KINEPHANOS

From Importers to Designers and Publishers: How Distributors and Computer Stores Helped Shape the French Video Game Industry

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Abstract

The birth of the French video game industry, focused on microcomputers, is generally considered to have taken place in 1983, when France shifted from an import industry – importing mainly from the United States – to a creative industry. Distributors and particularly microcomputer retailers, as the first companies established in France, played a prominent role in these transformations of the industry. Most of the establishments of the time became distributor-publishers, retailers, and wholesalers who also published, like Ellix, Video Telemat Report and Innelec. These structures laid the foundations of the new industry, while assembling the first groups of developers, and giving them access to the market system.

Keywords

Video game, microcomputing, distribution, video game industry, France.

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Though research on video games in France has developed in recent years, we still know little about the history of the video game in France, and about the birth of the video game industry in particular. Currently, the best study on the subject is a chapter by Tristan Donovan in his essay entitled *Replay* (Donovan, 2010, p. 124-137). Academic work has been sparse, and often limited to a few master's dissertations (De Oliveira, 2008) or papers (Mustar, 1988). These studies generally focus on the rise of video game publishing and development companies, often choosing to overlook the conditions in which they originated.

Recent work has shed light both on the difficulties of the French video game industry faced with international competition around the first generation of consoles, and on the important role played by foreign machine imports in the development of the video game market (Audureau, 2014, p. 123-134). From the mid-1970s to early 1980s, France was chiefly an import market structured by machine and software distribution and marketing companies. However, the 1980s witnessed the birth of a game software industry, around prolific publishing companies like Loriciels, and in the context of the rise of the European industry, largely focused on microcomputers, thus forming a "system of experience" typical of the European industry – the expression is borrowed from Mathieu Triclot, who identifies several game regimes, i.e., the university game, the arcade game, and the home game (Triclot, 2011 p. 98), each of which is characterized by its own logic and distribution network (Sidre, 2014). What then are the conditions in which the industry originated, and how did the shift from import to creative industry occur in the early 1980s?

Before answering this question, we will first review the manner in which distribution companies developed before 1983, which marked a turning point for the industry. The second part of this paper will focus on 1983, and on the publishing activity developed at the time by stores and distributors. Finally, I will seek to evaluate how these distribution companies contributed to the nascent French video game industry.

Sources

Few archive collections related to the French video game industry have been preserved, and fewer still are freely accessible to researchers. Worth noting is the existence of one significant collection I have had the opportunity to use in the course of this research, that is, the archives of Bertrand Brocard, manager of the Micros et Robots store in Chalon-sur-Saône, and founder in 1983 of the Cobra Soft publishing company (De Oliveira, 2008). To complete these archives, I have used for the most part trade publications (particularly *L'ordinateur individuel*, *Tilt,* and *Hebdogiciel*), with a focus on the promotional material found inside (Noyer, 2001). Several interviews were also conducted with key players of the time. Finally, using methodologies taught in material bibliography and the history of the book (Sidre, 2014), I have studied video game packages, and the traces they contain. It must however be noted that very few packages and games from the time period studied here, i.e.,

the turning point of 1983, have been preserved, be it by the various associations[1] or by state institutions.

I / Microcomputers and video games in France: the state of things in 1983

A) Before 1983, an import industry

The French video game market developed roughly in three stages that will be reviewed here. To begin with, there was the arrival of first-generation consoles in France in the mid-1970s, starting with Magnavox's Odyssey around 1974-1975. The presence of these consoles increased throughout the 1970s, even leading to the appearance of an early French creative industry. An example of this is the Société Occitane d'Électronique around Toulouse, which created several machines.[2] This industry did not, however, develop further (Andureau, 2014).

The video game market truly began to get off the ground with the arrival of the mass-produced microcomputer, i.e., the Apple II in September of 1977, along with the TRS-80 and the Commodore PET, in the spring of 1978,[3] which, by 1982, constituted three-quarters of the 70,000 machines existing in France (Brémond, 1982, p. 233). Not only did these machines give an initial boost to the microcomputer market in France, they also came with a significant array of game software that was imported by several stores. They proved to be very popular.

