

Racontons une histoire ensemble

History and Characteristics of French IF

Hugo Labrande

From the beginning to the present day, it seems that the language of interactive fiction is for the most part English. The first interactive fiction, *Adventure*, developed by Will Crowther, was written in English, modeled after a cave in Kentucky, and spread via the ARPANET, which was a strictly American network. Later, Infocom wrote games that are considered the canon of interactive fiction, again in English. In the early 90s, TADS and Inform were developed by English speakers, and the majority of the games that were subsequently developed with those two authoring systems were in English. As a matter of fact, at the date of the writing of this article, there are 3732 games in the IFDB, of which 388 are not written in English¹: 90% of all interactive fiction is written in English. The majority of authors, reviewers, and IF critics are thus English speakers, and interactive fiction is mainly an English-speaking genre.

But interactive fiction in other languages exists, though in smaller numbers. As a matter of fact, Inform and TADS have been translated for other languages; translations of Inform libraries are publicly available for eight other languages,² which means one can create a game in each of these languages. The biggest non-English speaking community is the Spanish IF community, mainly centered around the CAAD (Club de Aventuras AD); as for the second biggest, it is unclear: the German community appears to have a lot of games but was thought dead a few years ago³ (although it was apparently reborn last year); the Italian community was very active at the beginning of the 2000s, but their activity has declined since then; the French community enjoys steady activity but possibly fewer games.

As pointed out by a few critics, among them Jeremy Douglass,⁴ the

1 As of January 4, 2011, the count is as follows: 142 games in Spanish, 139 in German, 55 in French, 25 in Italian, 17 in Swedish, 4 in Dutch, 2 in Russian, and 1 (often a demonstration game) in Esperanto, Norwegian, Portuguese, and Slovenian.

2 Found at <http://www.inform-fiction.org/translations/complete.html>

3 [rec.arts.int-fiction](http://rec.arts.int-fiction.com) topic "German IF is dead", June 21, 2007.

4 *Command Lines: Aesthetics and Technique in Interactive Fiction and New Media*, page 17, note 3.

dominance of English in interactive fiction means that most of the histories of the genre are centered around works written in English and thus mention Infocom games as the canon of interactive fiction, from which everything else was derived, and acknowledge them as a major influence, if not the biggest. But as noted by some, while Infocom games were a huge success in North America, their success in other countries where they were also available varies greatly. Therefore, how can we talk of *a* history of interactive fiction that mentions Infocom as a major influence when every other community grew up without Infocom games? As a matter of fact, each other language community has its own history—one could say *parallel* histories—of the development of interactive fiction. Those histories are certainly interesting, as they might, for example, provide other perspectives about the market of interactive fiction (did IF die with the fall of Infocom, or was that a more general trend of the video game market?) and also give the opportunity to those communities to establish themselves as independent communities with their own interactive fiction culture.

Unfortunately, as of today, such histories are sometimes incomplete, and few are available, if very detailed. A few of them have been written by various members of the communities and published in SPAG: a timeline of French IF was written by Grégoire Schneller (“Eriorg”) and is featured in SPAG#47, Russian IF was covered by Sergey Minin in SPAG#48, the history of Spanish IF written by Pablo Martinez Merino (“Depresiv”) was published in SPAG#49, and a special feature about Italian IF (and its history, written by “torredifuoco”) was published in SPAG#51. Those histories are in general fairly long and well-crafted and provide a timeline of interactive fiction in those different communities and languages; however, they remain the only ones of their kind and thus are incomplete: there is much more to say, to study, to look for. Those histories need to be examined more, for they can teach us much more; I hope that in the future, we will see more studies of the genre in other languages, tackling some aspects of interactive fiction with another, different perspective.

As a member of the French-speaking interactive fiction community, I can only speak about this community and its history, for I don’t know any other community—the language barrier, as always, makes it hard to communicate with other communities. In the following, I will try to push further the study of the history of interactive fiction written in French, by talking in more detail about the 80s, a period that hasn’t really been

covered yet. This history of the 80s (as well as, briefly, the modern era) will also allow me to talk in a more in-depth fashion about various technical aspects of French interactive fiction and compare them to those of English interactive fiction (and, more precisely, Infocom games).

The Video Game Market in France in the 80s

Let's talk briefly about the video game market in France in the 80s—and of particular interest to us, the microcomputer market. First of all, we have to say a couple of things about France in the 80s: the country had about 55 million inhabitants, and the currency was the “franc français” (French franc, abbreviated FF). Due to inflation, it is quite hard to give an equivalent in euros (which was worth 6.55957 francs at the time it was introduced in 2002) or any other currency. The rule of thumb is that computers generally cost a few thousand francs, while games cost a few hundred francs.

First of all, it seems that the video game market was not really developed before 1980; a few microcomputers were available, but they were quite expensive. Then came the Sinclair ZX series of microcomputers: the ZX-80 came out in France in February 1980 and was the first microcomputer to be sold at less than 1000FF. The next year, the ZX-81 came out and was the most successful microcomputer at the time in France. It is hard to give exact sales figures for it, but a 1981 ad for this computer states that “tens of thousands of people in France already bought this computer,”⁵ offers a retail price of 790FF (only 500FF for the unmounted version), and states that games on tape are sold at a price “between 50FF and 150FF” (which was really cheap). The computer was sold from 1981 to 1987, at which date its production was stopped in favor of the ZX Spectrum (released in 1984 in France), which didn't sell as well as the ZX-81 (even though its retail price was seemingly as low as the ZX-81's).

The Commodore C64 was released the next year, in 1982, and was extremely successful. Despite of its price (4800FF) and its weight, it was a great success in France: about 1.5 million were sold throughout the 80s, not only for gaming purposes but also as a desktop computer.⁶ The

5 http://www.obsolete-tears.com/Sinclair/pub_zx81.jpg

6 <http://www.obsolete-tears.com/commodore-c64-machine-26.html>

C64 was very successful around the world, which means that a lot of games were available at the time (including classics such as *Arkanoid* and *Pong*). Commodore tried to improve the console with the release of the Commodore Plus/4, which was cheaper (1990FF) but which wasn't as successful as the C64 (partly because it wasn't compatible with C64 applications). In 1985, as machines with better capabilities were sold on the market, the price of the C64 dropped significantly to make it a more affordable machine. Games for the C64 were sold until 1994.

The following years saw the start of a boom in microcomputer sales in France, around the end of 1983 and the beginning of 1984.⁷ Several very successful microcomputers were released during this period, as well as a lot of games: this was truly the start of video gaming in France.

The first microcomputer to initiate this boom is the Oric-1. Oric was a British company (later bought by Eurêka, a French company, in 1985) that sold its microcomputers mainly in Europe; even though the computers had some bugs and issues (for instance with their HyperBasic language), they were affordable and extremely successful in the UK and France. The Oric-1 had 48kb of memory and a processor running at 1MHz. At first it cost 2000FF but was later sold at 1000FF, and it could be connected to the television, making it attractive for every family. In France, in 1983 alone, 50,000 Oric-1 computers were sold;⁸ it was later chosen as "Computer of the Year 1983."⁹ The following year, the Oric Atmos was released (first at 2490FF, then the next year at 990FF¹⁰) and was equally successful, if not more: 27,000 sold in the three months following its release in February 1984, and 120,000 in its first two years.¹¹ The success of those two Oric computers led to the development of a good number of French games, particularly interactive fiction games. The first Oric conceived by Eurêka, the Telestrat, came out in 1986 but sold badly (around 2,000 units).

The next computer that was highly successful in France was the Amstrad CPC. The Amstrad CPC464 came out in September 1984 and was an instant success; the business model was to build a computer that would be cheap, ready-to-use, and sold in supermarkets to attract

7 *Tilt* magazine, July 1984 issue, page 16.

8 We have to keep in mind here that this was before the boom of microcomputers, of course.

9 http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oric_1

10 <http://www.obsolete-tears.com/oric-atmos-machine-23.html>

11 http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oric_Atmos

families. It came out at the price of 2990FF (4990FF with a color screen¹²) and sold extremely well: 2 million units were sold in France in the 80s!¹³ Following this huge success, a great number of magazines about CPC464 gaming were started: the boom of the video game industry was definitely there. Its successor, the CPC6128, came out in 1985 and sold very well too. Those two computers reigned over the video game market in France for years, before the Japanese consoles took over at the end of the 80s, with the Nintendo NES and the Sega Master System.

Apple computers were starting to be successful too. The first Apple microcomputer that was sold in France was the Apple // Europlus (which is basically the same as the Apple //+ but for the European market) in 1980; it did not sell very well, because of some conception mistakes as well as a very high price (12000FF with the disk drive,¹⁴ which was expensive even for a color-displaying computer), but this computer, as we will see, had a very important role in the creation of interactive fiction. The next version of the Apple //, the Apple //e, sold pretty well, but it is the Apple //c that was the most successful: released in 1984, it had a mouse and a color screen and sold really well, though not as well as the previously mentioned computers.

Finally, the Atari ST microcomputers were pretty successful too. The first of them was released in 1985, and a couple of others were released a bit later; the sales of this microcomputer were 6 million worldwide. This microcomputer was attractive for its capabilities as well as its relatively low price (3000FF, a third the price of other comparable microcomputers with color capabilities at the time). Most of the success of the Atari ST happened in Europe rather than in the U.S.; in Germany, 2 million of units were sold, and in France it was 600,000 units.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, in France, a few magazines were exclusively dedicated to this computer, and we will see that there were quite a few interactive fiction games released for the Atari ST.¹⁶

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12 <http://www.obsolete-tears.com/amstrad-cpc-464-machine-5.html>

13 Marion Vannier, head of Amstrad France, in *Les Chroniques de Player One*, p.38 (Éd. Pika, 2010)

14 <http://www.obsolete-tears.com/apple-europlus-machine-37.html>

15 <http://www.albatos.free.fr/ordinateurs.php>

16 It was even the machine used by some members of the community in their youth to play interactive fiction or adventure games.

To sum up, the Amstrad CPC, Oric, and Atari ST computers were the most successful of this period and initiated a boom in the gaming industry in France starting in 1984. Other microcomputers that did well were the ZX, Commodore, and Apple microcomputers. We will see that most of the interactive fiction games developed in the 80s were either for the Atari ST, CPC, Oric, Apple, or even Commodore computers—it seems that the ZX was already too old when the first interactive fiction games were developed.

How about the sales of video games in that period? The July 1984 issue of the magazine *Tilt* featured an article titled “La puce aux œufs d’or” (“The chip that lays golden eggs”) about the rising market of video gaming in France, that it could bring wealth and fame to any good game programmer, as was happening in the U.S. at the time. The article states that since “the number of computers in France is thirty times less than the number of computers in the U.S.”¹⁷ then “while a game can sell between 100,000 and 1 million units there, a French game can only hope for figures 50 to 100 times less.”¹⁸ Later in the article, it is stated that “3,000 units is considered as a good figure for a game.”¹⁹ The creators of a game could ask at the time for royalties between 10% and 25%—that seems high, but considering the sales figures, this doesn’t make the game developers very rich. Still, this article talks about a huge ambition from French publishers to make the most of the boom that was starting at the time; it features comments from Laurent Weill, one of the creators of Loricels, which we will talk about in a bit.

