

> Remember

By Hugo Labrande

Issue #3 : Women's contributions to text adventures

In my text adventure communities, on Twitter, in my own research, I encounter an overwhelming majority of men; yet, most book readers are women, as are a large portion of adventure game fans (Sierra, at the time, estimated 40% of their players were women). Strange, I thought. So, this month, I felt like doing some research on women's contributions to retro text adventures – and I was excited to find more than I anticipated! I hope you'll learn some interesting stories and discover some cool games along the way.

A portrait of 15 women

William Crowther, Don Woods, Scott Adams, Brian Howarth, Dave Lebling, Marc Blank, Brian Moriarty, Graeme Yeandle, Tim Gilberts, Laurent Benes, Alain Brégeon, Andres Samudio, Carlos Marques, Michael Roberts, Graham Nelson, Espen Aarseth, Adam Cadre, Andrew Plotkin, Jon Ingold, etc. When you read about the history of text adventures and interactive fiction, you encounter a lot of men. One could say that it is true for the history of video games, as a whole; and there are compounding factors that skew such history towards men's contributions: institutional sexism of the days, gender expectations in society or within a family, the “mentrification” of computing (the moment where operating computers went from being seen as a secretary-like job to a powerful and creative endeavour), the tendency to forget women's contributions, the modesty of some women with regards to their achievements, etc.

Yet, there are numerous women whose contributions to text adventures are important. Some of the stories are well-known, other are more obscure; a few articles or documentaries have been made, in particular in the last few years, with the intent of highlighting women's contributions to computing, which are sometimes overlooked by people – including young women who, when seeing an industry whose most prominent faces are men and chat rooms filled with sexist comments, have a hard time finding a place and role models. I only speak French and English, so I am centering my list on the English-speaking parts of the world and the (much smaller) French scene. I would be delighted to learn about more women who contributed to text adventures in other languages and parts of the world!

North America

- **Patricia Crowther** is the ex-wife of William Crowther, and although a computer programmer too, she didn't write text adventures. She was part of a group that explored and mapped the Mammoth Cave in Central Kentucky, and she was the one who discovered a previously-unknown connection between caves that made the Mammoth Cave the largest cave in the world. When the Crowthers divorced, Will stopped caving, submerged himself in D&D and coding, and made a game that attempted to immortalize the memories of caving he had; the game, of course, was “Adventure”. I heartily recommend

you read this article that tells a side of the story I had never heard:

<https://onezero.medium.com/the-woman-who-inspired-one-of-the-first-hit-video-games-by-mapping-the-worlds-longest-cave-ef572ccde6d2>

- **Alexis Adams** is Scott Adams' ex-wife, and the co-founder of Adventure International. Scott Adams wrote "Adventureland" as Alexis was pregnant with their first child, which made her resentful of the amount of time he was spending in front of a computer. Scott then swore he wouldn't make another one; but then, unexpectedly, Alexis decided she wanted to try her hand at it. She wrote several of the 12 "Scott Adams Adventure" (we should really change that name, then!): she helped with "Pirate Adventure", and was the main writer in "Mystery Fun House" (which she had to interrupt to give birth to the couple's second child), and "Voodoo Castle" where she is the only one credited. (According to Aaron A. Reed, this might be the first video game ever with sole authorship credits to a woman!) Alexis was a psychology graduate (Scott and her met through a computerized dating service!), but she also had experience running a chain of restaurants and a mail-order business: she helped with the new company in managing the operations, travelling with her husband to conferences, and writing programs. This Twitter thread is a goldmine:

<https://twitter.com/i/events/891134040442642432?lang=en>

- **Roberta Williams**, who is the... really? Do I really need to say who Roberta Williams is? She invented the graphic adventure game after getting addicted to "Adventure" and the Adams' games, and went on to write some of the best adventure games of the 80s, most of which had a parser. A legend. As always, Jimmy Maher has great articles on Sierra games over the years, starting with this one:
<https://www.filfre.net/2011/10/ken-and-roberta/>
- **Mary Ann Buckles**, who defended her Ph.D. in 1985 at the University of California San Diego. Her thesis was titled "Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame Adventure"; she felt strongly that these games would change our relationship to computers. Her dissertation board had members dead set against such a frivolous subject; she fought them the whole way, and now her thesis is very often cited in academic works on video games. But the experience was so exhausting and hurtful that she left academia, stopped using a computer altogether, and worked a variety of jobs before becoming a massage therapist. You can find more info, including a New York Times profile and an interview by Jason Scott, in the following Twitter thread:
<https://twitter.com/textfiles/status/1351951493516177409>
- **Amy Briggs**, author of "Plundered Hearts", making her the only female Implementor in Infocom history. (**Liz Cyr-Jones** was listed as a contributor on "Beyond Zork" and "Hollywood Hijinx", but Amy Briggs was an Imp in her own right.) "Plundered Hearts" is a very good game, and stood the test of time better than some other Infocom games; it has a backdrop in nautical romance novels, and the story is squarely centered on the player-character, a woman, and her desires. Briggs had an interesting perspective (one that society, and other feminists, hadn't reached yet) on feminism and romance novels, which she loved: "One doesn't have to be Miss Simper to enjoy dancing (or necking in the gazebo) or be Ms. Rambo to defeat the bad guys. Just be yourself, and do both. [...] Feminism does not rule out romance, and romance does not necessarily have to make women weak". A very good source is Anastasia Salter's recent article "Plundered Hearts: Infocom, Romance, and the History of Feminist Game Design", which is an academic article behind a paywall unfortunately (though it won't be a problem for those of you who know how to use Sci-Hub). She was also interviewed in "GET LAMP" by Jason Scott:

<https://archive.org/details/getlamp-abriggs>

Australia

- **Veronika Megler**, who co-authored the smash hit “The Hobbit”, was once a bright undergrad at the University of Melbourne, where she played “Adventure”. She replied to an ad searching for part-time programmers, and found herself co-writing “The Hobbit”, designing the game’s engine with a focus on abstraction and having NPCs living independently from the player. She then graduated and worked at IBM for a few decades, and now works at Amazon Web Services after defending a Ph.D. on Big Data. She had no idea the game was so successful until 25 years after it was released, which is disappointing, but she has done quite well in her life, too! You’ll find all sort of great coverage in the links of her web page, which is written with much humor; there’s also a great interview of her (in English) on an Italian website:
<http://www.veronikamegler.com/>
<https://www.avventuretestuali.com/interviste/megler-eng/>

United Kingdom & Ireland

- **Anita Sinclair**, co-founder with Ken Gordon and Hugh Steers of Magnetic Scrolls, Britain’s answer to Infocom. She never wrote an adventure game (none of the three founders did; Rob Steggle was their main writer), but worked with the others on the Magnetic Scrolls engine; she also was director of the business, and had an excellent sense of business and marketing, which helped Magnetic Scrolls achieve notable success with their graphical adventures in the late 1980s. Her sister **Georgina Sinclair**, however, wrote much of their game “Jinxter”, as well as a novella (“The Tale of Kerovnia”) for “The Pawn”. The history of Magnetic Scrolls is written in various places, like the Magnetic Scrolls memorial page, which features some interviews; an accessible account of the company is, as always, on Jimmy Maher’s blog:
<https://www.filfre.net/tag/magnetic-scrolls/>
- **Linda Doughty**, who was a very prominent author in the British text adventure scene (under the name Linda Wright, which she does not wish to use anymore). In the words of Gareth Pitchford (read his “Twilight Inventory”, it’s great!): “Mention Linda [Doughty] to any seasoned adventurer and you’re likely to be swamped in a sea of praise for her games. And it’s praise that’s well deserved. Her games are renowned for their quality, devious puzzles and Linda [Doughty] shine.”. She authored half a dozen games, most of them using the PAW system, and had her own label Marlin Software, though her games were later sold by John Wilson’s Zenobi Software. Doughty is, or so I heard, rather shy and modest about her accomplishments, but came out of retirement (sort of) for the 30th anniversary edition of her classic “The Beast of Torrack Moor”, made by Chris Ainsley with graphics by Andy Green, in which she redesigned the pre-game. The game is playable online for free at
<https://adventuron.itch.io/thebeast>
- **the women of St Bride’s**, a community of women in Ireland who authored among the most famous text adventures in Britain in the 1980s. The community obeyed strict rules, and dressed in Victorian-era dresses; their school was described as a “Victorian boarding school”. Computer games, however, were seen as “involving concentration and commitment” (but also, perhaps, a nice opportunity to get their school some publicity); they authored 8 text adventures, among which the excellent “Bugsy”, and “Jack the Ripper”, first video game to achieve 18+ certification. The most in-depth writeup on the collective can be found at
<https://flexiblehead.blog/2014/02/16/st-brides-school/>
- **Mandy Rodrigues**, who was a contributor, and then the editor of the fanzine “Adventure Probe” (a legendary fanzine in the British text adventure scene),

for numerous years. She also founded her own label, Atlas Adventure Software, and wrote a few games with GAC at the end of the 1980s, such as "Atalan" or "The Black Knight", both of which were on the easy side and pretty well-received.