However, it was not until 1980, and the arrival of second-generation consoles that the market began to thrive. Four consoles in particular established their dominance: the Videopac,[4] the Atari 2600, the Intellivision and the Colecovision,[5] imported between 1980 and 1983. It was during this period that the market truly took shape.

[1] I used, in particular, the collections of MO5.COM, an association located in Paris.
[2] The Société Occitane d'Électronique, founded in 1976 in Toulouse, developed several models of *Pong*-type video game consoles – notably the Occitel consoles –, and also took part in the first projects to develop computer sciences in schools (Audureau, 2014). However, the company ceased its operations in June of 1980. DISABEAU (Christophe), « L'informatique individuelle : un peu d'histoire », *L'ordinateur individuel* n°36, April 1982, p. 157-161.
[3] These dates are found in "46 ordinateurs de 900 F à 25 000 F" ("46 Computers from 900 to 25,000 francs"), a feature published in *L'ordinateur individuel* n°3, December 1978, p. 36-52.
[4] The Videopac was the equivalent of the Odyssey 2 imported by Philips.
[5] In 1983, the four consoles were already said to dominate the market, according to Christian Gros and Rémy Pernelet, in *Jeux vidéo*.

B) The rise of distribution networks

1° Microcomputers and early market structuring

Let me begin by emphasizing the fact that during the 1970s and a good part of the 1980s, practices of video game and microcomputer product distribution and purchase were highly diverse. It is worth noting, in particular, that direct imports were common.[6] Consumers ordered the products that interested them from other countries, and even from the manufacturer itself, sometimes to save money, but quite often because there were no distribution networks that were both efficient and sufficient to supply the local market.

Video game distribution networks began to take shape when the three main microcomputer manufacturers, Apple, Commodore and Tandy, having restructured their resale networks in the United States in the late 1970s,[7] went on to reorganize the distribution of their machines in Europe, often setting up processes that reached beyond borders – Tandy Europe, for example, operated out of Lille. Apple, for its part, was established in France in 1982, and withdrew the distribution of its machine from Sonotec,[8] to entrust it to the wholesaler Seedrin[9] – thus affecting the software publishers affiliated with Sonotec, such as Saari.

2° The role of game consoles

It is with the arrival of game consoles that the market and distribution networks truly took shape in the early 1980s. Each manufacturer or distributor of a console either established itself in France, like Atari, or entrusted its distribution to a middleman – Coleco, for example, chose Ideal Loisirs. It is interesting to note that the consoles quite often followed different channels during their commercialization process. Thus, Atari and Philips used electronics store networks for the Atari 2600 and the Videopac. In contrast, Mattel and Coleco mainly used toy store networks – Ideal Loisirs originally imported the Rubik's Cube into France,[10] as well as many electronic games.

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[6] SAVONET (Bernard), « Acheter par correspondance aux États-Unis, une bonne affaire ? », *L'ordinateur individuel* n°20, September 1980, p. 48-51.
[7] Untitled short news item, in *L'ordinateur individuel* n°17, May 1980, p. 117.
[8] In practice, Sonotec was one of many Apple II importers in France at the end of the 1980s, even if, to my knowledge, it is the only company that was recognized as an official importer. The founder of Saari, Alain Zimeray, is actually the son of Georges Zimeray, Sonotec's CEO and leading shareholder (Guetta, 1990). SAVONET (Bernard), SEYMOUR (Philippe), TREVILY (Hervé), « Apple II au banc d'essai », *L'ordinateur individuel* n°10, September 1979, p. 56-64.
[9] Untitled short news item, in *L'ordinateur individuel* n°36, April 1982, p. 52.
[10] "Rubik's Cube" advertisement, *Jeux et Stratégie* n°6, December 1980-January 1981, p. 59.

Lastly, it should be noted that the two first French wholesalers specializing in video games appeared during this period: ASCRE, whose activity in connection with the Apple II and the PET was limited to the late 1970s, and the Monaco Computing Corporation, the original distributor for the Société Occitane d'Électronique,[11] which later diversified, remaining in operation from 1979 to 1984.