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Now that we have laid out the landscape for video gaming in France in the 80s, let’s focus on interactive fiction *per se*. If we consider the history of interactive fiction as it is in general written, interactive fiction was spawned by the mainframe games *Adventure* and *Zork*, and a bit later by the Infocom games for microcomputers. Does this version of the story still hold for the development of interactive fiction in France?

Where are *Adventure* and Infocom?: English

17 *Tilt*, July 1984 issue, page 16.

18 *Tilt*, July 1984 issue, page 82.

19 *Tilt*, July 1984 issue, page 82.

Interactive Fiction in the 80s

It is widely acknowledged that the first interactive fiction ever was *Adventure*, written in 1975 by Will Crowther in Fortran on a PDP-10 mainframe. This game was widely spread on the American network ARPANET and was a huge success. Following this, a few other games were developed—on mainframes as well; there were clones of *Adventure* but also more and more original games, quite often in the cave-crawling genre as well: *Zork*, developed inside MIT in 1979, as well as Phoenix adventures across the pond in Cambridge, U.K., and a game in Swedish, *Stuga*, released around 1978. The creation of adventures in Cambridge wasn't spontaneous; in fact, it was one of the very few places in the world to have a connection to ARPANET, which means a copy of *Adventure*, and later *Zork*, transited there, spawning interest in interactive fiction.²⁰ *Adventure* was thus incredibly influential, creating a new genre of video game and generating a great interest for the genre—an interest so great that it prompted some players of the games to create their own *Adventure*-like games.

Is the story the same in France? We don't know for sure, but the answer is most probably no. It is very difficult to find information about mainframes in France at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, and unlike the English-speaking community, no ex-mainframe user is part of the French community to provide useful information about them. However, a few things makes us think that *Adventure* could very well have never reached France. First of all, no text adventure in French playable on a mainframe has been found or mentioned anywhere (and if *Adventure* was so interesting and even a bit widespread in France, it is likely that someone would have attempted to create an *Adventure*-like game). Also, it is unlikely that at some point a computer in France ever had a connection to ARPANET: first of all, ARPANET was an American network, and (for all I know) the only international connections of ARPANET were to Norway and the United Kingdom; also, after a French delegation was sent to BBN in 1970, France became increasingly interested in computer networks, and from 1972 was

²⁰ As for *Stuga*, the authors had played *Adventure* and wanted to create a Swedish version: groups.google.com/group/rec.games.int-fiction/msg/70df36d635f1ad19. However, I don't know how the authors managed to play *Adventure* in the first place—maybe the game first transited through the Norwegian connection to ARPANET and then somehow ended up on a mainframe in Stockholm?

involved in the creation of its own network, CYCLADES. Another network, Transpac, was also developed by the French Ministry of Communications, and in the end CYCLADES was dropped in 1978 in favor of Transpac (which was used a few years later for the French network Minitel, which became very commonly used in the 1980s). Thus, it is unlikely that France ever requested a connection to the ARPANET, since it was involved in the creation of its own network; thus it would seem that we can safely assume that neither *Adventure* nor *Zork* ever crossed the English Channel. But even if those games were not known in France, one could imagine that someone would have had the idea of such a game and independently created the French equivalent of *Adventure*; however, as far as I know, this is not the case.

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How about Infocom games—and, more generally, English interactive fiction games? This is a bit difficult to answer, as well: information about it is quite sparse. However, we can say with quasi-certainty that Infocom games were not (or very little) influential; the average gamer of the 80s will most likely quote French games rather than Infocom games. There are several points to consider here: were they influential for developers and game designers, were they well-received by critics, and were they successful in terms of sales figures?

The thing is, the information about the release of Infocom (or English) games in France is very sparse and is certainly a field that would be worth exploring. I thought for a while—maybe as a preconceived opinion, but more likely because nostalgic gamers weren't talking about Infocom games when they were talking about games they played in the 80s, or didn't know those games—that Infocom games simply had never been released in France, or if they had, it was as “import games” that were thus sold at a pretty expensive price,²¹ explaining a small audience. It turns out that this is incorrect: Infocom games, along with some other English or American interactive fiction games, were indeed sold in France, sometimes at an affordable price, and were even reviewed in video game magazines. It is worth noting that those games weren't

²¹ Ciel Bleu, the publisher of the first French interactive fiction game, was previously importing software from Canada to sell at a pretty expensive price in France; Jean-Louis Le Breton, founder of Froggy Software, remembers that his goal was to create French games at an affordable price (200FF or 250FF) compared to the games in English that were then sold at a very high price (350FF or 400FF).

translated and were sold in English, which could have contributed to their lack of influence or success. However, according to a nostalgic CPC gamer, English games became less popular with the boom of the French video game industry around the end of 1984.

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Let's start with Infocom games: by reading old issues of video game magazines of the 80s, I could gather²² quite a lot of information about the release of Infocom games. The earliest reference to any Infocom game is in the December 1983 issue of *Micro 7*; the test of *Le Manoir du Docteur Génius*²³ mentions that “of course, the parser doesn't have the capabilities of Infocom games”;²⁴ this would mean that some Infocom games were available in France around this time.

The most significant trace of Infocom games that can be found is in the April 1984 issue of *SVM: Infidel* is the “Game of the Month”! The magazine reviews it on two pages:²⁵ it talks about the story of the game and the feelies, praises the parser that can recognize a lot of words and sentences, and mentions the presence of verbose and superbrief modes. Several things are worth noting in this article that give clues about Infocom games in France at the time. First of all, Infocom is introduced as “the creators of the famous *Zork*,” which (associated with the previous reference) makes us think that *Zork* had been published in France at the time.²⁶ Then, there is information about the release of the game: the publisher of the game in France is SIDEG,²⁷ the game was first released for Apple //e (the article says that versions for IBM-PC and Commodore 64 “should be released soon”), and it cost 695FF.²⁸

22 With the invaluable help of Grégoire Schneller, who provided most of the references here.

23 More on this game a bit later in this article.

24 *Micro 7*, December 1983 issue, page 137.

25 *SVM*, April 1984 issue, pages 88–89.

26 A name-dropping of an American game that nobody can find in France is an interpretation that makes less sense.

27 A very mysterious company—I could not find any information about it anywhere and thus was unable to determine if they published any other Infocom games in France around this time.

28 Which is a very expensive retail price for a game (about \$120) and is probably the kind of things Le Breton was alluding to (cf reference above). One could at the time find games—and even English games, as we will see—on this platform for about 200FF.

However, even if some magazines occasionally wrote about Infocom games, sometimes even reviewing those games, they were not famous enough to be considered by French gamers as classic games to which you compare other adventure games. This can be correlated with the remark mentioned above: after the boom of microcomputers and video games in France in 1984, a lot of French games were released, and games in English became less common. There are a few references to Infocom games in magazines, though. For instance, in its January 1985 issue, *Tilt* mentions the “good detective game” *Witness*.²⁹ In April 1985, *SVM*, in an article about text adventures,³⁰ mentions Infocom and its “good stories” as well as its “incredible parser [that] has an answer for every sentence in natural language”;³¹ the article mentions the games available in France at the time:³² *Zork*, *Infidel*, *Deadline*, and *Sorcerer*, available on Apple //, IBM-PC, and Commodore 64.³³

The release of the Atari ST and its relative success apparently gave a new platform for Infocom to release its games on. The first issue (September 1985) of *ST Magazine* mentions the software available on this computer; the category “text adventure” (implied: without graphics) is almost entirely made of Infocom games: *Zork* (all three episodes), *Wishbringer*, and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Galaxy* are listed as available, while every other Infocom game³⁴ is listed as “available in October.”³⁵ Another reference in the December 1985 issue of *ST Magazine* mentions the exact same thing: “Every Infocom game is available for the ST. Very high in the U.S. sales charts for years, they require a good knowledge of English to be played.”³⁶ A few years later, in December 1987, the magazine *Atari*

29 *Tilt*, January 1985 issue, page 76.

30 Both text-only and with graphics, but all with a parser, though the article focuses more on the text adventures with graphics since the genre was the most common in France at the time.

31 *SVM*, April 1985 issue, page 115.

32 Though maybe not all the games available, since *Witness* is not in this list even though *Tilt* mentions it four months earlier.

33 Those three computers thus seem the platforms for which Infocom games were released at the time.

34 Every other Infocom game released before September 1985—thus, every Infocom game released before 1986 except *Spellbreaker*.

35 *ST Magazine*, September 1985 issue, page 11.

36 Let’s just note another (hilarious) list made by the same magazine a few years later, in its August 1987 edition (page 55), where the listed Infocom games include *Brimstone*, *Essex*, “*Mind Forever*,” *Mindwheel*, *Sorcery*, and *Skul/West*.

1st lists again some Infocom games³⁷ that are available on the Atari; we note that in this list, a few games are missing, for instance *Hollywood Hijinx*, *Trinity*, and *Bureaucracy*³⁸: it is likely that those games were not released in France, for an unknown reason.³⁹ Unfortunately, no information about the retail price was included in those references. In other magazines, there were occasionally reviews of Infocom games; however, we have to note that the majority of those reviews were written after 1987, and as we will see later, adventure games with parsers were declining at that time.

In a nutshell, that is all we could gather in old magazines about Infocom games. It appears that the games were first released on Apple //, IBM-PC, and Commodore 64; then the games were released in a more systematic way for the Atari ST. It seems that Infocom games didn't enjoy a great success in France;⁴⁰ we could cite as reasons the high retail price (for the first years, at least—Infocom games for the Atari weren't as expensive, probably around 200FF) and the suboptimal choice of platforms,⁴¹ but the main reason is certainly that those games were text-only and in English.

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A word about other games in English. It seems that other games in English were released in France in the 80s, and some of them were more

37 The games listed are: *Ballyhoo*, *Cuttbroats*, *Deadline*, *Enchanter*, *Hitch Hikers Guide to the galaxy* [sic], *Infidel*, *Lurking Horror*, *Moonmist*, *Planet Fall* [sic], *Seastalker*, *Wisbringer*, *Witness*, and *Zork I,II,III*.

38 This game was indeed never released in France; a review of the game in the September 1987 issue of *ST Magazine* (page 54) states: “We found this game. Not in France, but in Belgium.” and “For those who want to play this game, they will have to solve a tough puzzle first: finding the game!”

39 Was it a lack of success of Infocom games, or the beginning of the fall of Infocom, that maybe prompted them to choose their releases carefully in an attempt to avoid losing money?

40 In the September 1987 issue of *ST Magazine* (page 54), the journalist writes, “Every single publisher that tried to sell Infocom games in France ended up with stocks that no one would buy.”

