By Hugo Labrande

Issue #15 : German text adventures, by a specialist

In this month's article, we get to discover the topic of text adventures in German, through a little fireside chat with Stefan Vogt! Stefan is a bit of a celebrity in the world of retro text adventures, thanks to his preservation work with Tim Gilberts, and his award-winning games: *Curse of Rabenstein* (a DAAD-based graphical adventure) and *Hibernated 1,* with a *Director's Cut* (featuring significantly more content than the original) released a few months ago as a physical version – in a special box that just blends in perfectly within anyone's Infocom collection!

Thank you Stefan for your time and your insightful answers – I learned a lot! If you want to read more by Stefan, find him on Twitter (@8bit_era) or itch.io :
    https://8bitgames.itch.io/

Hey Stefan! Thank you very much for agreeing to chatting with me on the topic of German text adventures! I am looking forward to learning more about them!

I am more than happy to shed some light for the international readers on the German adventure scene. It's always a pleasure chatting with you anyway!

My first question would be going back to the very beginning, if possible! For some languages, we have a pretty good idea of what was the very first text adventure with a wide enough distribution that it might have put the genre on people's radar. (Something like *Adventure* in English, *Stuga* in Swedish, or maybe *La piramide de Iunnuh* in Italian?) Is there such a "first game" in German?

Well, actually there is one. The adventure now widely considered as being the first is called *Zauberschloß,* which translates to *Magic Castle*. It was a game for the Commodore 64 with a very simple, unforgiving parser and PETSCII style graphics.

Zauberschloß came out in early 1984 via Markt + Technik, a publisher for software, books and magazines since 1976, and later it was even published in the famous *64er* magazine as type-in BASIC listing. I am pretty sure someone tried to make a German adventure earlier, but today people tend to lean towards the statement that *Zauberschloß* was the first, very likely because it definitely was the first to get nation-wide recognition and as such it was the first adventure most Germans remember.

And a more personal question: what was, for you, the first text adventure? Was it a German text adventure or one in English?

That's quite easy to answer. The very first adventure for me was *Castle of Terror* by Melbourne House, so in fact it was an English adventure. I started playing it the same year I got my Commodore 64, which was in 1986, I was nine years then. I learned English very early, which naturally happened when I started BASIC programming. I remember vividly playing it together with a good friend of mine who was a few years older and also knew English much better. I still remember quite a lot about this game and thus my first adventure experience. How much I liked the story and the graphics and I also remember that *Castle of Terror* taught me what EXAMINE means.

The geopolitical context in Germany in the 1980s was, let's say, rather unique. Am I right in thinking that text adventures, and microcomputers in general, were more widespread in West Germany?

Yes, that assumption is correct. Microcomputers in general were much more widespread in West Germany, where I notably grew up. I don't know much about East German microcomputers other than that there was the KC line of computers, which still remains a mystery to me up to this day. I actually doubt that there was much of a gaming scene in the mid-80s evolved in East Germany from these KC machines, as they were mostly used for educational purposes. If any games were developed, I believe it would have been homebrew products, but I really don't know anything about East German 8-bits so I am probably not the right person to ask. My publisher PolyPlay might know a lot more about this topic, so at one point you should hook up with Sebastian from PolyPlay. He grew up in East Germany.

In West Germany however, the homecomputer ecosystem was very much like in any other European country, but the home computers the German market accepted were less diverse as for example in the UK. You basically were able to get them all, so for instance there's been a Spectrum scene in West-Germany but actually the only computers that really mattered over here were Commodore machines, the Amstrad CPC and the Atari 8-bit. And that's pretty much it. The Commodore 64 was the king and held the throne of being the most popular 8-bit in West Germany, but other Commodore machines did considerably well, too. For instance the VIC-20 got its own target audience and surprisingly successful was the C16, too.

