

***Glutomax*: Quebecois proto-indie game development**

Jonathan Lessard

Concordia University, Montreal
jonathan.lessard@concordia.ca

In 1999, a friend and I went through all the BBSs (Electronic Bulletin Board Systems) we knew and searched the 1.0 Internet to gather all the independent Quebecois computer games we could find. This collection was the foundation of *Glutomax*, a short-lived website intended to identify, preserve and disseminate indie games from Quebec. The site is now lost, but the game collection has been preserved (see Table 1). Having recently failed to find more information on early Quebecois independent game making, I realized that the *Glutomax* experience had actually made me an authority on the subject. What follows is not the result of new research but a short discussion on this particular body of “proto-indie” Quebecois games.

Going through the *Glutomax* collection informs us on independent game making before the advent of a self-aware “indie” movement clustered around a broadly defined aesthetic project. These older games can feed the debate on what exactly an independent game is, and what makes current “indie” different from the traditional practice of making one’s own games. That this corpus is organized along cultural lines also raises the question of locality: does it really matter *where* games are made? One of the problems in originally gathering this collection and in finding information today about Quebecois games is that geographical or cultural origin is rarely mentioned or even detectable.

A quick overview of the *Glutomax* games reveals three major forms of “proto-indie” game making. The first is embodied by Oracle Software Productions (OSP), not to be confused with the slightly larger Oracle Corporation. The founder, Christian Boutin of Amos, describes the company’s vision in its 1995 summer catalog: “[our] goal is to bring more commercial quality softwares (sic) to the shareware market, at a more than affordable price.” OSP is a commercial operation aimed at a specific niche: the shareware market. Consumers of shareware were ready to accept lower quality games for cheaper prices. OSP aims at the broadest distribution possible and thus takes very little risks. English is chosen as a presumed universal language and each game fits an established genre. They are of good value and have been widely distributed in the shareware channels. The OSP titles are the only ones from the *Glutomax* collection that will return significant results in a Google search today, surfacing in retro-gaming sites and YouTube videos. Would OSP have considered itself “indie” in the current understanding of the term? Should we retroactively tag all shareware games as independent games? Like older shareware developers, many small commercial game companies today are technically independent but would not necessarily recognize themselves in the “indie” credo. They are simply aiming for more specific niches than the mainstream market without being in opposition or in reaction to it.

I-Grec represents the second type of independent game making practice, probably the one closest to current indie spirit. I-Grec’s games reflect a free, creative, and expressive approach to game making. The splash text of *uuuuuuuuuu* (ten years before *vvvvvvv*) says: “this game is free, unlike

you . . .” Instead of opting for conventional design, I-Grec chooses to take advantage of his independent situation to make games that would never be developed in a commercial setting. Although most of his works are quite silly, the mere number of it and the breadth of such titles as *Tabarnak* or *Oi Oi* show that game making is not entirely a joke to him. He is putting substantial work in defining and implementing a vision.

I-Grec’s corpus is released between 1996 and 1999 when the prominent video game paradigm remains “in your face” innovation: more megabytes, more pixels, more polygons, more networking, more enemies, more guns, more sound, etc. His own approach is rather anchored in a retrospective ludophilia. The themes, genre and aesthetics of his games both parody and pay homage to older classics. I-Grec’s Atari inspired work (see Figure 1) foreshadows current indie developers’ fascination with NES and SNES 8-bit aesthetics and mechanics. Judging from this progression, we can safely predict a soon to come passion for lo-fi Nintendo64 polygonal graphics in indie games.



Figure 1: *Tuque Rose* (I-Grec 1999)

I-Grec also displays a refreshing (if ridiculous) irreverence clearly illustrated by *Masturb Joe*. In this game you play a naked man with a quickly increasing “desire” gauge. He has to pick up randomly appearing items for points while keeping his desire in check by frequently stopping to masturbate. This has to be done behind a tree in order not to increase the “shame” gauge, but he has to beware of falling apples. This “anything goes” attitude can again be read as a tribute to early game culture when things weren’t so serious. It evokes the college humor of older adventure games such as *Leisure Suit Larry* or the shocking idiocy of *Custer’s Revenge* (actually cited in *Bruno’s* background). This light spirited approach is surfacing again in various independent game projects.

