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Out There: A Postmortem

By Michael Peiffert on 04/02/15 01:16:00 pm

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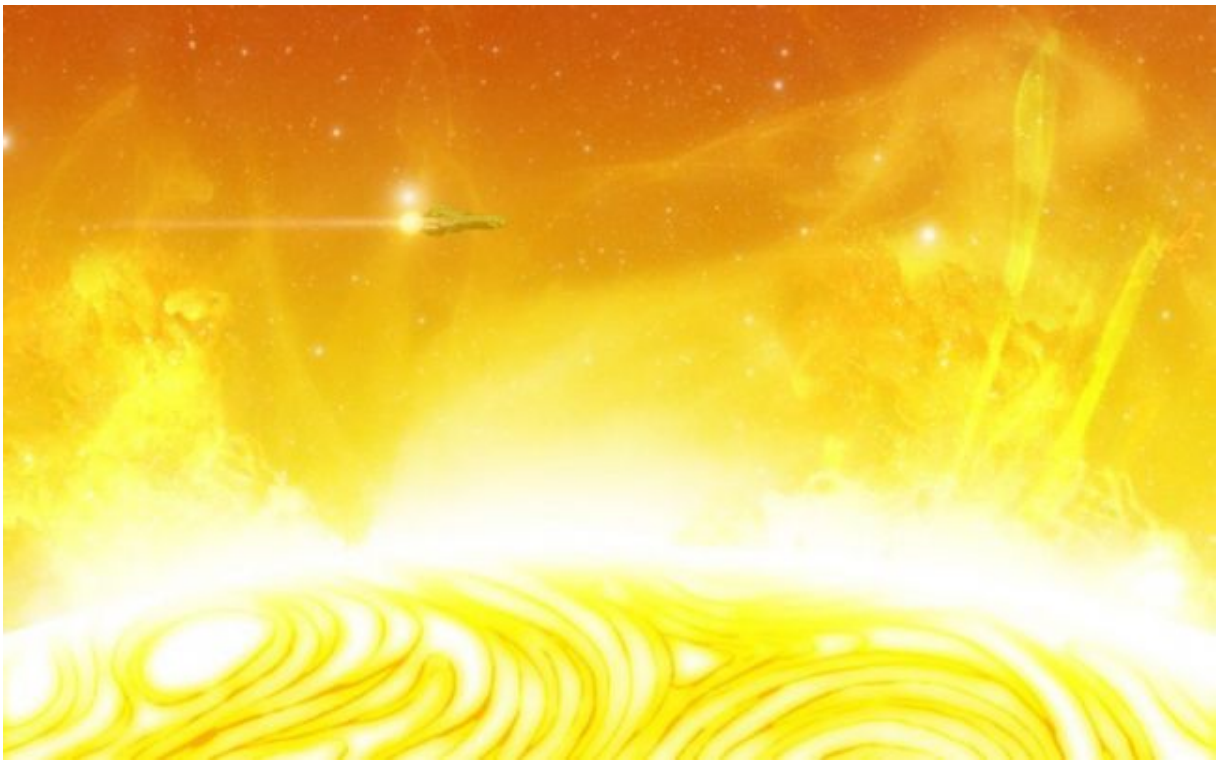
I'm Michael Peiffert, Mi-Clos Studio's founder and creative director.

This devlog has been written by Out There's game designer & writer FibreTigre during the development of the mobile version that was released early 2014.
Since then, the game got critical acclaim from press and gamers. It gathered awards and recognition such as:

- *Excellence in Storytelling finalist - IMGA 2015*
- *Best Game Design Award - Casual Connect*
- *Best Interactive Fiction Game of 2014 runner-up - PocketTactics*
- *Best Mobile Games of 2014 shortlist - TouchArcade*

Today, exactly a yeat later, Out There: Ω Edition releases on Steam. It's a complete makeover of the original with new graphics, music and contents.

It's time to rewind time to understand where we come from and what we came through.
Have a good read.



I. Meeting Michael

I first met Michael on April 12, 2012 at Pitch My Game (the very first one), a Parisian event where he presented the game he had just launched: Space Disorder. His presentation was not the most riveting and his game had left me utterly unenthused. At the time (much like today), I was not really a fan of mobile games as I find (witness the present tense) that they offer a superficial experience. However, some very strong points would offset these mixed feelings: there was a lot of work behind it, a lot of autonomy, a distinct lack of feeble financial lingo. For him, the search for the best possible gaming experience was based on beta testing, feedback and improvement, repeated until you reach the perfect game. I like people who are not afraid to sweat it out. His search for a good gaming experience clashed with other creators

who sought to make “the best Bomberman” or “Terraria, only bigger”. It was also notable that, of all the games that were presented, Space Disorder was the only one to be completed and commercialised, which was a good sign.

Our second exchange came in September 2012 at a conference I gave in Lyon on interactive fiction – he was in the crowd. The conference was very challenging for someone like me who rarely ventures out of his apartment (and who does not speak in public). Our conversations were very brief. He contacted me over the next two months to suggest we develop a game together. No pitch was made but he had two elements to start us off: firstly, a visual which is now the logo of the game (it hasn’t changed since!) and the idea to make a game “a la Dune”. I was a little cold and distant at first, as I tend to work independently (I have never been an employee): I am reluctant to become an associate, especially on a project that is not my initiative. However, purely as an intellectual endeavour in the beginning, I proposed a type of game that would not be Dune but rather something that would recall the voyage of the Normandy from planet to planet in Mass Effect 2, with a game dynamic akin to Oregon Trail – Star Control without the action, or Deuteros with a meditative twist. This initial mini-draft was well received by Michael, though I imagine it must have appeared very vague in his mind. He asked me for another proposal on a completely different gameplay, one that would involve artificial intelligence on a huge spaceship.

> “This document has inspired us and guided us like a lighthouse.”

I was not wildly inspired. I was thinking about these obscure games of the late 80’s/early 90’s such as Extase by Cryo/Virgin, when Michael called me back to say: “It’s all good, your first proposal is suitable.” Then he asked me to come up with a document that would explain the upcoming game from the point of view of a player once it had been completed, almost in the manner of a story or a video games review. What is extraordinary is that a year down the line, and after hundreds and hundreds of changes and many periods of doubt, the final product is extremely close to the experiment described in that document. I will be complimenting Michael a fair bit throughout this story, but the praise is absolutely warranted: he conjured a very pertinent working methodology that, among other things, prevented us from going astray. This document inspired us and guided us like a lighthouse. My next step was to completely write the script of the game with multiple alternate endings if possible, per Michael’s instructions. I completed this task on the night of December 24, 2012. The next day, Michael responded, completely blown away by the story.

This story has a DNA. In May 2012, a designer named Fanette Mellier asked me to write a book for her on the theme of space “of which the reader is the hero”, or “Choose Your Own Adventure” book. She would then format the piece as part of her year of residency at the Villa Médicis, which was actually celebrating the theme of space during that period. In June I gave her a document that looked, in my opinion, pretty neat. It included all that I find clever and beautiful in terms of interactive literature (the book will be published in April 2014). Among other constraints, I had to write with a relative scientific rigour. In fact the book will come with a mini-encyclopaedia that I wrote, which explains the rational foundations of the various plot points.

This work has profoundly influenced, and to a certain extent even fixated, my fearful and realistic vision of the universe. The writing phase left me feeling depressed, with intimate beliefs stemming not from fiction but from scientific observations or even buried intuitions that we tend to suppress: the idea that life is an accident; intelligence an anomaly, an illusion. Or that each day, every human dies a little because the plasticity of their brains modifies their very being during the various phases of sleep. And that finally, there will come a day when all suns will perish and life is no longer possible, and all traces of civilisation will disappear: all acts are ultimately futile and meaningless. These are physical, disturbing truths. Faced with this painful reality, I could tell a thousand science fiction stories in my life, and ultimately it would be the same one over and over again. It is in these principles and this atmosphere that lies Out There.