41 Infocom games were apparently never released in France for the Amstrad CPC or for the Oric, which were the two more popular microcomputers at the time; the reason might be that those computers weren't that popular in the U.S., and it would have required more work to adapt the Z-Machine on those computers first to get the European market; in any case, it was perhaps a mistake by Infocom, but it seems that it wouldn't have changed anything either.

successful than Infocom games.⁴²

It appears that some Scott Adams games were released in France and were pretty successful. The versions that were released were the games with graphics published by Adventure International. We can find a quick review of *Saga 1: Adventureland* in the April 1984 issue of *Micro 7*, stating “Scott Adams games are reference games,” and “the next three are now available”; the game was released for ZX Spectrum and Commodore 64, and the retail price was somewhere around 200FF (which is pretty cheap).⁴³ The January 1985 issue of *Tilt* (which featured a lot of tests of adventure games) mentions *The Hulk* (for Commodore 64 and Atari 800; an ad on the next page advertised a retail price of 185FF⁴⁴) and *Voodoo Castle* (for Apple //).⁴⁵ The last reference we could locate is in *ST Magazine* in December 1987, where the games *Questprobe 2: Spiderman* and *Questprobe 3: The Fantastic Four part I* were listed.⁴⁶

A couple of games in English got very good reviews in French magazines and were seemingly quite successful. First, *The Hobbit*, for Spectrum 48K and Commodore 64 (and later, interestingly, for Oric Atmos), had a very good review in the March 1984 issue of *Micro 7*,⁴⁷ as well as in *Tilt* in January 1985.⁴⁸ Then, *The Pawn*, which got very good reviews in Atari ST magazines^{49,50}; as a matter of fact, Magnetic Scrolls games enjoyed quite a good critical success, winning two *Tilts d’Or*⁵¹ in the 80s.

Mystery House was also available in France before 1982 for Apple // and may be the first text adventure in English released in France—we know it was released in France before 1982 for Apple // because it inspired the first French interactive fiction game, as we will see in the next part. We can also quote *Masquerade* on Apple // (a couple of French adventures for Apple // were compared to it by critics), games by Legend Entertainment such as *Frederik Pohl’s Gateway* and *Eric the*

42 Unfortunately, the research about those games is less comprehensive than for Infocom games, leaving room for a more precise and complete analysis.

43 *Micro 7*, April 1984 issue, page 118.

44 *Tilt*, January 1985 issue, pages 71 and 73.

45 *Tilt*, January 1985 issue, page 76.

46 *ST Magazine*, December 1987 issue, page 55.

47 *Micro 7*, March 1984 issue, page 107.

48 *Tilt*, January 1985, page 70.

49 *ST Magazine*, December 1985 issue, page 31.

50 *ST Magazine*, August 1987 issue, page 55.

51 *Tilt d’Or* for Best Graphics in 1986 for *The Pawn*, and *Tilt d’Or* for Best Adventure Game in English in 1988 for *Corruption*.

Unready, as well as games by Interceptor Micro such as *Forest at World's End* and *Jewels of Babylon*⁵²—the latter was actually translated into French a bit later, which is rare enough to be noticed.⁵³

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So why exactly were some extremely successful and influential games in English not successful at all in France in the 80s? The answer is very simple, and it is as always the language barrier. Those influential and originally English-speaking games were never translated into French, and since France is not traditionally a country where English is widespread,⁵⁴ games in English had a more limited audience and thus were not very successful or influential. We note that games in English were imported mostly before 1984: English games were played because there were not a lot of games in French at the time, but as soon as there were more games created by French video games companies (after the boom of the video game industry in France in 1984), it seems that not a lot of people played games in English anymore.

But can we say that, had Infocom games been translated into French, they would have been more successful? It is very hard to say. We could imagine that with such a translation, and considering the quality of Infocom games, more people would have played them in the early years,⁵⁵ leading potentially to a cementation of the genre that could compete with text adventures with graphics. But as a matter of fact, French gamers at the time seemed very attached to adventures with graphics (to put it mildly) and very patronizing toward text-only adventures. For instance, in the January 1985 issue of *Tilt*, a short paragraph titled “One dimension less” talks about some text-only adventures and notes that adventures with graphics are better because they spare the player the

52 The reviewer in *Hebdomada* couldn't get past the first screen, even after trying every verb he could think of, deeming the game “unplayable unless you have a Master's degree in English studies.”

53 Other examples are a translation of *Eureka*, by Ian Livingstone, and four translations of text adventure games by the French company Les Aventures in 1985 for Spectrum.

54 As compared to other countries, such as the Netherlands or in Scandinavia, where learning to speak English is more emphasized (by for instance having TV programs with subtitles instead of dubbing); the traditional cliché is that the French are bad at speaking English, which is probably not too far from reality.

55 Leading potentially to an earlier boom, because there would then have been excellent games on microcomputers?

trouble of imagining things, and the memory excuse doesn't hold for the most recent computers.⁵⁶ The April 1985 edition of *SVM* is harsher, writing in an article about adventure games,⁵⁷ "We have to mention the sinister incarnation, fortunately on its way towards extinction, of games that ignore graphics. For instance the Infocom series [sic] (such as *Infidel*), who think they are even by compensating with a (very good) parser and a broad vocabulary. *C'est un peu court, jeune homme!*⁵⁸" In Generation 4's first issue at the end of 1987, we can read, "The scenarios and the quality of those adventures are why they are among best-sellers in the U.S. In France, it is very different, since we seem to consider that a game in English without any graphics is not a proper game." But were French gamers attached to graphics just because they had the habit of them, or is it deeper than that?⁵⁹ An interesting question, for sure.

And in fact, we may be able to argue that Infocom was in fact quite influential, in a way. Because Infocom games were text-only, you had to be able to read English very well to be able to enjoy the game; whereas with an adventure with graphics, you understood the setting with much less effort and could still advance in the adventure with only rudiments of English (the classic verbs in adventure games, for instance) or a dictionary next to you. Thus, French people were more able to understand graphic adventures; before French adventures were developed, all that a French gamer could play, and thus would play, were graphic adventures. It is then quite logical that the first adventure games in French that were developed featured graphics, since the genre was pretty much the reference for a majority of gamers (and perhaps authors as well); the trend carried on throughout the 80s, and soon enough French gamers couldn't see why they would play adventure games without graphics, seeing text-only adventures as lacking something in comparison. Thus, this (unverified) theory would explain the market of adventure games in France in the 80s: the fact that Infocom games were never translated to French can very well have been somewhat influential in the 80s by bringing gamers to graphic adventures, shaping the landscape of French adventure games for the whole decade.

56 *Tilt*, January 1985 issue, page 76.

57 *SVM*, April 1985 issue, page 115.

58 Quote of a famous tirade of Cyrano in the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

59 After all, the boom of microcomputers happened in 1984, with computers with very good graphics capabilities; could it be that the French were just waiting for graphics to buy computers?

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Now that we have talked about games in English in France, and have seen how even the most influential games (that are part of the canonical, English-biased history of interactive fiction) were unsuccessful in France in the 80s, we can focus on text adventures in French during this period. It all began in the summer of 1982, with a summer holiday in the south of France.

The Birth of Interactive Fiction: Froggy Software

In 1982, Jean-Louis Le Breton was 30 and was living in Paris; he had a band, called “Los Gonococcos”, with Yves Frémion⁶⁰ and Jean Bonnefoy. The band split up, and he sold his keyboards in a Parisian store; in the store next to it, someone was selling back his Apple //+, so Le Breton bought it because, in his own words, “it was the first good microcomputer in France and I wanted to know how all that worked.”⁶¹ Along with the computer, he only bought one game: *Mystery House*, by Ken and Roberta Williams.

As summer was approaching, he went on holiday in the Gers,⁶² with the Apple // in the trunk of his car. He played *Mystery House* and liked it—he states that he didn’t like video games before: the fact that you could move your character around was interesting, but there were too many fights for his liking.⁶³ However, he thought that judging by the quality of the graphics and the scenario, he could easily do as well in a French game.⁶⁴ He thus learned BASIC in a month and programmed what would be the first text adventure game in French: *Le Vampire Fou (Mad Vampire)*. It was a pretty simple adventure, where the goal was to enter the Vampire’s castle to kill him before he killed you. Le Breton rewrote the game shortly after he completed it and published it in 1983. But its publisher, Ciel Bleu (whose previous activities were mainly importing

60 Who ended up being a successful cartoonist in several magazines such as *Fluide Glacial*.

61 http://www.jeanlouislebreton.com/fiches/01.php?id_news=45&SECTION=17

62 Rural and sunny area in the south of France, not too far away from Toulouse.

63 *Wired.com*, excerpts from *Replay: The History of Video Games* by Tristan Donovan, <http://www.wired.com/gamelifelife/2010/06/french-touch-games/>

64 *Idem*.

software from Canada to France), went bankrupt shortly after the release of the game. Moreover, this happened before the success of Apple microcomputers in France (the Apple //e and Apple //c); even if it drew the attention of some magazines as the first interactive fiction game in French,⁶⁵ it is unlikely that the game had a much greater success than other games at the time, and thus the release of the game wasn't exactly a "defining moment."

This story of the first French interactive fiction game highlights some very interesting things. First of all, the date of conception is the summer of 1982, and the date of publication is 1983; at this time, Infocom was already a few years old, had already published the famous and influential *Zork* trilogy (as well as *Deadline* and *Starcross*) and published no less than five games in 1983, while Scott Adams had already created quite a number of games for microcomputers: interactive fiction was already a booming genre in the U.S. when a handful of French gamers discovered *Le Vampire Fou* (which wasn't a long or complex or literary game). Then, we note that the influences of Le Breton for this first game is *Mystery House*: this isn't exactly an interactive fiction game but more an adventure with graphics and a parser. *Le Vampire Fou* is not exactly an interactive fiction game, but it is the first adventure game with a parser that was published in France. This point is of great interest, and we will return to it a bit later.

Le Breton then met Fabrice Gille, the son of a friend of his, who was 18 and had gotten his Apple // a short time before. Le Breton gave him a copy of his game, which was supposed to be copy-protected. Gille cracked it in no time, which impressed Le Breton and prompted him to want to work with Gille.⁶⁶ Both then founded Froggy Software to publish Le Breton's next game, *Paranoïak*; Gille programmed both the software and the copy-protection. *Paranoïak* was Froggy Software's first game and won the Golden Apple 1984.⁶⁷

Froggy Software went on to publish a dozen games on the Apple // before closing in 1987; the main reason for this was that the games were

65 A hilarious photo of Le Breton can be found in the December 1983 issue of *Micro 7* on page 31; but beware of the clichés about French people. (http://download.abandonware.org/magazines/Micro%207/micro7_numero11/Micro%207%20N11%20%28Decembre%201983%29%20-%20Page%20031.jpg)

66 http://www.jeanlouislebreton.com/fiches/01.php?id_news=45&SECTION=17

67 A prestigious award given by Apple every year for games on the Apple // computers.

becoming obsolete because of the rise of the Macintosh. Their games, mostly written or coded by Le Breton, had a particular flavor: they were not serious games at all (“adventure, humour, leftfield and a willingness to make fun of anything”⁶⁸), and they dealt with very different themes than the usual fantasy/sci-fi production of English games: the themes tackled were often political, for example. The games encountered a good critical reception in magazines, prompting the games magazine *Tilt* to dub Le Breton as “the Alfred Hitchcock of gaming.”⁶⁹

Paranoïak was the first success of the company; in the game, the player has to battle against mental illnesses, all with a humorous tone. Then came *Le Crime du Parking*, published in 1984 as well, which had an even greater success; the player has to solve the murder of Odile Conchoux, found strangled in a parking lot, and the game deals (much more seriously, but with silver linings of humor) with themes such as rape, homosexuality, and drug addiction.⁷⁰ *Même les Pommes de Terre ont des Yeux!* (*Even the Potatoes Have Eyes!*), published in 1985, was also a big success: it was set in a South American dictatorship where spies were everywhere (hence the reference to potatoes potentially watching you), and the tone is very humorous.⁷¹

So what were those games like anyway? First of all their parser was quite primitive—it was just a two-word parser, but it could recognize quite a number of words; moreover, the quality of the parser didn’t fluctuate from one game to another, which is a less trivial concern than it may appear at first: Infocom (and others) had the good idea of building the parser in an interpreter that could be used for all of their games, but for other French game companies the quality of the parser would often fluctuate. Second, Froggy Software was the first company to include funny answers to some inputs; the tone of the games was very humorous for sure, but they were the first to include funny default responses in their games, as well as a recognition of curses and insults. Third, all of their games included graphics; actually, most of the screen (about the top three-quarters of the screen) consisted of a picture of the room and the objects. As a result, the descriptions were really sparse, and

68 *Wired.com*, excerpts from *Replay: The History of Video Games* by Tristan Donovan, <http://www.wired.com/gamelifelife/2010/06/french-touch-games>.

