



PHOTOGRAPH BY JANET BELLER

A Young Girl's Fantasy Turns to Fortune

AS A CHILD, ROBERTA WILLIAMS WAS SCOLDED FOR CREATING STORIES. NOW HER IMAGINATION PAYS OFF IN COMPUTER ADVENTURES.

BY
JAMES DELSON

"WHAT'S FUNNY ABOUT MY SUCCESS IS THAT I USED TO GET INTO TROUBLE FOR TELLING STORIES. NOW I MAKE A LIVING AT IT."

Many of us dream of designing a hit computer game—just one in our lifetime. Thirty-year-old Roberta Williams has five games to her credit—all written in the past three years. Amazingly, between the time she was 10 and 26, she didn't even play, much less invent, any games.

"My first games career began and ended by age 10 with the playing of Candy Land," the designer told *FAMILY COMPUTING* contributing editor James Delson when they met recently. But Williams has risen like a phoenix out of the ashes of her 16-year hiatus from game playing to become one of the country's leading game designers, creating such adventures as *Time Zone*, *The Dark Crystal*, and *Mystery House*.

Born and raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles, Williams recalls that the high spots of her childhood were those times she would spin tall tales for her friends and relatives about her experiences playing *Candy Land*, the board game that leads children along a trail of gumdrops, lollipops, and other sweets to a gingerbread house. "If you really look at it, *Candy Land* is like an adventure game," says Williams. "You're going through this little fantasyland. When I told my friends and cousins these wild stories about my adventures there, they'd tell their parents, who would then call my parents to get them to stop me from making up such lies."

As Williams reached puberty, her interest in storytelling gave way to miniskirts and boy

chasing. She soon married, had two children, and worked briefly in various computer-related jobs. Her imagination took a rest for more than a decade, to be aroused when, at age 26, she discovered computer games. In the next three years she designed five trend-setting computer adventure programs.

Her credits read like a brief history of adventure games, beginning with her first program, *Mystery House*, which broke ground as the first illustrated adventure scenario. *Wizard and the Princess*, the first color graphics adventure game, led to the simpler *Mission Asteroid*. *Time Zone*, which fills six double-sided disks and more than 1,500 screens with 39 interlocking scenarios, is the biggest game ever manufactured, while *The Dark Crystal* was the first "adventurization" of a motion picture into a game. Now she has two new projects: *Family Circus*, based on the popular comic strip, and a new adventure program so top secret that she can't even disclose its title, although she will discuss some of its innovative elements. Williams and her husband, Ken, continue to revolutionize the field with programs from Sierra On-Line, the California-based software company they founded in 1980. "What's funny about my success now [is] I used to get into trouble for telling stories," Williams said. "Now I make a living at it."

FC: Why are adventure games so appealing to you?

Williams: Most computer games offer a way of

JAMES DELSON, the games critic for *FAMILY COMPUTING*, has written for *Psychology Today* and *Film Comment*, and is currently working on his eleventh screenplay.

escaping life, but adventures go further. They offer me the chance to tell stories.

FC: How old are kids who play adventure games?

Williams: Most kids from about nine and up enjoy them, but the puzzles require a thought process kids don't develop until they are about 11 or 12. Even my son, who's nine and has lived with adventure games since he was six, can't play alone. By about sixth grade, age level doesn't matter. It's the experience one's had in playing that counts.

FC: Computer games tend to be regarded as male-oriented activities. How can more girls and women get acquainted with them? How can you get someone to play who's simply not interested?

Williams: Well, I was that way until about four years ago. My husband used to bring home a computer terminal for his work. He would access the big IBM mainframe in downtown L.A., and then, when he'd finished his work, he'd play games like *Star Trek* and *Colossal Cave* (now *Adventure*). He kept trying to get me to play, but I didn't want anything to do with it. A lot of women don't understand computers, act bored by them, and are basically intimidated by seeing their husbands slaving over them night and day, so they're just turned off to the whole idea. But finally, like me, many of them kind of wander over when their husbands are playing and within five minutes they're hooked.

FC: Discovering *Adventure* was a turning point in your life?

Williams: It was amazing, because once I started playing it, I realized I'd been waiting my entire life for something like it.