At the time, the game was called Drifter. Michael did some research and it turned out there was already a space-themed game with that name, coupled with a blooming Kickstarter campaign. We changed the name to Faraway; the same problem arose. Michael then came up with this name: Out There. It's a great name, and I'm slightly envious not to have found it myself. It turned out that yet another space-themed game carried the name Out There Somewhere, which became public when we had already started to communicate about ours, so it was too late to do anything about it at that point.

In January 2013, we hadn't even laid down a single line of code for Out There when we talked at length about the issue of funding. Michael was smarting from his experience with the editor of Space Disorder and, quite naturally, the idea of participatory financing emerged. Unfortunately for Michael, it turns out that I am ethically against crowdfunding, which I believe is harmful to creative endeavours. As I write these lines, this is still very much the case, but if I had known what difficulties we would face later, I think I would have swallowed my principles and my stupid pride. I would curse myself on more than one occasion for this decision.

The fact was that if Michael wanted to work with me, I would force upon him the following funding model: we finance everything ourselves to create the game we want without any outside influence, period. What about eating? Well, apart from the effort we were putting in for Out There, we both had paid gigs on the side. In absolute terms, I still think this is the healthiest way to produce a game that has the verve and swagger of those made during the golden age of the 80's and early 90's. It also has the added benefit of allowing us to make money on the regular according to a very simple equation: it's not possible to sell a game selectively on iOS, where sales are highest. Therefore the mechanics of Kickstarter are not applicable.

Michael was always very courteous, despite the worries that came later, but I know that he must have cursed and hated me every time he suffered financially. That said, from time to time he happens to give his opinion on the world of video games, publishers or distributors. He says what he really thinks bluntly, with total freedom, and that slice of rage that characterises any creative effort. And he can do this for the simple reason that we are (still) independent and autonomous.

Finally, whenever we had to remove or edit features out of the game, the only question we asked ourselves was "Will this improve the gaming experience?" rather than "Damn, how will we explain to our financial backers that this feature won't be in the game?" Let's remember that at the time, the product everyone was waiting for in the realm of space-themed mobile games was Star Command, which enjoyed astronomical financial backing, and which ended up delivering merely 30% of its promised features in its final version. Michael is not yet old or cynical enough to want to enrich himself in such an egregious manner (in fact, he is even less fond of money than I am, as you will see). Last financial point: we have a 50/50 deal in terms of distribution of profits, taking into account our different fiscal statuses.

Early 2013: Michael is busy uncluttering some of the more abstract aspects of the game and making a little cash by doing side gigs, while I am producing gameplay documents. There are 120 of these: 1- to 10-page individual records that explain each aspect of gameplay with equations and words and phrases in both English and French for each screen. The game is (on paper) really taking shape. Michael allows me to include exchanges with aliens, and I dream every night of finally making a modern, playable, neat version of Captain Blood including the aforementioned exchanges. I imagine an astronaut landing on an unknown planet and laying on the ground runes collected in space to spell out phrases like "I", "Want", "Fuel". Michael thinks this is too similar to the universal translator found in Captain Blood, so we design a new system with a syllabic alien alphabet for which I write the algorithm. I based it on character strings found in exoctic languages on Google Translate (Star Wars used Tagalog to create its Ewok language). The result is very cool. Finally, in order to start laying all this stuff down, I create a pseudo-interface for the game in PHP so that Michael can have a basis to build on, and I spend a little time tweaking the Star Map that resets itself at the beginning of each game. The progressive spacing of the stars must benefit the gameplay (since the game entails finding technologies and building them in order to reach stars that are further away). And stellar paths, sometimes reaching dead-ends, must

generate without overlapping.

Michael takes things into his own hands in late February 2013. Even though he is busy coding, drawing and animating, his primary concern is communicating about the game. From the very first screenshot, he had an international marketing strategy in place for the game that would come to benefit us greatly. The importance of a marketing strategy in today's world cannot be emphasised enough. A developer friend named Stephen Perrin once created a French game that was, by all accounts, very well done: Zorbié. He had no strategy in place at all, and the result was a paltry 180 units in sales. Had he communicated about it properly, sales would have been ten to hundredfold. The idea is not just to say "I exist" but rather "Dear gamers, we're working our butts off to offer you something crazy and unique. We hope you'll love it!" At the end of the day, not communicating about your game shows a lack of love for what you do and for your future gamers. I've always been afraid of being a nuisance to the people who have read my stuff with Out There, and I thank them for putting up with my regular intrusions, but it is for them and to make them dream that we work so hard!

A little side note on my relationship with Michael: we spent around 30 to 60 minutes a day on the phone, and all we talked about was Out There. All our time was dedicated to the game and nothing else. He actually came up to Paris in June and we shared (for about an hour) a Coca-Cola together, but I think all we did was talk about Out There. It's borderline madness, but it demonstrates our commitment to the success of the game.

As Michael moves along with the process of clearing my documents, we exchange on the relevance of my proposals. This is where I understood the importance of knowing one's classics. To take a concrete example: In the spaceship, I wanted to make sure that the stock took as much place as the engines or the telescope. This meant that if you wanted to build a terraforming module, you would have less space for fuel or oxygen. Before taking on the arduous task of coding this, Michael threw me his famous catchphrase: "But wait a minute… Are you sure this'll work? That it'll be fun?" And the answer was yes, because it worked for example in Frontier: Elite 2. Sometimes the tension would move up a notch between us, for instance when Michael said he wanted to include a tutorial. It seems obvious to me now, but at the time I found it completely out of sync with the ferocity of the gameplay of a roguelike, for instance. After a series of sharp exchanges he simply said "Trust me", so I made him a scripted tutorial. He said he didn't want it to be scripted, so this time it was my turn to tell him "Trust me". Many good things are born of sometimes-harsh compromises.

For my part, I do not sit idly by waiting for time to pass: after a quick trip to Rome to complete and promote the space-themed interactive fiction book mentioned earlier, I start writing adventures and journal entries. Each stage of our hero's stellar voyage will be accompanied by a captain's log, much like the one in Star Trek, which will enhance the atmosphere or, on the contrary, steer it towards a potentially dark multiple choice adventure (a la Kobayashi Maru). In terms of a narrative structure, Out There could be compared to the experience of watching the episodes of a TV series in a disorderly manner: one random adventure by star system, set on a stout canvas that unfolds slowly.

> "Michael works a lot and sleeps little, and I tell myself that his sleep is more important than the ship, so I say nothing."

In order to step up communication between us, Michael puts all technical development work on hold to produce a trailer. At the time, we didn't have a musician. A studio very graciously offers us one of their pieces of music to illustrate the images of the game: Cleophas, a group of very talented guys from Montpellier to whom, as you will see, we owe a lot. This trailer is important because Michael wants to present the game at a French event in Lyon.

Here's an anecdote about the trailer. Michael had originally made a spaceship (the Nomad, which takes its name from The Stars My Destination), which looked a bit like a phallus. Michael works a lot and sleeps little, and I tell myself that his sleep is more important than the ship, so I say nothing. Besides, everything is very sexual in this very pulp universe: Frank Fazetta's topless guys interlocking their swords, oblong vessels with reactors on the sides… In fact, since the golden era of Astounding Stories (with authors such as Fritz Leiber who have since psychoanalysed the abundance of penises in their own stories, up to Final Fantasy) where the heroes have swords larger than their bodies and the kendo guards stand in the extension of the latter's crotches. The obvious sexual symbols are almost a standard. But one of his relatives saw the design and Michael had a go at me, saying he didn't want to be known as the "Phallus-ship" guy and that I should have told him. He had to draw on his last physical resources to redo everything. The trailer was a hit, generating a modest, but at the time very encouraging, 10,000 views on Youtube.