C) The development of resale networks

1° An unequal development throughout the country

It should first be emphasized that stores selling video games in France were rarely specialized in the field, and were most often microcomputer stores, or establishments in various fields that diversified (toys, electronics, books, etc.).

The development of microcomputer stores was mainly patterned on urban geography, with a focus on densely populated areas. Consequently, outside of large city centres, stores and services were few; hence the significance of direct imports, but also of the mail order retailing activities practiced by many establishments. A fairly evenly distributed network of sales outlets was made possible by the appearance, in the decades preceding the birth of the French video game industry, of cultural superstores, such as FNAC[12] and Nasa[13], that sold microcomputer products, machines and software, among other things.

On the whole, the vast majority of stores in the late 1970s and early 1980s were opened in the Paris area, mainly around the fifth, tenth and fifteenth boroughs. Many of these establishments were connected with other structures, such as distributors and importers, or stores selling other objects that set up microcomputer departments. In the early 1980s, new

[11] Based on a letter sent by the company to *L'ordinateur individuel* n°11, October 1979, p. 15.
[12] Founded in 1954, the FNAC store chain began very early on to distribute video games. However, it was not until Claudius Erhardy created the first departments devoted to software, around 1980, that video games truly began to be showcased (Gorges, 2011).
[13] Nasa is a chain of hi-fi and computer stores that developed in France starting in 1983 with its first sales outlet, until it ran into serious financial difficulties in 1986 – at which time the chain had one hundred and fourteen franchised sales outlets, and acted as a central buying service for other retailers. « Nasa : des "erreurs de gestion" », *Hebdogiciel* n°158, 24 October 1986, p. 11.

stores were created at a slower rate, but many existing stores opened a second sales outlet, often on the other side of the Seine.[14]

2° A wide variety of stores

Several types of establishments coexisted in the Paris area. Those located in the fourth, fifth and sixth boroughs were of a specific nature: catering primarily to students, especially around Jussieu University, these were stores that originally focused on toys, role playing games, war games, and in some cases, books, and later branched out into microcomputers. This type of store remained highly localized.[15]

Two types of establishments shaped the microcomputer marketing networks at the time: they will be named specialized stores and reference stores. Specialized stores focused mainly on one particular product, often in connection with a specific manufacturer, and were of significance to the users of the machines in question – for example, in Paris, Goal Computer[16] for Dragon microcomputers, or Électron[17] and Micro-Vidéo,[18] which made second-generation consoles their leading product.

Reference stores, on the other hand, were rarely specialized but appear to have been places of reference in the eyes of users at the time, as would suggest their media coverage in trade publications, in both the articles and promotional material: in Paris, this was the case for Illel, Sivea, La règle à calcul, but also for Ellix. Studying this media coverage is often very interesting: the stores truly acquired a personality, thanks to the way they were presented in

[14] These observations are made based on a thorough review of the trade press, primarily *L'ordinateur individuel* and *Tilt*, and more particularly the directories and advertising they contain.
[15] These establishments were showcased by *Jeux et Stratégie* magazine, which, as it focused on all forms of games, and particularly on board games and video games, promoted the stores specializing in games in general.
[16] Goal Computer, a microcomputer store opened in 1982 in Paris's tenth borough by Franck Algard, developed during the first half of the 1980s its own distribution company devoted to the Dragon, Espace Micro. « Espace Micro : 48 h top chrono », *Tilt* n°25, October 1985, p. 12.
[17] Located in Paris's seventeenth borough, Électron, opened by Yvan Coriat, organized with Mattel the "first tennis open" in Paris on the Intellivision console, in October of 1983. Electron/Mattel Electronics advertisement, *Tilt* n°7, September-October 1983, p. 23.
[18] Located in Paris's tenth borough, Micro-Vidéo's considerable success encouraged the owners, the brothers Philippe and Godefroy Giudicelli, to mention their plans to develop a franchise system to *Tilt* – a project that fell through as far as I know. ILOUS (Joëlle), « Pas de panique ! », *Tilt* n°7, September-October 1983, p. 16-61.

the trade press,[19] or to advertising that showcased the store managers, as in the case of Daniel Illel, manager of Illel.

