

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: HENK ROGERS

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I was in England about twelve years ago—no, twenty-two years ago. Oh, my gosh; time flies. I was at a trade show for the computer business, and I was talking to this person and telling them, Yeah, I made this decision never to wear a suit, and never work nine-to-five. And the person goes, Henk, I don't think I've ever seen you wearing anything except a suit. Do you even own a pair of jeans? That was the question. And I'm going, Oh, my god, I don't own a pair of jeans. So, I immediately went out and bought a pair of jeans. You know, you could say that fashion wise, it's been downhill ever since too.

You know. Now, I fight places that don't allow me to wear jeans.

Wearing jeans didn't stop Hawaii Business Magazine from naming Henk Rogers CEO of the Year for 2015. Henk Rogers has made a fortune in the video gaming industry, most notably for bringing Tetris, one of the world's top-selling videogames, from Russia to the rest of the world. More recently, this visionary entrepreneur and philanthropist has turned his talents to no less than saving the planet. He wants salvation to come through renewable energy, starting with Hawaii becoming a global model for energy independence. Henk Rogers, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Henk Brouwer Rogers may be best known in Hawaii for starting the Blue Planet Foundation, which is dedicated to ending the use of carbon-based fuels. This nonprofit organization was instrumental in convincing the Hawaii State Legislature to commit to a goal of making Hawaii 100 percent energy self-sufficient by 2045. Rogers didn't always have a passion for energy sustainability; rather, he was driven by his love of board games and computers to launch his highly successful career in video gaming.

I was born in the Netherlands, and I lived there 'til I was eleven. And my mother married an American when I was seven years old. My name is Rogers as a result. A Mr. Rogers from New York.

What was your name before that?

Brouwer; my mother's maiden name is Brouwer, which is the Dutch version of Brewer. So, if you look at the Heineken bottle, it says Heineken Brouwer, which is Heineken Brewers. So eleven years. And it's my middle name now, by the way, 'cause when I moved to the states, I didn't have a middle name, and everybody kept asking me, What's your middle name? So, I just put my grandfather's name as my middle name, since he had all daughters. Eleven years in Holland, then eight years in New York City. I went to junior high school and high school in New York City.

Did you learn English in New York City?

In New York City. I spoke no English before I landed. And it's interesting, 'cause my American father didn't speak Dutch, and the way we communicated was in German. So, I used to speak German. So, New York City; I lived there four years in Queens, four years in Manhattan. I went to Stuyvesant High School, which some people will know.

Which is a fabulous high school.

Fabulous high school.

Where you learned, what? What did you ...

Computer science.

Oh ...

Basically, in my four years at Stuyvesant, I had one elective. And you know, my entire career since has been based on that one elective.

So, you graduated from Stuyvesant High School.

I ... dropped out of Stuyvesant High School.

**Oh, you dropped out?
Didn't like that one elective.**

No, I never got tired of the elective, but you know, I had taken that, and there was no more follow-up courses in that. So, everything else was just like ...

How old were you when you dropped out?

Oh, I would have graduated, if I'd just stuck out the last year. I did graduate in New York City, but not from Stuyvesant. And I was convinced that I was never going to go to university. But my next stop was Hawaii.

Why was it Hawaii?

It was a stop on the way to Japan for my family. My father is an avid Go player, or was an avid Go player, and I think that's a big part of the reason why he wanted to move the family to Japan. Another reason could be that he looked at me, and he saw like a serious Hippie. I'd turned into a Hippie, and he didn't want the rest of his sons to become so, I don't know, wild, whatever.

And so, he's off to Japan, and you think it's to play Go. Now, you were heavily influenced by games of strategy as a kid; weren't you?

Well, you know, when I was a kid, say in Holland, you know, the game of strategy was Monopoly. So, I was pretty good at playing Monopoly.

And you liked board games?

Oh, yeah; board games. Board games are great, and I did a lot of it when I got to Hawaii. You know, at the University, we had a group called The ARRG; The Alternative Recreational Realities Group of Hawaii.

Now, were you a Hippie at UH as well?