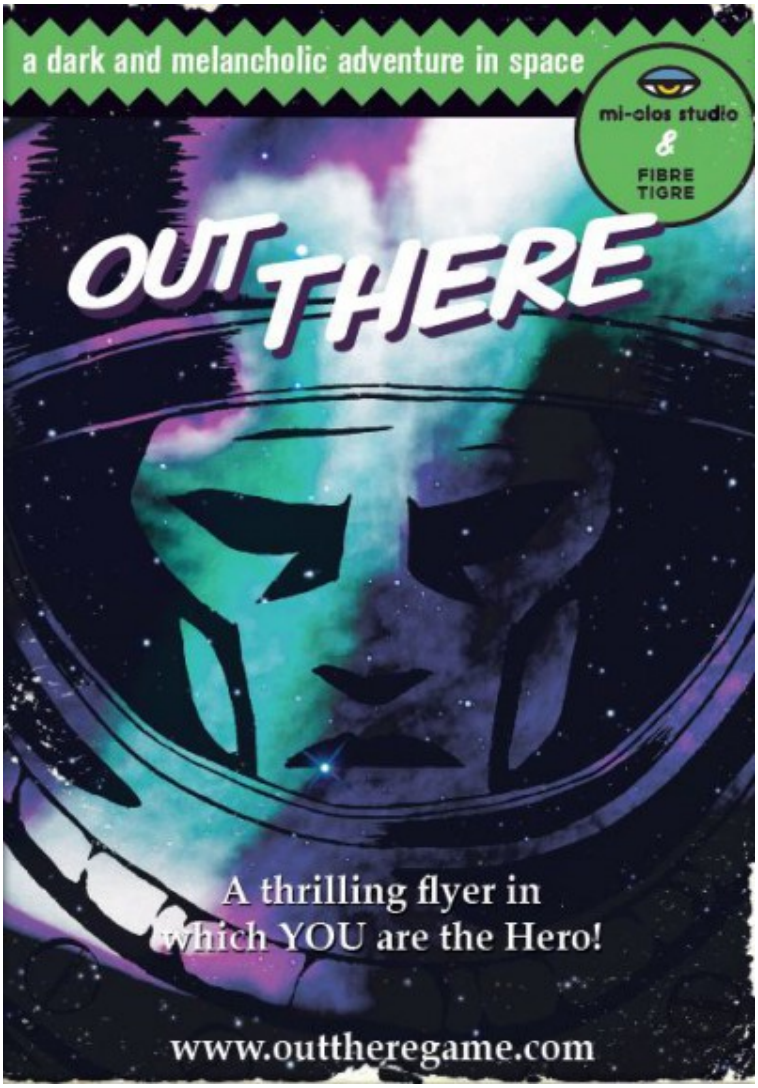
From the get-go Pocket Gamer, Indie Statik and most importantly Touch Arcade, which is the biggest media outlet on mobile games, talk about Out There, and positively. Pocket Tactics wrote a nice article about us and highlighted something that would become obvious to us down the line: the fact that Out There carries certain values – there is no fighting, for example. It's worth noting that the mobile market is rather like a supermarket where, much like detergent brands, there are not individual games but rather individual types of games: Tower Defense, FarmVille… The games are similar to each other, meaning that it's the biggest marketing scheme, or the guy who has a friend working at Apple, that stands out. Out There is – or at least seems – different.

A Wired journalist asks us to send him the game once it's completed. One day in March, Michael calls me in disbelief: Rock Paper Shotgun have spotted the game and want Out There to appear at the Rezzed convention in Birmingham. And we get the booth for free! Only 4 mobile games are selected internationally, including ours. This is an amazing acknowledgment, the type of recognition we would later get consistently in England, Germany, East Asia and that we're getting at the time of writing in the United States, but that we will likely never get in France, mainly because we are not quite normative, procedural, or sycophantic enough – and, especially in my case – because we just do not know when to keep our big mouths shut when necessary.

II. Investing without money

That period also marks the start of financial investments. Not only were we working on Out There, and therefore not making any money, but we also had to pay for travel, accommodation, etc. We needed to find resources elsewhere. I remember for instance, due to an unfortunate combination of circumstances, having to pay € 80 for a large poster, which turned out to be hassle at the time. I was angry because of this ridiculous sum, but hey, it was a different time. We were still in "Marketing Battle" mode and we just had to do what it took.

I suggested a pretty cool idea: making a Choose Your Own Adventure flyer. The advantages are plentiful and profound. After all, England is the home of Fighting Fantasy, of Warhammer 40,000, of Sir Ian Livingstone! And it allowed us to introduce the narrative character but also the idea of resource management in a short adventure. The best thing was creating a flyer that was visually reminiscent of old-school Penguin Books, with the iconic green top border, and we even added small artificial defects on the edge of the flyer, the kind you typically see on CYOA books. The work was done remarkably, and free of charge, by a professional. Michael was not happy because I used the cheapest kind of paper, but apart from that the end product kicked ass. Basically, what the flyer said was: "We're for real."



It was at this time that Michael told me: “Dude, we’re gonna have to translate the game into English.” I think by now it’s abundantly clear that, at that stage, there was absolutely no way we could afford a translator. I hadn’t completed the writing at the time, but the adventure file would eventually contain 28,000 words, which amounted to a minimum of € 2,500. So I got down to it. I had once scripted a game in English called Works of Fiction, an experiment based on simultaneity. Someone had commented “it’s clear that the game was written by a non-English speaker”, which had not bothered me too much but would later no doubt mortify the person tasked with proofreading the text. I feel sorry for Michael, because when it goes smoothly, coding is not particularly riveting, but when it doesn’t, it’s absolute hell. Writing adventures has become difficult. To summarise, there are several types of events: Captain’s log-style events that are there to set the mood. Super fun, though a little depressing. Then there are those that are thrust upon you: you are hit by an ice comet. I wrote it in one go, and then I translated it.

Adventures are difficult to write for several reasons. At home I have a bunch of technical books about role-playing games called adventure seeds, thousands upon thousands of abstracts of potential storylines put together by themes such as Betrayed Love, Revenge of a Family Member, Encounter with a Higher Power. But these works, almost all of them American, came out post 1990 and thus focus heavily on relations with Non-Player Characters.

But Out There is the story of a guy who’s completely alone. It would be impossible to use elements of a Betrayed Love or a City in Peril. I began by perusing scientific magazines, which is where oddly enough I found the craziest ideas, like the planet Caramel (Michael hated it, but I had the last word) or the nebula made of raspberry rum, to which we owe our 12+ rating. Then I re-watched Star Trek Classic, the kind of episode that seems unbearable today, where the crew tries for an hour to communicate with a giant space amoeba. There was good ground to cover because the stories were really in the pulp spirit, man and technology against the bizarro dangers of space. And finally, I used elements of contemporary writers of the Astounding era. There are horrible winged men that I took from a collection of Romanian SF novellas, profound cosmological queries found in Frederik Pohl’s work, naïve alien creations reminiscent of early Asimov such as a civilisation living in the heart of the sun. There are also strange temples and malicious protean creatures similar to the Shoggoths in Lovecraft – and also themes pertaining to degenerate races that are dear to this author. And of course, the heart of the game and the terrible daily grind of the hero, a lonely soul in the night, remind one of the first pages of The Stars My Destination. There is also the final narrative push, very 1920-1940, where nothing is said, nothing is resolved, nothing is understood. We see from afar “the thunder sport[ing] over the glaciers” in the words of Arthur C. Clarke, but nothing is explained as is the case in modern series, adventures conclude with a big “THE END?” as in Flash Gordon – that being said, the answers are usually included in the overall story arc. All this to say that nothing in the game goes beyond the 1960s!

Writing adventures, multiple choices, conditions, the balanced integration into the gameplay and then translating the whole thing into English was making my brain explode. Oftentimes, the English sentence was very ugly so I wrote an entirely different thing – so yes, some adventures are exclusive to the French version. At that time, a very talented singer told me: “To write well in English, you must write very short sentences, as if explaining simple things to a 5-year old child.” I thought at first she was being disdainful towards English speakers. And then I gave it a go. In French, I came up with fussy sentences like: “In the tenuous firmament, my sensors distinguish a singular construction with strange angles, emitting a curious radiation that I can not identify. As I slowly approach, I wonder about the wonders and dangers that await me blah blah blah…” In English it gave: “A stellar station. It seems abandoned. I decided to explore.” All of a sudden the English version is super badass.

> “Michael is a super pessimistic guy, so for a very long time during our collaboration, the success of the game to him meant sales of merely thousands of euros.”