D) The typical user in 1983

An overview such as this would be incomplete without a consideration of how the typical microcomputer user was fashioned at the time. Several readership surveys conducted by *L'ordinateur individuel*, the first French magazine devoted to microcomputers,[20] provide a portrait of the typical user.[21] The user was what is called a "hobbyist". He did not necessarily own a machine – a point I will return to later –, and used a microcomputer chiefly for pleasure or personal management and home automation, rarely for work: he was actually rarely a computer scientist by trade. The other distinctive feature of the hobbyist was the importance he attributed to programming, a typical activity on the microcomputer: indeed, one of the characteristics of the time was that "everybody programmed".[22] Several forms of video gaming expression were the result of such an approach to the machine, like the importance given to the listing, i.e., a code printed in the press or in specialized books that could be recopied on one's microcomputer.

L'ordinateur individuel played an important role in promoting the activity of programming. In a 1979 editorial, Jean-Pierre Nizard, the magazine's publisher, described videogames as the gateway to microcomputing[23] – a comment that is all the more relevant given the number of 1970s game programs that copied forms familiar to the users, i.e., "classic" games, card games or clones of arcade games. More importantly, Jean-Pierre Nizard viewed programming as the true gaming activity on microcomputers. His idea was that it was only through programming that hobbyists could attain the essence of microcomputing, and above all, truly have fun: here, the act of programming becomes the game, the quintessential ludic activity on a microcomputer.[24]

[19] Thus, *Jeux et Stratégie* very often turned to Illel and La règle à calcul when carrying out machine and game software tests, to obtain equipment as well as the retailers' advice and comments.
[20] The first issue of *L'ordinateur individuel* was published in October of 1978.
[21] For example, a survey in the summer of 1980, the results of which were presented in *L'ordinateur individuel* n°20, September 1980.
[22] Words spoken by Bertrand Brocard during an interview conducted on September 11, 2012.
[23] NIZARD (Jean-Pierre), « Édito », *L'ordinateur individuel* n°9, July-August 1979, p. 5.
[24] It is difficult to determine to what extent the editorial published in *L'ordinateur individuel*, which at the time was a leading magazine for hobbyists, actually did influence user behaviour and

II / The birth of the industry and the rise of the distributor-publisher

A) The industry at the 1983 turning point

One of the first transformations to occur in 1983 was the microcomputers' return to centre stage, and its progressive though not instantaneous overshadowing of game consoles.

The year indeed witnessed a sharp increase in the number of microcomputers sold in the country, many of which were of European, and often French, design. Though a French microcomputer industry did exist before this time, with manufacturers like the Société Occitane d'Électronique and Logabax,[25] many new manufacturers appeared, like Thomson, Exelvision or Matra. At the same time, two microcomputers in particular, of British make, played an important role in the birth of the French creative industry: the Spectrum, and especially the Oric, which will be discussed further below.

However, the fact 1983 is considered the year the French videogame industry was born is due mainly to the many events that helped shape it. First, there was the appearance of videogame magazines, with *Tilt*, the first French magazine wholly devoted to videogames, in the fall of 1982.[26] More importantly still, there was the emergence of several French publishers and developers over the course of the year: Loriciels and Infogrames, which would help shape the industry throughout the 1980s, but also Édiciel, Cobra Soft, Froggy Software, Ère Informatique, etc. Finally, two of the four important distributors that would shape the market throughout the decade appeared at this time: Innelec, the main videogame wholesaler, built around the personality of Denis Thebaud, and Micromania, which, at the time, focused exclusively on mail order retailing.[27]

perceptions of microcomputing. Nevertheless, the fact that many ideas expressed in the editorial were also conveyed by industry players during the 1980s leads me to view the text as seminal.

[25] Logabax was a French microcomputer manufacturer in the 1970s, which notably joined the "10,000 micros" project, aiming to provide school with microcomputers. The company closed in 1981. Untitled short news item, in *L'ordinateur invididuel* n°29, July-August 1981, p. 129.