I'm still a Hippie. I just get dressed up a little less wild from time to time. So, I'm in Hawaii, it's been a year. Two weeks of waiting for my dad turn into a year, and so finally, the family is ready to move. But by that time, I was going to UH, because I could get computer time there. And that was the one thing that I was interested in. So, I was going to night school, taking all the computer classes.

What did you intend to do as a Hippie, slash, computer guy?

I had no intentions. I just knew that computers were the way of the future.

Did you graduate from the University?

No; I dropped out. So, I had a disagreement with my dad about where I went to university. He wanted me to go to university in Japan, study philosophy, which is what he studied. He dropped out. Studied philosophy, and dropped out. And so, he wanted me to study philosophy. And I said, You know, I appreciate philosophy, but I need something practical. My grandfather was an engineer. In fact, I found out later

that my father was an engineer, and his father was an engineer. I'm the only non-engineer, but you could say that I'm a computer engineer. And so, University had a good computer science program, and so I said, No, I gotta stay behind. As a result of my disagreement with my father, I worked my way through college. I used to do everything; I drove Charley's Taxi. And so, the idea is, if you're working to pay for studying something, it better be something useful. And so, at the end of three years, they called me in. Mr. Rogers, you haven't taken any of your core requirements. And I said, Yeah, I know, and I have no intention. They said, Well, then you're not going to graduate. And I said, Well, that's okay. I don't actually need the paper; I just need the knowledge. And I really got a lot out of going to UH, and I never after that ever had an occasion where somebody asked me for a piece of paper. You know, a degree.

You would eventually do what your father wanted you to do, and that's go to Japan.

Yes. I don't know that my father wanted me specifically to go to Japan. He just didn't want me to stay behind. And I appreciate that. What eventually got me to go to Japan was, I fell in love with a girl.

I'd been to Japan several times, but I was there, and she was there, and I said, I'm not going back. I called my friend and said, You can have my car. And I told my friends, Throw out all my stuff, just keep this box of uh, computer tapes. I still have this box, and I don't know how I'm ever going to read that stuff. So, I left everything behind.

Henk Rogers married Akemi and stayed in Japan for the next eighteen years. For the first six of those years, he worked in his father's gem business. When personal computers started to take off, he decided it was time to meld his love of computers and games, and strike out on his own. The result was his invention of a computer game called Black Onyx.

When I started my company, I used my Hawaii experience of ARRG, which was playing Dungeons & Dragons. And personal computers happened, and I thought, This is my chance. So, I made the first roleplaying game in Japan. But I didn't speak, read, or write Japanese, and I hacked that computer and got my wife to try to read something in the manual, but she knows nothing about computers. And so, that was also like hocus-pocus that was coming out of them. Anyway, I hacked my way through the game, made it. So, there were no roleplaying games before The Black Onyx, and it became the number-one game in 1984, and it was the number-two game in 1985. So, it had a two-year reign. And now, something like thirty percent of all games in Japan are roleplaying games. So, you know, people that are in the industry that meet me and find out that I wrote Black Onyx, they say, Oh, my god, you're the reason I'm in this industry, you know.

Wow.

And that makes me feel good.

So, it's almost as if you you've always liked strategy and games, and you translated your interest in board games to the computer platform.

Yeah; absolutely. And it's the same thing; you've got to think about what reward do you want to give the player, at what pace, to keep them interested in continuing the adventure.

And it's a very logical process for you. If this, then that; if that, then this.

Oh, yeah. So, computer programming is like the best. Because once you tell it what to do, you give it specific instruction, it will do that forever.

Henk Rogers started his publishing company Bullet-Proof Software to market Black Onyx. It became one of the largest game publishers in Japan at the time, and soon, Rogers was traveling around the world, looking for new games to publish. That's when he discovered Tetris, a game that a programmer in the Soviet Union had developed. Rogers saw its potential, and was determined to buy the international publishing rights to it.