Back to Rezzed. Rezzed takes places in the spring and we had to produce a working game very quickly, which is not the easiest task. The development phase is thrown off balance, but it’s also very exciting, forcing us into peaks of frenetic activity, and we end up with a small piece of the game that works fine. Michael worked immensely hard: he had coding sessions on the plane, in his hotel room, until the very end so we could produce at the last minute a playable version of the game. Most notably he created in the space of two weeks the basis for the game’s graphics, which is the one used on the final version. Michael was thus able to get all the attendees to test the game to link up with key journalists and some interesting gaming personalities – e.g. big Youtubers, a very important detail thereafter. Before returning, he had already sent me feedback on the gameplay. It was generally positive: players were glued to the game. The adventures are long, but the players take the time to read. Players sometimes laugh, as for example when the hero says that he doesn’t miss humans, but he does miss burgers. So we decided to create an achievement (unlocked trophy) with respect to this particular adventure. In short, everything we’d created so far had stuck with the public. Rezzed would have another impact, this time on the music, which I will come to later.

But before that we registered the game at IndieCade, a festival for indie games. IndieCade was a fee-carrying competition (€ 80), which is quite steep. But we’d been selected by Rezzed via Rock Paper Shotgun, so why not? Michael, ever the pessimist, did not believe in our chances at all, yet it was he who insisted on participating in the contest. The reason was simple: the jury at IndieCade are all big names. Basically, you pay € 80 and you get, for instance, a journalist from The Verge, an American indie game developer and an influential publisher to play your game. I remember that we had to fill in a document to explain the game’s instructions. I just wrote: “Wait for the heart of the night. Put on the most beautiful music you know. Play Out There. Then turn off the lights. Walk slowly outside, and enjoy the irresistible song of the stars.” We didn’t win IndieCade, but we were close to the final selection and a few days later a reporter from The Verge contacted us and told us: “Guys, as soon as your game is done, send it to me alright?” Hooray!

Following Rezzed we went through a merry drama about the music on Out There. We were already very positive about Cleophas who made the trailer music. And just as we were about to shake hands on an agreement, we got a message from someone named Siddhartha Barnhoorn who offered to create the music and the audio environment of the game. Siddhartha had made the music for a game called Antichamber, which sold a million units, and which Michael regarded as kind of a holy grail – at least with regards to its soundtrack. Siddhartha had become aware of us through Rezzed and the trailer (once again, the critical importance of marketing). In addition, and we would learn this later, he was working at the time on the music of a game called The Stanley Parable, which went on to garner the recognition we all know about. Working with Siddhartha was an opportunity to have a good musician and attract a name that, though admittedly difficult to write, had already collaborated on a hit, which was good for our marketing strategy. Siddhartha asked for a substantial percentage of revenues. Michael was tempted, but the mere idea of it made me furious. Michael is a super pessimistic guy, so for a very long time during our collaboration, the success of the game to him meant sales of merely thousands of euros. I suggested the possibility of us selling tens or even hundreds of thousands of units, in which case the amount allocated to Siddhartha would be astronomical.

You must be thinking we’re absolute bastards for wanting to keep a potential goldmine (there was nothing at the time) between us and being stingy with the musician that would add a potentially unquantifiable artistic dimension to the game. The latter problem was swiftly resolved when we gave him permission to commercialise the soundtrack for Out There and keep 100% of the profits. We still had to figure out a compensation cap. And the question remained whether to choose him or someone else. We discussed three other musicians: Cleophas, a fashionable electro band from Paris and a very creative and talented musician who specialised in video games, who also happened to be very enthusiastic about the project. The amounts requested were roughly all the same. We chose Siddhartha both for marketing reasons and also because his music stuck perfectly to the game, but it was a very difficult decision from a moral standpoint, especially with regards to Cleophas. However, we put a lot both personally and financially into the project, so in a sense the decisions were easy to take – as Michael told me at the time, “I have a wife and two kids, I have to work to support the game financially, so we have to do what’s best for the game, period” – this coming from a guy who’s usually much less of a cynical bastard than I. So we accepted Siddhartha’s terms and added a cap, which he accepted straight away. He just really wanted to make the music for the game. Second good thing to come out of Rezzed: Eurogamer contact us and offer us a free booth at Eurogamer Expo in London in the autumn. The English seem to like us quite a bit! These signs would bode well for the future.

An intern approached us: Thibault. He's a student at a game design school in Bastille, which just happens to be the school that hosted the Pitch My Game conference where I first met Michael. I like these coincidences – they're good for the story. We told him he wouldn't be paid, but also that there would be quite a few thankless tasks such as filling spreadsheets and sending emails. But he agreed to work with us, and I think he didn't regret it. Michael was Thibault's sole point of contact to make sure he didn't get divergent instructions, but both of us decided on what his tasks would be. Sure enough, he ended up having to decipher miles upon miles of excel spreadsheets, which would become an invaluable asset for the project: the contact details of each and ever video games journalist on the face of the planet. He started discussion threads online in science fiction and video games forums – the guerrilla – and he accompanied us to conventions – at his own expense, but the experience must have been unique for a first-year student looking to make a career in the video games industry.

A major event loomed: Gamescom. An important event in the European gaming industry, held in Germany on the incongruous date of 15 August. But we weren't invited, which made us less than keen. It turns out that through various intermediaries, UBIFRANCE had come up with a sort of package to make it easier to have booth at the convention. France was in the spotlight at Gamescom. For those of you who are not familiar with UBIFRANCE, it's a French organisation that seeks to help French companies export their products. So we had access to a relatively good price: instead of paying € 3,000, we could get a booth for € 1,200. This was not an easy decision, but we were hoping to meet publishers, who would facilitate distribution (through advertising, using their contacts at Apple to get features, etc.), but also simply development by giving us a check ahead of royalties, thus giving us some breathing space. Michael produced a second trailer, much more effective because it was mostly made of gameplay footage and highlighted the strengths of the game. Thibault really put in the effort by sending out emails for our press release and it seemed to have had the desired effect because, when Michael arrived at the convention, a relatively important website had already mentioned the game.

Spoiler alert: Gamescom was such a disaster that Out There very nearly came to an end right there and then. First of all, the whole thing turned out to be one big pile of illusions. We met a lot of publishers such as Devolver, the editor of Hotline Miami. They were all ecstatic about the game – the festive mood of a convention certainly helps. Certain publishers gleefully offer to localise Out There for free in Russia, China, etc. At the time, we get our money's worth. But obviously the post-convention mood is quite different. Regarding the media, there's not much going on dead in the middle of summer, though we did get a glowing article in the Journal du Gamer, to which I am very thankful as it was a big psychological boost during this ordeal. The computer, the tablet, the project materials were all stolen at the end of the convention. But fret not, they left us the € 80 poster (which was to be stolen later, one thing at a time). A side note on the circumstances of the theft: all materials are entrusted to UBIFRANCE officials who put them under lock and key. When we asked for them back, they were gone. And true to the French tradition, no one is held responsible.

There are three main points to this disaster: first off, we'd lost our working materials. Because obviously we did not have the luxury of owning several computers, the one we used for demos is the same one Michael uses to work. Secondly, we lost the last month's worth of work, which was by then wandering somewhere on the planet. Thirdly, and this was the most serious point, UBIFRANCE and their various partners treated us with the utmost contempt. When we mentioned the theft, it was a bit like Marie Antoinette suggesting to the hungry masses that they should eat cake, for want of bread. They seemed to be saying, "Really? Just a computer? Just a small iPad? Why such panic?" That

would teach us to want to play alongside people too rich to understand the problems of independent developers. Michael and I were shattered. He told me straight up “The project is over”, and in fact for a few days the situation left us in a state of paralysis. And true to Murphy’s Law, I had an upheaval in my personal life at that precise moment, meaning that I could not sleep at my place for a month and I had to wander from friendly sofa to friendly sofa, with an EEE PC to work with.

> “Me, I get up because of love. I love people and I love to give them things.”

