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Ludic *Don Quixotes* Rewritten: Hobbyist French Game Ports as the Reconstructions of Former Game Culture

Abstract

In scientific discourse, high-budget remakes of classic digital games have been claimed as the purest examples of "retrospective nostalgia" on part of players and developers. This article aims to rehabilitate the remake and demake hobbyist development as a historical practice, reinstating the former game culture instead of simply thriving on players' nostalgic feelings. Citing examples of Hervé Monchatre, Dominique Pessan, and the Abandonware France organization, the author shows different methods of the same practice – porting French 8-bit retro games into other 8-bit gaming platforms. The indicated retro game ports are more than instances of "retrospective nostalgia." While their development seems *l'art pour l'art*, they nevertheless raise historical awareness about the former game culture.

Keywords: Hobbyist games, French digital games, game culture, historical heritage, video game nostalgia

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Introduction

In a short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* by Jorge Luis Borges, the titular fictional author re-writes a classic Spanish novel *Don Quixote* by Miguel Cervantes. Borges describes Menard's intention to follow the writing method developed by Cervantes strictly: "Being, somehow, Cervantes, and arriving thereby at the Quixote – that looked to Menard less challenging (and therefore less interesting) than continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard" (Borges 1939/1998, p. 91).

In the field of digital games, there are numerous Pierre Menard-like copyists creating their versions of *Don Quixote*. Much attention has been devoted to remakes and fan modifications of AAA games for the newest-generation gaming platforms in the last decade (Garda 2013; Hoch 2020; Plunkett 2016). However, the luxury of being remade and remastered concerns only mainstream digital games that are already successful in their "raw" versions (Khan 2020). Such games as *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* (Square Enix 2020) and *Resident Evil: Remake* (Capcom 2015), entirely re-created by large development groups, are indicated as examples of "restorative nostalgia" – the term used by Maria Garda after Svetlana Boym (2008, p. 13) and referred to in numerous texts afterwards (see Ahm 2021; Grabarczyk 2020; Ivănescu 2019, pp. 11–15). Garda (2013) suggests that restorative nostalgia involves "large companies in the media industry . . . [that] live on their heritage and legacy by developing media franchises based on nostalgia and continuity of their classical series" (p. 2), and that their attempts to restore old games are futile, as "a complete restoration is never possible" (p. 4) Likewise, Robin J.S. Sloan (2016, pp. 39–41) argues that a "nostalgic game" (for example, a remake) can be read positively only when it critically re-examines its sources of inspiration without attempting to restore them; that is, the only sensible retro games are self-reflexive "games-on-games" like *Braid* (Blow 2008), a pastiche of *Super Mario Bros* (Miyamoto 1984). Garda (2013) labels such a phenomenon as "reflective nostalgia," which "restores nothing" but triggers the positive process of cultural remembrance (p. 4). Moreover, scholars like Paweł Grabarczyk (2020) even equate restorative nostalgia with "nostalgia *per se*" (p. 55).

On the other hand, Péter Kristóf Makai, commenting on Boym's dualistic construct, argues that the division between restorative and reflective nostalgia is arbitrary. Makai (2018) ironically says: "there's bad nostalgia and there's good nostalgia, and we know which is which" (p. 125). He also reminds us that "nostalgia is hardly the melancholic, narcissistic, or individualising menace that it is portrayed as" (p. 126). Nostalgia in games does not stem from conservative or conservationist values; it is part of human – whether personal or collective – experience (p. 125). Indira Neill Hoch (2021), using the examples of *Final Fantasy VII: Remake* and *Yakuza Kiwami* (Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio 2002), demonstrates that remade games

may fulfill "both simultaneously restorative and reflective" purposes (Hoch 2021, p. 74). Moreover, Hoch (2021) stresses that "it is also unfair to attribute the creative effort of the human beings who worked on the games' development to solely profit seeking motives" (p. 65).

