

Smaky Story: A comprehensive approach of the practical, technical, and social dimensions of computing in French-speaking Switzerland

BEMELMANS Sophie

University of Lausanne

1015 Lausanne

Switzerland

bemelmanssophie@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Born in the 1970s in a laboratory of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL), the Swiss microcomputers Smaky were home to some of the oldest known games created in Switzerland¹. A dozen models of Smaky were produced and marketed in the French-speaking part of the country until the late 90's. Understanding how they became part of Swiss computing practices and studying these uses from a technical, practical, and social point of view, particularly regarding the creation of video games, are central issues to understand the Swiss video games heritage. There is hardly any academic research on these microcomputers. Our current knowledge is based on the archival work of enthusiasts, journalists and former computer engineers close to Smaky or EPFL². Therefore, as part of the 4-year research project *Confederatio Ludens*³ dedicated to this purpose, my PhD thesis (started on 1 February 2023) aims to deepen our knowledge of Smaky's history.

My thesis focuses on a topic that requires the integration of multiple academic disciplines, including sociology, historical science, and computer science. One of my primary goals is to develop a rigorous methodology that incorporates the strengths and perspectives of these disciplines. As such, I will be discussing the methodology I am employing in this integration.

METHODOLOGY

First of all, my work draws on inspiration from two historical approaches of media studies: platform studies⁴ and media archeology⁵. Therefore, I will study the technological landscape of French-speaking Switzerland between the 1960s and the 1990s from a technical, practical, and social point of view. My investigation will focus on exploring the different practices of inventors, operators, and users that have emerged around the Smaky microcomputers, with an emphasis on how they were experienced. I will study their technical characteristics to understand their relationship with creative practices, especially video games. I aim to understand how these computers were integrated into the daily lives of French-speaking Swiss individuals. Moreover, I will explore the afterlife of these microcomputers, including the practices that emerged after

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their production ceased, as well as the retrospective perception and experience of the Smaky computers.

I will rely mainly on the grounded theory method developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Strauss (2010), as adapted by Christophe Lejeune (2019), to conduct my qualitative research on this historical object. The objective of my thesis is to develop a theoretical model covering the social and practical dimensions of the Smaky microcomputers, based on an in-depth analysis of the actors' experiences.

To gather empirical data, I plan to conduct interviews with creators, operators, and users of the Smaky microcomputers, similarly to other researchers who examined the history of computing and video games such as J. Švelch (2018), B. Nicoll (2019) or M. Swalwell (2021b). Using oral history will allow me to get a deeper understanding of how the practices surrounding the Smaky were developed and evolved, as well as gain insights into their experiences (Descamps et al., 2005). I will also analyze written sources such as industrial archives, newspapers, and websites to identify factual elements, immerse myself in the field - particularly in the technical aspects of the Smaky microcomputers - and collect empirical data. By examining written sources, I can gain insights not only into the practices of the author, but also into how they experienced these practices (Glaser and Strauss, 2010). From a historical perspective, it is particularly interesting to be able to compare the information obtained from written sources with that gathered through interviews, to see how the author's experiences may have evolved over time.

CONCLUSION

During the PhD consortium, I would like to discuss this multidisciplinary approach which allows a more precise understanding of the way actors experienced different important stages in the history of computer science in French-speaking Switzerland between the 1960s and the 1990s. My work focuses particularly on their experiences with the Smaky during the years of its operation, but also on their lives afterwards. Finally, I seek to understand how their practice of computing has evolved over time and, in retrospect, how they experienced it.

To conclude, I would like to motivate my choice to focus on the local microcomputers Smaky and the experiences of Swiss individuals with it. First of all, a local approach is valuable because it allows for a nuanced understanding of the specific cultural, social, and historical contexts in which games are created and consumed. In the history of gaming, as Melanie Swalwell (2021a) explains, the local aspect has largely been overlooked. It is important to develop an appreciation for the sociocultural and geographical specificity of local communities. However, these local histories have to be critical so that it doesn't become a new orthodoxy celebrated solely for its uniqueness. By examining the specificities of the Smaky case, I can better understand the complex and multifaceted ways in which games were produced, consumed, and experienced. This approach can also help to challenge dominant narratives about computing and gaming cultures, and highlight the diversity and richness of practices across different communities and contexts.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See this database of Swiss games: <https://swissgames.garden/> [Accessed on 13 January 2023].

²For example, the preservation work of the Bolo Computer Museum – <https://www.museebolo.ch/?lang=en> [Accessed on 13 January 2023]. The website created by the Foundation “Mémoires Informatiques” dedicated to historical facts about the Smaky – <https://smaky.ch/> [Accessed on 13 January 2023]. Or the article from H. Kirrmann (1989).

³ See <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/209248> [Accessed on 13 January 2023].

⁴ See I. Bogost and N. Montfort (2009a, 2009b), D. Arsenault (2017) or C. Therrien (2019) in the Platform Studies collection of the MIT press (<https://mitpress.mit.edu/series/platform-studies/>)

⁵ See J. Parikka and E. Huhtamo (2011) or J. Parikka (2018).