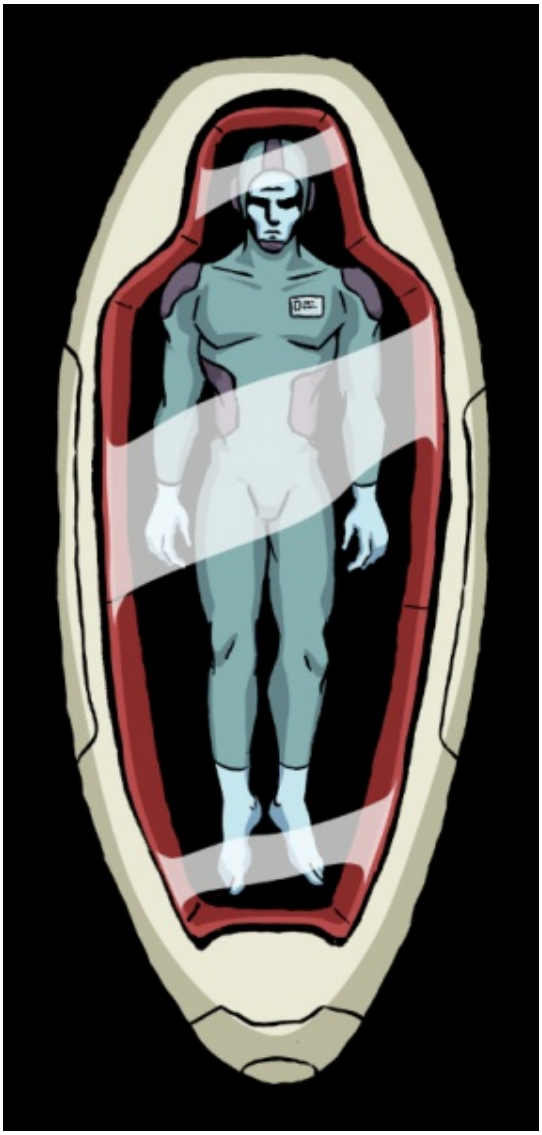
We had to react and take the problems one by one. The first was psychological. UBIFRANCE had made us very unhappy. So I wrote four formal letters of complaint: two the managers of UBIFRANCE’s website, one to the big boss and one to their legal department – which mixed both reprimands (“you were responsible for our equipment”) and institutional demands (“your mission is to support businesses”). I asked them for € 3,000, a ridiculously low amount. But it helped us stand fast. I told Michael “Don’t worry, everything will be alright”, when in truth I had no idea what would happen. And the cold violence of my letter reflected the contempt with which they had treated us, which would sometimes bring it all back to the fore. Then we had to deal with the hardware problem. We contacted people who had shown sympathy to our cause: Pitch My Game, GameDevParty, a bunch of cool guys who passed on the message. The next day a very generous donor lent Michael his iMac, on which he still works to this day. A true Christmas miracle. Finally, the last problem was that of our working documents. We had lost the sources, but we had the compiled folders. We wracked our brains to decompile them, but without success. I called a friend who is a Linux user, Eric, a big name in the French interactive fiction scene, who worked wonders, resolving a situation that no one on the Internet had managed to resolve. We owe him a lot. In the space of a few days we were once again operational – except that I was working from a sofa.

Unsurprisingly, UBIFRANCE sent us a letter (signed by the president, no less) explaining that, because of this or that archaic point of law, true to French tradition, nobody was responsible for anything, and certainly not them. We wouldn’t get our € 3,000 (the organisation’s annual budget was € 150 million in 2005).

I have something personal to say on this point. I don’t know where you find the strength to get up in the morning and get to work. Perhaps through inertia, or because our lives are structured this way – to pay the rent, essentially. Me, I get up because of love. I love people and I love to give them things. I’m glad that people take pleasure with Out There because I love to make them dream, I like living something whole and beautiful. But I also get up because of hatred. I was very angry at the contempt of these people towards not only us, but also against their stated mission of supporting businesses. I worked like a madman afterwards to provide the best possible game so that I could fight this invisible enemy who had hurt us (people find motivation where they can). Anger was making my brain work at 200 mph at the time, and to occupy my evenings (on the couch) I wrote Crisis at the Quai d’Orsay, a serious game which gathered 2,000,000 hits thereafter. Had I monetised it, it would have brought me at least € 10,000, an amount that would have been more than welcome at the time, but I hadn’t done it. Here’s a lesson that came out my stupidity: it’s always better to concentrate on creation than on destruction.

As I said earlier, all our contacts at Gamescom came up short, with the exception of a resilient Asian publisher who could not do anything for us without a copy of the finished article, which was entirely normal. Michael had money worries and much family pressure during this period. We agreed to release the game in November, which was a lot of work for me because I had not yet written and translated everything, and a tremendous amount of work for Michael. Basically, he could not finish the game alone. We therefore sought the help of a coder, Aurélien, to lessen our workloads – taking care of complex tasks such as managing backup and memory, very important elements for a game that would run on Kindle for instance. Since we didn’t have the money (sorry for repeating myself), Aurélien intervened for free for a month, in a contractually defined manner. Meanwhile Michael committed himself to marketing the game, and I to writing the story and the dialogues. Aurélien did fantastic work. He reduced the backup and recoded the internal stock and spaceship trading management system. We were fully satisfied with his contribution and looked forward to stepping up to the plate to reimburse his investment.

It was at this time that I started rereading my translation with a professional who graciously accepted to do it free of charge. There would eventually be a total of 28,000 words (I had not finished writing) to read in French and 24,000 in English. I thought it would take 5 days. We sat face to face while she read, corrected, etc. After 15 minutes, I asked her how much she had done so I could estimate the total amount of time we would need. She was still on the first sentence. It took several months – she could only do it outside of her regular working hours, and sometimes it was not just proofreading: sometimes I had thought of a sentence but forgotten to write it down. Other times my English was just too bad for her to bear, and she would have to rewrite whole passages. And there were instances too when the English and French versions did not align at all, which made her job that much more difficult. But the end result was good. Of the 24,000 English words in the beta version, only around 20 were discarded. Well done.



III. The search for an amoral concept

Eurogamer convention. Michael and Thibault are once again on mission abroad. Eurogamer allowed us to get in touch with the public, and to meet key journalists from the mobile industry but also Youtubers who would contact us again later. Only downside, our poster was stolen at the end of the convention. But there would have been no use for it until the game's release anyway, so its work was done (I just hope it ended up on some fan's wall and not in a trash can, that would be too bad!). It was difficult for us to show Thibault the appreciation his immense efforts had warranted. It turns out that I had with me a high-resolution copy of the original cover of Monkey Island made by Steve Purcell. I had made a massive print of it, as large as a window, which I took off my wall and gave him when I went to his school to get my iPad. It certainly wasn't much…

After Eurogamer, a new issue arises. Michael is having financial difficulties and it's affecting his family situation. I tried to pass on to him a few job opportunities that came my way. It was imperative that we complete the game as soon as possible so that we could begin to live off of it, but it became apparent that it would barely be finished on the date we had set – meaning no beta testing, no marketing, no preparation. November was a hellish month in terms of competition. It's not that we were competing with Call of Duty, but there are inevitably less opportunities to talk about us in the media. It seemed at the time that the game would not come out before the early 2014, even if it was completed. Both of us had to make new arrangements to be able to hold on financially until that date. The game wasn't completely finished with regards to some very specific details, but the heart of the gameplay was there. So I spent many months testing and retesting it. The game was very difficult. Many equations were unbalanced due to some changes we had made on the fly during the course of its creation. Having done the beta testing ourselves, we were faced with a number of difficult issues to address that were fascinating from the point of view of game designers.

Here are a few of these issues, though there were many of them that came up on an almost daily basis. The game is difficult at first, but it teaches the player to have a good spaceship in order to be comfortable and dominate the galaxy. So what happens then? How do we make it more challenging? One thing not to do (even though it seems intuitively good) is to create a variable, which makes the universe gradually more difficult to navigate as you gain power. Your fuel consumption goes down? Then fuel becomes more difficult to find. In practice it's a terrible idea because gamers aren't stupid and they get the impression that they're being subjected to unfair rules that are constantly changing. You can't go back to where you were humiliated before and flex your muscles, because that area has become harder to deal with. Oblivion was hated for it. It's important that the universe evolves irrespective of your actions. We therefore preferred a game with consistent,

non-gradual levels of difficulty. Roguelike lends itself to imagination and the player's own rules. As incredible as it sounds, some people finish Nethack without killing any enemies.

