>Remember

By Hugo Labrande
Issue #1 : Sierra's first translation

I recently had the pleasure of doing some research on the (pre-)history of French text adventures. It is an area that's not been explored very much; in collaboration with Alexis Blanchet, who recently wrote with Guillaume Montagnon a very well-researched book on French video games, I decided to explore the 1979-1983 period. One of the finds I was the most excited about was the discovery of Sierra's official French translations of their early games, which had been forgotten and were unknown even from specialists.

I am not going to tell you what Sierra was, and who Roberta and Ken Williams were. I would like to note, however, that two books on the history of Sierra Entertainment recently came out: "The Sierra Adventure" by Shawn Mills, and "Not All Fairy Tales Have Happy Endings" by Ken Williams. Reviews seem to indicate that those books actually largely complement each other, so unfortunately, you'll have to buy both :) If you'd like to read more on the early days of Sierra, Jimmy Maher's blog is very informative and has a number of very well-researched articles on the subject. Read for instance both articles on Mystery House:

> https://www.filfre.net/2011/10/mystery-house-part-1/
> https://www.filfre.net/2011/10/mystery-house-part-2/

Mystery House VF

The very first game we're going to talk about in this newsletter is On-Line Systems's first game, "Mystery House", which single-handedly invented the genre of the graphical text adventure. This was Roberta Williams' first game, which started her rather long and celebrated career as a creator of adventure games. "Mystery House" was created, as the story goes, on the Williams' kitchen table, and published in 1980 for the Apple II.


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YOU ARE IN THE FRONT YARD OF A LARGE
ABANDONED VICTORIAN HOUSE.  STONE STEPS
LEAD UP TO A WIDE PORCH
---------------- ENTER COMMAND?
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In 2019, Jason Dyer was continuing his project on his blog Renga in Blue :
https://bluerenga.blog/all-the-adventures/
His goal is to play every single text adventure in chronological order – and, additionally, attempt to find out as much as possible on these games. (If you don't know his blog, go check it out, it is amazing – and thanks to his work finding and cataloguing text adventures, some long-lost games are found again; for instance, it was his blog that prompted the recovery of **Wander**, the first known attempt at text worlds and adventures, from 1976.)

This time, he found and rescued (thanks to the Wayback Machine) a very rare game, which is the first text adventure in French – which will be the subject of a future article (I have lots of things to tell you about this one too!). In his article and in the discussion that followed on the French forums (ifction.free.fr/taverne), he mentioned having read something strange: apparently, there was a French translation of *Mystery Hou*se. Nobody on our forum had heard about this; Laine Nooney, one of the world's specialists of Sierra On-Line, wrote an article on her blog on Sierra's (or, rather, On-Line Systems's) second-ever ad, published in the summer of 1980, and expresses astonishment at the fact that a French version of Mystery House is mentioned:
http://www.lainenooney.com/blog/sierra-ad-2
 I myself had never heard of it!

And then, one of our members, "Yoruk", finds the disk image of "Mystery House VF" - the "VF" standing for "version française". You can find it here:
https://mirrors.apple2.org.za/ftp.apple.asimov.net/images/non-english/french/misc/On-Line%20Systems%20-%20Mystery%20House%20%28in%20French%29%20cracked.dsk
It seems to have been put on Asimov, a prominent FTP repository for all things Apple II, in 2018, quietly. We then speculate: since the name of the file says "(cracked)", is it an official version? The title screen mentions "Malibu Microcomputing – Tom Nalevanko": is it hacker's name, or the translator's name?

Malibu Microcomputing?

Jason Dyer was able to answer this one: it would seem like the name of the translator. In fact, Mailbu Microcomputing was a real software house at the time. Just take a look at page 3 of this magazine from Novermber 1980:

> http://www.introni.it/pdf/Micro_30_1980.pdf

And Jason even sent a magazine that has a catalog (page 52) that mentions "Malibu Microcomputing; contact: T. Nalevanko" , which is exactly the name that appears on the screen:

> https://archive.org/details/micro-6502-journal-35/page/n53/mode/2up

Note that the ad mentioned above says that the Malibu Microcomputing software is available in Europe, at SIVEA, in Paris. SIVEA was a very large computer shop in Paris at the time; they took ads in French magazines from 1979 to the mid-80s, and had several locations in Paris and throughout France. They will pop up again soon.

