

> Remember

By Hugo Labrande
Issue #7 : Horror in text adventures

Alexander Had, a specialist of horror video games (currently writing a Thing about it, judging by his Twitter @Alexander_Had1), asked me :

"Why is there so few examples of horror text adventures in the heyday of the genre, compared to other genres like sci-fi, fantasy, or detective?"

And that's an excellent question!

Alexander went into a little bit more detail into why this would be surprising. The 1980s, if we're trying to put the era into more context, was a great decade for genre in general, and in particular in movies. Blockbusters and other high concept movies were very high on sci-fi (*Terminator*, *Alien*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *E.T.*, etc.), fantasy (*Highlander*, *The Princess Bride*, *Conan*, *The Dark Crystal*, *The Neverending Story*), and horror in particular, with the rise of the slasher movie and numerous franchises (*Halloween*, *Freddy*, *Jason*, *Hellraiser*, etc.). The availability of VHS made cheap direct-to-video movies a viable proposition, and it seems in general like the market was increasingly targeting teenagers with incredible pulpy tales.

And teenagers were getting into computing, too, and form a very large part of the authors of early video games of the 80s. It would only seem logical to see these teens make games inspired by the genres they enjoyed, in particular horror ; and quite a few did, but they were overwhelmingly action/arcade games, that often weren't very spooky in no small part because of the graphic limitations of the time. (I still have a fondness in my heart for *Soft and Cuddly* and *Zombi*.) But text adventures dont really have these limitations - or at least, they aren't trying to make animated sprites scary - and they aren't the hardest to program. And if you see text adventures as a more literary lineage, there is also no shortage of horror books, especially in the 80s, with Stephen King, Clive Barker, Anne Rice...

Why weren't horror text adventures more widespread? Why is Infocom's *The Lurking Horror* seemingly the only example for the big text adventure publishing houses? (And no, *The Count* by the Adams doesn't, er, count - in an old *Retro Gamer* issue, Scott Adams seems to be of the belief it is not a horror game! I'll take his word for it...)

Preliminary data

I don't have an exhaustive list of every horror game that was released in the 1980s; Solution Archive doesn't have information on the genre of games, and IFWiki and IFDB are far from exhaustive, although they are a good start. From IFDB, I could count a little under 40 horror text adventures from the 1980s – even if you think that's off (by, what, a factor 2? 5?), there were thousands of text adventures in the 1980s, so it's definitely a small portion. Prominent examples include: *Jack the Ripper*

(written by the St Bride collective), *The Beast of Torrack Moor* by Linda Doughty, *The Mist* (yes, a text adventure adaptation of Stephen King's novella), *Transylvania* on the Apple II, *Cranston Manor* by Roberta Williams, and of course *The Lurking Horror*. There are a few haunted-house themed ones, and a few Draculas, and maybe this list doesn't capture the supernatural-themed fantasy games (like *The Spectre of Castle Coris* by Larry Horsfield). Overall, and perhaps I'm missing some examples, it also seems like the kind of horror that was written was old-school in its themes and literary influences - no slashers, no Stephen-King-inspired horror in small town America, no zombies, no Wicker-Man-inspired horror in the British Isles, etc.

I'm fairly certain we can rule out the cultural factor, too. In France, there were a few horror games among the first batch of text adventures: "Le Vampire Fou", "Le manoir du Dr Génius", "I.L. L'Intrus" (all from 1983, the latter being essentially a fun "Alien" fan fic), and a few more later ("Le Pacte" by Eric Chahi and "Black Sect" at the tail end of the 1980s), but overall, not that many, and none among the very influential ones. I don't know much about the other languages (except the current day Spanish scene has great multimedia-based horror text adventures), but I don't think I have an example of a strong presence of horror in the text adventure genre in the 1980s.

Could it be because horror and text adventures just can't be done? This blanket statement is just wrong when you consider text adventures of the 1990s and beyond: several classic text adventures of the post-commercial era are of the horror genre, like *Anchorhead*, *Shade*, *Theatre*, and *The Warbler's Nest*. It is not about their size - *Shade* and *The Warbler's Nest* would fit on a single C64 disk with Ozmoo - or about their mechanics - *Theatre* is very conventional - either.

However, we can note that there is one genre of adventure games which has very strong ties to horror: the FMV-heavy CD-ROM point-and-click games of the 1990s. Between *Phantasmagoria*, *The 7th Guest*, *Gabriel Knight*, *Night Trap*, *Harvester*, and uh *The X-Files*, it seems like most successful examples of the genre were horror. So it's not like there wasn't interest in exploring creepy houses, piecing together bits of narrative, solving a few puzzles, and fearing for your character's life, was there? (And similarly, since most these games wait for the player's input before anything happens, the turn-basedness of parser IF shouldn't be too much of an issue?)

I believe this comparison to FMV games is key to our question.

Further discussion

When I was preparing this article, I reached out to Wade Clarke, who on top of being a horror movie aficionado (and a reader of this newsletter!) wrote a survival horror text adventure, *Leadlight*, for Apple II (remastered as *Leadlight Gamma* for modern platforms). I reasoned he would know a thing or two about text adventures and horror, and wanted to see if he confirmed my intuitions.