FC: Did you become a fanatic?

Williams: I was up until three or four every night. I wasn't cleaning the house. I wasn't taking care of the kids. I would even go to bed thinking about how I could get past the dragon! When I finally solved it, I tried to find other good adventure games, but they didn't add up to what I thought they should be, so I figured I'd try and write one of my own.

FC: And that's how *Mystery House* came about?

Williams: Yeah, I just sat down and designed it. Then Ken programmed it and we took out an ad in *Micro* magazine to see if it might attract any public interest. We thought we might be able to make a little extra money on the side. We were amazed! It sold like gangbusters and gave us the money to start our own company.

FC: What motivated you to write *Time Zone* on so grand a scale?



Williams: I was always disappointed when adventure games ended. I wanted them to go on forever, the same way you feel about a really good book or movie. So I tried to write an adventure game that would go on for a long time.

FC: What is the playing time for a complete game of *Time Zone*?

Williams: I figure that the average computer game player spends about 10 hours a week at the keyboard. At that rate it would take about six months to finish *Time Zone*. If I had to do it over again I might only make it half the length it is. But I'm glad I did it because not many people can claim to have done anything like it. It's sort of the adventure game's answer to Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. Not that many people are going to try and play it, but when they do, it'll be something they'll remember for a while.

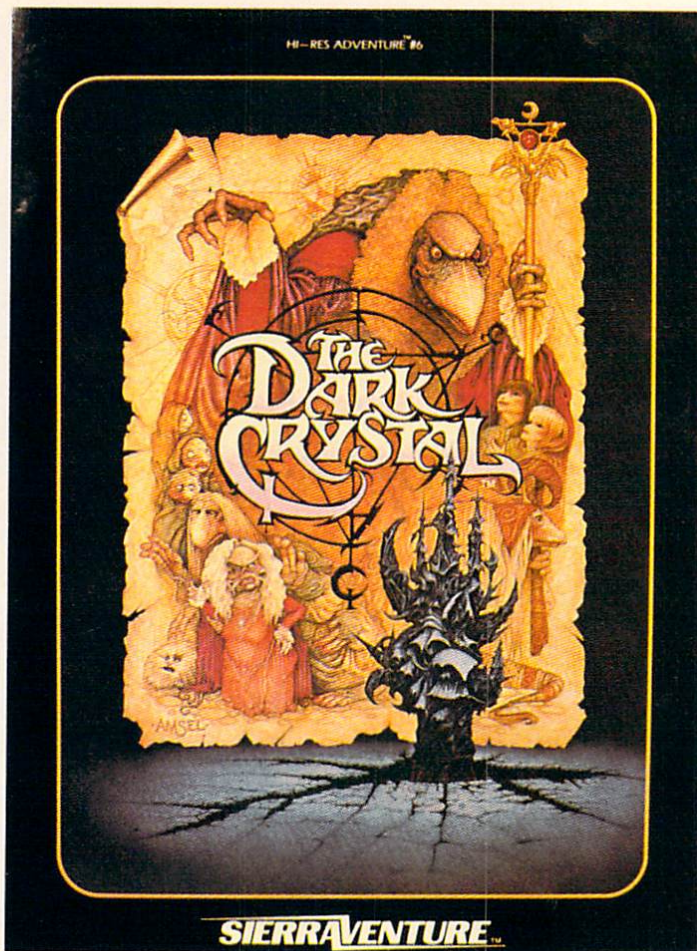
FC: Are adventure games best played by groups or single people?

Williams: It really depends on personal preference. Some people like to shut themselves up in a room and play. They don't want to be bothered. Others wouldn't think of playing without somebody else there. It's almost as if the shared experience were as important as the game.

FC: Do you worry about some people lifting your game ideas for their own programs?

In Time Zone, players travel through space and across seven continents, in eras ranging from 400 million B.C. to 4082 A.D.

"TO EVEN WANT TO PLAY ADVENTURE GAMES YOU'VE GOT TO ENJOY READING AND HAVE SOME SORT OF IMAGINATION."