However, we should exercise more caution: digital archeology, as championed by John Aycock, must be rigorous and not go too fast in its deductions. How do we know this is an official version? That it's the one mentioned by Sierra in their ad? For starters, it would seem odd that a software house that takes ad in magazines and works with distributors everywhere else would run the risk of translating and distributing an unofficial translation of On-Line Systems' game. Furthermore, a recent video game archeology article by Aycock and Biitner (both from my *alma mater* the University of Calgary) also talks about the French translation (page 11 of the article):

> https://journals.equinoxpub.com/JCA/article/view/36745/pdf

By inspecting the code of the French version, the authors conclude that Nalevanko likely had access to the source code when translating the game. And, well, there's also the fact that Ken Williams himself told me, in a reply to one of my emails, that he remembers doing business with Tom Nalevanko for this translation – though he can't remember many details.

"Les micros ne manquent pas de fantaisie"

The next question we can ask ourselves is whether this translation was distributed in francophone countries. And the answer is yes! Let's start with France: around this time, in France, there were essentially two magazines dedicated to computers: "Micro-Systèmes" (more geared towards professional users) and "L'Ordinateur Individuel" (for hobbyists). Lucky for me, both magazines have been digitized (most issues, at least) by volunteers over the years, at this amazing website (a must-see if you're looking for old French computing magazines):

https://abandonware-magazines.org/

By perusing every single issue of "L'Ordinateur Individuel", a time-consuming task that nevertheless game me a lot of insights and scoops, I was able to find some information on the distribution of "Mystery House VF" in France – in fact, it appears in numerous ads over the years! The first time I could find it was in an ad by SIVEA (remember these guys?) in the december 1980 issue:

http://download.abandonware.org/magazines/L%20Ordinateur%20Individuel/ordinateurindividuel_numero0023/Ordinateur%20Individuel%20023%20-%20Page%20109%20%281980-12%201981-01%29.jpg

(This is six months after On-Line Systens released the original game in the United States, which quite frankly seems like a miracle to me for the time.) The game is sold 250 FF (remember "francs francais" before the euro?), which wasn't too expensive for the time, as most games ranged from 150FF to 400FF. On the same listing, "Hi-Res Adventure 2" sells for 220FF, as does "Adventure Microsoft".

We then keep seeing the game pop up in ads for a few years: SIVEA sells it for 290FF in December 1981, and also in the summer of 1982; in November, they even add a little blurb, saying "An adventure in hi-res, very much like "And then there were none" by Agatha Christie; find the murderer before it kills you! Adventure **in french**, 305 FF". That's the last time I could find the game in SIVEA's ads, but other resellers seem to have it: JCD says they have the French version at the end of 1982, while others like SIDEG or STA just say "Mystery House". We know for a fact that the English version was also sold in France at that time: Jean-Louis Le Breton, who I need to tell you about one day, remembers buying the English version in May or June 1983 with his first Apple II.

