

Finding Aid to Ken and Roberta Williams' Sierra On-Line Collection, 1979-1999

Summary Information

Title: Ken and Roberta Williams' Sierra On-Line collection

Creator: Ken and Roberta Williams (primary)

ID: 111.4936

Date: 1979-1999 (inclusive); 1989-1995 (bulk)

Extent: 3 linear feet

Language: All materials in this collection are in English, unless otherwise specified.

Abstract: Ken and Roberta Williams' Sierra On-Line collection is a compilation of corporate records, publicity, financial reports, game catalogs, newsletters, magazines, published books, and other materials from Sierra On-Line. Additionally, the materials on loan to The Strong supplement this collection with original script ideas, notes, planning information, sketches, and other game design-related papers.

Repository:

Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong
One Manhattan Square
Rochester, New York 14607
585.263.2700
library@museumofplay.org

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Use: This collection is open to research use by staff of The Strong and by users of its library and archives. Though the donors have not transferred intellectual property rights (including, but not limited to any copyright, trademark, and associated rights therein) to The Strong, they have given permission for The Strong to make copies in all media for museum, educational, and research purposes.

Custodial History: Ken and Roberta Williams' Sierra On-Line collection was donated to The Strong in April 2011 as a gift from Ken and Roberta Williams. The papers were accessioned by The Strong under Activity ID 11068, Object ID 111.4936. The papers were received from Ken and Roberta Williams in two boxes as part of their donation of materials to the International Center for the History of Electronic Games. Additionally, two boxes of these materials are on loan to the International Center for the History of Electronic Games and the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, courtesy of Ken and Roberta Williams (Loan ID IL.153.1).

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Controlled Access Terms

Personal Names

- Williams, Ken, 1954-
- Williams, Roberta, 1953-

Corporate Names

- Sierra On-Line, Inc.

Subjects

- Computer adventure games--Handbooks, manuals, etc.
- Computer adventure games.
- Computer games
- Computer games--Design.
- Game design and development
- King's Quest
- Phantasmagoria (Computer file)
- Sierra On-Line, Inc.

Historical Note

Ken and Roberta Williams, pioneers of the computer gaming industry, founded On-Line Systems in 1979. Their combination of programming and storytelling abilities enabled the couple to productively collaborate on game designs. The Apple II computer, which had more superior graphics display capabilities than its predecessors, made it possible to develop multimedia games. On-Line System's first game, *Mystery House* (1980), is considered one of the first computer games to combine both text and graphics. Roberta Williams continued to write and design fantasy and adventure games, while Ken Williams assumed the role of CEO and company president. After releasing several successful computer games in its first few years, the company expanded with a move to Oakhurst, California and was renamed Sierra On-Line in 1982. Two years later, Sierra On-Line produced *King's Quest: Quest for the Crown* – the first game to feature interactive graphics and animation. Roberta Williams' game ideas translated into large sales numbers and substantial profits for Sierra On-Line, and she continued producing games with increasingly complex puzzles. Additional game designers (such as Al Lowe, Scott Murphy, Mark Crowe, and Corey and Lori Cole) contributed to Sierra On-Line's roaring success in the 1980s.

Sierra On-Line went public in 1989 and traded on the NASDAQ. As profits soared and the offices expanded, Sierra On-Line acquired other game studios (like Dynamix, Inc. and Coktel Vision) which worked separately on product advancement but shared manufacturing and distribution resources. Technologies continued to develop and Sierra On-Line followed, launching an online multi-player gaming service called The Sierra Network. Sierra On-Line also operated telephone tip lines for their products. The 1990s resulted in more titles to the *King's Quest* series, various serial games, and its largest undertaking in *Phantasmagoria* (1995). In 1996, CUC International, a subscription-based consumer services company, offered to buy Sierra On-Line for approximately \$1.5 billion. The deal went through in July 1996, with Ken Williams stepping down as CEO and president of Sierra. As part of CUC, Sierra On-Line almost immediately underwent restructuring and rebranding. Ken and Roberta Williams left the company one year later. After undergoing a prolonged series of corporate transactions and failed structural overhauls, Sierra was rendered defunct in 2008.

Though Sierra On-Line no longer operates, its impact on the gaming industry is well known and highly celebrated. Ken and Roberta Williams saw the potential for growth in the personal

computer industry and jumped on the opportunity to develop entertaining computer games. They pioneered the use of graphics, animation, and interactivity between the player and the game in a time when computers were mainly used for text. Roberta is lauded for paving the way for women in the predominantly-male gaming industry. Sierra On-Line's legacy has significantly influenced modern video games and how consumers play them.