Number 2 was the CPC but I think with less than 10% market share, which was pretty much reflected in the life of the 1980s me. From the 10 people in my class with computers, probably one had a Schneider CPC and the rest was Commodore all the way. I say Schneider because Amstrad had chosen to not market the machines themselves in Germany, instead they teamed up with Schneider, who sold Schneider branded CPCs. They don't have any major difference other than a much better shielding, due to German law, and the different branding, which even shows the Schneider name in the ROM of the machine. No other changes. I didn't now anyone with an Atari 8-bit but it did have its fanbase and especially the 800XL sold quite well in Germany.

Note that many countries had dedicated keyboards to go with their homecomputers, Germany only had English keyboards, which was favorable towards compatibility of international games, while you actually can work around the German "Umlauts" quite easy. Instead of ä, you may write ae, instead of ö you may write oe and ü becomes ue. Then we have the so-called "sharp s" which is this ß. And ß becomes ss. And writing a text like this doesn't feel awkward for the German eye, not really the most important information about German text adventures but still important if you're looking at screenshots from old German adventure games and wonder why you don't see an Umlaut. Some professional games though added a custom charset and created the Umlauts themselves. But you were not able to easily do stuff like this is you were writing games in Commodore BASIC.

In the late 80s, things shifted towards the Commodore Amiga being the clear winner of the 8-bit successors, but the Atari ST had a large fanbase as well. For reason notably, it's a great machine too. Both the Amiga and Atari ST in fact had German charsets and keyboards. So by then, the era of "Umlaut hacks" was definitely over.

A related question: I believe that English is rather widely understood in Germany (or in any case, it's much better than in France!). Were text adventures in English a big influence in Germany?

Yes, English is the first foreign language you learn at school and you start learning it very early. English is widely understood in Germany. You have to imagine that in the 1980s Germany was pretty much in a post-Nazi mode, where lots of allied forces were still located in Germany and they all brought their culture and values to the table. Which is a great thing, because that's what forged the open-minded multiculturual nation that we are today. When the Allies left Germany, their vision and their values remained. I am thankful that I grew up in such an environment.

Yeah, many games were sold in English versions, including text adventures. The Infocom games were all big hits in Germany though not a single Infocom game ever was released in the German language. And it was common practice to first release the English version of the game and then later bring out a German version as well, an example here would be Maniac Mansion. Not a parser game but Lucas had enough budget to translate their point and click masterpieces. So one can say that many English games naturally made its way onto the German market, absolutely officially, without the need of importing yourself. You just went to a shop and bought it. Different though if you were into the Spectrum or any other (for the German market) uncommon computer. There was not much of a Spectrum community over here so you rarely could go into a shop and buy something for the Spectrum, in such a case, importing was your only way. But for the C64 things were a lot different. We had our own popular German magazines though, the legendary *64er* magazine or my personal favorite (still) the *ASM* (*Aktueller Software Markt*). So to answer your questions: yes, English text-adventures were a big influence in Germany and most text adventures available on the 1980s home computer market were English.

And maybe another question on the "format" of German text adventures: are there patterns found in German games? For instance, there were virtually no pure-text adventures in France, and few in Spain I believe; was it similar in Germany, or were there adventures with more text density, and maybe more literary aspirations like Infocom's?

Not really, you pretty much had everything. No one aimed for an Infocom experience though, as the tools necessary for an ambitious adventure like this were not available at the time.

The majority of German adventures tended to have split screens, meaning you had graphics in the upper screen, while the lower screen added text. Some very well done, *The Yawn* for example, many games though painted simple graphics from within BASIC using the PETSCII charset on screen. You actually can draw nice graphics in PETSCII mode, so it was a nice workaround for those not able to do split-screen graphics because the lack of knowledge for assembler.

There were quite a few German adventure games that actually had point and click interfaces while still presenting text and graphics alltogether. Such games were quite popular in the German scene as well. I am currently working with Sönke Wortmann on the German translation of my game *The Curse of Rabenstein*, which will be a C64 only release. This version as well will have a point and click interface and a soundtrack while still retaining everything that people enjoyed with the original, parser based version. For the German market it makes sense going into this direction, as it was very common having games like this. And there won't be any additional ports because on the German market the C64 was and still is the by far most popular home computer so that it doesn't make much sense investing time in more ports, as harsh as this may sound.