[26] The first issue was dated September-October of 1982.

[27] The two other leading distribution companies of the 1980s were Guillemot International Software, which began dealing in microcomputers during the 1980s, and France Image Logiciel, which was created in 1985.

B) The retailer as "contact surface"

1° The store and its clientele

The expression "contact surface" is used by Fernand Braudel to characterize the role played by stores in *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, on the rise of capitalism in modern times (Braudel, 1992, p. 21). The comparison between stores in the era examined by Braudel and microcomputer retailers in the 1980s appears relevant for several reasons.

To begin with, the contact surface described by Braudel occurs between the public and the manufacturing industry. By passing products on, thereby often filling a gap for the clientele, in modern times as well as today, the retailer is truly the contact between the client who has come to buy the machine, and the company that manufactures and distributes it. However, in this case, the contact surface effect was mainly produced by the clients themselves, as the store offered them a place to meet and assemble, ultimately creating synergies. This simple fact of having a place to meet was instrumental in the birth of the industry: it was, for example, at Illel that the developer Jean-Louis Le Breton, before founding the Froggy Software publishing company, met his first publisher, Ciel Bleu.[28] Furthermore, a member of the Europe Oric club told me during a discussion[29] that at the offices of the importer ASN Diffusion,[30] he regularly met other Oric users, with whom he exchanged tips, particularly about programming, as well as programs and electronic components, etc.

The notion of contact surface brings us to the reasons that brought the public to these stores. Indeed, beyond the commercial services they offered, the stores were primarily places where machines were found, machines the users and hobbyists did not necessarily own. In this case, the stores were places to socialize and share a common microcomputer culture, much like clubs and other similar meeting places. Hobbyists came to use the machines, to play, to program, but also to hack, as they would in any other such place of social contact – thus, the

[28] At the time, Ciel Bleu was essentially a publisher that imported educational games made in Quebec. Interview with Jean-Louis Le Breton, March 28, 2012. See also Jean-Louis Le Breton's website for the history of Froggy Software: <www.jeanlouislebreton.com>.
[29] A meeting with the members of the Europe Oric Club, June 15, 2013.
[30] ASN Diffusion was in 1983 one of the first importers of the Oric in France. In late 1983, the company was granted exclusive rights by Tangerine, the machine's manufacturer, and changed its name to Oric France. When Tangerine filed for bankruptcy in 1985, ASN Diffusion did not succeed in buying the company – it was obtained by another Parisian store, Eureka Informatique, and its distribution company SPID –, and consequently turned to the distribution of other machines, such as the MSX Goldstar (Sidre, 2014).

Centre mondial de l'informatique (World Computing Centre) was nicknamed the Centre mondial de piratage (World Hacking Centre) by *Hebdogiciel*, given the unintended activities of those who frequented it.[31]

2° The rise of distributor-publishers

This was when distributor-publishers began to appear. In many stores, hobbyists would indeed gather, especially in order to use the machines. In the context of a nascent industry, where questions and discoveries were common, contact between the managers and clients was frequent – and all the more so in places of reference, like Ellix, whose ads described its salespeople as "hosts".[32] Retailers often considered the programming activity with interest, whether financial or other, and offered to publish and market the games hobbyists programmed in their store.

It should be noted that this publishing activity was not something entirely new for the stores. Many retailers already had experience in localization, whether of programs or machines, which required the production of packaging, as when Ellix marketed the Oric.[33] Stores were therefore occasionally familiar with the processes involved in designing and transforming a video game and its medium.

The phenomenon was especially striking in 1983 because of its extent, which coincided with the development of microcomputing in France, and its increasing accessibility to the general public. Earlier examples show that the rise of distributor-publishers was not something that happened all at once. As early as 1981, Sideg, a microcomputer store in Paris's fifteenth borough, published for the Apple II, the Commodore PET and the TRS-80. Starting in 1982, Procep, a Commodore machine importer, and Ellix developed publishing activities around the PET. But it is in 1983 that things really took off, with Innelec, R.U.N Informatique, Cobra Soft – a publishing company then tied to Micros et Robots –, Video Telemat Report and Vismo. Other companies had more or less significant publishing activities, without however making these public, in particular through advertising.