Collection Scope and Content Note

Ken and Roberta Williams' Sierra On-Line collection contains materials from 1979-1999, with the bulk of the materials dated between 1988 and 1995. This collection holds a sampling of Sierra On-Line's corporate records and textual information that supplements the video game and software collection of Sierra On-Line games in the International Center for the History of Electronic Games at The Strong. Materials in this collection include corporate annual reports, press releases, game catalogs, newsletters, gaming magazines, correspondence, photographs, bound materials (such as game strategy and player's guides), and more. Additionally, the materials on loan to The Strong consist of original Sierra On-Line game production books, script ideas, notes, drawings, flow charts, and other game design-related papers.

This collection has been arranged into four series, with two split further into subseries. The materials are housed in four boxes.

System of Arrangement

Series I: Sierra On-Line corporate materials, 1979-1997

Subseries A: Publicity

Subseries B: Financial reports

Subseries C: Game catalogs

Subseries D: Game-related materials

Subseries E: Awards

Subseries F: Photographs

Series II: Sierra On-Line gaming magazines, 1981-1999

Series III: Sierra On-Line books, 1993-1996

Series IV: Loaned materials, 1981-1996

Subseries A: Game production

Subseries B: Memorabilia

Contents List

Series I: Sierra On-Line corporate materials, 1979-1997

Subseries A: Publicity

Scope and Content Note: This subseries contains public relations and marketing materials from Sierra On-Line, including frequent press releases on major events in the company (like acquisitions or appointments) and product launches. There are also several news articles on Ken and Roberta Williams and Sierra On-Line.

Box 1

- Folder 1 Sierra On-Line historical information
- Folder 2 Sierra On-Line marketing material, 1990
- Folder 3 Sierra On-Line press releases, 1988-1991
- Folder 4 Sierra On-Line press releases, 1992-1994
- Folder 5 Sierra On-Line press releases, 1995-1997
- Folder 6 News articles, 1990s

Subseries B: Financial reports

Scope and Content Note: Within this subseries are papers pertaining to the financial aspect of Sierra On-Line as well as information for stockholders. The Annual Reports summarize each year's financial highlights, give overviews of yearly product development, and provide details on corporate management.

Box 1

- Folder 7 Quarterly earnings reports, 1989-1996
- Folder 8 Quarterly reports, 1989-1993
- Folder 9 10-K forms, 1991-1994
- Folder 10 10-Q forms, 1990-1993
- Folder 11 Stockholder information, 1988-1994
- Folder 12 Sierra On-Line Annual Reports, 1989-1993
- Folder 13 Sierra On-Line Annual Reports, 1994-1995

Subseries C: Game catalogs

Scope and Content Note: This subseries holds computer software product catalogs from Sierra On-Line. These informative catalogs explain the history behind many of Sierra's games, share interviews with game creators, and enclose order forms for users. As of 2013, electronic versions of these and other Sierra On-Line catalogs can be found at Ken Williams' Sierra Gamers website.

Box 1

- Folder 14 Sierra On-Line product catalogs, 1988-1996

Subseries D: Game-related materials

Scope and Content Note: This subseries includes several pieces of ephemera relating to some of the most popular game series by Sierra On-Line. For more game-related materials, see also the Sierra On-Line collection housed in the International Center for the History of Electronic Games at The Strong.

Box 1

- Folder 15 *King's Quest IV: The Perils of Rosella* small pullout poster
- Folder 16 *Larry Pops Up* disk
- Folder 17 *Phantasmagoria* public relations information packet, 1995
- Folder 18 *Torin's Passage* mouse pad

Subseries E: Awards

Scope and Content Note: This subseries holds two large wooden plaques given to Sierra On-Line staff members. For more awards, see also the Sierra On-Line collection housed in the International Center for the History of Electronic Games at The Strong.

Box 1

- Folder 19 *Shivers* plaque, November 1995
- Folder 20 *King's Quest V* - Adventure Game of the Year plaque, 1991

Subseries F: Photographs

Scope and Content Note: This subseries includes several distinct categories of photographs: Ken and Roberta Williams, other Sierra On-Line staff members, Sierra On-Line game products, and celebrity headshots. Of note is an autographed photo of actor John Travolta from the film *Staying Alive*, addressed to Roberta Williams.

Box 1

- Folder 21 Photographs

Series II: Sierra On-Line gaming magazines, 1981-1999

Scope and Content Note: This series contains a variety of Sierra On-Line's paper publications. Sierra On-Line's first official magazine, *The On-Line Newsletter*, was published in 1981; only one issue of this newsletter was printed. It was revived as the *Sierra Newsletter* six years later in 1987, running until Spring 1989. Then, the magazine was again expanded and renamed to *Sierra News Magazine* (Autumn 1989-Spring 1991). The Summer 1991 issue was called *Sierra/Dynamix News Magazine*, incorporating recent acquisition Dynamix, Inc. In Fall 1991, the magazine was renamed once more to *InterAction Magazine*, which operated until Sierra ceased product development in Spring 1999. The "Bright Kids Club" newsletter was a short-lived venture promoting Sierra's educational and child-focused games.