Basically, I would say that what happened to me in the Soviet Union is, you have a society where everybody is watching everybody, and they're very careful what they say. And I walk in, and I'm relaxed, and you know, ask me anything about my business. I don't have any secrets. And so, I was just friendly, and that is just a strange thing for them. That is not how they do business; it's all power trips. My power trip is stronger than your power trip, and if you don't listen to me, I'm gonna get such-and-so to do that to you. You are, you know, blah-blah-blah.

But to get their attention, didn't you have to have power?

No; I just had to have honesty. And so, I said, You know, I don't have a lot of money, I'm not a big business, but I'll give you a fair share of the money. They had a previous arrangement, where they had licensed the rights to Tetris for personal computers. And just to give you an example, they were getting six percent of ... six percent, of six percent. And by the time they figured out that six percent of six percent is zero, you know, a year had passed. And I said, No, that's not how you do it. This is the retail price; okay? And I will give you a percentage of the retail price, or a flat number. And so, that number will never go down. And if I have, you know, sublicenses, I will make sure that you get your share of the retail price. And that was something they'd never heard before. That's one thing. And then, another was, we had to do a contract. And I saw the original contract that they had, and it was terrible; they were being spanked. Because they don't recognize intellectual property in the Soviet Union; therefore, they had no knowledge of how to write an intellectual property contract.

So, when somebody came to them and said, This is the contract, take it or leave it ... what could they say? They didn't know what to argue about. And I was the opposite. I called my lawyer—and at that time, it took eight hours to make a phone call out of the Soviet Union. You had to sit by your phone, and if you're not there when the phone call came through, you had to wait and start again. So, I called my lawyer in Japan. I said, I need a contract. It's got to be no more than twenty pages, and it cannot use any big words, 'cause I have to explain every word in this contract to the Soviets. And

it's gotta cover all the bases, and it's gotta be fair; it's gotta have stuff in it for me, and it's gotta have stuff in it for them. So, I got the fax, and they couldn't believe it; you know, it was a fair contract. If I didn't pay on time, there was a penalty, for example, blah-blah-blah, and all this. And so, at the end of the day, they chose me. 'Cause, you know, there were other people that were going after those same rights, and they chose me, and it wasn't because I had the most money, or I had the most power; it was because I was the most honest. Yeah.

Did you know what you were onto then? Because even now, you're hip-deep in Tetris. It's still a big business for you.

Yeah. I did not know what I was onto. Well, I knew I was onto a little bit, because I'd already gone to Nintendo, Nintendo of America, and I'd already made a handshake deal with Mr. Arakawa. I said, Mr. Arakawa, this game is perfect for Gameboy. Now, Nintendo has a policy in Japan; they just sell the machine, and the software comes separate. But in the US, they had a policy always to include one game with the hardware. So, if you bought an NES, it started with a game, and if you bought a Gameboy, it started with a game. And so, he said, Why should I included Tetris? He said, I have Mario, I can just include Mario. I said, If you include Mario, then Gameboy will be for little boys, but if you include Tetris, Gameboy will be for everybody. That choice is yours. And so, he talked it over with his people, and obviously came up to the same conclusion.

Good argument.

Yeah. So, it was a good business. And so, I had a deal in my hand when I went to Moscow. And then, I basically fought for that end of it.

You know, it occurs to me as you speak that people your age, sixty-two at this time, many people. they're not into the games and they don't realize what a huge business this is.

The game business is bigger than the movie business. Sometimes, I see young people, and they go, I want to be a game designer, I want to get into the game business. And it really isn't what it used to be, you know. I made that first game by myself, pretty much. I did all the programming, did all the graphics, and did all the planning and the thinking and everything. And today, you know, it takes teams of people to make a game. And how many of those teams are there? There are hundreds of thousands of those teams. So, to get into the game business today, you can't just be good; you have to be brilliant.

Henk Rogers and his organization have continued to develop videogames, making multi-millions of dollars from new products, including for mobile devices and buying and selling copyright licenses. He moved his family back to Hawaii and was carrying out his businesses from here, when he started to think about what he wanted to do next with his life. The answer came to him in a most unexpected way.