[31] « Centre Mondial de Piratage », *Hebdogiciel* n°107, November 1, 1985, p. 1-18.
[32] Illel advertisement, *L'ordinateur individuel* n°36, April 1982, p. 107.
[33] Interview with Laurant Weill, October 22, 2012.

C) The variety of distributor-publishers

1° An activity of varying significance

For several of these distributor-publishers, publishing activities remained limited throughout the 1980s. Though the case of R.U.N. Informatique proves particularly interesting to study, the company actually only published two games in 1983: *Le mur de Berlin*, a clone of *Frogger* in which the player must get across the Berlin Wall, and *Le ballon d'or*, a soccer game.[34] Other distributor-publishers were more prolific, but did not advertise it – Sideg, for example, publicized the games it published in its catalogues, but not in its advertising.

In contrast, some companies proved to be very active publishers, the most notable case being that of Innelec. In 1983, the company created an entire label, No Man's Land, devoted to publishing. Innelec continued to publish until 1986, making it the only distributor-publisher to pursue both activities after 1984.[35]

The most striking example of a distributor-publisher of the time remains that of Video Telemat Report, a store in Paris's eighteenth borough. Originally specializing in the Spectrum microcomputer, the store began in 1983 to market several games by its manager Jesus Fernandez, and progressively welcomed other authors. The majority of these programs were clones of previously existing games, sometimes dressed-up differently: *Tamponneur*, for example, is a clone of *Pac*-Man in which the characters are replaced by cars – some of them ghosts –, and the labyrinth becomes a racing circuit.[36] More importantly, an adapter was developed in the store to enable the computers to run the new programs. Video Telemat Report developed an actual machine within the machine, as can be further witnessed through the retailer's various peripheral and software projects. This attempt was not pursued further however, and without interviews with the store managers, it is difficult to hypothesize about their actual motives. The case of Video Telemat Report remains to my knowledge unique in France.

[34] R.U.N. Informatique advertisement, *Tilt* n°8, November-December 1983, p. 46.
[35] It is worth noting in this respect that the figure of the distributor-publisher, i.e., a publisher who manages his own product distribution, or even markets products from other companies, is much more frequent and long-lived, existing to this day in complex manifestations through online game retailing platforms.
[36] *Tamponneur* test, *Tilt* n°13, June 1984, p. 38-39.

2° Varying motives

In most cases, retailers' motives for diversifying their activities to include hobbyist publishing were primarily opportunistic: seeing their clients program video games on their machines, the stores foresaw a potential financial windfall, and began to transform the programs into marketable products. To these financial benefits was added a positive impact on the store's image: a retailer who published his clients was more apt to be talked about, in the press as well as by word of mouth.

However, another motive quickly emerged for distributor-publishers, or at least for some of them: to enable the development of a creative industry in France, or at very least in French. Innelec may be seen as an example of this last case, as its founder Denis Thebaud insisted on the translation processes of imported programs, and on the necessity of offering clients programs in French.[37] No Man's Land's activities can also be viewed in this light, with the same Denis Thebaud stating that he began publishing to fill a void in the market.[38] R.U.N Informatique demonstrated this even more clearly in an advertisement for its two programs titled "Finally! Two games in French!"[39]

III / The birth of the French video game industry

A) A new status for the video game

1° From the "non-economy" to "the economy"

The "non-economy" is another term borrowed from Fernand Braudel, who, when explaining the stores' role in the birth of capitalism, uses it to characterize the way objects that were marketed went from one status to the other (Braudel, 1992). Once again, a comparison with the nascent video game industry and the role of distributor-publishers seems relevant. Before its publication, when it was still only written by a hobbyist, the game program was part of the "non-economy", meaning that it was produced and exchanged outside of commercial channels, therefore not contributing to said channels. Such was the case when the game program was exchanged among peers, following a sometimes barter-like system, or disseminated on a larger scale in the form of listings, or via piracy networks. When published by a distributor-publisher, the video game entered the economy as defined by Fernand

[37] See the introductions of the 1980s Innelec catalogues.
[38] Interview with Denis Thebaud, May 22, 2012.
[39] R.U.N. Informatique advertisement, *Tilt* n°8, November-December 1983, p. 46.

