> Remember

By Hugo Labrande
Issue #6 : A short history of French text adventures

I recently had the opportunity to publish an article which made the front cover of isse #53 of the Spanish CAAD magazine, which is a great magazine dedicated to text adventures. In that article, I discussed the history of text adventures in French, going all the way back to 1979 and the translation of Mystery House (see Issue #1), and discussed modern-day interactive fiction in French. As this article was published in Spanish, a lot of you probably haven't read it; with approval of Juanjo Muñoz, the editor-in-chief of CAAD, this month's article is the English version of that article! It doesn't look as good as it did in CAAD though ;-) A big thank you to Juanjo for letting me write this article, and allowing me to publish it here!

The history of interactive fiction is very often written from an anglophone perspective : *Adventure*, Infocom, Magnetic Scrolls, TADS, Inform, etc. I've always found that pretty frustrating, and there's also the fact that I joined the French IF scene at a quite young age, without being able of the history of the genre. There's definitely still more to find and to write, but here's what I know about the history of interactive fiction in French!

Early days (1979-1983) – Importing the genre
In the history of English interactive fiction, mainframe computers are very important: that's where *Adventure* and *Zork* started. There are very little traces of this in the francophone history: a few people in universities have mentioned playing *Adventure*, most likely in English, or *Haunt*, another early game; despite a lot of research and interviews, people like Alexis Blanchet (author of a recently-published history of French video games) couldn't find any example of a text adventure in French on mainframes.

The very first few text adventures in French are actually translations, from a number of disparate sources. The earliest we can trace is *La grande aventure*, which is a very unique piece: a translation of *Adventure* on CP/M that was very recently rediscovered, which allowed you to switch between French and English in-game! It was coded by Claude Kagan, a Franco-American tinkerer who was quite influential and was credited with a few innovations; on a trip to France, in one of the first RadioShack shops in Compiègne, he met two teenagers, François Brault and Thierry Gauthier, and offered them to spend the summer with his group of computing pioneers, where they helped translate the game. It sold in the USA and Canada (we even have ads for them), but not in France.

Other notable translations are ones by On-Line Systems (which will become Sierra years later), who translated a few of their pioneering adventure games surprisingly early. *Mystery House*, which was released in English in May 1980,

was translated by a Malibu software shop, Malibu Computing; the French version, mentioned in Sierra's second-ever ad in July 1980, was sold in France starting in November 1980, and kept being advertised for years in French magazines. Another game, that was never advertised and was luckily recovered from a garage sale collection, was *Aventures Insolites*, the translation of *Softporn*, which was translated by someone in France then made by Sierra themselves. We don't know if there are other ones (maybe *Wizard and the Princess*, which appears in a catalogue in Québec).

If they weren't exposed to *Adventure* or Sierra, what were French people playing in the early 1980s? Infocom gets a mention, starting with *Witness*; the game is praised for its parser, but the fact that it's prose-heavy and literate is a turn off for people who don't speak English that well. This will be a theme all through the 1980s: quite a few publishers try to sell Infocom games in France, but they never sell very well. It gets so bad that by 1987, *Bureaucracy* cannot be found in France, and a tester for a magazine had to drive to Belgium to buy it!

What French people appear to have been playing back then were mostly Scott Adams games, which serve as a yardstick for the genre – people frequently wrote "This game is a text adventure like the games by Scott Adams". I understand why: there were a dozen of them, on most platforms of the early 80s, and there were very few words, so you didn't need to know much English to play them. Plus, they weren't protected, meaning it was easy to disseminate them; a prominent magazine back then says "let's face it, we've all played Scott Adams' games, because they're not protected". However, these were never translated.

Were French people, and more broadly francophones, trying to make their own games back then? There are a few notable cases. The very first, and most obscure one, is Marcel Lejeune; during his compulsory military training in West Germany, he acquired a TRS-80, and read a lot of American magazines from the stores in the American section of West Germany. He coded a game, *Colditz* (perhaps, he says, after reading about Scott Adams or other articles on how to code a text adventure), and distributed it to a few friends; this is the very first original French text adventure. Later, in 1985, when he was editor-in-chief of a prominent Amstrad CPC magazine, he had someone adapt the code to the CPC's BASIC and got it published in 6 parts as type-in; if he hadn't, we wouldn't know about this game!