Likewise, Kristian Redhead Ahm (2021) distinguishes three player types based on interviews with Danish retrogamers: amateur archaeologists, amateur art historians, and techno-historians. Amateur archaeologists focus on archiving and displaying forgotten games outside the canon; amateur art historians popularize the well-known canon; techno-historians reconstruct the physicality of retro game experience. Ahm's (2021) research proves that all three player types enjoy gaming not only for (restoratively) nostalgic purposes but eventually they express historical interest via retrogaming: "an interest in the broader history of video games that goes beyond personal experiences with certain video games" (p. 14).

Moreover, the discussion on game remakes as examples of (restorative) nostalgia seems to neglect retro games made by hobbyists. Some fan preservationists enjoy adapting them for use in gaming platforms of the *same* or *older* generation, not necessarily the *newer* ones. They repair those games' bugs, and sometimes they slightly alter the gameplay. In Ahm's terminology, they would constitute amateur archaeologists or art historians, saving numerous games from oblivion with grassroots activities.

Especially the French hobbyist game development would be an interesting example. In the 2000s and 2010s, several retrogaming enthusiasts in France decided to reconstruct retro games by porting them to platforms on which these games had never been released or by fixing specific ports regarded as unplayable. We want to focus on particular hobbyist game developers: Hervé Monchatre (alias Tom Et Jerry du GPA), Dominique Pessan, and the Abandonware France group. As we will prove, their obscure works put the bipolar distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia into question.

Hervé Monchatre: Improving Froggy Software's games

One of the amateur archaeologists who would fit Ahm's terminology would be Hervé Monchatre, a member of the French demo scene since 1984. Between 1986 and 1994, he belonged to the GPA group that developed demo software for the Amstrad CPC computers ("Demoscene > Interviews/Entrevues > Tom, Jerry (GPA)," n.d.). Even after the dissolution of GPA, Monchatre has still been developing hobbyist software. So far, he also has made three ports of the 1980s Apple II games initially conceived by the French arthouse studio Froggy Software: Jean-Louis Le Breton's *Le Crime du parking* (Le Breton 1985; Monchatre 2009), Tristan Cazenave's *Le Mur de Berlin va sauter* (Cazenave, Labesse 1985; Monchatre 2012) and Cazenave's

La Java du privé (Cazenave, Desportes 1986; Monchatre 2020). Froggy Software's productions captured the *contestataire* moment of their time. They depicted the criminal demimonde (*Le Crime du parking*), concerns about the Cold War (*Le Mur de Berlin va sauter*, cf. Jankowski 2021a), and female liberation (*La Java du privé*, cf. Lebelle 2005). However, at least until Tristan Donovan and Hugo Labrande's mentions of Froggy Software's activity (Donovan 2010, pp. 125–127; Labrande 2011, pp. 405–407), these games were obscure, both outside France and the French Apple II community.

Monchatre reconstructed Froggy Software's Apple II games for the Amstrad CPC community. Such a reconstruction, however, was not entirely uncritical, as a simplified conception of restorative nostalgia might imply. Monchatre supplied each game with demo-scene-like electronic music and loading screens based on the retail covers by Jean Solé. Moreover, while *Le Crime du parking* on CPC was a faithful adaptation of its Apple II counterpart, Monchatre substantially changed *Le Mur de Berlin* and *La Java du privé.*

The first game in its original version was full of plot holes, as the player impersonated a French agent tasked to stop a terrorist from destroying the Berlin Wall. However, Cazenave's game did not specify for whom – the United States or the Soviet Union – both the French agent and the terrorist worked. Furthermore, there was no information on whether the player infiltrated West Berlin or East Berlin. Finally, the game featured a confusing ending. The terrorist destroyed the Berlin Wall, regardless of the player's actions, thus provoking the United States to declare war against the whole Warsaw Pact.

Meanwhile, Monchatre's version of Cazenave's game featured substantial changes to the source material. The port for the Amstrad CPC specified that the plans for sabotaging the Berlin Wall came from KGB as an excuse for the possible declaration of war against NATO. Moreover, Monchatre included a cheerful ending (impossible to achieve in the original version), which occurred when the player did not kill the terrorist carrying a bomb but only wounded him. As a result, the terrorist failed to detonate the Berlin Wall, and the conflict gradually abated.