I found myself in the back of an ambulance with a hundred percent blockage of the widow-maker. That is the artery, the biggest artery in your heart, and it will kill you if it's blocked. And so, I was lucky, 'cause I kind of felt it coming, and they called an ambulance for me, and so I was already on the way to Straub. And then, I realized ... because they were gonna take me in for observation. They said, There's nothing really wrong with you, we'll just take you in for observation, we won't even turn on the siren. The siren went on, the guy who was taking care of me was in the cockpit talking to the hospital. I didn't hear, but I knew he was saying, This guy is not even gonna make it, get an operating room ready, blah-blah-blah. And I'm back there; first, I said, You gotta be kidding me, I haven't spent any of the money yet. You know. I was going, Oh, is this some kind of a joke? I worked so hard all my life, and finally sell my company, get a bunch of money, and I'm on the way out? And then, the second thing I said is, No, I'm not going, I still have stuff to do. And it's kind of like, I thought, you know, what are the things that I'd always talked to myself that I was gonna get done in life, and that I hadn't even started? And that just made me say, No, I'm gonna do this. And so, I was in the hospital recovering, and the next couple weeks I didn't go back to work. I had my chance to think about my bucket list, and I said, These are missions in life. And the first mission came to me in the back of the newspaper. It was like ... in the back of the newspaper, a story about coral. Oh, by the way, we're gonna kill all the coral in the world by the end of the century. And you know, I moved to Hawaii, and I fell in love with the ocean. I used to dive, surf on the North Shore, and I couldn't believe that we would do something so callous as to kill all the coral in the world. Islands are made out of coral. And you know, you look a little bit further, and it's like a third of the life in the ocean is dependent on the coral existing. So, I said, No, no, we're not allowed to do that. What's causing that? It's ocean acidification. What's causing that? Carbon dioxide going into the ocean is causing that. So then, my first mission is to end the use of carbon-based fuel. And so, I started the foundation, and recently, we had a big success in Hawaii, that Hawaii has made the mandate that we're gonna be a hundred percent renewable by 2045 for electricity. And that is a huge step in the right direction.

And your Blue Planet Foundation had a role in that.

Oh, I would say we're the ones who created that legislation and fought for it. You know, 'cause when you create a piece of legislation, then you have to work with all the politicians, and you gotta get enough politicians to get behind it to get it passed. So, it's not good enough to just come up with the words, 'cause it's all the pushing that goes on. I guess it's called lobbying.

Yes, it is. You mentioned your ranch; it's Puu Waawaa on the Kona side of the Big Island.

Yes.

And it is all renewable energy; it's off the grid.

We're off the grid. So, what we do at the ranch, I built an energy lab. And originally, I wanted to just study storage, 'cause the thing that's stopping renewables, meaning solar and wind, is that they're intermittent. Which means that sometimes there's wind,

and sometimes there's not. And in the daytime there's light, and in the nighttime there's not. So, you get a lot of energy, and then you have shift it to a time when you don't have energy. That requires storage. And it can be pumped hydro, it can be batteries, it can be anything; flywheels.

But whatever it is, it's expensive.

Not necessarily; not necessarily. I mean, you know, if you're the first one, and you're the only one, yes, it's expensive. But if everybody's doing it, then the price comes down. Like solar panels used to be expensive. But now, I mean, pretty much anybody can have solar panels. So, all these things which are expensive can be made cheaper if you make them in volume, and if there's competition. So, the same thing goes with storage. So, in the beginning, it's expensive. But I mean, it's like, okay, so the rich guys get to have the plasma television that cost twenty thousand dollars, but now you can go to Costco and buy one for five hundred bucks. The same thing. It's a little different technology, but it does the same thing. And so, storage is gonna be like that.

And you're already off the grid at your home in Honolulu, and on the ranch.