A final note on this era was the interesting influence of a classic 1980 article by Ken Reed on how to program a text adventure; this article, published in *Practical Computing*, detailed how to make a sort of text adventure engine that would hold verbs, objects, and actions that yielded a result, in arrays and databases. This article, of course, was the direct inspiration for *The Quill*, which led to Gilbertsoft, and DAAD; but it spread in France too, first in a translation of a ZX81 book, then in a type-in in *Micro Systèmes* in 1982. The system was then used to create a number of early text adventures: on Oric, for instance, there are *Morts Subites*, *Le Mystère de Kikekankoi* and *Le Manoir du Docteur Génius, Terminus*, and *Les aventures de Lilla et Jacky*; there might be more on other platforms.

The French touch in the 80s
It seems like 1983 is a turning point for text adventures in French - and maybe for the French video game industry in general. The Oric-1 comes out in May that year, and sells very well; it seems to spur the creation of a number of text adventures, like the aforementioned *Morts Subites* (a launch title written by a group of teenagers, including the son of one of the importers of the Oric), and more importantly, *Le Manoir du Docteur Génius*, a text adventure with wireframe graphics written by Laurent Benes and Karine Le Pors. It is one of the first games published by Loriciels, which became one of the French video game powerhouses of the 80s, publishing 150 games in 10 years. This game wasn't really successful critically or commercially; but Benes and Le Pors' next game, *Le Mystère de Kikekankoi*, released around Christmas 1983, was very much so, despite what modern eyes would see as flaws (a time limit and lots of sudden deaths). Benes would keep refining his engine, for instance by adding support for pictures instead of wireframe graphics, and write *Le retour du Docteur Génius*, then *Orphée* (very beautiful, but very hard), for Loriciels. Loriciels kept publishing notable games in the genre, like *Le diamant de l'île maudite* in 1984 (with full pictures and an expanded parser), *Tony Truand* (a complex, sprawling game), or *Le Pacte* (by Eric Chahi, who later created *Another World*).

Interestingly, all of the Loriciels games mentioned above are actually graphic adventures: there is, at first, wireframe graphics like in *Mystery House*, then pictures, that get more and more refined as the technology ages. Interestingly, Benes doesn't recall being inspired by Mystery House; he remembers playing a text-only adventure game back then, reading an article about how to make a text adventure in BASIC (possibly the type-in in *Micro Systèmes* mentioned above), and experimenting with graphics rendering (a lifelong passion of his) in LOGO. I'm not sure if that set a precedent at Loriciels, or in the rest of France; what's certain is that there was no equivalent of Infocom, who made literary, long, rich text-only adventure games, in France at the time. The cutting-edge adventure games that were sold at the time were mostly on the Apple II, and had hi-res graphics: the On-Line systems ones, including *Time Zone* (which flopped), but also *Escape from Rungistan*, *The Mask of the Sun*, *The Desecration*, and the translation of *Empire I: World builders*, *Les bâtisseurs d'empire.* (Even Scott Adams was moving away from text-only, and remaking his games with graphics under the Scott Adams Great Adventures brand.)

This brings us to a second interesting graphical adventure developer of the 1980s in France: Froggy Software. Its founder, Jean-Louis Le Breton, bought an Apple II in the summer of 1983, along with *Mystery House*, and learned programming so he could do the same kind of games. His first one, *Le Vampire Fou*, came out for Christmas 1983. He then created Froggy Software in 1984, which would publish games for the next five years, exclusively on Apple II, using an in-house engine, and almost always with a format similar to other Apple II adventure games: a picture in the hi-res portion, and a couple of lines at the bottom for the parser and the responses. Froggy made decidedly French games, with a flair for brash and parodic humor, and for a rather acceptable price; their games met some nice success back then. They also ventured in more "mature" territory (though these games now appear offensive under a modern lens) with games like *Le crime du parking* (1985),

their best-seller (10 000 copies), which starts with the body of a naked woman slumped in a supermarket cart. The game also has, as far as anyone can tell, the very first ever LGBT representation in a video game.

A third publisher we should also mention is ERE Informatique, who published a variety of games throughout the 80s (mostly on Amstrad CPC), including *SRAM* and *SRAM 2* (a goofy adventure in a medieval setting with anachronisms), and *Le passager du temps* (a game about time travelling featuring a beloved sidekick, in the form of a cat with funny interjections); all three were among the CPC's biggest successes. These showcase the quintessential format of the French text adventure on platforms other than the Apple II: a sidebar at the right side of the screen displaying information (like an inventory, the list of exits, a banner, or a cat), a picture, and the parser and responses below. There were a few variations, but this interface was used in most adventures of ERE Informatique, Loriciels, and other publishers (e.g. *La chose de Grotenburg* published by Ubi Soft).