The fact that SIVEA sells the game, and that Malibu Microcomputing had a working relationship, leads us to think this was Nalevanko's version that was sold. We have, however, a stronger proof of that, which was brough to my attention by Alexis Blanchet. At the time, there was a magazine about games – board games, chess, go, checkers, mathematical games, etc. - that was popular in France named *Jeux et Strategies* – and they were starting to take notice of these new-fangled computer games. They started to talk more about these, starting with an article titled "Les micros ne manquent pas de fantaisie" ("Micro[computer]s aren't lacking in whimsy", roughly) by Pierre Berloquin, in issue number 9. In that article, they talk about video games they were impressed with, including the French translation of *Mystery House*. And guess what: there are screenshots, including a screenshot of the title screen, and it clearly shows "Malibu Microcomputing – Tom Nalevanko"! This is about as solid of a proof as we can expect from such an undertaking. Here is a scan of the article:
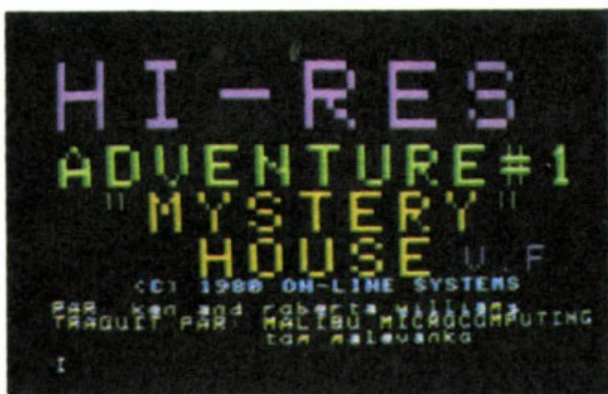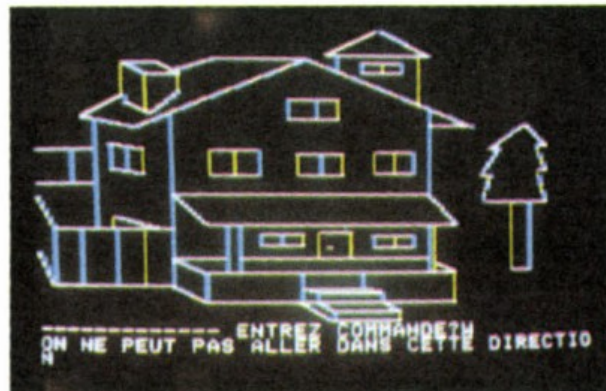
1. première surprise : le jeu est traduit (ouf !!)
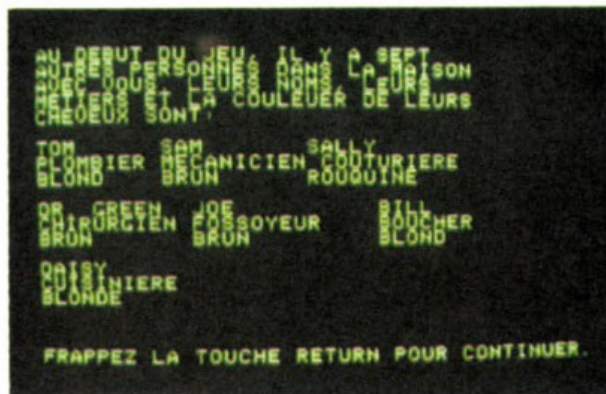
2. attention : vous ne serez pas seul !
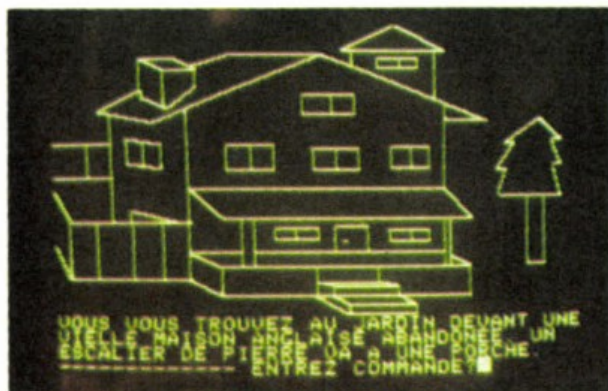
3. « entrez commande » ; mais laquelle ?

4. ...manifestement pas celle-là !

Let me also mention briefly other francophone countries. There is proof (in the *Ordinateur Individuel* ads, once again) that a shop in Brussels, Belgium was selling this translation as well around 1982. As for Quebec, there is actually a Summer 1982 catalog from one of Quebec's first software houses, Computerre, that mentions "Maison Mystère", with the "Mystery House" cover:

https://www.brutaldeluxe.fr/products/france/computerre/computerre_catalogue_ete1982.pdf

(Note that Quebec laws prohibit English names, at least for works in French, which is probably why "Mystery House VF" wasn't the title in that catalogue.)

What about the game itself?

You've probably all played *Mystery House*, and know what to expect: classic wireframe graphics with colors that bleed a little bit, sudden deaths in the purest Roberta Williams style... One can wonder about the quality of the translation; and, well, I don't think that French was Tom Nalevanko's first language. Even though the text is understandable, there are very odd phrasings that sound wrong to a native speaker. In fact, I was able to find two different reviews of this translation by professors of French, who were trying to see if this game was a good way for students to learn French. (The question "Can IF help with learning a language?" is apparently as old as translations of IF, and unfortunately there hasn't been much progress on that question for 40 years...) Their answer was a resounding no: sure, the game is fun and might motivate students to learn more French, but the translation is of rather poor quality, and the game accepts misspelled words (a limitation of the parser, which only looks at the first few letters of the word). And – gasp! - there is no

way to type accents! An entertaining read, and one that confirms what my impressions were on the level of French on display here.

In any case, if you want to experience that translation (to see how rusty your French is), there is an interesting quirk: the parser still accepts the commands in English, as if that had never been disabled, or as if Nalevanko forgot to disable it. You can thus play the game by reading the descriptions, and typing the commands in English! If anyone gives that a go, be sure to let me know!