Braudel, that is, it entered the commercial networks, and was marketed by the store, or – the ultimate achievement – by other stores. Ellix, for example, marketed its programs at La règle à calcul.[40]

However, the distributor-publisher did a bit more than allow the game to enter the economy. As a retailer, the distributor-publisher advertised the programs it published, either in its promotional material, like Innelec, or within the store, like Cobra Soft and Micro et Robots.[41] Olivier Bomsel, in his study on publishing protocols, highlights the importance of the act of displaying in the publication process – the publication itself is a display, the act of making something public, of exhibiting it (Bomsel, 2013). It was thus the distributor-publisher that would display, publish the marketed games.

It was then that the video game took on a new status, moving from the non-economy to the economy, from the private domain, where the hobbyist exchanged it with his peers, or simply used it on his own machine, to public space, the space where it would be exhibited, showcased, marketed, distributed within the commercial networks that would confirm, through this marketing process, the new status of the video game product.

2° The first stages of the rise of the author

The video game program was not the only thing that benefited from this act of displaying.

First of all, it is important to remember that, during the 1970s and 1980s, video game development was still chiefly an individual affair, involving at most a few people. The development of a program was often the work of a single individual, whose role could stretch beyond the code, to include other aspects of design, such as music, graphics, packaging, etc.

The author was still rarely identified during the 1970s and 1980s, whether on the games themselves or in the media staging. The few exceptions, such as the case of Scott Adams, who developed adventure games in the Marvel universe on Apple II, generally confirmed the rule. Certain distributor-publishers broke new ground in the field, by mentioning the developer of a program. Ellix, for example, used an odd phrase on the cover of *Pengoric* in 1983: “Ellix and the author present *Pengoric*.”

[40] Interview with Laurant Weill, October 22, 2012.
[41] Interview with Bertrand Brocard, May 18, 2012.

The most remarkable case here is again that of R.U.N Informatique that explicitly named the author of its programs, Hervé Le Marchand or Le Marchant – both spellings were used –, student at École Centrale, in its advertising.[42] The same Hervé le Marchand wrote, a month before R.U.N. Informatique's first advertisement, a letter to *Tilt* in which he presented himself as a "video game author".[43] There are, to my knowledge, no other cases in which an individual identified himself as a video game author during the 1980s in the French production, and video game design was rarely associated with a specific person at the time, but the case of R.U.N. Informatique remains interesting to note.

B) From local micro-scenes to the first major publishers

1° Local scenes, national scenes

The importance of the various distributor-publishers largely depended on their range of appeal, as publishers of course, but primarily as retailers, because it was in this form that hobbyists first discovered them. Companies having the most noteworthy publishing activity were thus either "reference stores", like Ellix and Sideg, or distributors whose reach was national, like Procep and especially Innelec. The case of Innelec is all the more relevant to study because the distributor originally offered mail order retailing, albeit for a very short time. These companies established their reputation primarily through the ads they published in the trade press, and here, once again, it was Innelec that most stood out. Like several other distributor-publishers, but more consistently than the others, the company included inserts in its advertising announcing that it was seeking developers who wished to be published, and thus gave itself a national focus.[44]

In contrast, Micros et Robots-Cobra Soft was a unique case of regional publishing. The retailer, based in the city of Chalon-sur-Saône in Burgundy, was one of the only establishments in the area, and quickly attracted a clientele that spanned a very significant portion of the region, from Dijon to Lyon.[45] Here, we find the same processes with regards to publishing and showcasing the published games within the store as elsewhere, the difference

[42] R.U.N. Informatique advertisement, *Tilt* n°8, November-December 1983, p. 46.
[43] Letter written by Hervé le Marchand to *Tilt* n°7, September-October 1983, p. 114.
[44] No Man's Land advertisement, *Tilt* n°9, January-February 1984, p. 105.
[45] Interview with Bertrand Brocard, May 18, 2012.