Yes. So, we were studying storage, and we finally decided that we were gonna just get off the grid on the Big Island. And so, we tested the different storage technologies, and now we ended up with a battery technology that basically runs by itself, and it doesn't get hot. Most batteries, you have to be very careful with them, because they can overheat and catch on fire, blah-blah-blah. This chemistry is nothing like that. What's in your phone or in my Tesla is lithium cobalt. And what's in the batteries that are sitting in my home is lithium iron phosphate. Lithium iron phosphate is a chemistry that doesn't get hot. You could drive a nail through it, and it doesn't go crazy. And if you do that with lithium cobalt, you're asking for trouble. And so, doesn't require any cooling system. And Sony makes them. So, Sony, you know, they're a big company; they've been making batteries for thirty years. They've been making this particular chemistry for like eight years, and they've tested, and tested, and tested them. I mean, their company reputation goes, you know, into their product, and so, they gave us a ten-year warranty, which is as good as anything in the industry.

And you think that it'll be just a matter of a short time before battery power gets accepted and cheap enough to distribute.

Yes.

What are some of the things that prepared you to have the career you did, which was something you made up yourself? You didn't follow a template for it. What were some of the formative things along the way?

I think one of the things is that I always had a deep-rooted feeling that whatever it is that I wanted to do, I could do it.

Where did that come from?

I think it came from New York. It's it's kind of an attitude that we had in high school. We stopped the war in Vietnam. Okay; we didn't specifically, but we were part of it. And that kind of energy, the feeling that youth can change the world, and that is a very important feeling. And I need the young people in Hawaii to have that feeling; they need to take ownership of their future, and make Hawaii the example of sustainability.

You know, through all of the big ideas and the big pushes, and the big deals you've made, you've had a very stable family life.

I think my family has had the same ups and downs as any family. But now that I've sort of retired from the business—you know, I was a Japanese businessman. This nine-to-five wasn't nine-to-five; it was nine-to ... fifteen, or whatever. It's like, crazy, hard work in the old days. Now, I have much more time to spend with my family.

You're still CEO, though.

I'm CEO of several companies. But no, actually, the main business is the computer game business. My daughter is the CEO.

I see.

I'm the chairman.

So, what about the ones that you are CEO of?

Um ...

You have a different definition?

No, no, no. No. So I try not to be CEO, as much as possible. I try to be the visionary, and so, I'm the chairman of a lot of companies, but I'm not necessarily the CEO. I don't do day-to-day, and I don't go to the office unless I have a meeting. So, it's a new way of operating, and it gives me much more time to travel, and I do a lot of conferences and speaking at conferences, and connecting to people in other places.

So, for many years of your career, you were really not home with family.

Yes.

They sacrificed that.

Well, the worst time was when I was programming. Programming takes twenty hours a day. I would sleep for a couple of hours, and do programming the rest of the time. I never got to see my family. My wife was a computer widow, is what they call it. And many programmers still go through that. They start programming, and they can't stop until the middle of the night sometime, and so they don't have a life. And pretty soon,

you figure out, Well, I can't run a company this way, I can't program and run a company well. And I can't, like, do that and expect to be kind of a contribution to my family. It's not just about bringing home money; it's about, you know, being there when children are going through, I don't know, teenager crises. And we've had our share of all of that.

Henk Rogers: husband, father, grandfather, computer programmer, entrepreneur, visionary, chairman, and perhaps one day, off the grid planet superhero. Mahalo to Henk Rogers of Honolulu and Kona for sharing his life story with us. And thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, hui hou.

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You have how many siblings?

Oh, my goodness. Okay. So, there's my bio dad, and my mom who had only me. My mom was a single mom, and I never knew my bio daddy. So, he went off and I had no contact with him, because basically, they didn't get married. Then, she married Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers and my mom had seven children. So, six boys and one girl ... and they adopted one. So, there's nine of the original family, and we grew up together. Then, Mr. Rogers, in his infinite wisdom, had a second family, as if nine wasn't enough, and he had two more children, daughters. So, that makes it up to eleven. And then, he passed away. And so, I'd heard that my biological father was still alive, so I found a way to contact him when I was fifty years old, my bio dad, and I found out that I have four more siblings. So, I have two sisters and two brothers on that side, that are blood-related to me. And I found out one of them lives in Hawaii, in Hawi. And then he ... again, I think men are very ... they're not the smartest about this kind of thing. He left his wife with four children, and married another woman who had already six children. So, that makes it twenty-one.

Wow!

So ... yeah; I'm one of twenty-one.

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