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Issue #13 : Old and new translations of retro text adventures

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of talking to the Interactive Fiction Technology Foundation about cross-pollination between IF cultures, with translations being a big part of that. So it's no surprise that this week, I wanted to talk about translated works in retro text adventures!

Digging into this topic made two things evident to me:

- there are few examples overall, and
- they're almost always translations from English to another language.

This shouldn't be a surprise to anyone; text adventures and interactive fiction in general is very much an Anglophone thing, and has been since its inception. There are one or two orders of magnitude more games in English than there are in other languages. But let's flip this on its head: English speakers have missed out on some great games that have never been translated in their language, and it's really too bad for them!

## **Retro translations**

How many text adventures were translated in the 1980s? After some digging, here is my answer: not that many, but also surprisingly many. The different video game markets were way more divided than nowadays: there weren't really multinationals, distribution was complex and not unified, communication between markets was not the norm, neither were multi-country releases, and the platforms were heterogeneous, with each country having its differences in terms of various microcomputers' popularity. But really above all, text adventures were and remain the worst kind of video game to translate, as there is just reams of text plus a parser that has to adapt to the local grammar. Despite all that, there are quite a few examples of translations.

Of course, the French language text adventures are the ones I know the most, especially since I did a little digging on the early 80s scene a couple of years ago. It turns out the situation is quite enviable, as there are quite a few translations from various sources. The very first translation might also be the very first text adventure in French - *La Grande Aventure*, a translation of a recreation of *Adventure* that ran on CP/M computers. The game was ported in the SAM76 language by his inventor, Anselme Roichel, and partially translated, before inviting two French teenagers to New Jersey to tinker all summer on computers and help finish the project. There is an article about this on Jason Dyer's blog, and I took a deeper dive (which included interviewing the former teenagers!) last year on fiction-interactive.fr (in French):

<https://bluerenga.blog/2019/06/28/bilingual-adventure-1979/>

<http://www.fiction-interactive.fr/la-grande-aventure/>

There are also translations that come from unknown sources - for instance, *Aventures Insolites*, a translation of Sierra's *Softporn Adventure*, where the translator is unknown (it is thought it could have been someone at a French distributor) but the text eventually made its way to Sierra, who integrated the strings in the game. And a peculiar case of a translation that was more of a remake/adaptation, as *Transylvania* for the Apple II was remade as *Brocéliande*, complete with folklore from the Brittany region, by Jean-Pierre Coudreuse. But most translations to French that exist are actually thanks to Québec, whose presence on the North American market incentivized the production of translations. This is how *Maison mystère* (*Mystery House*) and *Mission Astéroïde* (*Hi-Res Adventure #0*) and *Le sorcier et la princesse* (*Hi-Res Adventure #2*) were translated. But local distributors also translated text adventures themselves, like Vifi/Sogiciel, a Québec distributor, who translated *Cyborg* (Mike Berlyn's first game, before joining Infocom) and *World Builders I* (*Les bâtisseurs d'empire*). And finally, there is the case of *Azlan*, a type-in game in the *ZX-81 Handbook*, which was translated in French in 1982 and inspired at least one original French game. *The Quill* was also translated to French, perhaps first for the North American market (but no traces exist), then for the French market (despite the agreement CodeWriter had with Gilsoft), as AdventureWriter; but to my knowledge, no Quill game has ever been translated. Finally, has there been any French game translated to English or any other language? Not to my knowledge; the only story that I know was that, supposedly, Froggy Software (classic French Apple II adventures) attempted to get their game *Le crime du parking* published in North America, presumably with an English translation; but the distributors balked at the game, which had sex, murder, and homosexuality. C'est la vie, I suppose...

What about Spanish? I really don't know the scene that well, but you know who does? That's right, Juanjo Muñoz! And according to him, the biggest example of a translation is one that was never released. When Aventuras AD created their classic *La diosa de Cozumel*, they also took steps towards releasing it in English. The title was shortened to just *Cozumel*, which would work in both languages; the box art showed *Ci-u-than Trilogy 1* in English; and the back of the box showed a blurb in English and some screenshots with English texts! What happened, then? Andres Samudio had hired two British women to translate the game, and it seems like the translation was in a quite advanced state; but ultimately, Dinamic (Aventuras AD's distributor) could not reach an agreement with a UK distributor, and the English version never saw the light of day. This is really too bad, as it is basically the only example of a translation to English of a text adventure at the time! As for translations towards Spanish, I could only find one (which is frustrating, I'm sure there were more!): *Gremlins*, one of Brian Howarth's adventures, which was translated and distributed by Erbe Software. And that... it? (For what it's worth, *La aventura original*, by Aventuras AD again, was just inspired by *Adventure*, but was not a faithful recreation.)