being that as the only store of consequence in the region, Micros et Robots attracted many potential developers through word of mouth. The mechanism was simple: local hobbyists were published by the company, their games were showcased in the store, they invited their friends to see the display, said friends proposed their own games and told others about the company, and so on. At this stage, it is not known whether other such regional scenes developed elsewhere in France; more research on the subject would be required.[46]

2° The case of Ellix

The case of Ellix is particularly interesting to study, as it seems the most noteworthy and founding phenomenon of the time.

Ellix was a microcomputer store located near Gare de Lyon in Paris, of which Laurant Weill was a co-manager.[47] In 1982, the store focused its strategy on Commodore machines, and launched publishing activities around them.[48] In January of 1983, Ellix became the first to import the Oric in France, followed shortly after by JCS Composants,[49] and the distributor ASN Diffusion. Ellix nevertheless managed to become a place of reference, specialized mainly in the Oric, in the first half of 1983: the store intensified its publishing activity, thus taking advantage of its aura of exclusivity in the field, and around the machine. However, in the summer of 1983, while Ellix's publishing activity was ever increasing, ASN Diffusion was granted exclusive rights to the Oric.

Around Ellix, large numbers of hobbyists interested in the Oric met, exchanged, and above all, programmed. A true community of developers appeared at the time, the importance of which is all the more notable since its members went on to work in the French video game industry during the 1980s and 1990s. This was the case for Carlo Perconti, who would later

[46] I am using the term "regional scene" in a strictly geographic sense – studies in art history would be necessary to determine whether the expression could have value from an aesthetic perspective – , and in the sense that a certain video game school could have developed in Chalon.
[47] I was unable to find out who the other co-manager was.
[48] Ellix advertisement, *L'ordinateur individuel* n°36, April 1982, p. 107.
[49] JCS Composants was one of the first Parisian stores to market microcomputers in 1978: located in the eight and later in the fifteenth boroughs, the store imported into France a version of the Apple II, the CAB 64, in the late 1970s, as well as the Nascom 2, starting in 1980, and the Oric 1 in 1983.

develop *Jeep* and *Hubert* for Loriciels; this was also the case for the brothers Hervé and Éric Caen, who would found the Titus publishing company in 1985.[50]

In the fall of 1983, given the sharp increase in publishing activity, Laurant Weill decided to leave Ellix to create a full-fledged publishing company, where he was followed by many of these developers, as well as others like Pierre Faure: Loriciels. This was a very important event for the nascent French video game industry, and not only because Loriciels was one of the main French video game publishers in the 1980s. Indeed, recalling with hindsight his decision, Laurant Weill spoke of the necessity that emerged at the time to separate the two activities, that is, to separate what were increasingly perceived as two distinct trades.[51] With these words, Laurant Weill summed up one of the main transformations of the French industry during the 1980s, that is, how publishing and distributing gradually became two distinct activities, and separate companies were established, while a new trade was learned, that of publisher.

Conclusion

When measured against the history of video games in France, the distributor-publisher phenomenon seems no more than an epiphenomenon, a short-lived event. Nevertheless, the companies that were developed at the time were confronted with the majority of the issues that the industry would deal with during the 1980s (place of the author, dealings with manufacturers and importers), and more importantly, they helped shape the industry, because thanks to them, individuals learned the publisher's trade, authors were trained and recognized, and groups of developers were formed.

The phenomenon's importance must not however be overestimated. We must consider the various models that appeared at the time. For example, Infogrames, the other important publisher in the 1980s along with Loriciels, was established on the sidelines of distribution networks. Furthermore, this paper focused on the published and commercialized production, the one that was part of "the economy". In addition to this, many games, many creations

[50] Interview with Laurant Weill, October 22, 2012.
[51] « Exporter ou mourir ! », *Hebdogiciel* n°59, November 30, 1984, p. 8.

remain in the shadows, waiting to be uncovered by further research, further building blocks added to the history of video games in France.

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