However, all through the 1980s, other interfaces were developing, and gaining traction. An interesting game was 1985's *L'aigle d'or*, which won a Tilt d'Or for best game of the year: one controls the character on screen using one key per action (open, take, drink). The interface feels like a graphical continuation of RPG games of the time (like *Wizardry*, whose French translation came out at Christmas 1983), although *L'aigle d'Or* was categorized as an adventure game. Another improvement on the traditional parser was the interface in *Captain Blood* (1986), another widely-acclaimed game of the time, with an innovative icon-based conversation engine to talk with aliens. But the biggest competitor was, of course, the point-and-click interface, which French video game creators used as early as 1987, with *Le manoir de Mortevielle*, as well as *Maupiti Island*, *Croisière pour un cadavre*, and *Les voyageurs du temps*. All of this led to parser games being considered out of fashion around 1988, which can be seen in magazine reviews at the time. A few games came out after this, but by 1992, parser games weren't a thing anymore.

The modern scene
French adventure games continued meeting some success: the 90s had prominent and successful point-and-click games, especially ones by Cryo Interactive (*L'Amerzone*, *Versailles 1685 : Complot à la cour du Roi Soleil*, etc.), and the torch was carried on by games like *In Memoriam*, Quantic Dream games, and more recently, *Life is Strange*. Other people, who worked on parser adventure games, went on to create different kinds of video games: Eric Chahi, who wrote *Le pacte*, went on to create *Another World*; Elliott Grassiano, who worked for Loriciels at its beginnings, went on to create the Microïds studio, of *Syberia* fame. But parser games were done for now, and only experienced a renaissance a decade later, with the amateur scene.

In 2001, Jean-Luc Pontico found out about Inform 6, and set out to translate the libraries, as well as *Adventure*. Around the same time, there was a website specially about translations of IF works (http://if-translations.exhome.de/), from which a few translations came out, and a Yahoo mailing list. (Around 2004, members of the mailing list created a phpbb forum, which is still alive at ifiction.free.fr/taverne, but a lot more discussion is currently happening on the community's Discord server, at https://discord.gg/EhmdFsv.)

The first original game of note is FibreTigre's *Filaments*, which came out in 2003. It is a long adventure game set in Paris, with fantastical elements woven in the game; personally, this is the game that made me want to get into interactive fiction. (Unfortunately, it also has a few bugs.) FibreTigre's trajectory is an interesting one, which serves to illustrate the (French, but also English) IF scene's difficulties. He wrote a number of games, his most ambitious being *Ekphrasis* (2006), a Indiana-Jones-meets-art-history adventure across Europe, with photos of each location. This game was nominated for a XYZZY Award, but doesn't seem to have been played much, as nobody complained that the final puzzle had a bug before I did in 2015. His next effort was an ambitious comedy game with parallel universe gameplay, in English this time, called *Works of Fiction*. It was announced on rec.games.int-fiction one day, but it got no traction (the English typos and bugs in some Glulx interpreters' handling of windows didn't help either; despite all this it's a wonderful idea for a game). That was, I believe, the final straw (shades of Adam Cadre's *Endless Nameless* here...), and something had to change. FibreTigre didn't stick around for long after that; having saved up some money, he decided to leave IF behind and start working on writing video games with a broader appeal and that would be easier to market. It worked wonderfully for him: he is a wonderful storyteller, and created a great marketing persona, which led him to finding success with games such as *Out There*, *The Sigma Theory, The Beautiful Walk*, as well as very popular podcasts, several books, and a tabletop RPG that smashed the record for biggest crowdfunding campaign in France.

The story of "a small IF scene of amateurs that struggles to survive, and deals with the discouragement of only having a handful of authors playing each other's games" is, I believe, a familiar one in IF scenes around the world. It doesn't help that, unlike the English and Spanish scene, there is no connection with the historical ways and tools - for instance, we mostly use Inform, derived from Infocom games who were virtually unknown in France, and don't support pictures despite the 80s French scene being heavily focused on graphical adventures. The IF scene in France had some tough years between 2010 and 2015; the yearly competition, started in 2005, had to be cancelled a few times for a lack of games. However, things have started to look up more recently, with significant community investment into a brand-new modern-looking website with weekly articles, more investment into choice-based systems, an active Discord server, a renovation of the yearly comp (with prizes!), frequent game jams, and a Twitter account. People may still come and go, but overall there is a lot more vitality and exposure compared to previous years, and a lot more authors and players, as evidenced by the last few competitions and a total renewal of the participants. This is a very good sign for the community, and I'm very happy to finish this article on such a positive note !