Ok, how about German? I really don't know the scene that well, but you know who does? That's right, Stefan Vogt! Stefan gave me a lot of context and a few games that were translated; prior to asking him, the only translation that I knew of was Infocom's in-house attempt at translating *Zork I* in German. The attempt was ultimately shelved (even though it was complete) but resurfaced in the "Infocom Files" that were shared on Github a few years ago; and the consensus seemed to be that the translation was of poor quality, likely done by a non-native speaker. It's actually a running theme, according to Stefan: there were great text adventures in German, but the translations were almost always terrible. Another game translated to German was Brian Howarth's *Gremlins*, which again according to Stefan is a very bad translation, likely done by a non-native speaker (maybe someone at Adventure International UK, Stefan thinks). There were also a couple of translations by Ariola Soft: *Das Geheimnis der Atztekenmaske*, German translation of *Mask of the Sun* (a 1982 Apple II game, released in 1984 on the C64 and Atari 8-bit; "did not age well", says Stefan); and also *Eureka!*, a Ian Livingstone game. And finally, It seems like at the tail end of the 80s or the beginning of the 90s, the German studio ByteRiders also worked on "mouse-driven text adventures", with a cursor and a list of verbs you have to click on, similarly to Legend Entertainment's titles. *Brubaker* was written in German and (according to Stefan) there was a mention in magazines back then that the studio was working on the English version, but it did not end up being released

officially. But *Crime Time* was released in both German and English, which represents our first (and, I think, only?) bona fide example of a non-English text-based adventure being translated and officially released in English in that era!

Now, how about Japanese? I really don't know the scene that well, but do you know who does? ... Do you? Because I don't! Let me know if you do! Anyway, Japanese is very interesting, because parsing Japanese is extremely complex, which is historically, as far as I understand, one of the reasons why things moved to graphical adventures and choice-based visual novels rather quickly. My knowledge of translations in Japanese mostly comes from Jimmy Maher's article on the topic, aided by Oren Ronen:

<https://www.filfre.net/2012/07/japanese-adventuring/>

The first source is Star Craft Inc, a Japanese company who started translating popular North American text adventures into Japanese as early as 1983. The list on MobyGames is pretty great: Sierra's *The Dark Crystal*, Scott Adams' *Strange Odyssey*, *SAGA 1: Adventureland*, *SAGA 5: Mystery Fun House*, as well as *Masquerade*, Polarwave's *The Crimson Crown*, and more! I have not played any of them, but the article mentions that the parser is not very good, and sometimes separates the verb from the noun to simplify the grammar. The other translations are, oddly enough, translations of Infocom games! Four games were translated: *Zork I*, *Planetfall*, *Enchanter*, and *Moonmist*, all wrapped in a fancy interface, and with a fully functioning and very nice Japanese parser! The *Zork I* version, strangely, even got a PlayStation and Sega Saturn release. These are extremely interesting examples, especially when you take into account the fact that Japanese is a hard language to parse.

I suppose I could go on and on trying to find more examples, but I couldn't find many more. *Commodore 64 Adventures*, a book by Mike Grace, got translated in Italian as *Avventure e commodore 64*; Jacob Munkhammar wrote not one but two translations of *Adventure* in Swedish, one published for the ZX Spectrum (an incomplete recreation) and one year later on Macintosh based on the source code (a big thanks to Fredrik Ramsberg for alerting me of that!). If you know of more examples, let me know - or, actually, go one step beyond and add information about it online! Go to CASA, or IFDB, or IFWiki, and add the information, so future scholars have even more information than me!

## Modern translations

At the turn of the century, between Internet, old games no longer being commercialized (and going from copyrighted to abandonware), and modern tools such as Inform, it became easier to recreate old games and even translate them. There were in fact lots of translations of lots of games (the language with the most such translations might be Russian, on the RInform website), but I will just focus on modern translations of old games. I am here mostly relying on IFDB, and a few tips from experts (thanks Fredrik, Juanjo, and Stefan!); this section is not meant to be comprehensive, but if you know of more I always like to get tips and links from you !

One of the projects that triggered a lot of translations was Graham Nelson's recreation of 350-point version of *Adventure* in Inform 6, along with source code. This spurred quite a few translation efforts for this game, sometimes as a way to demonstrate the power of newly-translated Inform 6 libraries, like in the case of the Spanish *Aventura* by Jose Luis Diaz, or the French *Aventure* by Jean-Luc Pontico. There is also the Swedish *Äventyr* by Fredrik Ramsberg, the German *Abenteuer* by Toni Arnold, the Dutch *Avontuur* by Yuri Robbers, the Russian *Приключение* by Денис Гаев, and the exotic Lojban *la nuntalyli'u* by Nick Nicholas and others. If you have the original game in mind, and you want to learn a new language, you know what to do!