Another example, with the same aim of making the experience more pleasing: we thought about imposing on the player a vessel with more space, rather than dishing out abandoned spaceships at random. But when you think about it a bit, while that idea makes the first part slightly easier, it would make the following ones very boring. It's important to keep the player guessing. We wanted the player to come across Omega by chance, a magical substance that fills up the fuel tank, and that it would be used as such… until they notice later in the game that it can serve other useful functions, such as repairing broken equipment. And later still that Omega allows for passage through black holes to travel long distances, thus cursing themselves for having used it all on equipment repair. There is a narrative unveiling of the structure of the gameplay. We made sure that if your intergalactic engine breaks, you would need to disassemble your telescope to build a new one and therefore go to the last extremities to survive, self-cannibalising to find the energy to continue. We wanted to destroy the financial system familiar to us by making the player choose between storing gold or iron, platinum or oxygen, and that of course, iron and oxygen be crucial in your adventure.

> "We tried to attend Paris Games Week, but were told rather tersely that we were too late."

At that point Michael decided that he wanted to completely redo the system of dialogues. It was a very good idea, and I immediately put together the elements he needed to implement it. Not only was the system complicated, but what I also thoroughly enjoyed in Michael's request was that it had a real humanistic value to it. Imagine meeting aliens who speak to you in a foreign language. You have to try to understand what they want. Basically, they all ask in their own way, "Are you a friend?" And our hero struggles to say yes, because sometimes they would instead say, "Are you an enemy?" The fact that we have to try to understand something foreign, to establish a link, is a wonderful value – even if, at the end of the day, the player is in it for his own survival. In fact, I'd come up with a quite "earthly" karma system. If you behaved like a bastard, your reputation would be known throughout the galaxy and the aliens would welcome you with weapons – an idea that comes straight from Captain Blood. It could not be implemented however, because it would have altered the balance of the game and therefore induced a new period of testing which we could not afford. But I'm happy that the game is profoundly amoral. The player can destroy inhabited worlds by turning their suns into black holes – because he needs them, for instance, to make a space leap. They would not be judged for this, which is the basic theme of the game when one understands the overall story. But in addition, it becomes more difficult to say at other points in the game "What's happening to me is really unfair!" The game thus became very enjoyable. Some sessions would last for hours.

You will notice an amusing parallel between our poor hero, always limited in his means and constantly complaining about it, and us, the creators of the game, with our goals in mind and never enough resources to achieve them!

We tried to attend Paris Games Week, but were told rather tersely that we were too late. So we asked to compete for the title of Best Game. We were sent a form to fill in. By hand. And return it by snail mail. That's France for you. We found it discouraging – not the idea of putting a stamp on a letter, but interacting with people who still insist on using paper for such things, in 2013, in the quintessentially digital world of video games. It's terrifying. I ended up complaining about it on a forum dedicated to this topic, in a humorous manner, but Michael asked me to tone it down: it may upset important people. France…

Besides, a little later the European Indie Game Days (EIGD) were held, with a Pitch My Game session, and I had the opportunity to pitch Out There. I did a terrible job, but I got to meet Étienne Perrin, a passionate developer with a lot of good ideas. Also, at one point I left the meeting to make a phone call, and was chased down in the hallway by a distributor who thought that I was leaving on the sly. Good sign. As part of EIGD, there was competition for Best Game, with some very cool nominees. Out There, however, wasn't nominated for anything. In contrast, in the category of Most Original Game there was Exodus, a rather standard metroidvania, but with the notable quality of having been created by a bunch of students bankrolled by some random French video games association. France… So remember, if tomorrow EIGD nominates your game in the Most Original category, it's at least as good as a standard metroidvania made by students.

During this period, we were contacted by a number of publishers. We already had this editor in Asia with whom we'd developed close ties. The Asian market is very particular: both hermetic (Japan) and prone to piracy (China), with highly variable conditions depending on location: translating the game into Japanese would cost € 5,000 while Chinese was only € 1,000. The Asian editor told us: "Sign with us, we will localise and sell your game in Asia, and depending on the platform, you get 50% to 75% of the profits. And do not ask questions!" The "Do not ask questions" was related to piracy. The game would be pirated, that much was obvious, and there's just no way to control it: something a lot of developers have a hard time accepting. However, our man is a big name who runs Playism, the Japanes Steam, so we made an agreement with them.

Other publishers came to us, big names in the mobile world and the larger realm of video games – developers whose games I played when I was 12! It was crazy. Michael had been left a little disabused after his collaboration with an editor on Space Disorder, and it was difficult to see what more they could bring us given the positive press coverage our game had garnered, other than a slot on Steam. After various delays, we asked publishers for a rather low advance on royalties since we would break even after 5,000 units sold. We thought to ourselves that if we couldn't hit 5,000 sales with Out There, we should just hang ourselves! To illustrate how our collaboration is purely professional, Michael often told me straight up that if the game did not sell well soon after its release, he would never again work with me – which suited me completely. The publishers said no, except one (the big mobile one, which suited us well) who pretended not to have received the email – which is a clever way of saying they were thinking about it. But they all counter-offered the same thing, taking out the advances on royalties. And we pretended not to have received their emails.

> "Michael managed through unimaginable machinations to get his hands on the Holy Grail of mobile developers."

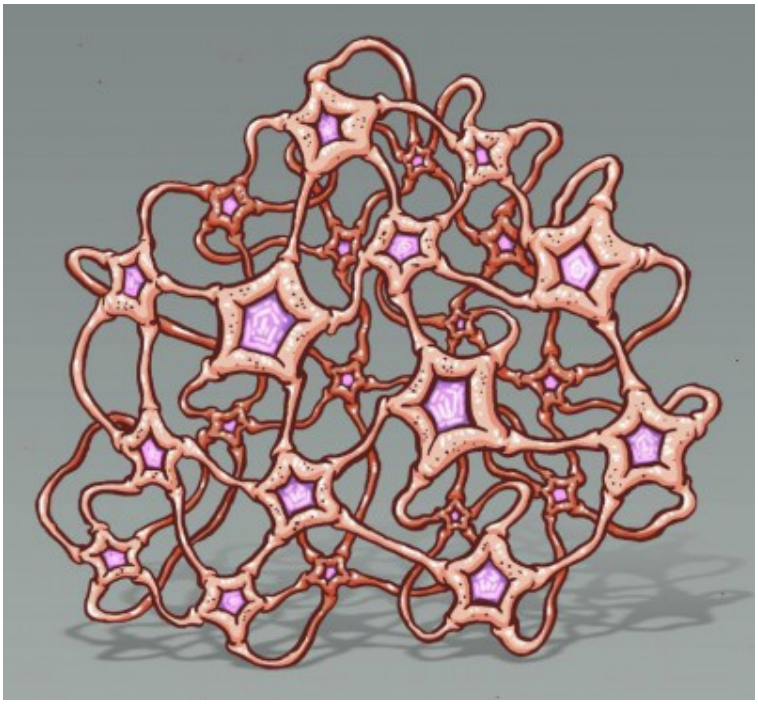
Another piece of bad news in this dreary month of November: we learn that Faster Than Light will be released on iPad in "early 2014". It really hit me hard, I was so depressed that I sent an email to Michael to cheer him up, thinking that he'd be as downtrodden as I was. It turns out he didn't care. Let's be clear, Out There is not FTL, but FTL had had such an impact that people often hoped we'd be its equivalent on iPad. For a long time, when you did a Google search for "Android FTL" or "iPad FTL", Out There would appear as one of the first results, simply because a number of sites had come up with titles such as "Out There is not FTL (but still a great game!)". To make matters even worse, FTL would come back with additional content written by a very big name, the guy who wrote Planescape: Torment. In short, it was already us two against the entire world with no resources, and now, much like in a crazy Manga, a challenger shows up on our turf with the most impressive assets imaginable. But as you'll see, it turned out not to be as simple as that for them.