According to him, one of the things that is important to notice is that the horror genre seems to be very closely associated to cinema. Wade quoted the interesting-sounding book "The Definitive Guide to the Cinema of Fear: Horror", which noted that the horror genre in literature was rapidly coalescing and extremely prolific around the same time as cinema was born too. And horror was a large part of the early productions, between Frankenstein, Jekyll, or the unforgettable German Expressionism. Following that thought, I would argue it's also always followed closely the evolution of cinema and its technology, be it Technicolor blood or the rise of the VHS. And then, of course, FMV CD-ROM adventure games, which became a platform of choice for horror.

But translating movies, which are audiovisual, into text adventures, which aren't at all, isn't easy. This isn't to say that horror can only be done in movie format, of course; there are plenty of horror books and horror interactive fiction. However, in the context of the 1980s, I believe that horror was mostly centered around movies of a specific kind : the gory slashers with chases and murders, with potentially attractive scream queens and titillating sexual references. This is not the ideal subgenre of horror to adapt into IF; in fact, in my opinion, it is precisely the worst, the one relying on suspense (tricky to pull in turn-base narratives), sensory overload, and striking visuals.

Text adventures, on the other hand, are great at depicting an atmosphere, a world, letting the player explore and reflect. It is, in that sense, closer to psychological horror, where things are off-kilter, the senses can't be trusted, and you face the dark side of humanity and the repressed social fears. Movies like *It Follows* or *Midsummer* seem to me prime targets for adaptations in the text adventure format; *Shade* and *The Warbler's Nest* are, at their core, stories with troubling elements where the senses hide reality; and Lovecraftian stories (like *Anchorhead* and *Theatre*) are about uncovering secrets so horrible they can drive you insane. The thing is, the psychological horror genre wasn't that popular (or at least not as popular as the slasher movie) in the 1980s, which probably explains why there weren't that many text adventure authors of the day who wrote games about exploring the dark corners of the mind.

(This isn't to say psychological horror is the only genre one could do in interactive fiction; just that the usual mechanics are more immediately suited to that kind of horror. When Wade wrote his game, he drew from his knowledge of survival horror video games, and added RPG combat and health management to keep the pressure on, among other things!)

Anyway, that argument about the style of horror in the 80s versus the style of horror that text adventures are best at is sort of my main point – and I'm not 100% sure it's enough to answer Alexander's question. (I also think that these considerations about game design don't really explain why teenagers, the population that's the most likely to write fan fiction and derivatives, still didn't seem to try to write lots of zombie Quilled games. But maybe they also understood that it wasn't really working and didn't recreate the thing they liked about their favorite movie?) In any case, Wade made a couple of other good arguments, and I thought these would nicely close this article.

The first one is that a horror movie often relies on you being scared for the characters, or at least some kind of identification that would make you scared when they are. However, it is difficult for text adventures, especially in the 1980s, to have an expansive cast that you care about. Furthermore, more often than not, the main character of a text adventure is "you", a character with no real personality or emotions, and that can be saved by a ">RESTORE" or ">LOAD". This is actually a great point, made by Jonathan Lessard in his article (in French) "Lovecraft, le jeu d'aventure et la peur cosmique", on why H.P. Lovecraft's world is so over-represented in adventure games: since your character doesn't communicate their feelings such as fear, terror, pain, etc., you as the player don't really empathize or take the horror as seriously; it just doesn't resonate as much.

Lessard actually makes another point, which is specific to Lovecraft games: in a Lovecraft story, the protagonist is an investigator (great for text games), but as he finds more and more things, he slowly descends into madness; this is very contrary to the player's arc, which is "let's gain more information to progress and get closer to

success [the end of the game]". (It is very difficult to drive a player insane by revealing indescribable secrets as you progress.) But this actually is a point that one can generalize: text adventures, especially in the 1980s, had puzzles that you solved, made you feel smart, and got you closer to the end of the game; this is not how a slasher movie goes at all in terms of narrative. (Same for psychological horror, I think, but then again *Shade* and *The Warbler's Nest* do not have puzzles in the conventional sense – they wouldn't have been well-received as a commercial game in the 1980s.) As Wade notes, horror movies deal a lot with recurring threats (you think you escaped the killer, but it's right there), which is seen as a bit annoying in text adventures (like the thief in *Zork 1*); to quote Wade's great way to put it, "having someone hitting your arms at random while you're trying to solve a puzzle can be a nuisance". There's also a level of fiddlyness in puzzles that don't go very well with impulsive, instinct-driven decisions; you don't usually try to join several steps when scared, and hitting a logic wall (or a parser understanding problem) at a scary moment would defeat the immersion.

I'll stop here for now, because I think there is definitely food for thought! But my answer would thus be something like that: horror in the 1980s was very much about the audiovisual spectacle and the thrills that made your heart race, which isn't something text adventures could approximate; however, there's still lots to do in the field, and there's quite a few classic text adventures released after this period that often go (successfully) for something with a bit of a different flavor, such as psychological horror! I hope you like my answer, Alexander!