The second text adventure ever, so to speak, was a Swedish game, *Stuga*, from 1978. (If you didn't know about it, go read the article on Wikipedia about it; it is a consequence of an ARPANET link to Scandinavia, and it is an absolutely fascinating story on the creation of a pioneering text adventure!) It was a popular game when released on microcomputers on the 80s, but wasn't translated to English. Fredrik Ramsberg and Johan Berntsson (you might have heard of these two) converted it to Inform 6 in 2009, and the same year, Johan Ottosson translated it to English, as *Cottage* - so yes, not only you can play the first anglophone text adventure in various languages, but you can also play the first non-anglophone text adventure in English!

Interestingly, there doesn't seem to be that many "fan translations" of *Zork*; maybe because it is less famous than *Adventure*, or more probably because there is no open source reimplementations available that people could work from. (The original source code in ZIL has been available for a few years, but there is no French ZIL libraries or anything like that...) There is one translation, though, in Italian (dubbed "ZorkITA"

online), by Whovian and Ragfox; I believe (my recollection might not be accurate) the story is that the game was first translated in a "play-by-post" format over at OldGamesItalia, with one person translating the output of the commands submitted by people on the forum, which is a very smart way to do it! On the French side, Benjamin Roux was working on one, but it wasn't completed (but if you're interested, let me know!).

I could not find any other Infocom titles that had been translated recently. Actually, there sort of is one... There is a sample walkthrough in Infocom's *Planetfall*, that was programmed into a game, *Spacestation*; and it turns out that *Spacestation* was translated around 2002 into French by Sabine Gorecki! Sabine was an early mainstay of the modern French interactive fiction scene, particularly interested in the fact that these games and their creation was accessible to vision-impaired users. She translated a few other older text adventures to French, namely *The Wizard's Castle* (1979), *CIA Adventure* (1980), and a couple of other recreations of older games.

There should be a few more, but I haven't really been able to find much more... Surprisingly, there is only one translation of a Scott & Alexis Adams game, the German *Piratenabenteuer*, by Christian Bluemke (2004). (I say surprisingly because the source code has been available for 40 years, there are modern recreations too, and the amount of text to translate is small!) The Spanish RetroComp 2004 was an event where new creations related to older text adventure were made; the winner was *Dracula, la Primera Noche*, by Urbatain and Def, a translation of CRL Software's *Dracula, the First Night* (1986). The Spanish scene seems to have made more translations, like those of *Hampstead (Bienvenido a Hampstead)*, or Chris Evans's *Mad Martha*; information about these is scarce and I don't even know if they are modern translations or if they should have been included in the previous section. I was also able to find type-in games that have been translated to other languages, such as 1983's *Haunted House* by Jenny Tyler and Les Howarth, for which IFDB tells me there is a Spanish translation (*La casa encantada*) and a Serbo-Croatian one (*Ukleti Dvorac*); and Tim Hartnell's *Revenge of Castle Dread (La Venganza del Castillo Encantado* in Spanish).

One great new source of translations is the work of the Slovak Game Developers Association, who recently partnered with the Slovakian Museum of Design to offer no fewer than 10 translations of Czechoslovakian games! This is a very interesting project and you should definitely look at these translations of Spectrum games from

the late 80s/early 90s period, available here:

<https://scd.sk/clanky/playable-english-localizations-of-slovak-digital-games-from-the-late-80s-period/>

And this follows the translation last year of "Indiana Jones in Wenceslas Square" by Švelch and Kouba. With this, I believe that Czechoslovak is the language with the most translations to English, which is very cool and a bit unexpected! But do not sleep on Czechoslovakian text adventures: they were extremely popular, with a very active scene, and some very interesting ties to the political, as the turmoils of freeing oneself from the Soviet Union's control were rippling through the country.

Lastly, I wanted to end this section by mentioning the work of Jim and Charlie Gerrie, who have in the last few years written and ported quite a few games to the TRS-80 MC-10. This includes, interestingly, a few translations to English, such as (as far I could tell): *Hero Knight*, a translation of *A Hős Lovag*, which is the first Hungarian text adventure, written by Tihor Miklós in 1985; *The Cavern of the Morlocks* a translation of the French *La Caverne des Morlocks* by a teenage François Coulon; and *The Shield of Oran*, a translation of *Citadelle* (1984) by Pierre Faure, one of the only text-only French text adventures! Major props to them for their work, which needs to be highlighted; and what is more fitting to end this issue than a modern port and translation of an old game onto another retro platform?