

Roberta Williams didn't know what she wanted to do with her life until she designed her first microcomputer adventure game three years ago. Today, she is one of the leading designers of home computer games and part owner—with her husband Kenneth—of a \$20 million business.

"I've always had a big imagination," says Williams, who spent her childhood reading books, but never attended college. It wasn't until she became addicted to an underground home computer game called "Colossal Cave," though, that she put her imagination to work. "I played 'Colossal Cave' till all hours of the night," she explains. "I developed an appetite, and I couldn't get enough." Since there were no other adventure games of the same caliber available for home computers, she made one up. Her creation, called "Mystery House," was a carefully plotted "whodunit" that had something "Colossal Cave" didn't have—graphics. In fact, it was the first home computer game to use graphics. She and her husband, who had programmed the game for the computer, marketed it through a computer magazine, selling \$8,000 worth the first month.

With the profit, they began their own business, Sierra On-Line. Her next game, "Wizard and the Princess," helped revolutionize the microcomputer industry by being one of the first games to be programmed

on a computer disc rather than a cassette, a change that made it possible to program longer games. It also used 21 different colors in its graphics, rather than the usual six.

But her *crème de la crème* so far has been a color graphic journey through time and space, called "Time Zone." Clearly marked as *not* a game for beginners, "Time Zone" is ten times as long as most other games (both sides of six discs) and takes players months to complete. It's similar to other adventure games: players must map their way through the game so they don't get lost; they collect objects that may be of use at some other point—a flashlight, for instance, or a magic ring. But it differs from other games because a time machine enables players to travel back to the Stone Age, where they tour and collect the items they may need in the future, or to China in 50 B.C., or forward in time to A.D. 2082 in North America. In total, there

are more than 1,300 rooms in 35 different land- and time-scapes.

Adventure games like "Time Zone" attract an audience different from that of fast-moving shoot-'em-up arcade games. "Adventure games demand more from you mentally," explains Williams. "They are really a dialogue between yourself and the computer."

But there is something exciting about the continuous motion in arcade games and Williams has plans both to design arcade games and to use "real time" (industry lingo for the continuous action that is programmed into the game) within adventure games. In such a game a player would be feeding instructions into the computer—calling the shots as in an ordinary adventure game—and then, suddenly, hit a section where the computer takes over. A player's ability to respond then determines the

outcome. Such action would increase the excitement of adventure games and possibly attract a larger audience.

Although she wasn't particularly interested in the computer world when she worked as an operator and a programmer, Williams finds that designing adventure games satisfies her desire for creativity. And she likes the fact that whole families often play her games. "One person may actually be operating the computer," she explains, "but when a problem comes up, everyone in the family tries to help." Her company receives hundreds of queries from families who get stuck at some point in the games.

As a mother of two children, the elder of whom loves adventure games, being able to produce a completely different sort of family entertainment is just what Williams wants. "I've never liked to do what others were doing," she says.

—Jane Bosveld

A Wizard of Computer Fantasy