- **June Rowe**, who was very active in the British text adventure scene in the late 80s/early 90s. She wrote for quite a few different fanzines ("Adventure Probe", "From Beyond", "Spectrum Adventurer", etc.), and playtested countless adventures at the time. She was the co-author, with Paul Cardin, of one PAWS adventure: "Jester's Jaunt", which was well-reviewed by Gareth Pitchford (most of the info here comes from his "Twilight Inventory"!).

France

- **Karine Le Pors** is credited in two text adventures along with her then-boyfriend Laurent Benes, "Le manoir du Docteur Génius" et "Le retour du Dr Génius", for the Oric. The first game was one of the first text adventures in French, and is the one that enjoyed the most commercial success, as a launch title for the newly-formed Loriciels, an important game publisher in France in the 80s. Le Pors, who was then in high school, helped with the design of the games, playtesting them, and handling the music (she also helped with the music of Benes's next game, "Le mystère de Kikekankoi"). As far as I can tell, she is the first woman credited in any video game from France.
- **Clotilde Marion** is credited as writer and designer of "Même les pommes de terre ont des yeux" – yes, that's "Even the potatoes have eyes", and the reason is that it is set in a South American dictatorship where spies abound. Your task is to overthrow the local junta and gain support for a presidential election; it is well-made and can be funny, although some of the humor comes in the form of cliché "spanfrench" (? "Frenchañol"?). Marion was interning at Froggy Software, and tried her hand at designing a game, wanting to go further than the inevitable "damsel in distress" trope that was the "story" behind a lot of games back then. She was a student in a Parisian computer science school, and notes wryly in the only interview I know of her (in which the writer tries, of course, to be funny about this whole incredible "woman in video games" thing) that although the field of video games was closed off to women, the computer departments of corporations really was not, and she intended to keep going in that direction.
- **Chine Lanzmann** only wrote one game, "La femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs", which is more multiple-choice than classical adventuring parser. The theme, however, is very interesting: you play as a woman on a computer network (the Apple II's French network Calvados), and try to stop a hacker from harassing you, travelling to different places to the network. It is very interesting to see a 1986 Apple II game about a woman harassed and propositioned in computer chatrooms and in her PMs by men, and is written with a lot of humor. Lanzmann was a fixture of the Calvados scene, and a figure of the French Internet in the 90s and 00s; she now is a coach helping women who want to have a career in tech.
- **Agnès Bonneville** was credited on one text adventure: "Han d'Islande", a graphical adventure game for the Amstrad CPC, adapted from a book by Victor Hugo. She was in high school when her brother François started to program a text adventure, and she and another friend (François Gay), drew all 77 location pictures. I wanted to mention her work also for the following anecdote (issue 18 of "Amstar"): seeing that there was no woman in the game as it was designed, she took the liberty of adding some in and drawing them, then making her brother add them to the game.

Nowadays

If you're interested in the current text adventure scene, you'll find lots of women active in the community. Prominent figures of the English-speaking community include Emily Short (wrote amazing games, contributed heavily to Inform, did lots of advocacy work, contributed to interactive fiction at large – a legend), Jacqueline A. Lott (author of a few very cool games and contributor to the scene for decades, most notably as organizer of ClubFloyd, the Introcomp, and now the IFComp), Steph Cherrywell (a more recently established author, who writes great games and won the IFComp twice), Katherine Morayati (whose work is more on the experimental, boundary-pushing side), etc.; and you should probably check out the games of Laura Knauth, Irene Callaci, Kathleen Fischer, and Suzanne Britton.

I hope you have enjoyed this month's newsletter! And unfortunately I'm sure there's other biographies I could have included there... If you want to add something to this list or correct a mistake, send me an email, I'd be delighted to hear about it!

Next month, I'm planning something a bit special, a tutorial to very easily make your own 8-bit text-based adventures. See you then!