Williams: Let me start off by saying that I don't know how to program, which has hurt me, but which we have managed to work around by my being able to supervise each game from beginning to end. Anyway, the first thing I do is think up the game's concept. Then I draw the "map" of the game board. It's a very basic map, limited to defining the areas that the player will pass through on the adventure. I just map out where you can go, then decide what the places are that you're going to. Now, what's going to happen to you? Well, as in *Time Zone*, having a witch swoop down on you in the streets of London a hundred years from now is illogical, so that's out. But there'll still be cars, so you can get run over if you cross the street without going with the green light. I create "puzzles"—anyplace you get stuck—and they can be as easy (to solve) as opening doors or as complex as having to make a series of decisions in the proper order.

FC: What does the map look like as you get into more advanced stages of planning?

Williams: A mess. But I can tell by looking at it, without any words or any other material, what's going on. That way I can fix any faults or problems there are before I start writing. I write page after page, room by room, exactly what is supposed to happen. The programmers have to totally understand the game, so I can't leave anything out. It's like writing a book. Everything has to be defined: the pictures as they should appear on the screen, every possible move the player can make, every message, everything the player might want to say in that room, descriptions of each room, everything.

FC: What about room descriptions? Have you abandoned that style in the new game you're working on?

Williams: Yes. That's a big difference. By eliminating the description we had to improve the picture; and that paid off for us. The pictures are better than anything we've ever done. It doesn't say where you are. It just assumes that you can see where you are and what's around you.

FC: Do you ever go back and make changes once the "book" is finished?

Williams: Only if it's absolutely necessary. Because once you make one tiny little change in a game like that ...

FC: You get a ripple effect, where everything it touches has to be changed as well?

Williams: Yeah. I don't like to get into that.

FC: How do you approach the problem of rules complexity in designing your games?

Williams: I decide who the game's for and take it from there. All the games I've done before have been for adults, so the rules were tailored for them. Children have been in the back of my mind, however, with the wish that

Inspired by Jim Henson's animated movie, *The Dark Crystal* explores the battle between the good Gelflings and the evil Skeksis.

"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO PROGRAM, WHICH HAS HURT ME."

Williams: I can't be concerned about what other people do. It's a fact of life in this business that if you do something new or good there will be a number of clones following it onto the market. It happened with *Mystery House* and *Wizard and the Princess*, and probably will happen with all our new games as they come out as well. I just believe that you do what you do, and nobody else can do what you do better. It comes down to technique, crafting the puzzles, and, basically, how interesting the whole game is. That can't be passed on to anyone else. That's in your mind, so I don't worry about it.

FC: You've come so far in such a short period of time. Do you wonder about what lies ahead, or do you have your future mapped out?

Williams: About two years ago things were kind of scary. We thought we'd created this animal we couldn't control. It was almost as if it was growing in spite of us. Now we've been around three and a half years and we're more sensible and practical about things. It's an industry that has so much pressure on you to create and be good and stay one step ahead of everybody else that you don't often have time to reflect any more on what's happened or what's going on. All we think about are everyday pressures.

FC: Can you describe your work habits in creating an adventure?

they could grasp everything. The game I'm designing now is called *Family Circus*, based on the cartoon strip of that name. It's for children 10 to 17, so I have to think of simplicity.

It's really three separate games, each involving one of three kids in the strip: Dolly, Jessie, and Billy. The rules are the same for all three games, but they're on different difficulty levels, depending on the age and skills of the player. For example, with Dolly, the game teaches you how to go through the house, find your things, pick them up, and figure out where they should be put away in the right place.

FC: Is it a fantasy game?

Williams: No, each of the games revolves around the house and the back or the front yard. So if you're Dolly you can: 1) jump on your parents' bed; 2) look under the bed; 3) leave the room; or 4) look out the window. Depending on the number chosen, different things will happen.

FC: Is there a point system?

Williams: No, the payoff is a happy face for the right place and sad faces for the wrong places. If you're Jessie, you have to learn right from wrong, and if you're Billy, it gives you chores to do, and you have to do them correctly with the right items. There's very simple puzzle solving in the game, but it's more or less given to them on a silver platter.

FC: What can you say about your other new game?

