rewarded for your initiative.

Consider this: What if that big blue giant is IBM, its new baby is the PCjr, and you are a software developer named Sierra On-Line? Playing ball with the blue giant is no game, nor is it a fantasy adventure. It is, instead, the opportunity to make it big in what figures to be the fastest growing market in the computer field.

For Ken and Roberta Williams, co-founders and owners of Sierra On-Line, the decision to develop software for IBM's newest pride and joy has been more than a little similar to the high resolution adventure games the company is famous for. The decision to develop such cartridge software as the *HomeWord* word processing program and the games *Crossfire* and *Mine Shaft* was made with grand hopes that this would position Sierra as a leader in PCjr software. It was also made with the full knowledge that it was a tremendous gamble on the company's part.

PROFILE:



"Being hooked up with IBM is a nice thing," Ken Williams says, smiling slightly at an obvious understatement.

Taking a Chance The gamble, says Ken Williams, was that Sierra had to spend about $1 million of its own money to develop the Junior software. According to Ken, Sierra's contract with IBM included little up-front money, so they had to use a "big chunk of the company's resources." Williams says, "We went so far in the hole for development, it's incredible." Nonetheless, he also says he is confident his Coarsegold, California, company made the right moves.

"Being hooked up with IBM is a nice thing," he says, smiling slightly at what he apparently considers an obvious understatement. "Being tied into that machine as heavily as being its official word processor had to be a good thing."

However, it was hardly a sure thing that *HomeWord* would become the Junior's official word processing program. Williams tells of being called to IBM's facilities in June, 1982, to discuss the development of software games for the PCjr. Sierra had established itself as a prominent developer of games, and its high resolution adventure, *Adventure in Serenia*, had evidently caught the attention of some folks at IBM.

"They called and said they wanted games," Ken says, and goes on to recount how, during that meeting, IBM officials mentioned they were meeting later that day with another software developer to discuss word processing programs.

The *HomeWord* Sell Ken says he told them he was developing a word processor which he felt would have a lot of appeal for a machine like the PCjr. Sensing disinterest on the part of the Big Blue executives, Williams decided not only to play ball, but to throw them a high, fast pitch.

"I said, 'I'll bring a demo of it, and if I can blow you guys away, let's talk about it'," he recalls. And a meeting was scheduled for two weeks later. Williams says he and Jeff Stephenson, a programmer at Sierra, developed *HomeWord* for Junior while sitting in an airport five hours prior to that meeting. It's now evident they did indeed "blow those guys away," for that airport-born word processing program with its icons and easy-to-follow directions became the "official" word processing program presented to the world when IBM unveiled the Junior last fall.

Future Wares Not only do the Williams and Sierra stand to benefit by the three cartridge programs IBM is selling under its own name, but they have also made plans to market additional software for the Junior under their company's name. One of the new products, *Oil's Well*, is a cartridge game that Williams feels has the potential to become a big hit. On disk, Sierra also plans to offer *Jawbreaker, Mr. Cool, Ultima II, Frogger,* and another version of *Crossfire*.

Ultima II is an adventure game that has proven to be a best-seller in its versions for other machines. *Frogger*, of course, is a home version of the immensely popular arcade game. *Crossfire* will possibly be renamed for the enhanced version, but Williams says it will be a superior version of the game now available on cartridge, with "terrific music" and superior graphics. *Jawbreaker* and *Mr. Cool* are new arcade-style games.

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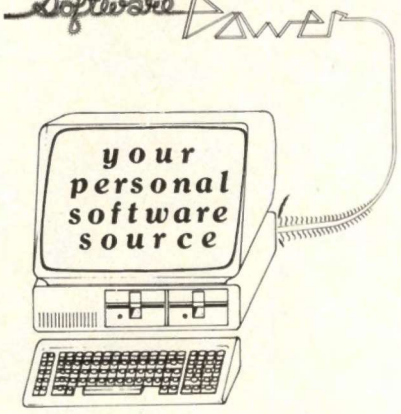

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PROFILE:



Beyond a doubt, it is Sierra's high resolution adventure games that gave the company its momentum in the early days.

Growing with Games These new offerings are evidence of terrific growth at a company that didn't even exist four years ago. Ken, 29, and Roberta, 30, had been working for other people until mid-1980. She had been a computer operator for the City of Los Angeles, and he had been a programmer for some of the numerous firms which have grown up in recent years in the Silicon Valley.

Roberta's first step into video game production came when she wrote *Mystery House*, a murder mystery game set in a spooky Victorian mansion. The game caught on with those in the vanguard of the personal computer revolution. Soon after, Ken quit his job to start Sierra On-Line with Roberta. In January, 1981, they hired their first employee. Today, Sierra employs 110 people.