A popular example of a point and click text-adventure fusion is *Soul Crystal* one of my personal German adventure favorites. Lovely graphics, captivating story and you could actually play it with your joystick or a mouse. Lovely. Not sure if games like these were successful in other countries as well but if not, then maybe the point and click text adventure fusion is the pattern you've been looking for with your question.

I seem to recall you mentioning one day some popular text adventures at the end of the 80s / beginning of the 90s. (A trilogy? I think?) Could you tell us a little more about these games? Should people grab a German dictionary and attempt to play them?

Ah yes, you mean the games from Weltenschmiede (translates to "Worldsforge"). Weltenschmiede actually was what I consider the German Infocom. Their adventures had rich prose, captivating stories, suberb writing and monumental play time. Their games were among the very few German adventure games that really had commercial success. They basically released three parser based games which were: *Das Stundenglass* (*The Hourglass*), *Die Kathedrale* (*The Cathedral*) and *Hexuma*.

Weltenschmiede came late to the table so their games were released for Amiga, Atari ST and DOS. *Stundenglass* came in early 1990, *Die Kathedrale* in 1991 and *Hexuma*

in 1992. What these games all had in common was they were were sophisticated, proably not directly on par with Infocom in terms of writing style but quite close, and they all had graphics as well. They distributed these games with an advanced set of feelies, even with background story novels, the smallest one for *Stundenglass* had more than 40 pages.

I think at least *Stundenglas* didn't age that well as the gameplay sometimes is quite mean to the player, anyway still remarkable games which remain a great product of their time. I should mention it's not really a trilogy as the games are not related but they released these three gems which remain a true classic from the time that I consider the height of the German adventure movement.

Another great game that came out around that time was *Die Drachen von Laas* (*The Dragons of Laas*), another wonderful game with rich prose and great graphics in addition. You certainly should grab a German dictionary and play those games but I believe this is quite a hard thing to achieve as the German language is not easy to learn (so I've been told).

When was the "peak" of German text adventuring? Was it the mid-80s like in the US, or early 90s like in Spanish, or another time? Is there a point after which text adventures were suddenly not as cool and popular?

Well, I think there were actually two peaks. I consider the 8-bit era and the rise of the Commodore 64 probably from 1984 to 1987 the first peak of German text adventuring, though much was done through homebrew games at that time. The second peak, where things on the Commodore 64 and their successors Amiga, ST and even DOS became really professional. Games such as *Bozuma*, *The Yawn*, *Soul Crystal* or *Die Drachen von Laas* are well-written games that also reflect the ecosystem of the German homecomputer scene, where both the Commodore 64, the Amiga and ST really were the most popular computers up to the early 90s. I think the second peak lasted from 1988 to 1992 or 1993. I wouldn't necessarily say that adventures were suddenly not as cool but it certainly should be mentioned that at that time, the world generally moved on from text adventures and largely focused on other games, just like it was in any other country. Unfortunately.

Is there still an interest in these German text adventures? A website, a fanzine, a forum, anything you can think of? Do you know for instance if

modern German-language interactive fiction authors are also involved in the preservation of these games's history?

Yes, those German text adventures do have a following. Though it's not as big as the Spanish scene and certainly nowhere near the English scene.

What I observed a bit is that these days you get most of the people to play your games in English and it doesn't make much difference without it being written in mother-tongue, but there is that small German fanbase that tends to play German only adventures, which I want to satisfy with the upcoming *Rabenstein* release.

I actually don't know of any modern German-language interactive fiction author other than me, and I am personally not involved in the preservation of these titles, mostly due to the other commitments I have which just leaves so little time for a project such as this. The most extensive collection of German adventure games is available through below link, though the site hosts English titles as well. But they really do hunt games that haven't preserved yet to add them to the database. The website is:

https://www.germanc64.de/index.php

I hope you've enjoyed learning about another retro text adventure scene! Thank you again Stefan!