69 *Idem*.

70 Apparently, because of that, none of the American editors that Froggy Software contacted to try to get this game published in the U.S. was really keen on doing so.

71 A port of this game in Inform (without graphics) has been done by the author of this article and can be found here: <http://ifiction.free.fr/index.php?id=jeu&j=013>.

the graphics were necessary to advance in the games (though you could turn them off at any time). The only exception to this is the game *La femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs* (*The Woman Who Couldn't Stand Computers*), written by Chine Lanzmann and coded by Jean-Louis Le Breton, published in 1986; this story of a flirtatious, then murderous computer and your adventures on the Calvados network (a French network of Apple // computers that people—among them the creators of the game—used as chatrooms) had seven different endings that you had to complete to win the game. The game was text-only, and the parser was quite primitive since it only consisted in Yes/No answers.⁷²

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So as a matter of fact, every Froggy Software game featured graphics and two-line descriptions.⁷³ But in fact, as we mentioned briefly in the previous part, most interactive fiction games in French that were released in the 80s featured graphics as a prominent part of the game. As a matter of fact, we can say that *interactive fiction didn't exist in France in the 80s*. Interactive fiction as we know it—one can say, Infocom-style IF, or “literary” IF—didn't exist: only a handful of games were text-only, and almost none of the rest were aiming at any kind of literary quality whatsoever. The term “interactive fiction” was never used in the 80s by any game company or any reviewer (at least, none that I know of⁷⁴): people were talking about “adventure games,” “role-playing games,” and then when point-and-click games started, “text adventure games.” The descriptions were sparse at best, and the graphics took up most of the screen (we will detail this a bit more later). And, even if a handful of English-speaking interactive fiction games had been translated into French at the time (such as some from Interceptor Micro), no Infocom game was ever translated into French; game creators in France thus didn't really have a model of literary text-only interactive fiction to be inspired by.

In what follows, we will still continue to refer as those games as “interactive

72 An Inform port of this game was done by the author of the article and is available on the IFDB, as well as the original ROM: see <http://ifdb.tads.org/viewgame?id=brxdd0j3xu8mmgmc>.

73 Very much in the style of *Masquerade*, for example.

74 Note that *La Femme Qui Ne Supportait Pas Les Ordinateurs* was decribed by Froggy Software as an “interactive novel,” a term that wasn't re-used by anyone else, though.

fiction games” but as well as “text adventure games” or simply “adventure games”; the reason is that they are what was the closest to interactive fiction that was available then in France, they had a parser and a keyboard-based input, and some of them didn’t have any graphics.

Other Successful Publishers: Loriciels, ERE Informatique

Froggy Software wasn’t the only successful company that produced text adventure games at the time; around 1984, a few other French game companies achieved a very similar (and in some cases, greater) success by publishing adventures written in French. There are quite a lot of them, for example Titus, Lankhor, CobraSoft, Excalibur, and even Infogrames; in the following part we will talk mainly about two companies: Loriciels and ERE Informatique.

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Loriciels was a company created in 1983 by Marc Bayle and Laurant Weill; the name is a pun between “logiciel” (software) and “Oric” because they first focused on publishing games for the Oric microcomputers. They didn’t just stay on the Oric, and they expanded their area of publishing to the ZX Spectrum (often for adaptations of their Oric hits), then the Amstrad CPC, and later the Atari ST and the Amiga. The company first achieved great success with a non-textual adventure game, *L’Aigle d’Or*,⁷⁵ in 1985, for which they won the first-ever “Tilt d’Or”;⁷⁶ they won a second one for the text adventure with graphics *Le Mystère de Kikekankoi* (*The Whowatwen Mystery*). They were among the biggest game publishers in France in the 1980s, publishing about 150 games in 10 years;⁷⁷ but a stream of financial problems forced the company to shut down in 1993.

75 That can be translated as *The Golden Hawk*; the game was an adventure game where your on-screen character had to progress through a series of rooms in a castle to find an artifact; the game was praised for its atmosphere and its isometric-2D graphics.

76 That can be translated as “Golden Tilt”; it was the Game of the Year award given by the influential video game magazine *Tilt*.

77 Their strategy was to be very open to new games: anyone could send them their game, and they would publish it if they liked it; that’s how they published *L’Aigle d’Or*.

The first text adventure game Loricels published was *Le Manoir du Docteur Génius* (*Dr Génius's Manor*). The game wasn't exactly a success; it was a short adventure where you had to escape a manor filled with traps, with bits of humor but described as lacking in atmosphere and surprises.⁷⁸ The graphics were just lines drawn *à la Mystery House*; the parser recognized quite a lot of actions but was limited to the first four letters. A sequel of this game, *Le retour du Docteur Génius* (*The Return of Dr Génius*) was released in 1985 for Oric as well.

One of their biggest successes in the genre of text adventure is *Le Mystère de Kikekankoi*, released in 1983 for Oric, and then in 1985 for CPC with greatly improved graphics. Once again, this is a text adventure with graphics very much in the spirit of *Mystery House* (for the original version). You find a message in a bottle from a woman imprisoned by a mad scientist; you must rescue her by exploring the city of Kikekankoi and the nearby cave. The game is timed—you have 500 turns to rescue her—and instant deaths are numerous; the parser recognizes about fifty verbs and a hundred nouns (a list of what is recognized by the parser is given at the beginning of the game). The game had a big success upon its release and was praised in *Tilt* as “still enjoyable even if a bit old” in 1985;⁷⁹ it's probably one of the most famous French adventure games of the 1980s.

Le diamante de l'île maudite (*The Diamond in the Cursed Island*) was also a great success in its time; released in 1984 for Oric and 1985 for Amstrad CPC, you had to explore an island to discover a diamond in underground caves. The graphics show a notable improvement compared to those of *Le mystère de Kikekankoi*; the game screen shows a picture, below it the parser, and consistently asks the question “What do you do?” The game is a really long one as well: for the first time, it is likely that not one, but two developers worked on this game. The improvements of the parser system earned rave reviews from the press: the vocabulary was a good size, but what compelled the critics was that the words were completed from the third or fourth letter, and bad words were deleted with a beep; it was also possible to enter several commands at the same time using a slash. This game had great success and is also one of the most famous of the era.

Other quite successful text adventures released by Loricels are *Citadelle* (a role-playing text-only adventure with a parser recognizing 260

⁷⁸ *Tilt*, January 1985 issue, page 74.

⁷⁹ *Idem*.

words), *Tony Truand* (a game with a complex story and 120 locations), *Le pacte* (a horror game created by Eric Chahi, who went on to create *Another World*—known as *Out of This World* in the U.S.—several years later), *Han d'Islande* (an adaptation of a novel by Victor Hugo; featured graphics but also a noticeably longer prose than usual), and *Orphée* (with graphics, a sidebar indicating the characters in the area and the inventory of the player, and the parser above the graphics; the game was beautiful but very hard).

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ERE Informatique was created in 1981 (which makes it one of the oldest French video game companies) by Philippe Ulrich and Emmanuel Viau. They released a variety of games in diverse genres, but their biggest hits were text adventure games; all of their games were released only for the Amstrad CPC. They were bought by Infogrames in 1986, allowing them to focus more on the game crafting aspect and less on the commercial aspects. However, financial and royalties problems with Infogrames led to the closure of the studio several years later, in 1989, with most of the designers leaving to found another video game company.

One of the most famous games by ERE Informatique was the *SRAM* series (*SRAM* and *SRAM II*, both released in 1986). In those widely acclaimed games, the player is on a strange planet,⁸⁰ and a huge political change occurs; a hermit and a witch call for your help to get Egres IV on the throne. In the second game, Egres IV has become a bloodthirsty sovereign, and you have to dethrone him. The tone of the game is humorous, though the humor in the game is more subtle than for other games at this time; the world is a sort of medieval world with anachronisms—there are fire extinguishers—and influences from other genres, which makes for an incoherent but funny setting. The graphics of the game were praised and were top-notch at the time of its release. The game itself required a lot of work from the three authors, Serge Hauduc, Ludovic Hauduc, and Jacques Hemonic: the first game underwent nine months of development (and the second required three months); still, both games are pretty short games. The game sold very well and was a massive hit for ERE Informatique.

Another famous game was *Le passager du temps* (*The Time Passenger*),

80 The title of the game read backwards surely gives a clue about the planet.

released in 1986. This game was another great success for ERE Informatique: using a simple but well-crafted story (your uncle disappeared, and you are traveling through time as you're looking for him), the game manages to stay long and difficult; the graphics were praised, but the most beloved feature of this game is the cat that appears in the sidebar, commenting on the action in a humorous tone.

Perhaps the most acclaimed game by ERE Informatique is *L'arche du Capitaine Blood* (*Captain Blood*), released in 1987; it sold well in France, as well as in many other countries.⁸¹ While it's not interactive fiction *per se*, it's still worth mentioning for its conversation system: the game has 120 icons you can combine to form sentences to communicate with the aliens you encounter in the game; this system required a lot of work by Philippe Ulrich, who reportedly wrote tens of pages of dialogue with the aliens. This novel conversation system (that wasn't really emulated later) was praised, as well as the graphics and the sound; the story is a fairly complex sci-fi story of clones and aliens. We note that this is one of the first cases of a successful point-and-click game, paving the way for the golden age of the genre a few years later, and taking the adventure game further from interactive fiction.

Other interactive fiction titles published by ERE Informatique are *Oxphar* (an adaptation of a play, set in a medieval-fantasy world; the reviews praised the graphics as well as the wit and poetry displayed by the game; the parser was a simple two-word parser, with the feature that the game could learn new synonyms for verbs), *Harry & Harry*, *Crash Garrett* (a humorous and almost parodic story about undercover Nazis in the U.S. in the 1930s), and *1001 BC*.