Similar subtle changes affected *La Java du privé*, a story about the private detective hired by a female principal suspicious of her husband. The CPC version set another objective: to capture an anonymous envelope with compromising photos of the principal before her husband finds them. Also, *La Java du privé* in Monchatre's version was far less misogynist than Cazenave's original game. For example, the Apple II version required the player to whip a prostitute to satisfy her and receive an object pushing the action further. Meanwhile, the Amstrad CPC port expected the player to give her thongs and subtly flirt. Monchatre also redesigned the other puzzle solutions to be more logical and less violent.

Monchatre's remakes of the Apple II games were crucially consulted with the French Amstrad CPC community, who supplied the copyist with remarks about the scenario and notified him about potential bugs.[1] Although porting an 8-bit game to another 8-bit hardware may seem aimless, Monchatre's ports nevertheless engaged a relatively large retrogaming community devoid of uncritical attitude to the source material.

Dominique Pessan: Demaking Cobra Soft's games

Monchatre enhanced Froggy Software's games by porting them for a more advanced platform. Meanwhile, Dominique Pessan, as a member of the community revolving around the Oric computers, demade two games never released on that platform. These are: *Meurtres sur l'Atlantique* (Brocard et al. 1985; Pessan 2012) and *Meurtres en série* (Brocard et al. 1986; Pessan 2002), both initially designed by Bertrand Brocard and edited by his company Cobra Soft. Both mystery adventure games, resembling Agatha Christie's novels but more political in their message, were designed for numerous platforms, including Amstrad CPC and Thomson MO5. Compared to them, Oric computers appeared to be inferior platforms with lesser screen resolution, and Cobra Soft moved from them after publishing *Meurtre à grande vitesse* (Brocard 1984; cf. Ribault 2019).

Here, it is necessary to underline what a demake is. Tonguç İbrahim Sezen (2015) defines a demake as "a retro-inspired reimagining or remake of a modern game, as if it had been created on an earlier platform" (p. 267). While demakes may take extreme forms, like porting modern games to platforms even 30 years older (Thomasson 2023, p. 431), they nevertheless constitute demanding challenges for fans who produce them regardless of the platform (Evans-Thirlwell 2020). As Tom Faber (2021) describes the phenomenon of demaking: "[d]emakes are love letters to old games, both homages and distinctive products that demand precise study of the source material and artistic choices" (para. 9). Demakes are not necessarily inferior to the original versions; they can even become altered, as Pessan's activity demonstrates.

The ports of *Meurtres sur l'Atlantique* and *Meurtres en série* to the inferior Oric machines were radical undertakings. Nonetheless, Pessan, with Brocard's collaboration, programmed two demakes and even improved them compared to their original versions. For example, *Meurtres en série* featured coordinates, absent in the original versions for Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, and DOS. This feature was

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[1] The ending credits of *La Java du privé* state: "Je commence par créditer les testeurs qui ont dû subier les différentes versions de ce programme, changements de scénarii et bugs compris" ["I'd like to start by crediting the testers who had to endure the various versions of this program, including changes to the scenarios and bugs"].

essential because *Meurtres en série* relied on precision. The player navigated a police detective from a top-down perspective, moving on the Sercq island near Normandy, where the titular serial murders occurred. Each move cost time, and without coordinates, the player would fall behind on tracing the murders committed by former Nazi soldiers who sought a precious treasure buried during World War II. The demake for the Oric computers made this task easier for potential players, mainly because Pessan published a reconstruction of events in the game world (Ranx & Pessan 2021).