Finally, Michael managed through unimaginable machinations to get his hands on the Holy Grail of mobile developers: the contact details for the head of features of Apple Store Europe. Just to show you how far-reaching Apple's omnipotence is, these contact details had originally been offered to us against a percentage of our game's profits, and for a while we seriously thought about accepting the offer. You read that right, a percentage of the game in exchange for an email address. What kind of a crazy world are we living in?

By early December, we had a small part of the game that was presentable. We did our beta testing, which covered 25% of the game. Michael contacted the company Humble to sell the game in a bundle for Android. With iOS, the same deal is not possible: the Apple Store decides everything – you can sell a game at a certain price, and that's it. So we put the game on sale discreetly, with no announcement, as part of an Android pre-order, which gave access to the beta version for $ 3.99. We decided to announce the release with much fanfare on 7 January, lest it get lost in the turbulence of the Christmas period.

Michael had a vision: to conquer and pamper the Android market. Indeed mobile developers prefer iOS, because it means more sales. In addition, a well-known rumour among publishers is that, if you release a game on Android first, Apple would then be reluctant to promote it.

So Michael wanted to go against the tide by offering a demo and a bundle specifically on Android to seduce the market.



The release sparked a number of things. This is where the very sad and painful story of our adventure reaches its happy turning point, so you can put the tissues away. Straight away the game sold, and not just a little. And it sold over time, throughout the month. To give you an idea, because I swore to Michael never to reveal our numbers, after mere hours we exploded our various sales goals: we repaid our financial investments, we made more sales than most French indie games upon their release, and some even throughout their entire tenure… including Space Disorder. During presales. On Android. Without any marketing. Humble immediately came back to us saying “Um, hey guys, this whole thing is pretty cool actually” and told us straight up that they wanted us on the Humble Store, on the second day of operations (without any communication, let’s not forget).

Very quietly, our success spread around the small world of video games distributors and all the platforms came to us gradually, except Steam, but we didn’t have a PC version yet… Consequently, we quickly gave a definitive “no” to the publishers who were on stand-by. The second thing to come out of this was that we were rewarded with positive feedback from gamers. We were quickly inundated with tens, hundreds, of positive and ultra positive comments by email, in forums. You might think they wouldn’t bash a game they’d just paid for (though it has been known to happen…), but with time, the positive feedback would be everywhere. For example on a Russian forum that we were unable to reach because it blocked our IP, people clicked on a link that spoke well of the game and caused a stream of continuous sales.

Some players even exchanged really well-researched tips and FAQs for the beta version! In addition to the feedback, which was very rewarding after all the work we had put in, the game actually worked. Not many bugs – some of those reported weren’t actually bugs at all! Many people informed us that if you landed on an inhabited planet and drilled it for resources, you couldn’t communicate with the aliens anymore. In fact, it was a feature of the game: if someone comes to ransack your house, you’re not going to be very friendly to them! I quickly created an Internet forum where we could centralise all these requests and Michael made sure that it could be accessed from the game.

Yet another consequence was that word of our sales attracted predators. Many people were suddenly reminded of our existence and that perhaps we might need something from them. For instance, one person approached Michael and offered him € 10,000 up front in exchange for 10% of the game. With what you’ve read so far, the proposal seems laughable, but we were tired and weak at that time, and Michael tried to convince me that it was a good idea, so battered and febrile was he because of his personal situation (the money doesn’t come right away, but at the end of the month, and after two months in Apple’s case). And we also had to fight against this type of mental interference, which was just a nuisance because we had to finish the game! Sometimes he would get angry because he was under pressure, and I’d feel hatred (again!) against these people who had ignored us throughout this whole story and, now that the game was selling, threw themselves at us! It was Rezzed, Rock Paper Shotgun, The Verge and Pocket Gamer who deserved the 10%! They were the ones who had supported us from the beginning!

We were both going through challenging times. Michael was experiencing this very strange sort of anguish, like people who have just won the lottery and can’t quite believe it: he told me “Ok, we’re making more and more sales every day, but what if it stopped?” Or “Ok we made sales on Android but what happens the day we release the game on iPhone?” Or “Will we have time to finish the game?” (Even though we precisely did not have a date set by an editor!) Or “But if we make too much money out of it, will we still want to make games?” (said in a sincere tone of despair). I remember one day, to calm him down, quoting Kipling: “Meet with Triumph and Disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same.”

The end of the year brought with it a certain serenity, with the mechanics of the game, after much feedback, reaching a level of elegant balance. And just before Christmas, we got two gifts: Touch Arcade and Indie Statik mentioned Out There as one of the “most anticipated

games of 2014". It was a miracle straight from the gamers. I say gamers, because these rankings were made by the gaming community and not by the staff. Let's remember, Touch Arcade is the most prestigious website in the world for mobile games. They selected five games; we came in fifth, ahead of Faster Than Light – which was not even mentioned. Beyond recognition and the assurance of further sales, this ranking was a great tool for the future. What magazine would refuse to even review the game with such acknowledgment? They would be obligated to host us, the two down-and-out blokes with no money to buy even a pack of Doritos. Financially, I got help from two different sources. I did not ask my family for money but they did help me a little, and the electricity company put me on the special rates list for people in need.

IV. A Mystical Endeavour

On January 7, we officially announced the existence of the beta, which further boosted presales and led to a flurry of articles. I agreed (well, I asked) to take care of all the communications for Out There from this point. Michael is a real control freak when it comes to communications, which is not a bad thing because I tend to say what I think to the wrong people when passion takes the better of me, which is a cardinal sin in the industry. He struggled to delegate this to me, which led to few clashes. We already knew that the game would come out on February 27. We had planned 3-4 articles and press releases with screenshots, the trailer and interviews. In reality, it turned completely different, a real shambles. Michael had once told me during a phone conversation that I should perhaps get in touch with Youtubers, meaning people who make videos of video games. I had never really seen any, except for Dark Souls where I like to gamers displaying high-level skills.

I took half a day to assess the situation. Then I had a vision. All the Youtubers in the world would play Out There and make a video of the game, no more, no less. This would be my game. I started by making lists, linking Youtubers to one another if they were friends of mine – or colleagues, using a pyramid structure, sector by sector: minecraft / strategy / FPS / country / comedy / serious reviews, etc.). At the top, I had the big boss, PewDiePie: 20 million subscribers. With 20 million subscribers, if only 1 in 1000 people bought the game, it would amount to 20,000 sales, or $ 80,000. All for a short video, or 20 minutes of the guy's time. In fact, the conversion rate is not 1 in 1,000, it's even bigger! It follows a logarithmic law according to which small Youtubers trigger some sales, and the bigger ones trigger even more sales, but not necessarily in a proportionate manner. Regardless, each Youtuber represented money, for sure. I also had my mini bosses in the list, some of whom did our pitch, such as AquaSyris, a French guy who made us some amazing videos, or At0mium who – alas – we never managed to get, and who could have been our gateway to Jeuxvideo.com, but we'll see to that later.

> "It was the perfect example of my theories on the toxicity of participatory financing and the system of subsidies."

I started to come up with my own techniques. I knew that if you put a few German words in an email to a German Youtuber, he'd find it cute. It was important to try to personalise as many emails as possible. Certain words elicit more interest than others: if you present yourself as a developer, it's more notable than if you said creator of a game. If you talk about a preview version, it gives off a sense of professionalism that is more exciting for certain groups of Youtubers. And of course, once a Youtuber was kind enough to make a video, I would solicit his friends. I lived like a madman for a month. I would get up, run 2.9 kilometres around the Jardin des Plantes, then sit in front of the PC and my extensive list of Youtubers until I went to bed at night. I developed a pain in my back one day and spent some time working stood up. Michael was furious that I would write to Youtubers who only had 500 subscribers for instance (which is not really relevant, given the importance of Twitch nowadays) or were Czech or Korean. But I just had to target the small fish before I could move on to the slightly bigger ones and finally the huge ones. And besides, I wanted them all.