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As we saw with the example of these two publishers—surely among the most successful publishers of adventure games in France in the 80s—interactive fiction wasn't really common; the games were more text adventures with graphics. However, they share common paradigms with “literary,” text-only interactive fiction; the games underwent a period of evolution throughout the 80s, and different systems and game design concepts were tried. In the following part, we're going to attempt a transversal survey of IF in French in the 80s: rather than enumerating games chronologically, we're going to enumerate topics in interactive

81 It charted first in France, Germany, Italy, and the U.K. and sixth in the U.S.

fiction design theory and see how they were addressed in various games of this period.

The “French Touch”: Interactive Fiction in France in the 80s

The production of adventure games in French in the 80s was very diverse, as well as numerous: hundreds of games were released, with different themes, different interfaces, different tones, and the genre was extremely popular at the time. Enumerating all the games published during the period would be tedious, and to be fair quite useless; instead, we are going to attempt a review of the genre throughout the 80s in a transversal way, looking at some characteristics of adventure games rather than the games individually. This methodology will allow us to see better the evolution of the genre, as well as its specifics.

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The first point we are going to discuss is the form of the games. As we said before, most adventure games with parsers in France featured graphics, and that is what the gamers and reviewers were really used to and liked. Text-only adventure games were not really successful, and as a matter of fact a bit patronized by reviewers, who saw text-only adventures as a thing from the past (before adventures with parsers as a whole became a thing from the past at the end of the decade). Is that to say that no text-only adventure game in French was ever released? As a matter of fact, almost. Browsing through countless adventure games with parsers released at the time, I was only able to find a handful of them that were text-only, which makes me say that 99.9% of French text adventures in the 80s featured graphics;⁸² let's have a look at this list.

There is Froggy Software's *La femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs* (*The Woman Who Couldn't Stand Computers*),⁸³ written by Chine Lanzmann

82 Even of bad quality: one can find a remark in the January 1985 issue of *Tilt* (page 76) about how some (quite dishonest) developers drew beautiful graphics for the title menu and the first few rooms, while the rest of the graphics looked quite bad, the goal being to lure the player with a promise of quality graphics.

83 The ROM for this game is actually hard to find, but an Inform port of this game was done by the author of this article and is available here: <http://ifiction.free.fr/index.php?id=jeu&j=029>.

and coded by Jean-Louis Le Breton, released in 1986. The story is as follows: your computer went crazy and tries to seduce you; adventures on the Calvados network⁸⁴ ensue, with seven different endings you must explore to win the game. The game is text-only, but it is still a very particular type of interactive fiction: the parser only recognizes Yes or No, and the story unfolds by choosing your answer to questions the characters sometimes ask you. However, the setting is quite clever and noteworthy. The game looks like an online chat with different characters, along with system messages (such as “Connecting network... Done”), and there is absolutely no description of an external or imaginary element. you could almost think that what happens in the game is in fact happening to you. The only thing that reminds you that it is a game are the title screen and the ending screen (the only two illustrations of the game).

Another text-only game was *Citadelle*, published in 1984 by Loricels. This is seemingly the first text-only adventure⁸⁵ and was presumably not a huge success.⁸⁶ Still, the game was praised by *Tilt*,⁸⁷ noting that the game was long and offered quite a lot of challenges for the adventurous gamer; the only drawback they note was the absence of graphics, which made the combats boring (they could consist in a succession of “You miss. The groll misses. You miss. (etc.)”).

The other text-only games I could find are CobraSoft’s *Dossier G: l’Affaire du Rainbow Warrior*⁸⁸ (*File G: The Rainbow Warrior Scandal*), published in 1985, which seems more a CYOA than a regular text-adventure and doesn’t seem to include graphics; *Mission secrète à Colditz*, released by Soracom in 1986.

This completes the list of text-only adventure games in French released in the 80s. Interestingly, it seems that *Citadelle* is the only text-

84 A French network for Apple // computers, using the Transpac communication network, that featured services such as chatrooms, email, message boards, and online news (via the Agence France Presse). The network was used by Jean-Louis Le Breton (under the alias “Pépé Louis”), Chine Lanzmann (“Chine”), and other online friends, who all make a cameo in the game.

85 Though the review of the game in *Tilt* describes it as “the first RPG entirely in French.”

86 Numerous articles about Loricels state that *L’aigle d’or* was their first successful game.

87 *Tilt*, July 1984 issue, pages 54–55.

88 Inspired by the Rainbow Warrior scandal of the summer of 1985, in which French intelligence sank a Greenpeace ship while it was stationed in New Zealand but got caught. The whole affair was revealed to the public, creating a scandal in France.

only adventure game with parser released in France in the 80s, making it possibly the only interactive fiction game in French of the decade.

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Since virtually almost all French text adventure games featured graphics, we will talk briefly about the different type of graphics in those adventure games.

The first text adventure game in French, as we said before, is *Le Vampire Fou* by Jean-Louis Le Breton. Le Breton had the idea of writing such a game after playing *Mystery House*, by Ken and Roberta Williams, on his newly acquired Apple //+; as a result, the graphics in *Le Vampire Fou* are simple lines drawn on the screen.⁸⁹ This style of graphics can actually be found in a couple of other games. For example, the early game *Le Manoir du Docteur Génius*, published in 1983 for Oric and the first game published by Loriciels, has similar graphics;⁹⁰ its sequel, *Le Retour du Docteur Génius*, was published in 1985 with similar graphics, though slightly better (some areas are colored on the screen, and the drawing is simply better done). This style of graphics, a consequence of limited graphics capabilities of the microcomputers on which they were released,⁹¹ quickly disappeared with new computers with improved graphic capabilities. The only noteworthy attempt was the 1985 CPC game *Bad Max*;⁹² the story is heavily inspired by *Mad Max*, the music of the game was composed by the Alan Parsons Project, and the game also features line-drawn graphics, with an interesting (and in retrospect, quite funny) twist: the game is in “Stereo-3D,” that is to say everything is drawn twice, once with red lines and once with blue lines a few pixels away, presumably creating a 3D effect when playing the game while wearing the 3D glasses that went along with the game.

Later, games had better graphics, but the design remained unchanged. This was the design chosen by Froggy Software:⁹³ the graphics are on the upper part of the screen, and the descriptions and

89 As seen here: <http://grospixels.com/site/images/vampirefou/vampirefou02.gif>.

90 One can wonder if the graphics here are inspired by *Mystery House* or by *Le Vampire Fou*.

91 The Apple //+ and Oric-I could only display a handful of colors, and the display was quite imprecise as well. Thus, every adventure game that was published for the Oric-I had similar graphics, such as *Le Mystère de Kikekankoi*. The next generations of those computers, the Apple //c and Oric Atmos, could display more colors.

92 http://cpcrulez.fr/GamesTest/view.php?game=bad_max

93 Such an interface design is comparable to the one in *Masquerade*.

parser are below. This design can be found in almost every Froggy Software game, as well as in games such as *Le diamant de l'île maudite* (Loriciels, 1985), *Atlantis* (CobraSoft, 1985), *Attentat* (Rainbow Productions, 1986), *Le Pacte* (Loriciels, 1986), *La cité perdue* (Excalibur, 1987), and many others.

Another, different interface was also very popular: the graphics were embedded in a frame at the center of the screen, and there was a sidebar to the right, with the parser either above or below the picture frame. While not totally revolutionary, this interface could be quite beautiful and allowed some improvements—the sidebar could be used to list the exits, the inventory, the objects or characters present in the room, or even, as in *Le passage du temps*, a cat that was commenting on the action. This kind of interface was used in games such as *Le mystère de Kikekankoi* (Loriciels, 1985, CPC version), *Orphée: Voyage aux Enfers* (Loriciels, 1985), *Oxphar* (ERE Informatique, 1987), *Le passager du temps* (ERE Informatique, 1987), *La Chose de Grotenburg* (Ubi Soft, 1988), *Excalibur Quest* (Excalibur, 1988) and *L'île oubliée* (Bruno Fonters, 1993).

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As always in this type of game, the quality of the parser is always vital; there were numerous systems and improvements that were designed over the years.

As for *Le Vampire Fou*, the parser was extremely primitive: it seems like a two-word parser (that didn't recognize a lot of words), but in fact opening the ROM file with a simple text editor shows that the actions that you had to do to progress in the story were hard-coded! This was obviously not a very good parser, and it could only get better.

The vast majority of the parsers of this era were simple two-word parsers, that quite often only recognized the first few letters of a word. As a matter of fact, the reviews of some games (such as *Conspiration de l'an III* by Ubisoft in 1988) state that those games were correcting typos, but it is possible that the game in fact only recognized the first few letters of each word. The fact that only the first few letters were recognized was cleverly hidden by *Le diamant de l'île maudite* (Loriciels, 1985): the game had an auto-completion feature that recognized the word after the third or fourth letter was input by the player and deleted words it didn't recognize with a bleep. This clever feature (praised by

critics⁹⁴) accelerated the input for the player: everyone wins.

Interestingly, there is one major difference with interactive fiction companies in the English-speaking video game scene: the fluctuation in quality of the parsers. Typically, the most famous companies that produced interactive fiction in English had a parser that was designed and improved inside the company and used for all the games the company produced; in fact, in general it was not just the parser that was identical: the games were created in a programming language that was internal to the company and then played embedded in an interpreter.⁹⁵ Surprisingly, this system wasn't really used in France; the only company that reused the same parser several times was Froggy Software—and it's probably because Jean-Louis Le Breton was a programmer on the majority of Froggy Software's games (he probably reused some code he wrote for other games). But as for other companies, the parser was seemingly rewritten every time, leading to parsers of uneven quality (for example, in 1985 Loricels published *Orphée: Descente aux enfers* with a parser that could recognize complex sentences—such as “X, take key to Y”—as well as *Le diamant de l'île maudite* that had a two-word parser that recognized 90 words⁹⁶). As a consequence, there wasn't really an increase in the quality of parsers over time, which means that even at the end of the decade, some games commercially released by relatively successful companies could have a parser of very bad quality.

A particularity of the parsers in text adventures in French of this era was that they reacted to insults. The first games to do so were games by Froggy Software (which had in general a humorous tone): upon input of an insult, the game reacted in various ways: in *Même les pommes de terre ont des yeux*, a picture of a big and ferocious man was displayed, and the only way to continue playing was to type what he asked, that is to say “pardon à genoux” (“bowing my head and sorry”), whereas in *La femme qui ne supportait pas les ordinateurs* it was just a “Oh, that's cheap!” A lot of subsequent games—especially the ones with a humorous tone—also recognized the input of insults and reacted in various ways: sometimes by insulting the player back,⁹⁷ or more creatively.⁹⁸

94 *Amstrad Magazine*, February 1986 issue.

95 This is the case for Infocom, Magnetic Scrolls, and Level 9 Computing games.

96 *Amstrad Magazine*, February 1986 issue.

97 *SRAM* (ERE Informatique, 1986) displayed a picture of a pig, saying “Here's a photo of you last year.”