Still, what is crucial here is not the demakes themselves but the fan activities that those demakes triggered. *Meurtres sur l'Atlantique*, an inter-war game about a Nazi spy infiltration during a transatlantic cruise in 1938, remains a valuable example. At its release, *Meurtres sur l'Atlantique* was triumphant; it received the prestigious Tilt d'Or award and positive reviews. Part of its success could be attributed to the social anxieties in France when the right wing won the parliamentary elections (Jankowski 2021b, p. 48). However, since the dissolution of Cobra Soft in 1990 (Ribault 2019), the popularity of the game notably diminished. Possibly the reason was the hermetic interface; *Meurtres sur l'Atlantique* required finding all 40 witnesses to solve the 'whodunit' clue, and the necessity to repeatedly tap a button scanning each ship's room in search for persons and hints could be exhaustive to modern players.

However, when a nearly forgotten *Meurtres l'Atlantique* was released in the demade version on the Club Europe Oric website, it suddenly ignited a vivid discussion. Internet users started to ponder the game's content anew. They reconstructed the gamic intrigue, indicated famous people who were the sources for the non-player character avatars and enjoyed exploring the game, despite its non-existing ending ([Aide] – Maxi mène l'enquête 2013). The nostalgia that the Oric ports sparked is both restorative and reflexive. Pessan restored the memory of Brocard's games not only by re-creating *them* but also by re-creating the *discourse* about them. This remark especially concerns the once-acclaimed *Meurtres sur l'Atlantique*, which received the Tilt d'Or award for the best mystery adventure game in 1986 (Meistermann 1986) but was forgotten afterward. Thus, to use Ahm's terminology, Pessan can also be considered an amateur archaeologist.

Abandonware France: Saving ports from death

Lastly, a more institutionalized organization preserving heritage is worth mentioning. Up to 2016, when Brocard founded the Conservatoire du Jeu Vidéo, the central organization which had been taking care of retro titles was Abandonware France. Unlike Monchatre and Pessan, this organization embodies an instance of "amateur art historian" discourse, as defined by Ahm (2021).

Established in 2000, Abandonware France gathers the MS-DOS versions of retro games commonly called "abandonware" (that is, released by now non-existing software houses).[2] Then, if the new publishers do not claim copyright, the organization makes the gathered games compatible with the latest Windows operating systems and shares them with internet users (Brochier 2017, p. 24). Of course, the organization still acts within the bounds of legality (p. 38), and for that reason, it only allows to download games with unknown copyright reservation, strictly cooperating with the commercial retrogaming shop website GOG.com (Cassou 2010).

The most controversial – but the most interesting within this paper's scope – element of Abandonware France's activity has been their project, "Projets exhumés." The project involves cracking old commercial French digital games that were unplayable because of critical bugs or hard-to-resolve anti-piracy protection ("Les jeux exhumés," n.d.). Thanks to Abandonware France, the DOS/Windows ports of such French games as *Zombi* (Cadin et al. 1988) and *L'Arche du Capitaine Blood* (Exxos 1988) are possible to play, even though their quality remains lower than in the original versions.[3]

Again, preserving the inferior ports may seem purposeless, mainly due to the easier availability of better game versions. Nonetheless, the DOS/Windows ports are adjusted for the ready-to-made installation without needing external emulators (the executable files activate the DOSBox built-in emulator after the installation). Thus, modified for contemporary use, Abandonware France's ports are more accessible to retro emulation beginners than the raw computer files.

Even more impressive is Abandonware France's revival of essential games that nowadays would be unplayable otherwise. Examples include porting the Sega Mega Drive version of *Dune* (Cryo Interactive 1992) and *In Memoriam* (Léxis Numérique 2003). The importance of such ports results from overcoming technological constraints. *Dune*, a pioneering strategy game based on Frank Herbert's science fiction novel about the war between the royal families of Atreides and Harkonnen, was released in different versions. Only the version for Sega Mega

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2   To be precise, the website defines abandonware as software that "consiste à proposer en libre téléchargement d'anciens jeux qui ne sont plus disponibles dans le commerce à ce jour, et ce, depuis longtemps, et dont le service après-vente a été lui aussi abandonné" ["consists of offering free downloads of old games that are no longer commercially available, and have been for a long time, and whose after-sales service has also been abandoned"] (see "Abandonware France fête ses 20 ans" 2020).