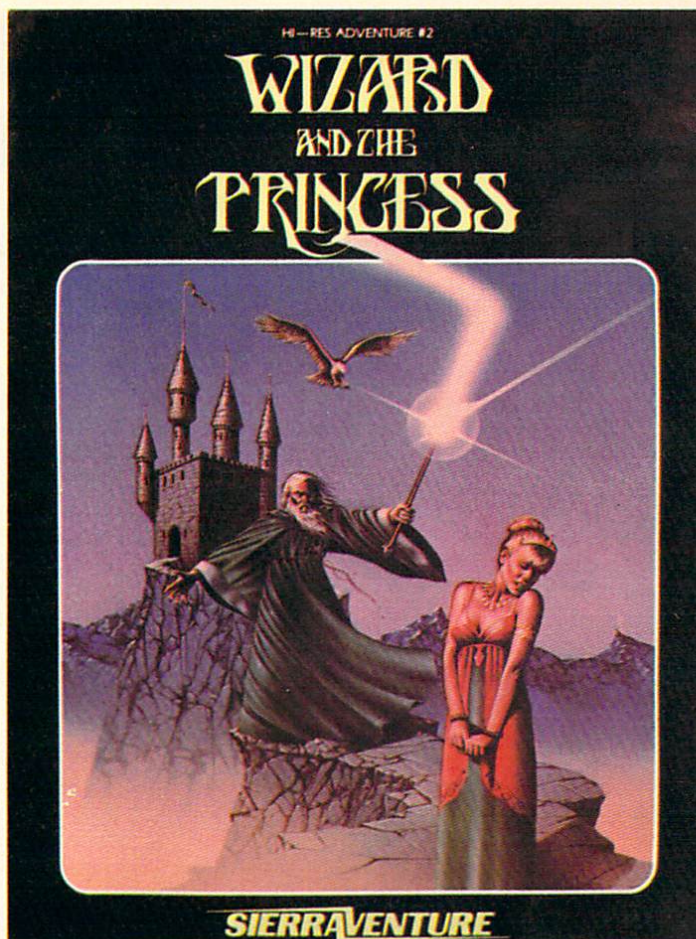
Williams: It's a totally animated program, so far beyond what's available on the market today that there's only one computer capable of handling it at this time, and I'm not permitted to say which one. Your character can duck, walk, climb, jump, swim, run, leap, crawl, stoop, throw things, and shoot a bow. It has 3-D effects, so you can go behind objects or walk in front of things. You still type into it, talk to it, and it talks back. But now there are full sentences, instead of just two words.

FC: When you say fully animated, does that mean if you tell your character to walk, it keeps walking until you tell it to stop?

Williams: Yes. And there are other characters in the game, both bad and good, whom you encounter and have to deal with immediately, because the game's in real time. Everything happens as you see it. So if you happen upon an ogre, you can run away, hide behind a rock, or do something else. But you've got to deal with it instantly, or you're killed. People are going to be killed a lot in this game when they're learning how to play it.

FC: What other characters do you face?

Williams: There are four or five bad guys, each with their own personalities, abilities,



and character traits. The ogre's slow, so you can run away from him. The witch swoops down on her broom and tries to get you, so you have to duck and dodge or hide behind a tree to evade her. If you're chased by a wolf you have to climb a tree, because they can't.

FC: Some of the adventure games I've played are so frustrating that I just want to get up and walk away forever. How do you approach the question of frustration when designing a game?

Williams: That's one of the biggest things to know how to do, and I'm not sure where it comes from. With me, it's intuition. But I'm also committed to the idea of being completely logical. If you just sit and think things out in my games, the answers are always logical. How could you open a door if you didn't have a key? Use a credit card, or a hair pin if you bent it. Try to think of ways of doing things that aren't the normal way, but that still are possible. Things in my games are always there right in front of your nose. People may have a tendency not to look where it's most obvious. They want to make it harder on themselves.

FC: What is the relationship between the game designer and the player?

Williams: They're adversaries. Wits versus wits. I try to thwart the player as much as possible, but without being too bad. Give 'em a little challenge, a little fun, then let 'em win. **FC**

Wizard and the Princess, the first graphic adventure in color, was the only computer game to remain on Softalk's bestseller list for more than a year.

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