98 *Oxphar* (ERE Informatique, 1987) displayed “You have to clear this infamy!” and the game suddenly changed to an Arkanoid-style mini game where you had to break

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As for the tone of the games, we have to notice that a lot of them were humorous. The first one, *Le Vampire Fou*, had funny descriptions—and more generally, most Froggy Software games featured quite a lot of humor in the descriptions and the answers of the parser.⁹⁹ Numerous other games, even if they featured a long and complex adventure, had an overall funny tone or occasional funny descriptions; for example, *Le passager du temps* memorably featured a cat to the right side of the graphics, which could occasionally provide hints and commented on the action, leading to a lot of puns and pop-culture references. But in fairness, a lot of the humor displayed in the games wasn't exactly subtle; when badly done, this kind of humor would lead to games that aged quite badly and were not exactly noticeable for their literary qualities. As a side note, the fact that a lot of text adventure games featured a lot of humor (in their descriptions and answers to the player) in an otherwise normal setting and adventure is an artifact that we don't really find in later French adventure games of any kind. Most point-and-clicks that were released by French companies didn't feature this sort of compulsive humor; apparently, this was a phenomenon that was limited specially to text adventures in the 80s.

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Finally, let's talk a bit about the themes, settings, and stories told by these text adventures. It is interesting to note that the themes were very different from adventure games in English, which very often featured fantasy and sci-fi themes. Instead, French interactive fiction seems to have had a lot of games with an historical setting: Ancient Greece (*1001 BC*, ERE Informatique, 1986), the French Revolution (*Conspiration de l'an III*, Ubi Soft, 1988), World War II (*Mission Secrète à Colditz*, Soracom, 1986). A great variety of periods were explored¹⁰⁰—with more than a

the bricks forming the word INFAMY—which, according to reviewers, could take some time!

99 In *Même les Pommes de Terre ont des Yeux!*, a game set in some South American military dictatorship, the default response “I don't understand” was the parser saying with a strong parodic Spanish-inspired accent that he didn't understand what you were saying.

100 It seems that French people have a particular taste for history; in video gaming, it is shown by, for example, the success of *Les voyageurs du temps (Future Wars)* by Delphine Software, or by the French studio Cryo Interactive (in collaboration with

few times the excuse of a time-travel machine (*Le passage du temps*). The more common among historical games were certainly games set in the Middle Ages (*La geste d'Artillac*, *SRAM*, *Montségur*, *Les Templiers d'Orven*, etc.); this may seem pretty logical, as fantasy settings are classic adventure game settings and offer a lot of challenges to the player as well as a very particular atmosphere. However, it is worth pointing out that there actually seem to be more games with a Middle Ages setting than games with a fantasy setting.¹⁰¹ Fantasy is certainly an English genre, and while the genre has become more and more popular in France, the “real” Middle Ages is a period that is part of French culture and that surely is familiar to more people. Speaking of typically English-speaking genres, there are very few French text adventures with a science-fiction setting.¹⁰² There are also quite a variety of games that were set in a contemporary world, with, as Tristan Donovan points it out,¹⁰³ some adventures deeply grounded in reality and sometimes news: the publisher CobraSoft published games like *Meurtre à grande vitesse* in 1985, set in the French high-speed train TGV in which you have the two hours between Paris and Lyon to solve a murder, or *Dossier G: l'affaire du Rainbow Warrior* in 1985 as well, echoing the affair of the Rainbow Warrior that everyone in France talked about in the summer of 1985;¹⁰⁴ there was also *Mokowe* (Lankhor, 1991), which was about poachers in Kenya. Finally, the horror genre was quite popular as well.¹⁰⁵

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Here are, in a nutshell, some of the aspects of French text adventures of the 1980s; as we can see, there are quite a few particularities that are worth noting, both as interesting for the history of the craft of French text adventures at this time as well as in comparison to other text adventure scenes. We will now move forward a bit in history to talk

the French National Museum Reunion) authoring a very successful series of more than a dozen 3D point-and-click adventures, each in a different historical setting—Pompeii, Versailles, Greece, China, Aztec Mexico, etc.

101 That quite often blend in role-playing elements, in fact—among others, *Citadelle*.

102 Compared to the six science-fiction games written by Infocom.

103 <http://www.wired.com/gamelifelife/2010/06/french-touch-games/>

104 As an interesting side-note, CobraSoft was the only French publisher I know that included some kind of feelies with some of their games: included with *Meurtres à grande vitesse* were some clues that the player was to discover in the train, such as a tape or some nails.

105 With games such as *Le Vampire Fou*, *Le Manoir du Docteur Génius*, or *Le Pacte*.

about the end of text adventures in France, at the end of the 1980s.

When Adventure Games Take Over: The Downfall of Interactive Fiction

As the 80s came to a close, it seemed that interactive fiction and adventure games with parsers were less and less common and more and more considered as a thing from the past.

This is easily seen in reviews of games in various magazines. Actually, it seems that starting in 1988, the critics considered text-based games as a prehistoric genre—even though successful text adventures came out as late as than two years before! For example, the game *Mike & Moko*, published by MBC¹⁰⁶ in 1988, got a fairly positive review in *Micro News* that still expressed not understanding why MBC was wasting good ideas (here, an adventure playable by two players simultaneously) by using an overused, worn-out gaming form; the review starts with, “The kings of adventure games with keyboard-input commands (though this genre disappeared years ago) strike again!”¹⁰⁷ Another game, *Le Maraudeur*, released by Ubi Soft in 1989, gets a review in *Amstrad Cent Pour Cent* that rates the game fairly poorly, starting with, “Here is one of the last adventure games in the direct style of old games,” and stating (with a bit of humor), “The style of the game is not surprising at all, since it’s exactly the same as the old games (those released last year).” With this comment, it is as if in 1988, the critics suddenly felt (or maybe just decided) that the genre of the text adventure with graphics was old and outdated.

What happened in 1988 (or the year before) that triggered this sudden qualification of text-based adventure games as an outdated genre? We’ll have to look at the history of adventure games and the games released around this date to find some clues about what happened; and in fact, we find that we can consider 1987 as the year in which mouse-controlled adventure games became massively successful. In this year, ERE Informatique released *L’arche du Capitaine Blood*, which didn’t use command-line prompts but rather point-and-click systems and

¹⁰⁶ A French publishing company that specialized in text adventures with graphics; created pretty late (1985), it published half a dozen games before going bankrupt, and it designed its own authoring language, Jade/Jadis.

¹⁰⁷ http://cpcruelez.fr/GamesTest/view.php?game=mike_et_moko

an icon-based conversation system; the game was extremely successful and an evident artistic success, with critics praising every aspect of the game,¹⁰⁸ and it enjoyed very good sales in Europe and around the world. 1987 was also the year of the release of *Maniac Mansion* by LucasArts Studios: this game was also very successful, established LucasArts as one of the best developers around, and popularized the system of point-and-click with a few action verbs. It was also the year of the release of *Le Manoir de Mortevielle* (*Mortville Manor*), developed by the French studio Lankhor; it was a point-and-click game set in a manor, where you had to solve a murder mystery. The game received very good reviews (noting its stunning voice synthesis feature) and is still considered a classic French adventure game. This combination of no less than three classic point-and-click adventures in the same year surely generated a lot of attention to the point-and-click system as a very welcome change (easier to manipulate, better graphics, and coincidentally better games); we can easily think that when text adventures with somewhat weak parsers, still pictures, and stories that weren't as good as the aforementioned games were released after them, the comparison wasn't particularly flattering and quite possibly made them look outdated.

In the following years, quite a few successful point-and-click adventures were released as well: as for classic French adventure games, we can list for instance *Les Voyageurs du Temps* (*Future Wars*), published in 1989, *Maupiti Island* (the sequel of *Le Manoir de Mortevielle*) in 1990, and *Croisière pour un Cadavre* (*Cruise for a Corpse*) in 1991. The LucasArts games also enjoyed some success in France around this time. This means that from 1987 to the beginning of the 1990s, numerous good point-and-click adventure games were released in France; the text-based adventure games, already considered as an outdated genre, couldn't rival this new genre, and soon enough the genre was becoming extinct.

Soon enough, the only publisher that released new French text adventures was Lankhor—and paradoxically, Lankhor was the publisher of *Le Manoir de Mortevielle* and *Maupiti Island*: the company made both text adventure games as well as point-and-clicks that supposedly ended up killing the text adventure genre. In 1990, *La secte noire* got some nice reviews—it is described in the September 1990 issue of *Joystick* as a “very classic, but still enjoyable, adventure”;¹⁰⁹ its sequel, *La crypte des maudits*, was published in 1991 and had as a feature an improved parser: it was

108 The game won the “Tilt d’Or” the same year.

109 http://cpcruelez.fr/GamesTest/view.php?game=la_secte_noire

equally well received.¹¹⁰ *Mokowé* was one of Lankhor's last games, an adventure about poachers in Kenya, with features such as activity in the village and in the jungle depending on the time. It was a very hard game but also very interesting.¹¹¹ Lankhor published a couple of other text adventures, as well as some point-and-clicks. Unfortunately, for reasons that remain unclear, they stopped making text adventures. They actually lost a lot of money with their 1993 point-and-click game *Black Sect* (only 3000 units sold, because of a mediocre interface and too-easy puzzles), which apparently prompted them to review their strategies and stop the development of some games. They ended up not making any more adventure games of any kind: from 1992 until its closing (in December 2001, because of some financial difficulties), the studio only made racing games.

Upon examination of the history of different studios of the time, we can note a very interesting pattern. In 1985, Elliott Grassiano, who worked at the time for Loricels, founded Microïds with the help of the founders of Loricels; Microïds went on to be very successful, creating the famous adventure game series *Syberia*. Eric Chahi, who wrote *Le pacte* for Loricels, later worked for Delphine Software and created *Les voyageurs du temps* (*Future Wars*), *Another World* (otherwise known as *Out of this World*), and *Heart of Darkness*. When ERE Informatique went bankrupt, a lot of the people who were working on its games founded Cryo Interactive, which became a very successful company, creating for example *Under a Killing Moon*, *DragonLore*, *Chroniques de la Lune Noire*, *Faust*, and a series of historical adventure games in 3D that were successful in France (with titles such as *Versailles* and *Egypt:1156 B.C.: Tomb of the Pharaoh*). Also, we can note that Infogrames and Ubisoft, founded in the 80s, published quite a number of text adventure games during this period (but not only text adventures). The pattern here is that a lot of the people involved in the creation of text adventures in France in the 80s went on to work on a variety of other adventure games that were very successful worldwide, prompting some critics to talk about a "French touch" in adventure games: the people that created the French touch had the opportunity to create text adventures first, and we can thus think of those text adventures as precursors of this French touch.

After the last Lankhor text adventure (in 1991), this seems to be the end of text adventures in French. I couldn't find any other text

110 http://cpcrulez.fr/GamesTest/view.php?game=la_crypte_des_maudits

111 <http://cpcrulez.fr/GamesTest/view.php?game=mokowe>

adventure on any computer with a date of release later than 1992. Thus, in a very similar fashion to what happened in other communities—the English and Spanish ones, for instance—the genre seems to be definitely dead. In fact, it is just hibernating, as we will see in the next part: for the French community, springtime came at the beginning of the millennium.