Beyond a doubt, it is Sierra's high-resolution adventure games that gave the company its momentum in the early days. With Roberta doing the writing, Ken programmed the interactive games to include bright, splashy graphics to illustrate her text. Roberta says she has no professional experience as a writer, but her interests and abilities gelled with the computer adventure game. "I like mysteries, fairy tales, science fiction, and I love history," she says. "I had only played one adventure game before, but when I did, I said, 'I've been waiting for this all my life.' Something clicked."

Something certainly did click, and with Ken's programming giving shape and substance to her imaginative creations, Sierra On-Line grew to become a leader in software for the personal and home computer. It has become the "largest independent publisher of home computer software," according to its press releases, and that fact would be hard to dispute.

Most of Sierra's software has been devoted to entertainment. Their adventure games like *Ulysses* and *Time Zone* are listed in the product catalog alongside such action games as *Lunar Leeper*, *Mouseattack*, and *Cannonball Blitz*. To date only a few Sierra products have been designed for business or home management use, but Ken says that will all be changing as the company shifts directions in the future.

New Directions "Last year, 70 percent of our products were games," he says. However, Sierra is now planning greater diversity with its new offerings. In 1984 it is aiming at an equal three-way split between entertainment, educational and home productivity programs, Williams says. As an enhancement to *HomeWord*, Sierra plans to introduce *HomeWord Speller*, *HomeWord Filer*, and *HomeWord Finance*, which will all be integrated with the word processing system. Early next year, they plan to publish *HomeWord Tax*.

Sierra's educational line will make it a Mickey Mouse operation, but this is no insult. In fact, it is a source of great pride for the Williams. Beginning this summer, the company will offer educational software that will feature the cartoon characters from the Disney family. Mickey and Goofy and Donald Duck will soon be leading youngsters through math and reading games, and, not incidentally, luring parents to buy the software from the cover of the program packaging.

Ken enthusiastically discusses the power of the Disney characters as sales vehicles, claiming that Mickey Mouse is the most recognized trademark in the world. Sensing that the Disney presence on software packaging would translate into increased sales, Sierra On-Line signed a licensing agreement with the movie and amusement park monolith.

"I think Spinnaker has an awfully good name and reputation," Ken says, referring to the leading producer of home educational

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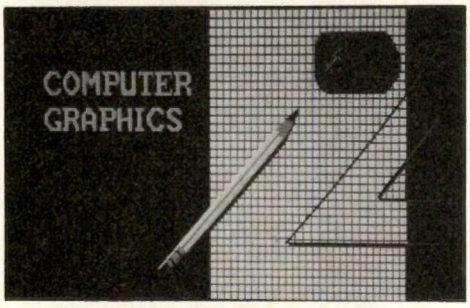

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PROFILE:



"I had only played one adventure game before, but when I did, I said, 'I've been waiting for this all my life.' Something clicked."

software. "I want to be number one in educational products, and I don't want to spend $5 million in advertising. Most people have heard of Mickey Mouse." And most people, he obviously feels, will buy educational software bearing the smiling face of that most famous rodent.

Banking on the readily recognized characters from cartoons and movies is nothing new to Sierra. Products already released employ the characters from Johnny Hart's *BC* comic strip as well as Jim Henson's creatures from *The Dark Crystal* movie.

Action's Out The so-called home computer revolution obviously influences the Williams' decisions about what sorts of software to develop and publish. As machines like the PCjr move into the home, owners are going to be searching for programming with broader, more practical applications than merely zapping aliens from here to kingdom come. "Hard-core action, and action for action's sake, is dead," Williams says. He feels that the *Space Invaders* type of action game is on its way toward extinction, and the games that will be played in the future will be primarily simulations, strategy games and adventures. It goes without saying that Sierra On-Line is concentrating on these types of games which, after all, have been its true stock in trade all along.

It was adventure games that started Sierra on its heady climb to success. "They sort of pushed us out ahead," is how Roberta describes it.

It was the Junior that has presented the company with its greatest challenges. The cost of developing software for IBM "about took us under," Ken says. But the PCjr is here, and sales of Sierra's programs figure to soar as the public buys IBM's newest baby.

Speaking about reaction to his programs, Ken says, "I would much rather be a commercial and critical success than just a critical success." It is easy to see that the Williams not only write adventures, but are also possessed of the same spirit that prompts adventurers to take chances and amass treasures. With the PCjr, they just may have written their most successful adventure yet. □