

From fiction to reality

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Recently, during a nice evening organized by L’Echo¹ to gather its columnists, I started a long conversation with one of my colleagues, on Science Fiction. Although we had a 20 years difference in age, I realized that he also knew nearly everything about Isaac Asimov², Frank Herbert³, Arthur C. Clarke⁴ and even Raymond Kurzweil⁵, my bedtime readings when I was a student.

With a special mention for Raymond Kurzweil: for IRIS, the machines developed by Kurzweil Computer products Inc., the company that he created in 1974 were, on one hand, a nice source of inspiration and on the other hand, an objective to match or exceed with our own solutions for Intelligent Document Recognition (IDR).

For one evening, I found myself immersed again in the universe that was mine when I was a young student. We exchanged about our respective entrepreneur’s journeys and about our most inspiring literatures. Why have we been impressed by these novels? What can we say today about these incredibly rich stories, that were challenging the ideas of the period (with sometimes clear warnings about the risks linked to new technologies!).

¹ L’Echo is a famous Belgian financial newspaper.

² Isaac Asimov is a great master of Science Fiction and the author of “Foundation”, “Robots”, etc.

³ Frank Herbert is the author of “Dune” and other famous novels

⁴ Arthur C. Clarke is a great novelist and the author of “2001, A Space Odyssey”

⁵ Ray Kurzweil is the author of “The age of intelligent machines” and “the singularity is near”

Why did I create the company IRIS? Because I wanted to develop an intelligent machine, worthy of these novels, with a powerful artificial brain able to automatically recognize documents, in all sort of different languages. Because I wanted to do as well or even better than Mister Raymond himself with his KRM (Kurzweil Reading Machine). In Belgium, and at that time, it seems that we were inspired by Asimov and Clarke. With IRIS and Lernout & Hauspie⁶, two companies created in 1987, our country could have become a hot place for Artificial Intelligence, by providing the computers of the world the eye of IRIS and the ear of Lernout & Hauspie.

A good example to show the importance of our readings as key source of inspiration! They enrich us and expand our horizon, sometimes in an unexpected way. They help us to reflect and allow us to see things from a different angle. Sometimes, the writer will even be able to seed our mind with some new ideas and this will influence our lives.

I had this in mind when I decided to write the story of IRIS “*The IRIS Book*” and I thought it could inspire some young entrepreneurs. To be honest, it also wanted to secure a small place for IRIS in the saga of the OCR

⁶ Lernout & Hauspie was specializing in speech recognition. After a difficult start, the company accelerated and became listed on Nasdaq. Then, in 2001, it completely collapsed due to an enormous financial scandal.

(Optical Character Recognition⁷), which is often presented as a pure American story. A bit discourteous for the many European scientists who have greatly contributed to the progress of this technology. But of course, in Europe, we are far less good in marketing... albeit ... if you go to the Wikipedia page of Ray Kurzweil and click on OCR, you will be surprised to start a short video of the IRISPen™, the famous OCR pen developed by IRIS! Well done, this time, Belgian kids!



With IRIS and L&H, our country could have become a hot place for Artificial Intelligence

⁷ OCR stands for Optical Character Recognition, one of the basic technologies needed to automatically recognize documents.