3   Numerous DOS/Windows ports of old French "abandonware" games, shared on the Abandonware France website, feature only 4-color palette graphics in Mode 4. Compare, for example, *Zombi*'s DOS/Windows version with its Atari ST counterpart ("Galeries d'images du jeu Zombi," n.d.; "Zombi (1990) Screenshots," n.d.).

Drive featured French dubbing, absent in the commonly known, English-dubbed PC CD edition published by Virgin Games ("Dune Downloads," n.d.). Virgin's chief executive officer Martin Alper, as an international publisher, intended to reduce the "French" aesthetics of Cryo Interactive's game (Ulrich 2019), and such reduction involved cutting the French dubbing for the most popular PC CD version. However, *Dune* can be played in the version with French dubbing, thanks to Abandonware France.

Meanwhile, Éric Viennot's *In Memoriam* – one of the first alternate reality games, where the player chased the serial killer while using the embedded web browser with fake websites serving as clues (Cox 2012) – became unplayable over time due to the extinction of Adobe Flash and Shockwave technologies required to play it ("In Memoriam," n.d.). Thanks to Abandonware France, players can discover *In Memoriam* anew due to the latest browser support and the inclusion of Adobe Flash and Shockwave. Thus, digital game restoration may be crucial for experiencing the use of deceased software that generally would not even be available on emulators.

Naturally, one can question whether cracking commercial software for preservation is more than just piracy. In France, the Law of 3 July 1985, which extended economic software copyright to 70 years after the author's death, is still in use (Lucas 1985). Therefore, sharing any "abandonware" software is *de facto* piracy. Nonetheless, the answer is more problematic than one can think. Abandonware France fills essential gaps in digital game preservation. As Fanny Brochier underlines,

> Si le piratage n'est pas une solution à préconiser d'un point de vue déontologique, il peut néanmoins être pertinent d'observer comment ces techniques peuvent ou pourraient aider dans un avenir proche à conserver le jeu vidéo d'aujourd'hui [If piracy is not a solution to be advocated from a deontological point of view, it may nevertheless be relevant to observe how these techniques can or could help in the near future to preserve today's video games] (Brochier 2017, p. 38).

In this understanding, actions such as "Projets exhumés" are a form of resistance against abandonment that the retro games had faced – at least insofar as these actions help to institutionalize digital game preservation further.

Conclusion

To sum up, one may consider the supplied French game preservation examples not merely as "retrospective nostalgia." On the contrary, Hervé Monchatre's case proves that porting an 8-bit game itself may be a basic form of "reflective nostalgia"

due to the critical erasure of the most misogynist, or simply inconsistent, game mechanics. Dominique Pessan's example demonstrates that porting an 8-bit game to a technically weaker platform can restore game communities' former interest in now-forgotten games and spark fruitful debates. Finally, Abandonware France's case shows that the informal preservation of second-hand game ports is useful; moreover, it points out many years of negligence of government institutions, which did not care about preserving the national heritage in the form of digital games.

While these cases could be easily labeled as *l'art pour l'art*, they stand out for several reasons. Firstly, the restored or ported games are either in the public domain or beyond the interest of their actual legal owners, without the possible threat of suing the remakers. Secondly, French hobbyist games are not created to capture their first editions' "original" experience. French hobbyist games remind us of the 1980s democratic gaming culture when classic arcade games were ported in France or elsewhere by enthusiasts (cf. Blanchet & Montagnon 2020; Garda & Grabarczyk 2021; Švelch 2018). So understood, the unofficial porting of retro games has been "not primarily a question of nostalgia, or particularly historically aware practice, but a way to learn game development" (Suominen et al. 2015, p. 85). There are many more Pierre Menard-like copyists in the digital game field than mentioned in this article. Their grassroots activity deserves attention, for it invigorates the discourse around long-forgotten games and fills the niche left by nowadays non-existent or careless developers.

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