The 2000s: The Genre Rises from Its Ashes¹¹²

The year 2000 saw the resurrection of interactive fiction—at least, an organized attempt to centralize the interest in interactive fiction, both playing and creating. The Yahoo! mailing list “Inform_fr” was created this year and featured discussions about “French adaptations of Inform text adventures [as well as] discussions about translations and creations of ‘interactive fictions’ [sic] in French.” Several members of this mailing list stuck around and are still active members of the French community.

The real kickstart for French creation of modern interactive fiction in Inform is certainly the translation of the Inform 6 libraries. The translation was done by Jean-Luc Pontico, who released them in January 2001, along with *Aventure*, the (first-ever) translation of the classic game *Adventure*. The next year, Eric Forgeot released a demo of *Le pouvoir délaissé*, an upcoming game; this was the first attempt at the creation of a novel French interactive fiction game, but unfortunately it is still unfinished to this date (the author moved on to other games instead).

The first completed original interactive fiction game is *Filaments*, by JB Ferrant. The story of the game is about a young girl, Margot, living in Paris and uncovering strange and surreal events; the game is mainly an adventure game, with quite a bit of humor as well, but mostly serious (and even dramatic) events. The game is fairly long and unfortunately has a few annoying bugs, but it remains a very good game; it is most certainly a modern game as well and features no graphics. It was translated to Italian later the same year and won the Best Game in Italian of the Year award.

JB is actually a very important author in the French interactive fiction community, if not the most important. After authoring the first original French interactive fiction game, he went on to release a couple more

¹¹² The interested reader can refer to the timeline of modern French interactive fiction written by Eriorg and published in SPAG#47; this timeline is fairly complete up until 2006. It is available from here: http://www.ifwiki.org/index.php/History_of_Interactive_Fiction_in_French.

games in 2004 and 2005. He then undertook a huge project, a very ambitious game named *Ekpbrasis*; it is actually the first French game with graphics, sound, and music and is a long game featuring a fine arts teacher traveling around Europe (complete with actual photos of the monuments he visits) to uncover a mystery involving forgers and Renaissance art. Recently, he released *Works of Fiction*, his first game in English; unfortunately, no French version of the game is available. He also participated in a handful of Speed-IFs.

The next step in the development of the French interactive fiction community was the creation of a message board in August 2004 in an attempt to centralize the people interested in reading interactive fiction (both in French and English) and creating it too. The forum has been moderated by Eric Forgeot and remains quite active today, as more and more members (and potential authors) have joined the forum since its creation.

Eric Forgeot is a central figure in the French interactive fiction community; under his pseudonym “Otto Grimwald,” he has been the moderator of the forum for years and often gives technical advice to young authors who ask for help on the forum. He authored quite a number of games, winning the French IF Comp in 2007 with *Les Heures du Vent* (*Hours of the Wind*) and participating in every Speed-IF event that was organized. He also provided a few technical advances to the community, as he created the Inform 7 extension that allows the creation French games with it (he has been using Inform 7 for his games since it was out), as well as translating the libraries for JACL and Hugo into French and creating a Linux Live-CD complete with IDEs, interpreters, and games to get started in interactive fiction. Recently he wrote a tutorial for Inform 7 for *lesiteduzero.com*, a famous French website that compiles a variety of tutorials for programming languages, which brought new people (and potential authors) to the community.

The French interactive fiction community was becoming more and more organized; it was only a matter of time until an equivalent of the IF Comp was created. The idea was prompted by “Stab” in April 2005, and thus the first French IF Comp (or Minicomp, because of its small number of games that are entered every year) was organized by Eric Forgeot shortly after. The French IF Comp has been organized every year since then and features in general no more than four or five games; it always provides an opportunity for people to try to complete a project of theirs, and the community, though small, tries to get involved as much

as possible.

The first French IF Comp saw five participants entering: the winner was Adrien Saurat, with a humorous one-room game called *Le cercle des gros geeks disparus* (*Dead Geeks Society*); he went on to win the 2006 edition with a post-apocalyptic game called *La Cité des Eaux* (*City of the Waters*) and the 2009 edition with a story of chimney-sweeping men in an underground city, *Catapole* (this game was played in an “international edition” of Club Floyd in 2010¹¹³); as a matter of fact, he won every edition of the French IF Comp he entered. He was also a participant of the first two French Speed-IFs in 2007; he recently entered IntroComp 2010 with a game called *Plan 6 From Inner Earth*.

Another event among the French community was its participation in the Commonplace Book Project: as part of a museum exhibition about the Commonplace Book by H. P. Lovecraft, several interactive fiction games were created using themes from this book. About half a dozen games were written in English, but the French community (as well as the Spanish one, as a matter of fact) participated in this project; various members of the community wrote a chapter using a sentence from the book, and the various chapters were tied in a Glulx game (with pictures and music) that was ultimately shown at the exhibition. This was the first (and to this date, the only) game created in a collaborative effort, and was quite a success.

Interestingly, the French community also rediscovered the concept of Speed-IF and organized four of them, the first one being in the summer of 2007. A few of these games were actually expanded by their authors to lead to reasonable-sized (and reasonably bug-free) games. Moreover, the organization of such Speed-IFs prompted the organization of a Speed-IF in English (organized by Jacqueline A. Lott, who is also a regular visitor to the forum) on the theme “The Francophones stole the spirit of Speed-IF!”

The Contemporary French-speaking IF Scene

Judging by the very different history of French interactive fiction, one can ask how, and to what extent, the contemporary scene is shaped by this history.

113 A transcript of the session is available at the ClubFloyd website: http://www.allthingsjacq.com/intfic_clubfloyd_20100704.html.

The answer is brutally simple: no direct legacy of this history remains among the contemporary scene. In fact, no author of the contemporary French-speaking IF scene declares to be influenced by any 80s games whatsoever, and a lot of them didn't discover interactive fiction because they played it back in the 80s; moreover, French games that were published in the 80s are seen as outdated, with very little to learn from them. The contrast with the English-speaking scene is striking: a lot of people writing and playing interactive fiction in English played Infocom games, or Scott Adams or Magnetic Scrolls or even Phoenix games; *Curses*, the first game written in Inform, has been described (even by its author) as an interactive fiction exactly in the style of Infocom games; Infocom games are still praised as being the canon of interactive fiction and for their literary qualities and inventiveness. In comparison, the contemporary French-speaking interactive fiction community barely makes any reference to 80s adventure games in their discussion or in their creations, and the history of 80s text adventures in France is not very well known to the members of the French interactive fiction community (as shown by the present article, which is an attempt to write this history for the first time ever).

In fact, we could say that there is no common interactive fiction culture that ties the members of the French interactive fiction community together. This is a major difference from the English-speaking interactive fiction community. Is that bad? In a way, yes, but it is actually a double-edged sword. Surely it is a drawback: the fact that no company creating interactive fiction in the 80s was as extremely successful as Infocom means that not a lot of people were playing interactive fiction in the 80s, and if they did, they might not remember such games as extraordinary, breath-taking, epic adventures. In fact, the great success of Infocom probably relies on two factors: the availability of their games on every microcomputer, and the quality of their games, which were long, epic, hard, and very pleasant adventures. Neither of those factors are present in the 80s French interactive fiction scene. The games were for the most part exclusive to one platform, and some were available for only a couple of computers; moreover, they aged pretty badly and were quickly considered as outdated. As a result, while a lot of English-speaking people played and enjoyed Infocom adventures and can nowadays find games that are very similar to them, a significantly smaller number of people played interactive fiction in the 80s, and even though they probably have their favorites among those games, they

appear outdated, a thing from the past. Moreover, their form was very different from what interactive fiction is nowadays: there is no automatic identification between modern interactive fiction and 80s interactive fiction. Conjugating all those factors, this leads to a very, very small audience for interactive fiction in French, and this is an enormous drawback; surely the success of an interactive fiction company such as Infocom would have given the French community a bigger base of players and potential authors and might even have shortened the “hibernation period” we mentioned before. As another proof for this, we can take a look at the Spanish community: the company Aventuras AD created interactive fiction games from 1988 to 1992 and was massively successful, spawning a great interest in interactive fiction, creation of fanzines, and so forth. The community then entered a hibernation period and woke up in 1997, with the creation of a newsgroup (and then a mailing list, and then a website with forum) about interactive fiction, and the same year the first competition was organized.¹¹⁴ the success of Aventuras AD (as well as the interest generated by the success of this company) gave the Spanish community a wealth of potential players and authors and makes this community bigger¹¹⁵ and older than the French community.

But in a way, not having canonical references for what good interactive fiction is means that canonical interactive fiction in French is still yet to be written: the community is only a few years old and has the opportunity to attempt to create influential games and explore new game design and storytelling paradigms. Moreover, since the community, as well as the number of games, is small, a lot of the members of this community have played the majority of French games, and this hopefully creates an exchange, a reciprocal influence that can make the whole community aware of what is done in itself and give authors new ideas,

114 SPAG #49, “A History of Spanish IF”

115 Another possibility to explain the size differences would be to take into account the number of people speaking Spanish/Castellano worldwide (half a billion) and the number of people speaking French (a quarter of a billion). I don’t know if, as it seems to be the case in the French-speaking community, a lot of people playing interactive fiction in Spanish are Spanish; if it is the case, then considering that France has 65 million inhabitants when Spain has 45 million, this would definitely prove that the ratio of people playing IF in Spanish is greater than the ratio of people playing IF in French. But even if we consider the worldwide numbers, the Wiki of CAAD shows that the average number of games released in a year is about 25, when in the French community 10 released games means a good year; the ratio still seems higher.

which in return will influence other authors.

But this affirmation is to be contrasted: as a matter of fact, a lot of people in the community can read or speak English and thus can play English interactive fiction games. As a consequence we cannot really talk about French IF as a “closed world” where everything is yet to be (re-) discovered. In fact, the French-speaking IF community is very much aware of what happens in the English-speaking community and sometimes talks about various events happening in it; a lot of (and perhaps even the majority of) French-speaking authors played, and continue to play, interactive fiction in English. Thus, a lot of the IF theory that is discussed in various newsgroups, forums, or webzines is known to the French-speaking authors; they know about game design, storytelling, conversation systems, and other important questions, as much as an English-speaking author knows. Thus, as any other author, their creations and designs are built upon these theories: French-speaking games are every bit as modern as English-speaking games. But unfortunately, it is unlikely that a debate about an aspect of the theory of interactive fiction, or a novelty in a game, will have any influence on English interactive fiction: the language barrier, as well as the fact that the English-speaking community is a busy one, means that very few people of the English-speaking community will look at what the French community (or as a matter of fact, any other community) produces and talks about.¹¹⁶

Still, if authors of interactive fiction in French know about what the English community is discussing, how and to what extent are they influenced by interactive fiction in English? First of all, it turns out that a few of the members of the French-speaking community played some Infocom games before joining the community, either at the end of the 80s on their microcomputer¹¹⁷ or by rediscovering those games on abandonware websites;¹¹⁸ once again, Infocom games created an interest

116 Very few people from the English-speaking community had a look at what was produced by the other communities; the only examples I know of are reviews of *Ekphrasis* by Emily Short (personal website) and Felix Plesoianu (SPAG #47), a translation of *Olvido Mortal* by Nick Monfort, and playthrough of *Catapole* at ClubFloyd last year (organized by Jacqueline A. Lott, who is also an occasional contributor to the forum of the French community).