OSP games strove to reach and please a majority. I-Grec’s disinterest in commercial success or worldwide distribution allowed him to make his games culture-specific. Although they do not all reflect Quebecois culture, those games that do truly have a unique flavor. *Tabarnak*, a point-and-click adventure game, is the only game I know to be written in *joual*, Quebecois vernacular French (see Figure 2). This makes the game not only very recognizable, but also requires a strong cultural familiarity for full appreciation. The usual verb icons at the bottom of *Tabarnak’s*

screen might not be perfectly comprehensible to one only used to standard French but are hilarious to those familiar with Quebecois French.



Figure 2: *Tabarnak* (I-Grec 1998)

The geographical and cultural origins of video games are often difficult to assess. Is there anything specifically Montrealais about the *Assassin's Creed* series? Does *Machinarium* reflect contemporary Czech culture? Certainly not as clearly as *Les Quatre Cent Coups* is French, and even Parisian. Of course, most games are made in an industrial context and strive to maximize accessibility. The usual approaches to localization are more about obscuring cultural and linguistic differences than their preservation. Indie developers are in a good position to speak to and from a particular community. It can also be a way to stand out in the ever larger stream of games flowing on our screens. I, for one, would notice an overtly Quebecois game. Not because I think it would be better, but simply because I enjoy recognizing myself in a cultural object and feeling that I have a privileged relationship to it. I would in fact be interested in any culturally anchored game simply as a welcome change from the blandness of globalized generic aesthetics such as heroic fantasy or zombie fiction.

The remaining games of the *Glutomax* collection could be tagged as “self-training” or portfolio building projects. Games like *Awale*, *Simon*, *Pendu*, or *Spid2* are unimaginative, generally subpar remakes that were freely distributed, often without credits (although I still think our *Awale* was pretty good for the time). This type of micro independent game making has now grown both in quality and in quantity. Game-related courses and “game jam” events have created many opportunities for small-scale training and experimentation projects. Better tools, game-design education, and competition have contributed to making these projects generally more interesting than their 1990s counterparts.

Independent game making in Quebec (as elsewhere) probably goes back to the introduction of personal computers in the late 1970s. The *Glutomax* collection is only a snapshot of this production with a bias on the second half of the 1990s. Completing this collection would be no trivial task. Large portions of early local digital cultures have disappeared alongside the BBSs

and disk (and tape) swapping clubs around which they were organized. It is urgent that we unearth and archive any surviving backup to preserve this heritage. The analysis of a region- or culture-specific body of early computer games would also be much more interesting in comparison with other collections. Were there significant local differences in the practice of independent game making before it was globalized by the Internet?

Title	Authors	File_id.diz (original description)
<i>Construction Bob Escapes from Hell</i>	Oracle Software Productions (OSP)	--* Construction Bob escapes from hell *-- The all-star construction stuntman is back in the bouncing adventure of his life! Poor old Bob mistakingly ends up in hell. To get out he will need your help. Run, jump and ride mining carts as you avoid rocks, leap over holes and dodge arrows. Enemies like the gargoyles, the demon hands and Satan himself are out to get you! --* [VGA][Adlib][SB][PAS][GUS][Joystick] *-- * CONSTRUCTION BOB IN THE BOUCING FACTORY * Help Construction Bob as he bounces and bounces to make items for the Bouncing Factory! Features excellent VGA graphics, 50 exciting levels of non-stop bouncing action, and great sounds! It features a PG mode (not for the faint of heart!) and a G mode (for kids and faint of heart!) Requires VGA, and a high-speed PC (v2.0b) by: /\ Oracle Software /\
<i>Construction Bob in the Bouncing Factory</i>	Oracle Software Productions (OSP)	-- CHAMPIONS OF ZULULA ELITE EDITION [OSP] == Fight single matches, elimination tournaments or the awesome 20 monsters bash, which is one of the most action-packed event every seen! Elite Edition includes better graphix than Champions of Zulula, more monsters, one more boss, digital sound support. Download one of the most original fight game today! Requires : [VGA][1mb XMS] Recommended : [386+][Adlib/SB/PAS/GUS]
<i>Champions of Zulula Elite Edition</i>	Oracle Software Productions (OSP)	Earth Invasion is a space fight game in which you are a Yanchooz fighter pilot. Your job is to lead the attack on the planet earth. You must accomplish 10 missions of fast action space dogfights. You will have to face many human fighters and capital ships. It feature great EGA high resolution graphic.
<i>Earth Invasion</i>	Oracle Software Productions (OSP)	Flame Storm: The Bratockian Saga part II It's here! The long-awaited sequel to The Walls of Bratock. Bigger than it's predecessor, Flame Storm also features an all new oblique-overhead environment, better graphics, improved music and more than 10 cinematic cut-scenes to give the most complete role-playing experience ever in the shareware industry! VGA, 1meg, Sound Blaster
<i>Flame Storm: The Bratockian Saga part</i>	Oracle Software Productions (OSP)	====Á The Walls of Bratock V 1.3 ä==== The best shareware role-playing game ever! Stunning VGA 256 colors graphics, Awesome Sound Blaster musics and digitized sounds, and two great cinematic cut-scenes. Fight fearsome monsters and talk to dozens of people as a monstrous quest unfolds before you! /\ By Oracle Software /\ Optionnal speech pack: WOBSB10.XXX ====Á OVER 2.5 MEGS of pure role-playing ä====
<i>The Walls of Bratock</i>	Oracle Software Productions (OSP)	-- The Tournament of Zulula 3.0b == Greatly enhanced version of this tournament game. Battle 8 different races/creatures as you fight your way to the top of the Tournament of Zulula. Features great action, CGA graphics and great sound effects
<i>The Tournament of Zulula</i>	Oracle Software Productions (OSP)	

