

Transmedia in the early 1980s: Breaking out of the computer monitor with the games by Mel Croucher and Automata UK

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While little known outside Europe, Mel Croucher was a household name in the 1980s British game culture, both as a game auteur and a journalist. Despite his relatively short game design career, Croucher's work foreshadowed many future industry trends, including transmedia storytelling, location-based gaming (with *Pimania*, 1982), interactive movies (with *Deus Ex Machina*, 1984), indie games about the human condition (also *Deus Ex Machina*), and even the use of chatbots (with *iD*, 1986).

Most of Croucher's games were published by his own company Automata Cartography, later renamed to Automata UK. His biggest hit was the 1982 absurdist text adventure *Pimania*, connected to a real-life treasure hunt that doubled as a social experiment. The pinnacle of his ambition was 1984's *Deus Ex Machina*, a metaphorical game about stages of human life in a dystopian society – played in sync to a concept music album, composed and recorded by Croucher himself and featuring a cast of performers that included the post-punk singer Ian Dury and the former Doctor Who actor Jon Pertwee. Although the game flopped commercially, it captured the attention of retro gamers and academics in the 2000s and has been retrospectively labeled as a groundbreaking experiment and one of the earliest art games (Juul 2019; Cornfeld, Simon, and Sterne 2018). Some of Croucher's games, including *Pimania*, involved reallife activities, making them predecessors of pervasive games (Montola, Stenros, and Wærn 2009) or alternate reality gaming (Dena 2008). Others used multimedia components, such as novelty songs on the B-sides of cassette tapes or *Deus Ex Machina's* rock music soundtrack. Moreover, nearly all Croucher's games were embedded in an ongoing narrative that unfolded in the weekly comics in the *Popular Computing Weekly* magazine, written by Croucher and illustrated by Automata's cartoonist Robin Evans.

A part of a larger biographical project on Mel Croucher and Automata UK, this paper focuses on the transmedia nature of his productions. It draws from multiple interviews with Croucher, from an interview with his collaborator and illustrator Robin Evans, from Croucher's design documents and business correspondence stored in the

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Mel Croucher collection at the Northwest Computer Museum (Leigh, UK), from the contemporary 1980s press coverage, and from Croucher's games and their paratexts.

I start from the observation that Automata's efforts clearly fit the common understanding of *transmedia*. The term was popularized in the 2000s by Henry Jenkins, who defined transmedia storytelling as "stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the [fictional] world." (Jenkins 2006, 293). As transmedia scholar Matthew Freeman points out, the term has been often understood "in relation to technological convergences" of the 2000s, when the web emerged as a connective tissue between different kinds of media content (Freeman 2014, 2362). By this measure, Automata would have been well ahead of their time. But the focus on technological change obscures the fact that transmedia strategies had been used long before computers and computer networks. Freeman gives the example of L. Frank Baum's sophisticated transmedia handling of the *Wizard of Oz* books (Freeman 2014, 2366). Like Baum, Croucher was a versatile entertainer, who was never limited to one medium; among his key inspirations was the comedian and vaudevillian Groucho Marx. Instead of "inventing" a new approach, one can understand Croucher's contribution as a revival of Baum's franchising strategies as well as of the multi-genre eclecticism of vaudeville.

Either way, Croucher's transmedia strategy set his work apart from most of his contemporary fellow game creators, who focused their efforts primarily on software artifacts. For Croucher, software was just one element of a multidimensional entertainment experience that included comics, music, costumed live appearances by Automata staff, and audience participation – all of which will be shown in more detail in the conference presentation. As Croucher put it in the interview for the project, "the multimedia side is the most interesting aspect to me – to introduce print, music, TV, radio, [...] physical prizes, getting people out on the streets, literally going to places." While realizing its possibilities, Croucher was never fixated on the computer as a sole means of expression – his strategy was to decenter software and produce transmedia (or multimedia) experiences. In his own words, he saw "no reason not to break out of the confines of the computer monitor."

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