I would tell Michael on the phone, "Yes, sorry, I won't do it again" but I never meant a word of it. I had a fierce outlook; he could not understand my goal, my mystical endeavour. He did not understand. There was no such thing as a small Youtuber because every Youtuber, in my delirium, was a molotov cocktail thrown in anger at UBIFRANCE's headquarters. It was the perfect example of my theories on the toxicity of participatory financing and the system of subsidies. It was a punch in the mouth of the system, and I hate the system! But if Michael was not very happy, my madness finally paid off and he cut me some slack. As I write these lines, Out There has had 60 longplays with another 30 in the works, on a panel of Youtubers with 500 to 150,000 subscribers – but I haven't targeted any Youtuber with over 200,000 yet. I dare not say how many Youtubers I've had to harass in order to get these 60 longplays because it would be embarrassing, but I have not said my last word.

Seeing as this is a mobile game, making a longplay is much more complicated than for a PC game. Youtube has not only generated sales and improved awareness of the game. It has had two important impacts. For instance, a lot of freelancers, and even seasoned video games journalists, are also secret Youtubers, because their industry is changing, and they're trying to adapt. So when we set off on the last round of press releases, we were sometimes in conquered territory – we'd send out a message like "Would you like to test Out There" and we'd get an answer like: "Hey, I'm XXX on Youtube, I did your preview, so send me the full version!" Pure bliss.

Mini communities then pop up around the game. The game lends itself well to Youtube because it's full of difficult choices and obviously commenters don't hesitate to make fun of the player, with comments like "You're an idiot! You should mine more!" or "Divide your resources but wait before using them!" Such is the case for AquaSyris who made 5 very funny videos, basically saying, "Ok, you want me to mine more, here you go!"

We find ourselves in that gilded phase where the game completely escapes our grasp and players begin fantasising about its possibilities. One comment that surprised us said: "You should try to cross the black hole, you get teleported." This was something we were keeping for the final version – but in his imagination, the commenter just assumed it. Another one said: "The Omega can be used as a substitute for the creation of a technological module, keep it!" This was false, but it's a feature that we had implemented and then withdrawn because of the imbalance it had created. Sheer poetry of the imagination of players eager to play Out There. We then included the cinematic end scenes. I don't know if they'll prove popular, but they gave us chills. There are three endings, including a secret one, and I think it's worth it to complete the game – even if the journey is the most important thing.

Humble Bundle hadn't reached out to us again, which was tearing Michael apart. I was pretty confident because in business, Americans usually keep their word. After much anxiety that sometimes descended into full-on disputes, Humble sent us their contract and we were happy. We would be centre stage on the Humble Store. We announced it around – press, Twitter, Facebook – nobody really cared.

The final week came around, bringing with it its fair share bugs that pushed Michael into a corner. Backup problems. Putting in place achievements proved particularly difficult. A side note about the latter: I had created them in part as a marketing tool. Remember the flyer whose message was: "We're for real"? In this case it was 10 times worse, with quotes from Farscape, news headlines from big names, famous SF concepts, etc. And then Michael told me: "Your titles are not compatible with iPhone standards." I enquire about this and it turns out that an achievement on iPhone must hold… 14 characters. Fourteen characters! We had to go through each possibility in order to keep in line with our marketing strategy. The real issue is testing these achievements. Apple has an App Sandbox, but it's super convoluted to navigate – at least for me. The night before submitting the game to Apple, I modified one of the endings by stretching it. Stressful times.

One hour before submitting the game to Apple, we modified the specs on a spaceship that was too powerful. It was 2am, and Michael and I were on the phone gently yelling at each other to figure out if its performance should be a 0.7 or a 0.65. Which was all very stressful for me, since I like everything to be done and dusted a full 15 days in advance. And then we sent the build, and I think Michael slept a whole day.

The day after we submitted the game, we landed a booth at PAX, an idea Indie Mega Booth had come up with, which selects the world's best independent developers to be present at a video games convention in the United States. Quite a large booth at that – enough to fit several computers. And brace yourselves: we're placed next to Twitch and opposite Double Fine: a subtle metaphor for our lives. Next to a bunch of streamers, and in front of my nemesis who had been force-fed through crowdfunding. I thought about making a big banner that said "If you would like to see how to make a video game with $ 4 million less than the guys opposite us, come check us out." This is great news for the project, a little less for the wallet. It took a lot out of our existing profits from pre-orders when accounting for airfare, the hotel and all the rest. We confirm regardless and vaya con dios, we jump headfirst into the next phase of our adventure. After all, we're not there to open a savings account.

At that time, I had an appointment with a major publisher to sign a contract for a comic book, Blue Ribbon (which turned out to be as hectic and intense an adventure as Out There). It was about a fairly quick cash injection of several thousand euros and I really needed it to get through February. In agreement with the cartoonist, I refused the proposal (temporarily) because we wanted to have a better project. But the temptation to compromise had rarely been stronger – and I had never experienced a professional appointment as tense as this one, but I was struggling against myself. Basically, if the game does not sell well upon release, I would have to take up paid employment, which would also

mark the end of a certain way of life that allows this type of creation and adventure. We'll see how that goes, since everything that you're reading now is written before the game's release.

> "The goal was to make all the magazines talk about us."

Michael had the task of making autonomous builds and placing them on different distribution platforms – which also includes signing a contract with each of them, etc. – and he asked me to take care of the press. The objective was to get reviews. I operated in the same way as with my Youtuber project, that I was leading in parallel. The goal was to make all the magazines talk about us. Not only mobile sites and video games magazines, but also non-specialised publications and even some specialising in other things, such as astronomy, but that might be interested in the game. Likewise, I wanted no geographical restrictions. I was surprised to learn that there are three video games publications in Iran (and a video games trade show!) and two in Turkey. I also learned to click on "Get yhteyttä" on a Finnish website if you want to contact them.

At that point, Michael was really angry at my sense of priority – so I had to compromise (and do certain things in secret). He also felt particularly febrile because Apple was slow to accept the game and if journalists asked us for a review version, we would not be able to send it to them. We weren't on speaking terms before the day before the game was due to be finally accepted, but Michael had reason to be tense: the game was not validated for a silly reason, Michael had forgotten to check the box stating that we had implemented the achievements. We had to go through validation cycle. Poor Michael really suffered from this situation.

Approaching the press is a thankless task, with its high walls, its victories, its defeats. At Aurillac‚Jeuxvideo.com's fortress stands tall like a Western Mordor impervious to solicitations. The haunted cemetery of countless Android sites of which no one knows if they're dead or alive. The gleaming battleships of American sites that don't even have contact forms – if you're worth the time, they already know! We got help throughout our adventure, and sure enough I also got help in this case. Thanks to all those people, professionals or intermediaries of the video games press, who participated in the project's success by giving us the final push needed to reach the upper echelons of the media.

Apple finally approved the game. To tell you about Michael's mental state, we got the validation at 3am and he was fully awake, just waiting. Such relief. So we had to send out a hundred or so coupon codes for reviews. Oddly enough, we got returns mid-game. Journalists would stop playing and write us: "Wait a minute, this game is actually good!" as if taken aback – which was probably the case, breaking as it did their routine of testing countless hours of Candy-Crush-like games. Pure bliss.

And then The Verge wrote us, "We'll try do a testing for Out There, tell us what suits you best." Polygon! Barely a year prior I was writing gameplay documents for a game that didn't even have a name.

And then a big, big Youtuber – the one right below Pewdiepie in my pyramid structure – wrote us: "Um, my subscribers are asking me to test your game, what do we do?"

And then The New Yorker, The Guardian and Wired wrote us: "Is this the final version? Because we want to test it."

Of course video games, especially on mobile platforms, are one big lottery. Maybe we'll crash and burn. But we will have done everything in our power to make a good game with honesty and hard work. The end of this story is not ours; it belongs to you who are reading these lines. Of course we hope to earn enough to make our next game (we've already got ideas line up!), but just like in Out There, the journey is as good as the destination.

Indeed, our strenuous efforts were perfectly rewarded when, after having lived though this wonderful adventure of making Out There, one of the biggest gaming sites sent us a simple e-mail consisting of the following five words: This is just fantastic, gentlemen.

FibreTigre, February 20, 2014, seven days before the release of Out There.