Box 1

- Folder 22 *Sierra Newsletter*, Spring 1988-Spring 1989
- Folder 23 *Sierra News Magazine*, Autumn 1989-Summer 1991
- Folder 24 *InterAction Magazine*, Fall 1991-Spring 1992
- Folder 25 *InterAction Magazine*, Summer 1992-Spring 1994
- Folder 26 *InterAction Magazine*, Fall 1994-Holiday 1995

- Folder 27 *InterAction Magazine*, Summer 1996-Fall 1997
- Folder 28 *InterAction Magazine*, Holiday 1997-Spring 1999
- Folder 29 *The On-Line Newsletter*, June 1981
- Folder 30 "Bright Kids Club" newsletter, Fall 1994-Spring 1995

Series III: Sierra On-Line books, 1993-1996

Scope and Content Note: This series holds just a few of the books printed to accompany Sierra On-Line's games. For more Sierra On-Line game strategy guides and player's guides, search the library holdings at the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong.

Box 2

- Folder 1 *The Official Book of King's Quest, Third Edition*, Donald Trivette, 1993
- Folder 2 *King's Quest VII: The Princeless Bride, Authorized Players Guide*, Peter Spear and Jeremy Spear, 1994
- Folder 3 *Phantasmagoria Official Player's Guide*, Russ Ceccola, 1995
- Folder 4 *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh, The Official Strategy Guide*, Rick Barba, 1996
- Folder 5 *King's Quest: Kingdom of Sorrow*, Kenyon Morr, 1996

Series IV: Loaned materials, 1981-1996**Subseries A: Game production**

Scope and Content Note: This subseries contains game production materials that are on loan from Ken and Roberta Williams. These materials include game scripts, sketches, flow charts, vocabularies, drawings, and more. Of interest are the two binders (housed in Box 4) used extensively during the production of Sierra On-Line's well-known *King's Quest VI* and *Phantasmagoria* computer games. The production books have scripts, annotations, illustrations, and other notes on the filming and programming from these games. For more game-related materials, see also the Sierra On-Line collection housed in the International Center for the History of Electronic Games at The Strong.

Box 3

- Folder 1 *The Black Cauldron* script, notes, and drawings (56 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 2 *The Black Cauldron* flow chart and drawing (2 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 3 *The Black Cauldron* overview flow charts (12 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 4 *The Colonel's Bequest* script, notes, and drawings (73 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 5 *King's Quest I* story and design ideas (27 pages) -ON LOAN- [**Note: May actually be for *King's Quest 8*, but original label reads for *KQI*.**]
- Folder 6 *King's Quest II* verbs and nouns list (44 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 7 *King's Quest II* notes (orange binder) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 8 *King's Quest II, III, IV* script ideas and notes (25 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 9 *King's Quest VII* backgrounds and block maps; *King's Quest: Mask of Eternity* hand-drawn maps; *Phantasmagoria* storyboards and floor plans (envelope) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 10 *King's Quest 8* script ideas and notes (107 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 11 *King's Quest 8* game ideas (16 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 12 *King's Quest: Mask of Eternity* new design document (20 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 13 Various drawings (60 pages) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 14 Text drafts for unproduced games -ON LOAN-

Box 4

- Object 1 *King's Quest VI* Production Book (navy blue binder) -ON LOAN-
- Object 2 *Phantasmagoria* Production Book (light blue binder) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 1 *The Colonel's Bequest (Murder Mystery)* flow drawing -ON LOAN-

Oversized

- Folder 1 *The Black Cauldron* overview flow charts, 1985 -ON LOAN-

Subseries B: Memorabilia

Scope and Content Note: This subseries includes the first issue of *Sierra News Magazine*, notable correspondence (including a letter from Apple's Steve Wozniak to On-Line Systems), and other related memorabilia on loan to The Strong from Ken and Roberta Williams.

Box 3

- Folder 15 *Sierra Magazine*, Autumn 1989 (Vol. 2, No. 2) -ON LOAN-
- Folder 16 Correspondence -ON LOAN-
- Folder 17 Other memorabilia -ON LOAN-

Oversized

- Folder 2 Birthday card from KQ8 team, n.d. -ON LOAN-

Box 4

- Frame 1 Framed letter from Steve Wozniak to On-Line Systems, May 23, 1981
-ON LOAN-