117 Cf. SPAG #47, “Interview of Adrien Saurat,” and Eriorg’s presentation post on the community forum.

118 Such as Samuel Verschelde (“Stormi”), who found *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Galaxy* and *A Mind Forever Voyaging* on such a website and then discovered the French-

for interactive fiction for some people. But even though some people played those classic games, they are not quoted as a major influence among the community. They are not considered as “classics” in the community,¹¹⁹ but those who played them agreed that they are indeed very good games. Instead, the French community plays a lot more games from the modern era—as we mentioned before, the French community keeps up with what the English community is doing. Sometimes, it’s a modern English game that prompted someone’s interest in interactive fiction—for example, JB Ferrant’s first interactive fiction game he played was *Aisle*.¹²⁰ More generally, a lot of members of the French IF community play interactive fiction in English, either Infocom’s games or more recent ones,¹²¹ but very few cite them as major influences.

But then what exactly are the influences of the French-speaking IF community? What prompted the interest in interactive fiction of the members of the community? There are multiple answers¹²². It appears that in almost all cases, people stumbled on a game that they liked and that made them continue their search for interactive fiction, then landed on the forum of the community;¹²³ some of them had already played this kind of games before,¹²⁴ whereas for some¹²⁵ it was a totally new

speaking interactive fiction community.

119 But again, there don’t seem to be a lot of games considered universally as “classics.” There are several reasons behind this: no common interactive fiction culture and little heritage left by the 80s (thus no potential “old classics”), perhaps even a reluctance to call games written in English “classics” (because some people potentially can’t read English), and a very young community that hasn’t produce a lot of games yet. The only candidate could be the first French game, *Filaments*—we’ll talk a bit about this later.

120 SPAG #47, “Interview of JB”.

121 Cf. various sources, such as SPAG #47 (“Interview of Adrien Saurat”) and the list of played games on the IFDB profile of Eric Forgeot (“Otto Grimwald”), Grégoire Schneller (“Eriorg”), Samuel Vershelde (“Stormi”), and myself.

122 For a more detailed account of those factors, the interested reader may have a look at the presentation topic in the community forum (<http://ifiction.free.fr/taverne/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=7>), as well as the interviews of JB Ferrant and Adrien Saurat in SPAG #47.

123 This is actually not true for some of the most recent members, who found the tutorial for Inform 7 posted by Eric Forgeot on a famous website of tutorials of programming languages; information is lacking concerning the origin of their interest in interactive fiction.

124 Such as Adrien Saurat, Eric Forgeot, and Grégoire Schneller.

125 Such as JB Ferrant, Benjamin Roux, Samuel Vershelde (who describes having been dumbfounded when he found (in 2000) that this kind of games existed), and myself.

discovery. The games that people stumbled upon were sometimes Infocom games,¹²⁶ sometimes modern interactive fiction games in English,¹²⁷ but quite often modern interactive fiction games in French. In fact, *Filaments* can be considered as a cornerstone in this regard: a lot of people that joined the community after its release said that they found this game and loved it, prompting them to look for more games of the same kind.¹²⁸ *Filaments* may in fact very well be considered as the first classic of the modern era of French-speaking interactive fiction. But as a matter of fact, other games in French are sometimes quoted as being the game that generated interest in interactive fiction.¹²⁹ But interestingly, it seems that the members of this community share very similar interests that could somehow explain (or be put in relation to) their interest in interactive fiction—other than an interest in computers and programming. Those influences are, among others, CYOA books,¹³⁰ role-playing¹³¹ (with, interestingly, a few authors of interactive fiction being or having been game masters in various role-playing games), role-playing computer games,¹³³ and quite logically adventure games.¹³⁴ Those influences may possibly be quite common in other communities such as the English one, of course, but they are worth mentioning here for the

126 Such as for Samuel Verschelde and Adrien Saurat (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to Galaxy*) or Benjamin Roux (*Zork*).

127 Such as for JB Ferrant (*Aisle*) and Grégoire Schneller (*Savoir-Faire*).

128 Such as for Grégoire Schneller (who played *Savoir-Faire* first, but didn't really like it, and then played and loved *Filaments*) and myself.

129 Such as the aforementioned winner of the French IF Comp 2006, *La cité des eaux*, or even the humorous one-room “few-moves” *Les espions ne meurent jamais* (*Spies Never Die*).

130 CYOA books were very popular in France in the 80s and the 90s. They were edited in France by Folio Junior under the collection *Un livre dont vous êtes le héros* (*A book in which you are the hero*), which incidentally is the name most people now use to talk about gamebooks. Several series were translated and edited, such as the *Fighting Fantasy*, *Lone Wolf*, and *Sorcery!* series, as well as numerous books by Herbie Brennan. The *Choose Your Own Adventure* series of gamebooks is, however, unknown in France.

131 In fact, JB Ferrant collects the Steve Jackson gamebooks (he says he has over 300 books now), wrote three gamebooks (that can be bought on his website), and his second interactive fiction, *La Mort Pour Seul Destin* (*Death as Your Only Fate*) is an homage to the *Sorcery!* series of gamebooks. I myself was an avid gamebook player (around 50 books) in my youth.

132 Such as for JB Ferrant, Jean-Luc Pontico, and Adrien Saurat.

133 With the *Ultima* series being quoted as a reference, as well as *Baldur's Gate*.

134 The *Monkey Island* series seems to be a reference for most people, as well as the *Myst* series, and countless others.

reason that few people in the French-speaking community came to it (and became part of the “modern era” interactive fiction community) because they knew interactive fiction from games they played in their youth, for instance: we’re looking here at possible influences that could, by their similarity to interactive fiction,¹³⁵ explain why most people became interested in interactive fiction when they first discovered it only a few years ago. Trying to figure out what are the previous influences of the newcomers in interactive fiction is useful to determine which fields are closely related to interactive fiction (thus possibly giving some clues about what interactive fiction is similar to and what characteristics are similar), as well as understanding what can bring people to interactive fiction (and what potential audiences can be interested in interactive fiction). Furthermore, it is easy to determine those influences for the French community, because it is a small community where, so to speak, everyone knows each other.

Finally, let’s have a look at the games produced by the French community. It might not be very relevant to try to find any pattern in the games created by this community, because the number of games, as well as (and perhaps more importantly) the number of authors, is very small: there are about 60 original games belonging to this “modern IF” era,¹³⁶ and the number of authors is about a dozen.¹³⁷ Thus, the patterns we may end up finding depend too heavily on individual preference. We’ll then just note that a lot of games have a contemporary setting; also, fantasy and medieval games are very well represented (as well as a couple of “historical” games set in some ancient period).¹³⁸ We can also note

135 What those influences had obviously in common with interactive fiction were things like interactivity, puzzle-solving, and branching narratives; we could probably find more.

136 We have to note that some of them are actually games created by a young author to get more familiar with an authoring language.

137 Actually, there are exactly 16 authors, only 9 of whom authored more than one game.

138 The *Wired* article that we quoted before wrote that French games of the 80s had very different themes from the games written in English; far away from fantasy and sci-fi, French adventures were more rooted in reality, said the article. This is actually still true, as most recent IF games in French are set in our modern world, and very few belong to the sci-fi genre. As for the fantasy genre, it is indeed a bit represented, but medieval settings are very common in French adventure games (thus making a fantasy setting maybe less far-fetched): it was represented in the 80s by games such as *Citadelle*, *Montségur*, and *La geste d’Artillac*, and as for recent IF, a lot of games by Eric Forgeot have a medieval setting, out of personal interest it seems.

that quite a few games are actually very short,¹³⁹ and games in general are of short length;¹⁴⁰ however, this doesn't seem to be too peculiar when compared to modern interactive fiction in English, for example.

In a nutshell, contrary to bigger communities, the contemporary French-speaking interactive fiction scene is not influenced by any previous history of interactive fiction; this actually harms the community, because interactive fiction is not an established genre in the eyes of a certain gaming audience, and it lacks any reference point in the past that players could associate with interactive fiction. This is, in a way, a totally new genre, which can deter players from trying it, as well as the fact that there will be no nostalgic players that discovered and/or participate in the modern scene to relive similar experiences from games they played in their youth. Thus, the community is still very small, and it seems that its audience is equally small. Interestingly, the members of the community thus have different and composite influences, which surely leads to different approaches, tastes, and takes on interactive fiction—but in fairness, the community is probably too small and too young to make this mean something.

Conclusion and Perspectives

The goal of this article was to present a history of, as well as some more general perspectives about, the French-speaking interactive fiction community. As we saw, this community is very different from the English-speaking community on many levels.

Writing the history of interactive fiction in French in the 80s for the first time, we saw that this history was a very different one from the one (centered on English-speaking countries) that is usually told. The influence of Infocom games is negligible to non-existent; as a consequence, the form of interactive fiction in French in the 80s was closer to adventures with graphics and a parser than to purely text-based games. We also saw that while a few companies were fairly successful, none of them had the success or the influence and the market dominance of a company like Infocom;¹⁴¹ the reasons are numerous,

139 Because of the games created to get familiar with the programming language, as well as Speed-IF games, but not only.

140 The only long games are actually JB's *Filaments* and *Ekephrasis*, as well as Loïc B.'s *Largo Winch* and *Enquête à hauts risques*.

141 On the other hand, the French interactive fiction scene did enter a state of

from the late blooming of the market, thus giving them less time to get established as giants before the rise of point-and-click adventures, to the possible concurrence between skilled studios, or even a lower literary quality that made that games sometimes quickly outdated.

The consequences on the contemporary French-speaking IF scene are very important: because interactive fiction didn't have as much success in the 80s—and in fact one could argue that they simply didn't exist before the modern era—the community lacks a large base of players (and potential authors) that could probably have been brought by a greater popularity of the genre some decades ago. The community has found some other influences, and various people from diverse backgrounds are now part of the community. Still, even if the community seems to have reached a maturity and a stability that ensures that it will continue to create and stay active for some years, things are not looking wonderful: the community is still very small and doesn't seem to grow (or to increase its potential audience significantly by reaching out to more players) very fast. This created a paradoxical situation in the community, where the few authors that keep the community alive are sometimes tempted to write their own games in English so that they could be played and reviewed by a greater number of people. The fact that very few English-speaking interactive fiction players play and review any game that's not written in English contributes to a sort of one-way relationship that could be harmful to every other, non-English-speaking community.¹⁴² Of course, the English-speaking community is hardly responsible for that; the “culprit” is the language barrier, and the fact that English is nowadays widely acknowledged as the global language. This is a challenge that the French community has to face: to manage to keep a healthy number of games published in French while looking for ways of reaching new audiences—for example by making their work more well-known among the English-speaking community. This is definitely a crucial time for this community, and there is certainly a lot to do for its members.

hibernation very similar to what happen to the English and Spanish communities, probably because of the rise of the point-and-click genre; the fact that the whole genre didn't rely on one enormously successful company didn't prevent this hibernation.

¹⁴² This is seemingly what happened to the German community for a time, where every German author switched to English as the language of their games because it would attract more attention to their games.

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