Bruno	I-Grec	by: /\ Oracle Software enr. /\ ?¿?¿?¿? B R U N O ?¿?¿?¿? † i Grec Games, 1999 Mexique, Mexico, Mexican Mexicain, Mexicasa, Tacos Didos, Nachos, Pantegos Cremos, Doritos, Tabarnakos Cheetos, chiquito & viva el gato ombre?¿!; † ?¿?¿?¿?¿?¿?¿?¿?¿?¿?¿?¿?¿?
Masturb Joe in Alpha Zone	I-Grec	*** MASTURB JOE *** The latest action game from i Grec, also the craziest game you've ever seen!! HAVE FUN!
Oi! Oi!	I-Grec	=>o oi! oi! =>o =>o oi! le jeu d'action a =>o =>o la atari. =>o =>o « 1997 i grec games » =>o
Striptease: a mathematical diversion for mature ladies	I-Grec	
Striptease: a mathematical diversion for mature gentlemen	I-Grec	
Tabarnak	I-Grec	— T A B A R N A K ! — - A la poursuite du Pantegos! - i Grec Games Le jeu du siecle! Vivez trois jours dans la peau d'un alcoolique! 2.3 megs d'alcoolisme intense!!!
Tuque Rose	I-Grec TUQUE ROSE
uuuuuuuu	I-Grec	by i Grec Games (c) 1999 Part I: The Tree. 100% lo-fi and 100% Atari, avoid enemies and get the hook!!!
Awale	Pierre-Yves Leclerc & Jonathan Lessard	 1999 i Grec Games °
Ilsa la Louve	ITKU Courriers	#.....# "ItLaRanTdANlKu" COURRIERS" "PRESEnTs: "iLsA lA lOuVe v6.9.(japanese)-a sexy RPG game in VGA-..disk 1/1"..... #.....# -juLy gRêlE of 97-# 78 -+- PaSSed ThroUgh --+ 98 65 -+- dA gATEs of HeLl --+ 46 99 i<8i6>AsK-yOggIlOurS 87
Invadeurs	ITKU Courriers	#.....# "ItLaRanTdANlKu" COURRIERS" "PRESEnTs: "InVaDEurs v3.1416" ..-a futuristic doom clone-..disk 1/1"..... #.....# -NoVembeR RaIn 98-# 78 -+- PaSSed ThroUgh --+ 98 65 -+- dA gATEs of HeLl --+ 46 99 i<8i6>AsK-GrAnDmA 87

Rapadog	ITKU Courriers	<pre> ##### "iTLarAnTdANlKu"COURRIERS PRESEnTs: RAPADOG v1.0 - a sexual adventure - disk 1/1 ##### #-NoVembeR Third 96-# 78 -+- PaSSed ThrOugh +-+ 98 65 -+- dA gATEs of HeLl +-+ 46 99 i<8i6>AsK-GrAnDmA 87 </pre>
Mémoire	?	
Le Pendu	?	
Simon	?	
Spades	?	
Spidz	Francois Godbout (alias Tinkr or Whaf)	
Splatter Kombat	Stephane Hockenhill Et Francois Delisle	

Table 1: Glutomax pre-2000 Québécois independent game collection